

# Modern American Stupidity

## Introduction

Stupidity has been a component of Americana ever since the first explorers stumbled onto the New World. In fact, the most surprising thing about America's discovery is not the usual "When" and "By whom" but the "How often" and "How many" explorers had to learn of it for themselves. No other land has been discovered so often, and if all claims in this matter are valid, it was first discovered by the Caucasoids,<sup>1</sup> Malies,<sup>2</sup> Chinese,<sup>3</sup> Minoan,<sup>4</sup> English,<sup>5</sup> Norsemen,<sup>6</sup> Danes,<sup>7</sup> Irish, Romans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Libyans, Welsh, Venetians, Scots and Portuguese.<sup>8</sup> Columbus was really the last to discover America. He is honored as the discoverer because he was the first to promote its exploration and settlement.<sup>9</sup> Further, his supporting culture was cognitively prepared to appreciate and technologically developed enough to exploit his error<sup>10</sup> that he had not reached Asia, as he died believing,<sup>11</sup> but accidentally (re)discovered a world not wanted by anyone who found it and regarded as an impediment by subsequent explorers trying to get around or through it to the Orient.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, non-fishing Europeans had to be bribed, drugged or beaten to go the new world,<sup>13</sup> and the 'tween decks of the ships which carried colonists thither were crowded with poultry, horses, cattle, sheep, goats, swine and convicts.<sup>14</sup>

After Columbus had shown the way, the Old World, with mixed motives and varying degrees of enthusiasm, followed his lead where ever it was he had gone. The horizons and opportunities for stupidity now widened and broadened and new forms of idiocy burst out of the traditional molds of folly. Stupidity was no longer confined to the stodgy constraints and restrictive pat-terns of theological thought and action but became brash, reckless and inventive in a world in which imagination and reality seemed the only limitations on possible blunders, miscalculations and disasters. Despite this, generally speaking, those who settled the New World could not miss. As difficult as it was to get established,<sup>15</sup> once a colony was self-sustaining, the land was so rich that it did not matter what system or non-system of government, economy or society developed: nature was so generous that any would succeed, and at some point, American stood for something. No one knew what—but it stood for something. It might have been liberty for slave owners; it might have been slavery for wage earners, but it stood for something. Be that as it may, the nineteenth century saw the end of the golden age of individual stupidity. In the 1800's, people could start out with nothing and lose. They went out on their own, made their own mistakes, paid for them themselves on the spot and learned as little as possible from the experiences.

One thing they did not learn was that money had become God. The religion for Western civilization in general became the economy.<sup>16</sup> We Americans printed on our bills and coins, "In God We Trust" meaning we believed in, worshiped and all but prayed to them despite the busts in the boom and bust cycles. Such downers notwithstanding, America was still perceived in the 1930's as the land of the future because it was separated by a broad ocean from the misfortunes, crimes and follies of Europe.<sup>17</sup> But gone even by then were the times when a person could go out and fail on his own at his own pace. Now, (s) he usually joins a firm which is overcharging its customers or work for the government, which is, true to the spirit of democracy, ripping off the people. Stupidity is now cultivated, developed and promoted

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by the calculating professional. It has become organized, streamlined, modernized and incorporated. Mismanagement is now computerized so that errors which used to take weeks to unfold can be perpetrated in seconds. In a world in which stupidity has reached such bewildering bureaucratic complexity, Americans are justifiably confused and searching for something they can believe in—like themselves.

## Composite

The composite American today entertains a number of religious beliefs all of which predominated at one time or other and still comprises a significant part of his cultural heritage and national identity. The general American is sort of Christian<sup>18</sup> in belief if not behavior. Politically, he believes in democracy, although the Constitution guarantees and surprisingly provides a republican form of government. Economically, he is a devout capitalist, even if private enterprise has been pushed to the fringe by the systematic organization, ownership and controls that government and big business fascistically<sup>19</sup> exercise upon each other. Finally, he is socially egalitarian, at least within his own peer group. If there are contradictions in the expressions of these belief systems as they shape daily life, they are happily lost on him. First and last, he is a pragmatist ill-disposed to let facts disrupt his cognitively dissonant life.

