

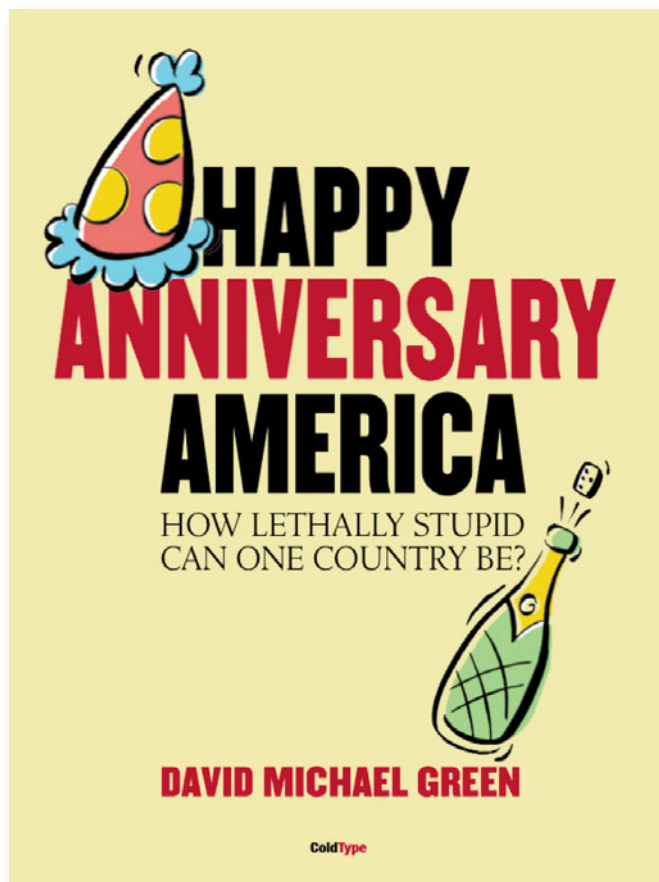
HAPPY
ANNIVERSARY
AMERICA

HOW LETHALLY STUPID
CAN ONE COUNTRY BE?



DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

ColdType



David Michael Green is a professor of political science at Hofstra University in New York. He is delighted to receive readers' reactions to his articles (mailto:dmg@regressiveantidote.net), but regrets that time constraints do not always allow him to respond.

More of his work can be found at his website, <http://regressiveantidote.net>

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WATCHING GEORGE W. BUSH in operation in the middle of March is like having an out-of-body experience. On acid. During a nightmare. In a different galaxy. As he presides over the latest disaster of his administration (No, it's not a terrorist attack – that was 2001! No, it's not a catastrophic war – that was 2003! No, it's not a drowning city – that was 2005! This one is an economic meltdown, ladies and gentlemen!) bringing to it the same blithe disengagement with which he's attended the previous ones, you cannot but stop and gaze in stark comedic awe, realizing that the most powerful polity that ever existed on the planet twice picked this imbecilic buffoon as its leader, from among 300 million other choices. Seeing him clown with the Washington press corps yet once again – and seeing them fawn over him, laugh in all the right places, and give him a standing ovation, also yet once again – is the equivalent of having all your logic circuits blown simultaneously. Truly, the universe has a twisted and deeply ironic sense of humor. Monty Python is about as funny – and as stiff – as Dick Nixon, by comparison.

It's simply incomprehensible. It's not so astonishing, of course, that a country could have a bad leader whose aims are nefarious on the occasions when they are competent enough to rise to that level of intentionality. Plenty of countries have managed that feat, especially when – as was the case with Bush – every sort of scam is employed to steal power, and then pure corruption and intimidation used to keep it. History is quite littered indeed with bimbos and petty criminals of this caliber. What is harder to explain is how a country of such remarkable achievements in other domains, and with the capacity to choose, and in the twenty-first century no less, allows this to happen. And then stands by silently watching for eight years as the tragedy unfolds before their eyes, all 600 million of them, hardly any of them even blinking.

