

History's Seven Dumbest Self-Inflicted Political Disasters

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As I'm sitting here both feral and furloughed—my major source of funding is under a “do not work” order [1]—it seems time for another blog entry before—out-sourcing myself— I head over to Europe, which is still very much in business, for a series of talks.

The sheer lunacy of the current situation in the U.S. has been noted repeatedly, but in the severely reality-challenged media environment, I see little evidence that anyone feels it will end up causing more than the mild inconvenience of a few vacations ruined by the closure of national parks. Surely the USA—a global hegemon, the world's largest economy, an utterly dominant military power, possessing the world's oldest democratic constitution, and almost a century and a half of internal peace—has nothing to really worry about. It will surely all turn out okay, and thus we should just let the pesky little tea party people scamper around on their \$170,000 salaries attempting to destroy majority rule, since ultimately they won't, right? It's all just theater, a social construction, nothing really to worry about right? Uh, right?

Uh, no. Things like this have ended very, very badly in the past.

As usual with this blog, I figured I should come up with seven examples. That took me all of about five minutes, which is sorta scary[2]. My criteria here are political units which were absolutely at the top of their game—wealth, power, institutions—and blew it through no fault other than their own stupid choices.

1. Alcibiades' Expedition to Syracuse

So we'll start by shooting fish in a barrel, eh? The handsome, glib and polished Alcibiades, the Ted Cruz of Athens, 415 BCE, with his brilliant arguments for investing vast resources in the conquest of the Greek colonial outpost of Syracuse. Thucydides gives us the whole story but in a nutshell, everything that could go wrong did go wrong, and after the final surrender of the expedition—the victors, in a gesture of appreciation for the unprovoked attack, left most of the survivors to die of exposure and starvation—Athenian military power was ruined, never to recover. Athens fell first to the Spartans, and shortly thereafter to the Macedonians, commencing a series of disasters—conquests by Rome, the Burgundians, Catalan mercenaries, the Ottoman Turks, civil war—continuing to this day with the current choice between the neo-fascism of Golden Dawn and the neo-austerity of Angela Merkel. Alcibiades, on the other hand, ended up first in Sparta, then as a retainer in the Persian court [3]. Rather as one expects Ted Cruz will spend his waning years luxuriating in the care of the Canadian single-payer health

system.

2. The Crusader Kingdoms in the late Twelfth Century

Arguably, the entire Crusades would qualify here, though in the short term they did succeed in reducing Christian Europe's exposure to poorly supervised young men wielding sharp objects. [4] But for our purposes, let us focus on the period of the late 12th century. Moslem states, caught disorganized a century earlier, had been united under the highly effective political and military leadership of the Kurd Salah-al-din, who by 1186 controlled most of the population centers to both the west and north of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. Faced with an imminent and overwhelming threat, the European leaders did what European leaders always do: engaged in dynastic quarrels and divided their efforts until the absolutely last moment. Sound familiar?

At Hattin on 5 July 1189, the Frankish forces found themselves in battle on a barren plateau in Galilee beneath the blazing sun of a Levantine summer with perhaps 30,000 Moslem archers and cavalry between themselves and the nearest source of water. They lost, and shortly thereafter Moslem forces regained Jerusalem, and the European venture would sputter to an ignoble close over the next two centuries.

3. John Lackland and Otto IV: Shock and Awe at Bouvines, 1214

Military disasters could, of course, occupy an entirely separate section, with seven-times-seven examples and room to spare, but as we have already paused in the Middle Ages, let us take the exemplar of Bouvines. John Lackland—King John of *Robin Hood* notoriety—faced a series of domestic problems, including concern about excess taxes. His erstwhile German ally Otto IV faced both the usual European dynastic and legitimacy issues, and had also managed to get himself excommunicated by Pope Innocent III. The territories of Philip II of France appeared a tempting target, particularly when the two allied themselves with half a dozen other local nobles also anxious to get rid of Philip (sound familiar?), and assembled an army nearly twice the size of Philip's.

But, due to confusion and lack of coordination, things did not go as planned, and the alliance experienced a catastrophic defeat. Otto would be forced to abdicate his throne to his rival Frederick II Hohenstaufen [5] and died miserably shortly thereafter. John would be forced to sign the Magna Carta, beginning the Anglo-American tradition of conceding, under extortionate conditions, disproportionate privileges to the wealthy and powerful while claiming this a victory

for popular sovereignty, a tradition which continues to this day. The lands of the allied nobility were absorbed into what would become modern France, marking the end of England's Angevin Empire.

4. Philip II of Spain

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Spain was the most powerful nation in Europe, with the most advanced military technology, vast quantities of silver coming in from mines in the recently conquered Mexico and Peru, and a sophisticated bureaucracy capable of control at a continental scale.

