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The American Fool: How Provincialism, Arrogance, and Greed Make American Foreign Policy an Exercise in Idiocy

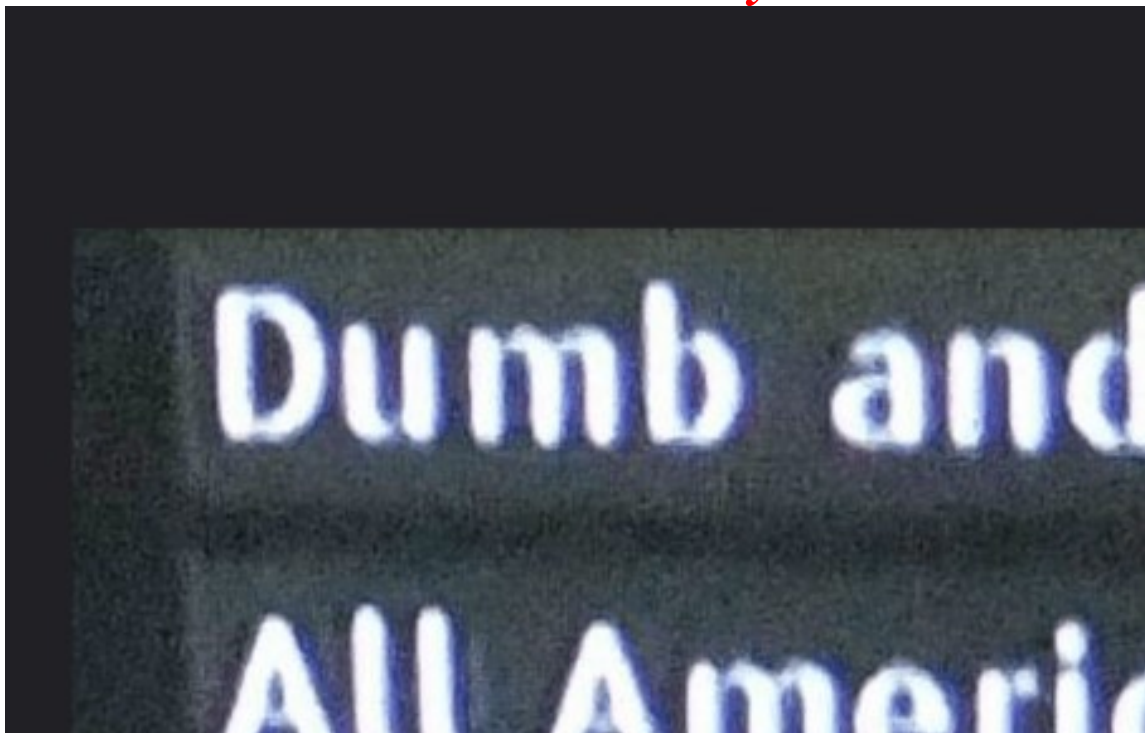


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The jokes regarding the “I” in “CIA” are familiar and predictable. The middle letter in the initialism might stand for imbecility, ignorance, or incompetence – essentially anything other than “intelligence.” Because its résumé of war crimes, international terror, and election skullduggery rivals the length of The Bible, most critics of the CIA – and American foreign policy, in general – justifiably focus on moral turpitude. Anyone with a conscience, and not under the spell of red, white, and blue hocus pocus propaganda, will

find it difficult to fend off queasiness after learning how the United States toppled democratically elected governments in Chile, Iran, and Guatemala – to name a few – and replaced them with torturous dictators, or how the International Court of Justice condemned the United States for targeting civilians with missiles and bombs in Nicaragua, or how its wars of choice and aggression in Vietnam and Iraq caused the deaths of millions of people. In *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated*, the late Gore Vidal includes a 19-page compilation from the Federation of American Scientists, in chart form, showing all of the countries that the US invaded or bombed from the Berlin Airlift of 1948 to Kosovo in 1999. At its conclusion, Vidal writes, “In these several hundred wars against Communism, terrorism, drugs, or sometimes nothing much, between Pearl Harbor and Tuesday, September 11, 2001, we tended to strike the first blow. But then we’re the good guys, right?”

No matter how loud the taxpayer funded jet fighter flyovers of football stadiums, there is no silencing the unavoidable “no” to Vidal’s query, just as the same answer would prove forthcoming if one were to ask, “We’re the smart guys, right?”

Underrated as a fundamental aspect of American foreign policy, and disaster creation, is the eternal presence and influence of the American Fool. To make the acquaintance of the American Fool, there is no better place to begin than with the Central Intelligence Agency. This is the brain trust that advised President John F. Kennedy that the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba would be a roaring success, and then distinguished itself in the same decade by convincing President Lyndon Johnson that a Saigon-stationed agent, Joe Hovey, was “crying wolf” when he warned of the Tet Offensive. Oops.