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And so, remarkably, as we mark now the fifth anniversary of the very most tragic of these debacles, the most destructive and the most shameful – because it was the most avoidable – the sad question of the hour is less what is to be done about it than will anyone even notice? Not likely. And not for very long if they do. And, most of all, definitely not enough so as to take meaningful action to bring it to an end, even at this absurdly late date.

But let's give credit where credit is due. This is precisely by design. This is exactly the outcome intended by the greatest propaganda-promulgating regime since Hermann Göring set fire to the Reichstag. It was Göring himself who famously reminded us that, "Naturally the common people don't want war; neither in Russia, nor in England, nor in America, nor in Germany. That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. ...Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country."

Sure worked in Germany. And it worked even better here, because these guys were so absolutely careful to avoid exposing the costs of their war to those who could demand its end. For example, by some counts, there are more mercenaries fighting in Iraq, at extremely high cost, than there are US military personnel. There's only one reason for that. If the administration implemented the draft that is actually necessary to supply this war with adequate personnel, the public would end both the war and the careers of its sponsors, post haste. For the same reason, this is the first American war ever which has not only not been accompanied by a tax increase, but has in fact witnessed a tax cut. Likewise – to 'preserve the dignity' of the dead, of course – you are no longer permitted to see photographs of flag-draped caskets returning to Dover Air Force Base. And the press are embedded with forces who are also responsible for their safety, which is just a fancy way of saying that they're so censored they make Pravda look good. It is, in short, quite easy for average Americans to get through their day, every day, without the war impacting their lives in any visible respect, and that is precisely what hundreds of millions of us are doing, week in and week out. All of this is courtesy of an administration that couldn't run a governmental program to save its own life – but, boy, they sure as hell know how to market stuff.

So perhaps there is no excuse, after all, for my naiveté, for my credulousness in wanting to believe that twenty-first century America might be different enough not to follow the smallest of men – a personal failure and a 40-year drunkard who, unlike

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Herr Göring's führer, couldn't even claim charismatic eloquence as the sole virtue accounting for his power – to follow such a petulant child off the deep end of a completely unjustified war. Perhaps Americans and American democracy are no wiser or better than any other people or political system, even today, even after the worst century of warfare in human history, even after the mirror-image experience of Vietnam. Maybe the experience of Iraq hasn't even changed them, and they'll once again follow like lemmings when led to war by pathetic creatures such as George W. Bush, fifty years from now. Or five years from now. Or even five months from now, as the creature d.b.a Dick Cheney tees up a confrontation with Iran in order keep Democrats out of the White House, and himself out of jail.

Sure, presidents and prime ministers, no less than kings and führers, will lie their countries into war. Sure, they're very good at it, and getting better all the time. Definitely a frightened people are more prone to stupidity than those lucky enough to contemplate in the luxury of quiet safety. Without question, it helps an awful lot – if you're just Joe Sixpack, out there trying to figure out international politics in-between a long day's work, helping the kids with their algebra homework, and the Yankee game – to have a checking-and-balancing Congress, a responsible opposition party, and/or a critical media helping you to understand the issues accurately, rather than gleefully capitulating to executive power at every opportunity. But that by no means excuses a public who were fundamentally far more lazy than they were ignorant or confused. And lazy is one thing when you're talking about a highway bill or even national healthcare. But when it comes to war, lazy is murder.

I don't think it took a giant leap of logic to understand that this war was bogus from the beginning, even based on what was known at the time. The war was sold on three basic arguments, each of which could have been easily dismantled even then with a little thoughtful consideration.

The first was WMD, of course. So, okay, perhaps your average American didn't know that the United States government (including many in the current administration) had actually once supplied Saddam Hussein the materiel to make these evil weapons, and had covered for him at the UN and elsewhere when he used them. Although this historical myopia is very much part of the problem, of course. Americans are so ready to denounce supposed enemies without doing the slightest bit of historical homework to become acquainted with the slightest bit of history to make sense of the situation. If you don't know that the US actually canceled elections and helped assassinate a 'democratic' president in Vietnam, of course you're going to support war there. If you don't know that the US toppled a democratically elected Iranian government to steal the country's oil and then installed a brutal dictatorship in its place, of course you're going to be angry at US diplomats being held

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hostage. And if you don't bother to learn the true history of Iraq, perhaps you'll find the WMD argument quite persuasive.