Not only is American stupidity thus fragmented due to the lack of a unified belief system, but we lack a basic knowledge about ourselves for exactly the same reason. In fact, if there is one subject upon which we are invincibly ignorant, it is America,<sup>20</sup> and this self-unconsciousness is traceable to the multischemas which provide several ready-made explanations for anything. This is one of the distinctive features of American culture: we do not have "An" answer for a given question or "The" solution to a particular problem. We have a variety of answers and solutions from which we can pick the one which is most appealing if not most relevant or helpful.

## Pluralism

The pluralism of American society<sup>21</sup> made tolerance a necessity, and although equality and diversity were not yet cultural watchwords, in 1852, the streets of New York already featured a balanced blending of horseshit, dogshit and pig shit.<sup>22</sup> In a like manner, American stupidity developed its adulterated nature, with each immigrant strain contributing to the caldron of idiocy which makes diversity our greatest national weakness. The sloth of Hispanics contrasted with the arrogance of Germans. The self-righteous prudery of the English clashed with the emotional abandon of Italians, while the Irish with

their prehensile paws<sup>23</sup> in their guise as the missing link between the chimps and the French all but belonged on display in a zoo and dragged down even the surrounding blacks,<sup>24</sup> who were stereotyped as lazy, drunken, sex-crazed, apelike and stupid.<sup>25</sup> Each detracted from the nation's efficiency as every failing and drawback of the old world's jetsam and flotsam<sup>26</sup> drifted to our shores to become part of our kaleidoscope culture.

Naturally, we like to make the most of the nobility of our ancestors. We see them as moral zealots struggling for justice and freedom against religious tyranny and political oppression. However, not since the Crusades could one find a more opinionated band of bigots than the early colonists, who had no fundamental objection to despotism so long as they were the despots imposing their oppressive views and values on others. Added to these dictatorial bigots were successive waves of criminals,<sup>27</sup> discontented religious and political radicals,<sup>28</sup> klutzes, deadbeats and malcontents specifically invited because they were poetically speaking tired, poor, huddled masses of wretched refuse: the landless from all of Europe.<sup>29</sup> Throw in Africans dumb enough to get caught by slavers, Orientals shrewd enough to work forever for a pittance and descendants of Indians, who had a dysfunctional immigration policy<sup>30</sup> and acquiesced in "Manifest Larceny"—the longest-running real estate swindle of all time—and you have the makings of the social mosaic by which we are so proudly handicapped. Stir a little and heat a lot, and you have a model of our festering, sweltering pot society. Although we do not brag about it, America was peopled by failures. Our ancestors came here because they were or anticipated being failures in the old country. Upon arrival, they failed in farming, mining, business and battles. Crackpots invented ships that would sink shovels that would not dig and boilers that would explode.<sup>31</sup> Builders constructed firetraps that were safe at any height until they collapsed. As development progressed, slums arose in the cities while in the country; land was cleared so that the topsoil could erode faster. Railroads to nowhere were constructed with promoters then misleading the unwary into settling along the wrong-of-way so that they could be more easily exploited later on.

## Image

American stupidity cannot be truly appreciated as a stagnant, torpid force but must be perceived in the dynamic context of a linguistic current verbally dissonant with reality. Much as our national character, composition and goals have changed throughout the life of the nation, so has our native stupidity devolved so that we might always have difficulty recognizing ourselves and meeting our self-induced challenges. To illustrate the point, we need only note that the patriotic rhetoric of 1776 was mostly about "Liberty."<sup>32</sup> A bell was cast and promptly cracked<sup>33</sup> to symbolize our qualified commitment to this ideal. Two hundred plus years ago, slave owners fought for their liberty, and now the word is all but forgotten. The current watchword is "Equality", and the government conceived in liberty has been pushing equality in the cause of diversity on the country for two generations. In both cases, the catchwords motivated radicals and obscured the reality that as ideals, they were basically inapplicable in a healthy society. Still, as a people divided by a common language and history, we can be as stupid as any and will continue to wrap ourselves in gratifying illusions verbally coated by misleading if inspiring labels.