In the 1980s, the CIA continually advised government officials that the Soviet Union was stronger than ever, and provided no strategic warnings of its collapse – not even in the weeks leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Similarly, there was almost no high level CIA anticipation of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Even as field officers, and FBI agents in New York, were forecasting doom, the hot shots at Langley were claiming cluelessness. One hint as to why powerful Americans might not have more comprehension of international events comes from Robert Baer, former case officer for the CIA, who writes in his fascinating memoir, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA’s War on Terrorism*, that in 1994, while on vacation in the UK, he noticed a large amount of Islamic polemics in London bookstores articulating an “uncompromising hatred for the United States.” Many of the books, according to Baer, who is fluent in Arabic, also included borderline incitements to violence. “Curious, I asked my CIA colleagues in

London if they knew who was putting this stuff out,” Baer recalls, “They had no idea, but there was really no reason why they should have. Since our London office couldn’t claim a single Arabic speaker, it was unlikely that anyone there was going to wander down Edgeware Road.”

Baer left the CIA in 1997, and has subsequently authored several books – two of which formed the basis of the Steven Soderbergh film, *Syriana*. One of the film’s formative books, *[Sleeping With the Devil: How Washington Sold Our Soul for Saudi Crude](#)*, acts as Baer’s tour through the bizarro-world maze of American foreign policy after 9/11. Political and military leaders claimed that the only way to avoid the apocalypse was to waste trillions of dollars on colonial wars of occupation in the Middle East as part of a worldwide campaign against terrorism, obliterating countless people in the process, and yet they genuflect to world’s leading enabler of Islamic terrorism – Saudi Arabia. There is no greater image of the American Fool than Donald Trump, dancing with a sword alongside members of the Saudi Royal Family. Former Senator Bob Graham tried valiantly, but ultimately in vain, to call attention to the obvious connection between the House of Saud and 9/11, but garnered only indifference, if not contempt, from his colleagues and the mainstream media. How could any set of policies that emanate out of self-imposed ignorance turn out as anything other than destructive and stupid?

Robert Baer names the clear culprit for inattention to Saudi Arabia in *Sleeping With the Devil* – “Saudi Arabia has lots of money and lots of oil. The country proved over and over that it was willing to spend it, as well as open the oil spigots anytime we asked. With a national capital addicted to fast money and cheap oil, complaining about the situation was considered bad form, like pissing in the village well.”

The extraction and consumption of fossil fuels threatens to incinerate the entire planet – an inescapable reality – but the addiction that Baer rightly identifies transforms decisionmakers and influential observers into idiots, creating an otherwise unimaginable scenario where a teenager – Greta Thunberg – is wiser than the so called “wise men” of business and government.

When it comes to terrorism, the American Fool’s fun does not end in Saudi Arabia. While condemning the NSA’s unconstitutional data mining operation, Baer cited the CIA and FBI’s failure to prevent the Boston bombing, even after the perpetrator was regularly calling Chechnya, and buying explosives. He told an interviewer, “This whole idea that big data and algorithms are going to keep us safe is a way for American corporations to make money.”

Despite its own propensity for con artistry, the United States is unable to spot grifters among its adversaries. Baer, like many others, recalls a long line of foreign nationals who made millions simply by telling American officials what they wanted to hear, no matter how implausible or even absurd. One sterling example, Ahmed Chalabi, helped sell the second invasion of Iraq to American officials by agreeing that it had the high likelihood of success with minimal casualties. Chalabi would later boast to the British press about how easy it was to deceive representatives of the US government, all while receiving their financial subsidy. In 2003, a Jordanian military tribunal convicted him of bank fraud.

There is a distinct anatomy of the American Fool. Beginning at the top with its addled brain, priorities of avarice and global dominance dictate policies rather than reason, logic, data, or elementary ethics. Even if one is sufficiently psychopathic to not feel any remorse for killing and maiming generations of people around the world, the instinct for self-preservation might restrain an intelligent person. The late Chalmers Johnson, a political scientist who consulted for the CIA from 1967 to 1972, attempted to clear the fog, and bring clarity to the American public with his trilogy of books on the folly of imperialism. *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, the first installment, proceeded from a definition of the eponymous term, which was the CIA's label for understanding the "unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people." Johnson goes on to explain that "what the daily press reports as malign acts of 'terrorists' or 'drug lords' or 'rogue states' or 'illegal arms merchants' often turn out to be blowback from earlier American operations."

The terrorist strike against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon of September 11th was the most horrific example of "blowback" to take place on American soil. Beginning in the Carter administration and steadily escalating during the Reagan years, the United States armed, trained, and funded mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan as part of its Cold War strategy to weaken the Soviet Union, which was attempting to turn the mineral-rich country into a satellite state. Most of the Afghan and Pakistani fighters eventually became leading figures of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The most infamous example was a member of a wealthy Saudi family who left his university studies to join the mujahideen cause. His name was Osama Bin Laden.

Beyond the immediate cause of blowback, terrorist hatred for the United States, and the 9/11 attack itself, derive from decades of American policies in the region, including the devastating economic sanctions, consistent bombing of cities, poisoning of the environment with munitions and toxic materials, assassination of political and military

leaders, desecration of Islamic holy sites, unwavering support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, full-fledged war. One does not need the expertise and insight of Chalmers Johnson to predict that rage is the likeliest native reaction to blowing up buildings and killing people in other countries. Most Americans didn't appear particularly happy on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, but with the American flag tied directly around his eyes, the American Fool is incapable of comprehending that residents of nations on the other side of the globe have the same emotions, loyalties, and concern for their neighbors and sovereignty.