But, in fact, even without the historical background information, it never made a damn bit of sense. Iraq had been pulverized by war and sanctions for over twenty years prior to 2003. Two-thirds of its airspace was controlled by foreign militaries. Its northern region was effectively autonomous, a separate country in all but name. It was in no position to attack anyone. Moreover, it hadn't attacked anyone – not the United States or anyone else. Indeed, it hadn't even threatened to attack anyone. Shouldn't that be part of the calculation in determining whether to go to war? Do we really want to give carte blanche to any dry (we hope) drunkard in the White House who today wants to bomb Norway (“They're stealing our fish!”), or tomorrow wants to invade Burkina Faso (“They dress funny!”)?

Too often, of course, the historical answer to that question has unfortunately been yes, we apparently do want to do that. But let's consider the massive warning signs in this case, even apart from what could be known about the administration's lies at the time. Shouldn't it have been enormously problematic that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11? Even the administration never had the gall to make that claim. Wasn't it transparent to anyone that America had plenty on its plate already in dealing with the enemy we were told we had, rather than adding a new adventure to the pile? And why wasn't this thing selling throughout the world, or even amongst the traitorous half of the Democratic Party in Congress? Remember how everyone at home and abroad – yes, including the French – supported the US and its military actions in Afghanistan only twelve months before? Shouldn't it have been a warning sign of epic proportions that these same folks wouldn't countenance a war in Iraq just a year later? That the administration had to yank its Security Council resolution off the table, even after breaking both the arms of every member-state around the horseshoe table, because it could still only get Britain and two other patsies to lie down for this outrage, out of a total of fifteen, and nine needed to pass?

And how about the logic of that whole WMD thing, after all? Did anyone ever stop to think that several dozen other countries have WMD, including some that are pretty hostile to the United States? Did anyone not remember that the Soviets once had nearly 25,000 strategic nuclear warheads pointed in our direction? What ever happened to the logic of deterrence? To mutually assured destruction? And what about the mad rush to go to war, preempting the UN weapons inspectors from doing their job? Are we really okay with the notion that instead of 'risking' whatever would have been at risk by giving the inspectors another six or eight weeks to finish up, we've instead bought this devastating war down on our own heads for no reason at all? If you stop to think about it, it makes you shudder. Which I guess explains why not

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too many people stop to think about it.

The second rationale for war was the bogus linkage between Iraq and al Qaeda. The extent and ramifications of this lie are so significant that the White House, it was just recently revealed, squelched a Pentagon report showing no connections between the two. Is this sort of censorship what the Bush administration means by democracy, the remedy it's always preaching for the rest of the world but never practicing at home? Anyhow, remember how definitive Cheney and the rest were of this supposed al Qaeda linkage, based pretty much entirely on a meeting between two operatives in Prague which likely didn't even take place? Now we find out that the Department of Defense has spent the last five years combing through a mere 600,000 documents, and found zero evidence of such a link. Not some evidence. Not mixed evidence. Zero evidence.

But you could tell even then that they had almost nothing to go on. Christ, the United States government itself has had far more interactions with al Qaeda – including helping to build the beast from its inception – than one disputed meeting between two spooks in Prague. Doesn't it seem that a decision to go to war should hang on more than a single thread like that, let alone a narrow and tattered one? And how many of us are down for attacking any country right now that might have had a single meeting between a low-level functionary and an al Qaeda representative?