## Labels

The importance of a word in maintaining an illusion was made vividly clear in 1902, when President Roosevelt was trying to appoint

a commission to settle a coal strike. The mine owners refused to accept anyone on the commission who was designated as a union man. TR railed at the "Woodenheaded" "Stupidity"<sup>34</sup> of an anti-union man until he realized it was perfectly acceptable for a union man to be on the commission: he just had to be called some-thing else (i.e., "An eminent sociologist").<sup>35</sup> Until this subtlety dawned on the President, language (i.e., the label) really was a stumbling block. Terminology prevented a resolution of the crisis so long as seating a "Union man" was perceived as granting Labor's reasonable right to representation. An even better example of how a label can change nothing but perception was J. E. Hoover's reaction to his boss's directive that he terminates an illegal program being run by the FBI during WWII. The FBI the biggest criminal organization in America after the Mafia—maintained a list of potentially subversive people who could be swept up and detained at a moment's notice. In a letter of July 16, 1943, wartime Attorney General Francis Biddle ordered Hoover to discontinue this "Custodial Detention" list, and Hoover obligingly and dutifully complied by changing the sign on the door. The "Custodial Detention" list was discontinued but the program relabeled the "Security Index"—remained, thus displaying Hoover's PR penchant/talent for appearing to follow orders.<sup>36</sup>

This was a criminal act of defiance against his boss by the nation's leading law enforcement officer, who made a career of criminal conduct as a law unto himself, operating without authorization, approval or integrity. Biddle's successor, Tom Clark, reauthorized the program in 1945, and, in an act of legislative congruence, in 1950, Congress passed the McCarran Act, (aka the Emergency Detention Act) which mandated most of what Hoover had been doing all along. During the hearings before its passage, Hoover appeared and supported the pending legislation without bothering to mention that the program being considered essentially already existed<sup>37</sup> albeit without legal basis. Supporting the pending legislation was one thing; obeying the law once it was passed was another. The problem was, as Hoover perceived it, that the law was too weak; he much preferred the more stringent program he already had in place. Accordingly, in 1952, he prevailed upon then Attorney General, Gen. J. H. McGrath, to give the FBI *written approval to violate the new, civil rights respecting law*.<sup>38</sup>

To carry the charade one step farther, when the weak McCarren Act was repealed in 1971, Hoover felt deprived of statutory cover for his unconstitutional list of subversives. Consequently, he sought and obtained authorization from Attorney General John Mitchell who claimed an inherent right to wiretap without court orders and advocated preventive detention of suspects<sup>39</sup> to continue his nefarious practice of investigating people not even accused of criminal conduct.<sup>40</sup> Repeating himself if not history, Hoover relabelled the Security Index the Administrative Index—ADEX, and the program of listing alleged subversive continued unabated.<sup>41</sup> It really did not matter what Congress passed or repealed: the FBI was going to list subversives with the blessing of the presiding Attorney General, whoever he was. When defying Congress, however, Hoover was savvy enough to be sure to have the Attorney General provide him with written authorization for the FBI's continuing criminal activities.

The same name-game tactic was used when the term COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence Program) was exposed in April, 1971. The program was designed by homosexual<sup>42</sup> moralist Hoover as an end run around the Supreme Court ruling in 1956 that membership in the Communist Party was not a crime in itself. Fearing

anyone who thought differently from himself and regarding anyone who questioned government policy a Communist,<sup>43</sup> he designed the program to harass not only that party but subversive organizations like the unions, pacifist groups, anarchists, racial justice groups, the Socialist Workers Party, the Puerto Rican Independent Movement, the Black Liberation Movement, the New Left, the American Indian Movement, the KKK (at LBJ's insistence) and, worst of all, critics of the FBI.<sup>44</sup>

In his crusading, vengeful zeal, our chief law enforcement officer as a living refutation of the theory of cognitive dissonance created illegal programs of institutional terrorism which targeted blacks, intellectuals, artists, professors, scientists and the clergy. Similar to being black, being an intellectual automatically qualified one as a potential subversive, and the FBI's Least Desirable List became so inclusive that being omitted from it was almost an insult—an indication of irrelevance. Like the Catholic Church's Index of forbidden authors, it included virtually all the biggies of the time: Lewis, Buck, Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Capote, Mann, Sandburg and Sartre etc.—everyone but Anonymous and Mailer. Einstein was honored by inclusion not as a writer but as a scientist<sup>45</sup> perhaps for practicing pink or red science. As for specific treatments of the targeted non-intellectuals, laxative laced oranges were provided to war-protesters; STD infected prostitutes were provided to Fair Play for Cuba supporters; a quart of distilled pig feces was slated for distribution at the Black Panther headquarters in Detroit, but the operations was cancelled; however, a diagram of Black Panther Fred Hampton's apartment was provided to Chicago police snipers and led directly to his death in 1969; and Rev. Martin Luther King, jr., whom Hoover deeply hated, was taunt-ed to commit suicide.<sup>46</sup>

