



Notes from the Dismal Science:

MY THEORY OF HOW BRILLIANT
PEOPLE CAN SAY STUPID THINGS

By Sherman Folland

Have you ever had the experience of hearing or reading some brilliant, or famous-for-being-brilliant person who is publicly saying something you know to be utterly ridiculous? How can this be? Are you like me and want to find some explanation for this? Anyway, here is my theory for it.

Suppose that there are two kinds of people in the world. Call them the “traveler people” and the “light bulb” people. Light bulb people are those who sincerely believe that the human brain is like a light bulb, higher wattage bulbs are brighter, bright bulbs illuminate things in all directions. Traveler people, in contrast, think that human intelligence is like traveling. You want to know what the Old Town in Prague is like then you ask someone who has been there. Reading, too, is travel in a more metaphorical sense, as is painstaking lab work. I prefer the traveler people, myself. After all, who would you hire to fix your plumbing if both were available at the same price: A brilliant theoretical physicist or a plumber with 20 years of experience? But, it’s fair to ask of this theory, “so what?” What difference would it make, anyway?

To show the difference, consider this example. Two brilliant chemists have achieved national prominence in their

field. Dan Rather comes over to interview them both, but serially. Rather asks the first chemist, who happens to be a light bulb person, his first question: “Professor, as a national expert on chemistry, what do you think of American foreign policy during the Cold War?” This professor would say something like: “Well, thank you very much, Dan. I relish the chance to discuss my views on foreign policy”. In contrast, his next interview is with the traveler person, and it might go like this. Rather: “Professor, as a national expert on chemistry, what do you think of American foreign policy during the Cold War?” The traveler would say: “Dan, how the heck am I supposed to know that? I have studied chemistry all my life. When it comes to foreign policy, I am just as ignorant as you are, Dan.”

Well, you probably get the idea: Brilliant people can say very stupid things when they talk outside of their area of genuine expertise. It is a simple theory and the real challenge will probably be to find a valid test for it. Unfortunately, by press-time I have not thought of a valid test for it, but I do have some examples. See if you agree that the following are cases where a truly brilliant individual said or did something stupid while acting outside of the area of his genuine expertise.

Proposed Cases:

RICHARD BISSELL

Bissell was brilliant in economics as a student in the ‘40s and soon acquired a professorship at Princeton, where he continued to shine. Picked to help to develop the Marshall Plan, he became its chief economic architect. When the CIA recruited him in the ‘50s, Bissell wandered confidently into unfamiliar territory. Not intimidated, he developed the U2 program for Eisenhower and headed the Kennedy government’s assassination section. Bissell designed the assassination attempts on

Fidel Castro and then planned the Bay of Pigs invasion. Arguably these aggressive disasters contributed to Khrushchev's own boldness leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis, perhaps they might have led to nuclear war. A comment among coworkers at that time was that Bissell knew everything there was to know about economics but virtually nothing about foreign policy. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, JFK gave Bissell a medal and then ask him to leave. Would you agree? A man who believed he was a bright bulb?

SIDNEY GOTTLIEB

Gottlieb was already widely noticed as a brilliant chemistry graduate student at CalTech. With unlimited options in academe, he nevertheless chose government service. Did he really continue in his field of chemistry while in service at the CIA? You decide. Gottlieb became the wizard behind the colorful dirty tricks designed to do in Castro with minimum attribution to the U.S. Chemicals were indeed involved in his plans. One plan of this clever assassin involved soaking Fidel Castro's beard with a solution that would cause the beard to fall off while he was speaking in public. Another proposed humiliation would require numerous firecrackers. My pitch is that Gottlieb knew chemistry, but he too didn't know foreign policy and consequently didn't fully understand the international consequences of his plans. I am no foreign policy expert either, but wouldn't you agree?: If he was one of Kennedy's "best and brightest", then he must have been a best and brightest light bulb.

WILLIAM SHOCKLEY

Shockley won the Nobel Prize, and later on, having studied data on IQ and race he reached some stunning conclusions, ones that experts 40 years later say were not true then and are

not true now. Shockley famously claimed that “Nature has color-coded groups of individuals so that statistically reliable predictions on their adaptability to intellectually rewarding and effective lives can be made.” He made this claim with insufficient evidence; a more recent Nobelist (Heckman), who studies IQ as part of his field, could show mathematically that such conclusions do not follow from existing evidence. Furthermore, experts explain that identical twin studies, which do show a degree of heritability, say something about IQ *within* families not *across* races.