Then, once again, there's the matter of that whole pesky logic thing. Pay attention now, class. What do we know about al Qaeda? They are devoted to religious war – jihad – in the name of replacing governments across the Middle East with theocracies, or better yet recreating the old Islamic caliphate stretching across the region, right? Right. Now if this vision could have more thoroughly contradicted Saddam's agenda for a secular dictatorship seeking regional domination on his own Stalinist terms, it is hard to imagine how. You don't need a PhD in international politics to see that these two actors were about as antithetical to each other as the Republican Party is to integrity. Then again, even having one doesn't necessarily mean you have the foggiest clue about what's going on in the world, as Condoleeza Rice clearly demonstrated by brilliantly failing to anticipate that Hamas would win elections she had pushed the Palestinians to hold. For someone serving as secretary of state, this idiocy is the rough equivalent of anyone else being shocked when a dropped bowling ball hurtles to the ground, because they're not yet fully acquainted with the concept of gravity. Evidently, in Texas this is what they call 'credentials'.

Lastly, Bush's little adventure in Mesopotamia was supposed to bring democracy to the region, remember? Never mind, of course, that there has long already been a fairly thriving Islamic democracy, right next door. Oops! It's called Turkey. And let's

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not forget Mr. Bush's long-standing devotion to democracy, as he amply demonstrated in the American election of 2000. Or as he has continually manifested by bravely and publically pushing the Chinese to democratize. Just as he has with his pals in Egypt and especially the family friends running Saudi Arabia, the recipient of more American foreign aid than nearly any other country in all the world. And let's not forget the several hundred thousand perished souls from Darfur, whom this great champion of human rights has fought valiantly to keep alive by... by... well, I'm sure he's done a lot behind the scenes. Sure is gonna be hard for them to exercise their precious right to vote from the next world, eh?

What is clear is that the reasons given to the American public for the war in Iraq were entirely bogus. This much is already on the public record, from the Downing Street Memos and beyond. Even if we can only speculate on why they actually invaded – oil, glory, personal insecurity, Israel, clobbering Democrats, Middle Eastern dominance – what we know for sure is that the rationale fed to the public was a knowingly fabricated pack of scummy lies. It wasn't about WMD, it wasn't about links to al Qaeda, and it sure wasn't about democracy.

But even if we can't identify the true motivations within the administration for invading, we can surely begin to see the costs. Probably a million Iraqi civilians are dead. Over four million are displaced and now living as refugees. Together, these equal a staggering one-fifth of the population of the entire country. Meanwhile, the remaining four-fifths are living in squalor, fear and a psychological damage so extensive that it is hard to grasp. America has lost 4,000 soldiers, with perhaps another 30,000 gravely wounded. Hundreds of thousands more will be scarred for life from their experiences in the hell of Mr. Bush's war. Our military is broken and incapable of responding to a real emergency, at home or abroad. Our economy will sustain a blow of perhaps three trillion dollars before it is all said and done. Our reputation in the world is in the toilet. We have turned the Iranian theocracy into a regional hegemon. And we have massively proliferated our own enemies within the Islamic community. That would be one hell of an expensive war, even if the reasons given for it were legitimate. It is nearly incomprehensible considering that they were not.

This month, a man died in France, the last surviving veteran of World War I, a devastating conflict that – even a century later – nobody can still really explain to this day. Meanwhile, Dick Cheney, John McCain and Joe “Make-me-SecDef-Mac-oh-please-pick-me-Mac” Lieberman parachuted into Iraq for photo-ops to sustain the war they don't have the integrity or the guts to abandon. Never mind that their visits had to be by surprise, and that they stroll around the Green Zone wearing armored vests – surely the most powerful measures of the war's success imaginable. Of course, to be fair, we've only been at it for five years now. Perhaps after the

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remaining ninety-five on McCain's agenda go by, Americans will finally be safe enough in Iraq to announce their visits in advance.

So, Happy Anniversary, America! You put these people in charge, and then – after seeing in explicit in detail what they were capable of – you actually did it again in 2004! You stood by in silence watching the devastation wrought upon an innocent people, produced in your name and financed by your tax dollars. And you continue to do just that again, now in Year Six.

Brilliant! Put on your party hat, America. You won the prize.

You've successfully answered the musical question, "How lethally stupid can one country be?"



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