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The Six Principles of Stupidity

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This was the week in which the Chinese made incredible gains in artificial intelligence and the Americans made incredible gains in human stupidity. I'm sorry, but I look at the Trump administration's behavior over the last week and the only word that accurately describes it is: stupid.

I am not saying the members of the Trump administration are not intelligent. We all know high-I.Q. people who behave in a way that's as dumb as rocks. I don't believe that there are stupid people, just stupid behaviors. As the Italian historian Carlo Cipolla once put it, "The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person."

And I am certainly not saying Donald Trump's supporters are less intelligent than others. I've learned over the years that many upscale Democrats detest intellectual diversity. When they have power over a system — whether it's academia, the mainstream media, the nonprofits or the Civil Service — they tend to impose a stifling orthodoxy that makes everybody within it duller, more conformist and insular. If Republicans want to upend that, I say: Go for it.

I define stupidity as behaving in a way that ignores the question: What would happen next? If somebody comes up to you and says, "I think I'm going to take a hike in a lightning storm with a copper antenna on my head," stupidity replies, "That sounds like a really great idea!" Stupidity is the tendency to take actions that hurt you and the people around you.

The administration produced volleys of stupidity this week. It renewed threats to impose ruinous tariffs on Canada and Mexico that would drive up inflation in America. It attempted a broad and general purge of the federal work force, apparently without asking how that purge would affect government operations. But I'd like to focus on one other episode: the attempt to freeze federal spending on assistance programs, and Trump's subsequent decision to reverse course and undo the freeze.

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When announcing the freeze, the administration stated its clear goal — to defund things like the diversity, equity and inclusion programs that Trump disapproves of. A prudent administration would have picked the programs it opposed and focused on cutting those, through a well-established process known as rescission authority. But the Trump administration decided to impose a vague, half-baked freeze on what it claimed amounted to more than \$3 trillion in federal spending. Suddenly, patients in cancer trials at the National Institutes of Health didn't know if they could continue their treatments, Head Start administrators didn't know if they could draw federal funds, cities and states across America didn't know if they would have money for police forces, schools, nutrition programs, highway repair and other basic services.

This Trump policy was like trying to cure acne with decapitation. Nobody seems to have asked the question: If we freeze all grant spending, what will happen next? Once the ramifications of that stupidity became obvious, Trump reversed course. And this is my big prediction for this administration: It will churn out a steady stream of stupid policies, and when the consequences of those policies begin to hit Trump's approval rating, he will flip-flop, diminish or abandon those policies. He loves popularity more than any idea.

But it is still true that we're going to have to learn a lot about stupidity over the next four years. I've distilled what I've learned so far into six main principles:

Principle 1: Ideology produces disagreement, but stupidity produces befuddlement. This week, people in institutions across America spent a couple of days trying to figure out what the hell was going on. This is what happens when a government freezes roughly \$3 trillion in spending with a two-page memo that reads like it was written by an intern. When stupidity is in control, the literature professor Patrick Moreau argues, words become unscrewed "from their relation to reality."

Principle 2: Stupidity often inheres in organizations, not individuals. When you create an organization in which one man has all the power and everybody else has to flatter his preconceptions, then stupidity will surely result. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it: “This is virtually a sociological-psychological law. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other.”

Principle 3: People who behave stupidly are more dangerous than people who behave maliciously. Evil people at least have some accurate sense of their own self-interest, which might restrain them. Stupidity dares greatly! Stupidity already has all the answers!

Principle 4: People who behave stupidly are unaware of the stupidity of their actions. You may have heard of the Dunning-Kruger effect, which is that incompetent people don’t have the skills to recognize their own incompetence. Let’s introduce the Hegseth-Gabbard corollary: The Trump administration is attempting to remove civil servants who may or may not be progressive but who have tremendous knowledge in their field of expertise and hire MAGA loyalists who often lack domain knowledge or expertise. The results may not be what the MAGA folks hoped for.

Principle 5: Stupidity is nearly impossible to oppose. Bonhoeffer notes, “Against stupidity we are defenseless.” Because stupid actions do not make sense, they invariably come as a surprise. Reasonable arguments fall on deaf ears. Counter-evidence is brushed aside. Facts are deemed irrelevant. Bonhoeffer continues, “In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack.”

Principle 6: The opposite of stupidity is not intelligence, it’s rationality. The psychologist Keith Stanovich defines rationality as the capacity to make decisions that help people achieve their objectives. People in the grip of the populist mind-set tend to be contemptuous of experience, prudence and expertise, helpful components of rationality. It turns out that this can make some populists willing to believe anything — conspiracy theories, folk tales and internet legends; that vaccines are harmful to children. They don’t live within a structured body of thought but within a rave party chaos of prejudices.

As time has gone by, I’ve developed more and more sympathy for the goals the populists are trying to achieve. America’s leadership class has spent the last few generations excluding, ignoring, rejecting and insulting a large swath of this country. It’s terrible to be assaulted in this way. It’s worse when you finally seize power and start assaulting yourself — and everyone around you. In fact, it’s stupid.

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