As for the Social Workers Party, it was presumed to be prone to violence, so it was kept under surveillance and subjected to dirty tricks. When members learned in 1973 they had been targeted by the Bureau, they sued the government for violating their constitutional rights. In 1986, Bureau lawyers asserted that radical ideas inevitably led to violence—that being the rationale for keeping tabs on the peaceful, law-abiding organization for *forty years*. In the years 1960-1966 alone, teams of twelve agents conducted at least 92 burglaries—one every three weeks. Needless to say, they had no legal rights to any of the 10,000 documents they photocopied and stole. Individual party members were harassed and physically attacked in their offices, and one office was shot at. While an investigation of these activities was underway, the Bureau officials continued to try to hide the truth.<sup>47</sup>

The COINTELPRO program clearly undermined democracy, violated the law and subverted the Constitution,<sup>48</sup> but otherwise, it was just jake. Originally created to cope with menace of the Communist party, it was eventually dismissed as silly, ridiculous, mindless and stupid.<sup>49</sup> However, that down-played its undeniable negative impact on so many innocent lives. In fact, if there ever was a subversive organization in America, the FBI was it, but to Hoover, protecting the FBI was protecting his way of life. He saw the lawless Bureau as the bulwark against lawlessness and the disintegration of American values. The FBI had the mission of setting things right again, which meant not only relabeling and linguistic elasticity but engaging in criminal conduct by the government in the name of the law.<sup>50</sup> The Bureau had the added advantage of being used by FDR, LBJ, Nixon and Reagan to spy on their political enemies.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most egregious cases was not a matter of “Intelligence” but criminal in nature: the FBI all but staged a murder and arranged

to have four innocent men take the fall for it. The Bureau knew of the planned crime and let it happen and then coached an informant to lie on the stand regarding the identities of the perps. For *forty years*, the Bureau then blocked all attempts of those falsely convicted of the crime to gain access to evidence which would have exonerated them. When the material was finally made available to them in 2004, the two surviving victims and the families of the others received \$102 million in compensation.<sup>52</sup>

Tellingly, no one in the Bureau ever asked about the constitutionality much less the ethics or morality of any of its programs. The only concern was pragmatic: would it work; would it yield the desired results.<sup>53</sup> No one asked if someone had committed a crime. In legalese, the second term in the “Elastic clause” of the Constitution was dropped: No one was concerned with propriety.<sup>54</sup> If it was necessary, it was proper: That is, a program gained propriety from its necessity. Further, once a case was set up, it remained operative even when the conditions at its founding changed so that the threat disappeared.<sup>55</sup> No doubt, the greatest danger to law and liberty comes from zealous, well-intentioned people with no understanding<sup>56</sup> of Constitutional rights or limitations on their powers, and *they do not want to understand them*. They just want to push people around. And push they did. When, during WWII, Hoover perceived a particular organization as a threat, he compiled a dossier on its leader, infiltrated it with spies and sabotaged its operations: And what was this ominous organization? The OSS—the forerunner of the CIA,<sup>57</sup> which might have committed the ultimate political sin—encroaching on the FBI's territory.

Basically, a culture of lawlessness developed and prevailed among agents who had not a single scruple to their discredit.<sup>58</sup> This constitutes the opposite of what anyone and especially adherents of the theory of cognitive dissonance would expect—that law enforcement officials would abide by the law.<sup>59</sup> They did not, and if there was any dissonance expressed in this regard, it was when someone pointed out their criminal conduct. Being criminals was fine, but no one was supposed to say they were criminals: That was taboo. Hence, the active policy of ignoring the Constitution and the law was furthered by an assumption of eternal secrecy.<sup>60</sup> Presumably, no one would ever know unless someone had the temerity to label a given program accurately,<sup>61</sup> which essentially never happened. Consistent with that, as Alexander Hamilton noted in 1787 (paraphrased), ‘the people are most in danger when the means of abusing their rights are in the hands of those toward whom they entertain the least suspicion’.<sup>62</sup> Certainly, no one suggested or suspected Hoover would abuse anyone's rights or that the FBI was incapable of controlling its own criminal conduct.

