**The stupid gene**

[Harlan Ullman](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/harlan-ullman/)

February 20, 2020

In Anatomy of Failure: Why America Loses Every [War](https://dailytimes.com.pk/556931/13-year-old-nails-elton-john-classic-on-americas-got-talent-the-champions-final/) It Starts, one of the endemic causes of failure was due to the acute lack of knowledge and understanding of the circumstances in which force was used. Obviously ideology, politics, group think, bureaucratic ineptness and other factors contributed. However, in retrospect, perhaps another reason demonstrated failure: stupidity!

And, quixotically, is it possible that stupidity arises from a “stupid gene” deeply embedded in human DNA? Of course, what is stupid as opposed simply to committing an error or making a mistake? Is cognitive dissonance, that is actions known to be harmful or dangerous such as smoking or taking risks that are foolish, simply an extension of stupidity? Or is stupidity ignorance and lack of intelligence and IQ? And what happens when something stupid such as making the wrong decision turns out well or a stupid bet returns a huge amount of money?

That said, many decisions made by states are, by any definition, “stupid.” No rational person would have allowed the events of 1914 turn into a world war. Yet that happened. No capable American politician would allow the national debt to soar to $23 trillion accepting annual deficits in excess of $1 trillion. Yet, that is the case.

American failure in using force often arose from various degrees of stupidity in turn arising from arrogance and a sense of superiority. For the United States, for understandable reasons, World War II produced both arrogance and this sense of superiority. America’s first 14 decades of existence and protective isolation provided by two vast oceans and natural resources of incalculable value moderated and contained any most of stupidity. The attack on Pearl Harbor and the sinking the American battle fleet changed that in December 1941.

The last and current administration have made China and Russia not merely competitors but adversaries and potential enemies. U.S. military strategy is “to deter and if war comes defeat” either. To say this is stupid understates the meaning of this word.

In three and a half years, from a standing start, the arsenal of democracy armed America and its allies ultimately forcing the fascist enemies of Japan, Italy and Germany to surrender unconditionally. In 1945, with much of the world in ruin, America was the strategic, military and economic colossus dominating the globe. That achievement led to an arrogance and sense of superiority as well as an unshakeable belief in the righteousness of democracy and its universal appeal.

That would lead to disastrous and some stupid decisions. For the first two decades of Cold War, America acted often with impunity in overthrowing or attempting to overthrow regimes antithetical to democracy from Latin America to Iran. As John Kennedy put it in 1961, “we will pay any price and bear any burden” to advance the cause of liberty.

Vietnam showed how wrong those promises and pretenses were. In retrospect, three presidents made stupid decisions that produced 58,000 dead Americans and countless Vietnamese in the first war the U.S. lost since the Civil War.

Failure would persist. Grenada, Lebanon, Afghanistan and the second Iraq War turned to be disasters of one form or another. Only the George H.W. Bush administration avoided the peril of the “stupid gene,” something predecessors have not. And this gene is not confined to these shores. BREXIT may well prove to be a really stupid decision taken by the UK. And China’s handling of the Coronavirus is bordering on stupidity run amuck.

Alas, the stupid gene is at work in today’s American domestic politics. The failed Democratic ploy to impeach and convict the president; a Democratic party split between nominating the inconceivable or the unelectable; and the demise of the Republican Party under Donald Trump are the latest symptoms of this gene’s presence. And no doubt the 2020 campaign will produce many more acts of stupidity beyond the Iowa caucus debacle.

Sadly, foreign policy is far from immune. The last and current administration have made China and Russia not merely competitors but adversaries and potential enemies. U.S. military strategy is “to deter and if war comes defeat” either. To say this is stupid understates the meaning of this word.

No one has defined what deter or defeat means and whether these are even achievable aims. Yes, China and Russia have interests that conflict with ours, allies and friends. Yet, which of these conflicts would cause a war? No one has answered this question other than through hypothetical scenarios such as China invading Taiwan or Russia moving into the Baltics, the latter an assault no Russian leader would seriously consider.

Historians well into the future will ponder how all this has happened and why so many stupidity induced acts occurred simultaneously. Possibly, as Shakespeare observed, “to err is human.” And possibly that underestimates the power of the stupid gene. One can only hope that a future Nobel laureate is working hard on a cure.

*The writer is a Senior Advisor at the Atlantic Council. His latest book is Anatomy of Failure: Why America Has Lost Every War It Starts*