The brain of the American Fool, clouded by greed and lust for power, directs the appendages to carry out its wishes. Rarely does the federal government have any difficulty selling war to the general public, because the average citizen knows next to nothing about geography, international relations, or history. On the former, a 2008 National Geographic survey found that only 37 percent of recent American college graduates could identify Iraq on a map, and only twenty percent could point to Israel. Derek Alderman, the former president of the American Association of Geographers, cites the National Geographic survey, along with his own substantial body of research, to argue for the "urgency of radical geographic literacy." The stumbling of the American Fool presents a grave risk to people around the world, Alderman reports, because advanced placement exams from high school students are often littered with racist stereotypes regarding Africa and Asia. Bigoted and ignorant assumptions help justify acts of military violence, and make international cooperation far less likely.

Alderman's program of deep geographic instruction, with connections to history, politics, and cultural and religious studies, for all its noble aspirations, is as tough to imagine as the audience at a Trump rally chanting, "Build That Geographic Curriculum!" The average American shows little curiosity for matters of substance, especially those that take place beyond the country's borders. The educational system, from the elementary to university level, continually cuts the social sciences, fine arts, and humanities, relegating learning to career preparation, and the electorate is consistently willing to elect as president American Fools like George W. Bush. According to Peter Galbraith, former US ambassador and diplomat, Bush did not know in 2002, while prosecuting wars throughout the Middle East, that there were two major branches of Islam in Iraq. He reportedly told a group of Iraqi Americans, "I thought Iraqis were Muslims." Barack Obama, despite his better education and more sophisticated mind, mostly continued Bush's policies, choosing to act a fool even if he knew better, so that he could then hand off the nuclear codes to the likes of

Donald Trump, who according to multiple accounts, did not understand the significance of Pearl Harbor.

The American Fool now stands naked in front of the world, as its lethal failures in Afghanistan are on full display. Recognition that nearly any invasion of Afghanistan was doomed to fail was so common throughout the world that the country earned the nickname “graveyard of Empires.” The Greek Empire, the Mongol Empire, the Persian Empire, the British Empire, and the Soviet Union all made attempts to conquer the Afghans, but perhaps none embarrassed itself as thoroughly as the United States. Nearly 2,500 Americans died in a twenty year war in Afghanistan, costing the US taxpayer \$2 trillion, all to watch the Taliban regain control of every province – an outcome that the US could have avoided if it accepted the Taliban’s unconditional surrender in December of 2001. Rarely does the US ever count the dead among its victims, but Brown University estimates that 71,000 Afghan and Pakistani civilians died in the US war. How many of the friends, relatives, and co-religionists of those 71,000 are currently plotting their own forms of “blowback” against the Empire that rained hellfire on its villages? Should a terrorist attack against Americans occur, it is a safe bet that the American Fool will rinse and repeat the whole cycle by launching a high powered war, using disproportionate levels of violence, and then committing to a multiyear effort of “nation building.”

The average American soldier lacked the fluency in the Dari or Pashtun languages or literacy in Islam and Afghan culture to ingratiate himself to the Afghan people, but many combat veterans knew that Afghans rightly saw the US as a colonial power, and that any attempt to “win their hearts and minds” was destined to fail. Somehow, yet again, military brass and intelligence agencies were oblivious. Their leading figures claimed right until the last minute that US-trained Afghan security forces would hold the line against the Taliban. The largely peaceful evacuation of Americans and Afghan allies from Kabul has given the mainstream press a wonderful opportunity to showcase their own ignorance. Casting President Biden as the lone villain for ordering the withdrawal of US military personnel, and acting as if the previous twenty years never took place, leading pundits wipe their tears as they shriek concern for the Afghans, often asking “how could this happen?” Their hearts never seemed to bleed, and they never articulated similar inquiries, throughout the two decade war, even as the US bombed and shot thousands of Afghans.

When the *Washington Post* published the “Afghan Papers” in 2019 – a collection of high level military and White House documents proving that leading officials in the Bush and Obama administrations knew that the war was nothing more than pointless destruction –

the rest of the media was practically mute. The American public did not so much as raise a collective objection – the antiwar marches, petitions, and rallies all having died down with the inauguration of Barack Obama, the only recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize to prosecute a war and bomb seven countries.

Now, Obama's vice president, Joe Biden, is watching his poll numbers slide, as an increasing amount of Americans hold him responsible for "Afghanistan bedlam." Meanwhile, the *Intercept* reports that \$10,000 invested in defense contractor stocks when the Afghanistan war began is now worth almost \$100,000. That return rate outperforms the market by 58 percent.

Cue the music: "Everybody Plays the Fool."

David Masciotra is the author of five books, including Mellencamp: American Troubadour (University Press of Kentucky, 2015) and I Am Somebody: Why Jesse Jackson Matters (Bloomsbury, 2020).

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