

THE CRAZY YEARS

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The Crazy Years: A Mission Statement

IN 1939, THE GREATEST SCIENCE FICTION WRITER who ever lived, Robert Anson Heinlein, produced one of the first of the many stunning innovations he was to bring to his field: he sat down and drew up a chart of the history of the future, for the next few thousand years.

The device was intended as a simple memory aid, to assist him in keeping straight the details of a single, self-consistent imaginary future, which he could then mine as often as he liked for story ideas. But because Heinlein was who he was, his famous Future History came, over the next six decades, to have an uncanny—if nonspecific—predictive function. That is, no specific event he wrote of came to pass exactly as he invented it, but he was simply so smart and so well educated that, more often than not, he correctly nailed the general shape of things to come. He was, for instance, just about the only thinker in 1939 to seriously predict a moon landing before the twenty-first century—and he invented the water bed.

And in Heinlein's Future History chart, the last decades of the twentieth century—the ones he wrote about and discussed as seldom as possible—were clearly and ominously marked: “the Crazy Years.”

I discussed this with him several times before his death in 1988. He had decided—half a century in advance—that a combination of information overload, overpopulation and Millennial Madness were going to drive our whole culture slug-nutty by the end of the century. One of his characters summed it up by describing the Crazy Years as “a period when a man with all his gaskets tight would have been locked up.”

This book is dedicated to the notion that Heinlein was right: that future generations will look back on us as the silliest, goofiest, flat-out craziest crew of loonies that ever took part in the historical race from womb to tomb; that never before in human history has average human intelligence been anywhere near as low as it is today; and that no culture on record has ever behaved as insanely as this one now does routinely. And if Heinlein is right, before long I'll be comfortably esconced in a padded cell, my frayed nerves soothed by powerful calming drugs.

Information Overload



Braindrain Wave

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SINCE POUL ANDERSON, one of the most lyrical and learned sf writers of all time, left us a few years ago, I've been digging out old favorite books of his and re-reading them. I doubt I'll live long enough to finish the task; Poul was almost as prolific as his friend Isaac Asimov. The worst book he ever wrote was above average. The one I looked for first, however, *Brain Wave*, is missing; I probably lent it unwisely.

I haven't read it in forty years, but it stuck: it was one of the first ten books I ever read. It posits a vast force field or zone of some kind in space, which has the effect of inhibiting intelligence—and through which the solar system has been traveling for thousands of years. One day in the late twentieth century, the solar system finally emerges . . . and every living thing on earth suddenly becomes exponentially smarter. This turns out to present as many challenges as opportunities—are you ready to negotiate with your pet, for instance?

In real life, however, I'm beginning to suspect the exact opposite has occurred. Available evidence strongly suggests the planet is currently entering an intelligence-suppressing field. How else to explain, for instance, the Israeli-Palestinian lunacy? Peace damn near broke out there, for a while . . . but fortunately stupider heads on both sides prevailed, boys were taught to throw rocks at armed men, girls trained to blow themselves apart in crowds of innocents and the region was again made safe for mothers insane with grief.

And speaking of moronic perverters of Islam....Nine years after the first attempt on the World Trade Center failed utterly, al-Qaeda finally developed a genius planner—one Mohammad Atta. But the genius's plan had him be the first one killed—for no reason at all. His superiors saw no problem with this either: they let their one and only genius suicide without objection.

And what bloodcurdling follow-up atrocities have they produced since the towers fell? Besides trying to hide behind starving cripples, then leaving their Taliban host/protectors holding the bag while they ran like roaches, I mean. Well, they masterminded two diabolically horrid new schemes and darned near pulled them off, too.

First, they scoured the earth for the stupidest, clumsiest man alive, incompetent to operate a Zippo, trained him to dress and behave as suspiciously as possible and then entrusted him with a bomb which, even if it had detonated, would not have brought the plane down. Somehow, the scheme went wrong.

Next, they apparently gave four Moroccan Muslim militants a baggie containing four kilos of potassium ferrocyanide and sent them to Rome in a nice inconspicuous group. The Italian cops recently rolled them up like a cheap rug; they were cleverly carrying around, to save themselves the trouble of memorizing them, several maps of the Eternal City with its water pipes and reservoir highlighted.