Hoover used his unchecked, secret powers to destroy wayward organizations and individuals guilty of wrong-thinking including civil rights workers, senior members of Congress who questioned war policy in Vietnam and anyone who wrote members of Congress or otherwise expressed their dissent by appearing at anti-war rallies. Hoover misattributed all such acts of dissent and moves for civil rights to Communist agents, and, to be fair to him, there was a period during the Cold War when the Soviets did infiltrate our government. Unfortunately, Hoover posited in his mind the real but limited threat to include any political movement which challenged his hidebound idea of Americana.<sup>63</sup>

A trivial if revealing example occurred in 1965, when Hoover asked agent Curtis Lynum to prepare a report showing Communists were causing unrest at UCal Berkeley. Not one to let facts shape his

perceptions, Hoover rejected agent Lynum's efforts which found no evidence whatsoever of Communist influence.<sup>64</sup>

In lumping together everything he found disturbing on the political landscape, Hoover beclouded everything and confused those who heeded his hateful diatribes. He encouraged in those who believed him a blind, religious allegiance to the holy if negative faith of anti-Communism which, for all his fear-mongering, remained an economic system he never explained nor probably understood.<sup>65</sup> In the pursuit of maintaining the status quo, the FBI opened more than 500,000 domestic intelligence files,<sup>66</sup> most on law abiding American citizens. One was on future U.S. Senator and Secretary of State John Kerry who, as a decorated Vietnam veteran, denounced the war as "A tragic mistake". As in the case of Socrates, such sedition had to be stopped, so the FBI worked to discredit him and to that end amassed a file on him of 2,934 pages.<sup>67</sup>

The saddest indictment of all of COINTELPRO is that it produced no useful intelligence which led to the arrest much less a conviction of any criminal suspect. It had nothing to do with law enforcement: its purpose was to ruin the reputations if not the lives of "Subversives".<sup>68</sup> Like the Security Index program, it was ordered shut down but continued under a new name. One of the new labels was "FISA" the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act which allegedly regulates security related wiretaps, but Hoover lives on insofar as the FBI abuses its power. None other than the Justice Department's Inspector General has cited hundreds of cases where the bureau acquired records of American citizens without warrants or by knowingly misstating facts i.e., lying.<sup>69</sup>

A tragicomic use of labels by Floridian, candidate George Smathers ended the senatorial career of the honorable Claude Pepper. Before an unsophisticated audience, he truthfully revealed his opponent was a shameless extrovert, practiced nepotism with his sister-in-law, had a sister who was once a thespian, a brother who was a practicing *Homo sapiens* and before Claude was married, he had practiced celibacy.<sup>70</sup>

The use/abuse of the term "Tax" by the government is also revealing. When George H. W. Bush was running for the presidency in 1988, he promised no new taxes so when required to raise money to balance the budget, he imposed "User fees" in 1990.<sup>71</sup> Twenty-five years later, in his decision on King v. Burwell, Chief Justice John Roberts rewrote Obamacare, switching his own term "Tax" for the word "Penalty" as written in the law. He then adjudged as constitutional his rewritten version of Obamacare which featured his "Non-user fee"—a tax on those who do not have health insurance. Meanwhile, the spirit of J. E. Hoover in the guise of the Keystone Kops continued to shape the Department of Justice. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 opened all kinds of opportunities for abuse of the legal system, and the government was quick to act led by the president and his Attorney General John Ashcroft. W maintained the inherent right to label anyone an "Enemy combatant", then lock him up and throw away the key: i.e., the act of slamming the label on a person deprives him/her of all rights.<sup>72</sup> In the same vein, the Freedom of Information act was quickly and quietly abridged, and a directive allowing wire taps of conversations between lawyers and clients was slipped into the Federal Register. The arrests of 900 terror suspects were protested by eight FBI agents not because they violated anyone's civil rights but because they violated common sense: Tracking such suspects could have led to networks of terrorists. His brainstorm of interviewing another 5,000 suspects was dismissed as out of the Perry Mason School of law enforcement and ridiculous. Al-though these measures pumped up arrest records, none helped track down any terrorists.<sup>73</sup> By the same token, detention of nearly 600

prisoners in Guantanamo yielded no ranking member of Al Qaeda.<sup>74</sup>

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## Conflict of interest

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