How could a Nobel Prize winner make such fundamental oversteps of the evidence? There is no doubt whatsoever that he was brilliant. My reasoning is this: Shockley’s Nobel Prize was won for inventing the transistor, it had nothing to do with the study of IQ nor with the study of racial differences. It may inform us of his emotions about his genetic theories to note that he also attempted to start a sperm bank for exceptionally bright people, so that he could share his brilliant genes with humanity at large. Reportedly, the bank failed due to lack of interest among the other super brilliant people. “Er, thanks for the invitation William, but, ah, I’ll have to pass right now, pretty busy.”

NOAM CHOMSKY

Chomsky began public life as an outstanding linguistic theorist and one of the most frequently cited. Even when one reads critics of Chomsky’s linguistics, one has to notice that he was and is at the center of his field of study. Decades ago he became, as a second profession, the leading radical critic of American policy. Surely America, the land of free speech, needs radical critics among us; this is a necessary feature of a robust democracy. But among Chomsky’s numerous insights are many jarring public statements. Perhaps convincing the reader is unnecessary on this point, but I offer one quote as an example. Here he is defending North Vietnamese Commu-

nists (NLF) after admitting to the evidence of their slaughter of landlords upon taking power.

“I don’t accept the view that we can just condemn the NLF terror, period, because it was so horrible. I think we really have to ask questions of comparative costs, ugly as that may sound. And if we are going to take a moral position on this—and I think we should—we have to ask both what the consequences were of using terror and not using terror. If it were true that the consequences of not using terror would be that the peasantry in Vietnam would continue to live in the state of the peasantry of the Philippines, then I think the use of terror would be justified.” (Chomsky quoted in Windshuttle, 2005, online).

Just terror? Give me a break! Such comments make one think that his real expertise lies in the linguistics lab at MIT.

ROBERT McNAMARA

Recalling from last semester’s film, *The Fog of War*, McNamara was simply brilliant from elementary school on. Continued brilliance in college and graduate school led to an Ivy League academic position and very soon thereafter the CEO position at Ford. Did he know anything about cars? Well, corporations frequently hire people who know business even if they know little about the product itself, so perhaps this isn’t the acid test. But, when Kennedy cajoled McNamara into taking the position at Defense, he seemed far out of his water. Many of us remember the television news reports coming in tallying the numbers of enemy dead as if this were a factory product. What dismayed me watching the *The Fog of War*, however, was how easily McNamara gave in to unwise policy demands of his superiors, both Kennedy and Johnson. Halberstam’s book on this era, *The Best and the Brightest*, fits my own theme well and was one of the inspirations for this column.

The Idea in a Nutshell

Halberstam wasn't essential, however, there are many influences for any idea and my favorite for this one is Will Rogers (I Never Met a Man I Didn't Like, 1991, p. 231):

There is nothing as stupid as an educated man if you get him off the thing he was educated in.

What's in Store?

It is said that a good theory is one that predicts well. So, with trepidation I will try a prediction. Only one and with trepidation, because I fear that I may already be off the thing that I was educated in. Also, let me say that I mean no ill will, I hope this person proves me wrong. Here goes:

Paul Wolfowitz was just appointed President of the World Bank. Wolfowitz was a key architect of the Iraq War, and, as a hawkish neoconservative, has spent his career studying and projecting American military power overseas. It has been said that the key to successful world development is that it be multilateral; to put the matter mildly, Wolfowitz has not been multilaterally minded. The heads of the World Bank have generally been experts in finance, banking, and economics. A recent president, Joseph Stiglitz even received the Nobel Prize in Economics. Of Wolfowitz, the *Economist Magazine* (June 4th, 05, p. 65) said:

He knows little about finance; only a little more about development, although as ambassador to Indonesia for three years, he has lived in a populous, poor country. Behind him he leaves the ongoing nightmare of reconstructing Iraq, a project that is certainly behind schedule and over budget.

I hope my little theory is wrong regarding Wolfowitz and the World Bank. On the face of it, however, it looks like a slam dunk.