Enter Philip II, who can best be described as the George W. Bush of his day, except Spain lacked term limits. By the end of his 44-year reign the Spanish monarchy had defaulted on its debt about a dozen times—note to Congress: tempting as this may be to score points with wealthy donors and people who vote in primaries, defaulting on your debt is “not a good thing”—, the Netherlands had successfully revolted, Spanish naval power had been so reduced by misadventures such as the Spanish Armada that in 1628 the Dutch “admiral” [6] Piet Hein captured the entire Spanish treasure fleet, and Philip's long, complex and costly machinations in France resulted in little more than a stalemate. Oh, and did we mention his major contribution to Spanish culture: the Inquisition? Despite the vast wealth of the Americas, Spain's trajectory would be downhill for the next four centuries. [7]

5. Louis XIV of France

“Sun King” Louis XIV 72-year reign is, like Philip's, another reason we should be glad we live in an era of term limits. A vain and pompous monarch, his megalomaniac building projects—Versailles, which when we visited had been taken over for an exhibition of Jeff Koons's balloon-dog sculptures [8]—and almost non-stop wars would leave France impoverished and institutionally weak, setting the stage for the overthrow of the monarchy two generations later, followed by a quarter century of political chaos under the Revolution and Napoleon. Unlike Philip, he did not suppress elite culture, which flourished, and had the foresight to appoint a finance minister named “Colbert.”

6. British policy in Ireland and China, 1840-50

In this instance, the stupidity was inflicted upon others: the guilty party would survive as an empire for another century, only to eventually succumb to soccer hooliganism and Australian

media barons. Still, consider that in the space of a mere decade, the British facilitated not only a devastating famine in Ireland that resulted in the deaths of around a million people (at a time when Ireland was *exporting* food: hey, we mustn't interfere with markets now, should we, and if those lazy Irish can't get off their deathbeds to work, they deserve to starve! Sound familiar?). And shortly thereafter, Britain fought multiple wars to force the Chinese government to allow British companies to import and sell opium in China. Rather as if heavily armed and psychotically violent Mexican cartels were controlling the importation and sale of narcotics in the US. Oh, they are?

7. European elites, August 1914

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe dominated the world in technology, communications, economic output, and for much of the planet, imperial control. What could possibly go wrong? Well, quite a few European elites had decided—I'm not making this up—that war was a pretty good thing, and were actually concerned that the current generation wasn't getting enough experience with it.[9] Mind you, they had in mind either using automatic weapons to massacre opponents armed with spears, or short-term ventures such as the three “wars of German unification” in 1864, 1866, and 1870, but generally: “give war a chance.” In the summer of 1914, an anarchist in Sarajevo gave them the chance, and the elites stood by and let things run on autopilot. They got their war, and four years later an entire generation lay slaughtered. The “Spanish flu” [10] took out another few million, and twenty years later, failure to give proper attention to media-savvy right-wing whacko birds (sound familiar?) led to the deaths of another thirty or forty million. World leadership shifted—for the time being—to the hegemon across the Atlantic, and by the early twenty-first century, shorn of their empires and genocidal impulses, the Europeans were reduced to 35 hour work weeks, and sitting in cafés drinking espresso and red wine, protected by highly effective nationalized health services costing, in percentage GDP terms, only half what the US pays. But it took about a century to get there: I'm not that patient.

My brother-in-law teaches high school in Abilene, Kansas, and tirelessly attempts to impart a profound lesson to his students. Just three simple words from a bumper-sticker he saw on a beat-up pickup truck out on the prairie:

Stupid Should Hurt

Yeah, stupid should hurt, and the way we are heading, it's going to.

Footnotes

1. As are 400,000 civilian employees of the Dept. of Defense. But none of those are really needed, eh? Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has just suggested that financial distress may render intelligence employees vulnerable to efforts to have them sell secrets, though if the recent experience with Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden is representative, financial incentives are quite unnecessary.
 2. Apologies for the Euro-centric bias, and I have no doubt that those with better knowledge of non-European history could provide ample examples from other parts of the globe.
 3. Then back in Athens, then exiled from there again...it's complicated.
 4. The Jewish populations of the Rhineland did not fare so well.
 5. Following in Otto's ecclesiastical footsteps, Frederick would also be excommunicated on multiple occasions, quite possibly setting a record in this regard. Though Frederick—who was raised in Sicily and fluent in Arabic—was one of the few “Crusaders” to successfully negotiate for Christian access to the holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I can envision those discussions over tea with Sultan al-Kamil: “So Fred, let me get this straight—you want me to let a bunch of wealthy old people come here and spend a ton of money and with any luck one of my cousins can rent them camels and another can sell them carpets? And the Pope sent you all the way here to *negotiate* this? Bro, you got a deal!”
- Frederick is one of my heroes, and I've paid homage at his tomb in Palermo.
6. As in “pirate”
 7. Philip II does, however, leave the legacy of a fawning Wikipedia entry.
 8. As well the ceramic sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*. The wheel of karma moves slowly but relentlessly.
 9. I know, it's a little more complicated than that: see Joll, James. *The Origins of the First World War* (1984) for a discussion of about fourteen different theories explaining the outbreak.
 10. Later research showed the disease first emerged at Fort Riley, Kansas, and thus more accurately should have been known as the deadly “Kansas flu.” But Kansas dodged the public

relations bullet on that one. Not so the *Wizard of Oz*. Or the Board of Education decision to de-emphasize the teaching of evolution. Or Brownbackistan.