My point is not that al-Qaeda has suddenly become unusually stupid. It has always been unusually stupid, and only once unusually lucky. My point is that the United States of America has become unusually stupid. Rambo, brandishing his howitzer in all directions and bellowing his war cry, is menaced by a mouse. The mouse knew a lion, once, but the lion's dead now. Kicking in doors indiscriminately all around the world to find the mouse, and trashing the finest Constitution and Bill of Rights on earth to punish him, is as profoundly stupid as, say, announcing to the world with childlike candor that henceforth you plan to lie to it any time you think advisable. And what could possibly be stupider than that, eh?

How about an example from right here in Canada? I've been chided in the past for citing monumental stupidities by Palestines, Israelis and Americans... but only trivial, local stupidities by Canadians. Why, I've been asked, can't Canada get a fair shake in the idiocy Olympics? My critics will be glad to hear we have a shot at the gold, having produced what some judges believe is the most appallingly stupid case of journalistic irresponsibility in recent memory. In response to one US government agency's recently announced intention to spread disinformation—admittedly a piece of world class stupidity in itself—one of our large metropolitan newspapers

ran a lengthy article that assembled slanted factoids, scurrilous Internet rumors, illogical innuendo and obvious outright nonsense to “prove” that President Bush himself bombed the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and pinned it on al-Qaeda to give himself an excuse to kill all the Arabs and steal all the oil. The piece is presented with an absolutely straight face, and only in the last paragraphs are you told the punchline: if America says it can lie, hey, maybe we’re lying too. Tee hee.

My heart sank as I read it: it was perfectly obvious to the meanest intelligence that many readers were going to miss the satirical intent. The majority of them, it would appear: a week later, responses were printed . . . and sure as hell, three out of five readers believe the piece was serious. One says he faxed it to all his friends, another calls it “brilliant and complete” and the third says it restored her faith in the possibility of freedom of speech in this country.

I have to agree with her: even composing enemy propaganda is now apparently acceptable, if you smirk as you do it. Or is that word too harsh? Publishing lies that blame Bush for 9/11 will, inarguably, give aid and comfort to our enemy, in time of war (albeit undeclared); the only question then is whether aspirations to humour constitute adequate excuse for putting Canadians at increased risk. I certainly won’t collaborate: I’ve pointedly not named the writer or newspaper and won’t while it’s still possible to download the article with a few mouse clicks. But I’ve given plenty of clues; anyone who really wants it, and is bright enough to be trusted with it, can find it.

For my next magical trick, I’ve actually got something even more shamefully stupid than crafting propaganda for terrorists as a joke—and again, Canada gets the discredit. You probably think I mean that doctor who refuses to treat smokers, but he’s already been adequately savaged by my distinguishable colleague Rex Murphy. I’ve got something worse: a pack of doctors who’ve sunk a knife into the broken hearts of some grief-stricken parents and twisted it, claiming the noblest of motives.

They’re highly respected, accomplished doctors from the Hospital for Sick Children with the University of Toronto and the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Their goal happens to be the same as that other doctor: they yearn to become heros who helped save the planet from wicked tobacco. But not by doing anything so strenuous as, say, learning how to prevent or cure nicotine addiction. Demonizing the addicts is so much easier. And how better to demonize addicts than to make everyone think they’re baby killers?

All it takes is bogus science. So these heros inspected the lungs of fewer than four dozen infants who died of SIDS, formerly called “crib death,”

looking for nicotine (only). Sure enough, sometimes they found some. There, they announced triumphantly to the press: We've proved smoking parents cause SIDS. Ma'am, you killed your child.

Of course, they'd proved nothing of the sort. No one knows the cause(s) of SIDS. Even if one accepts the ridiculous proposition that anything a zealot finds in a corpse's lungs must be what killed it, there was another small problem with the logic: very often, the parents of the dead infants with nicotine in their lungs were both nonsmokers. Oops.

Easily fixed: The doctors simply told the press, on zero evidence, that those parents are liars. No point checking with their insurance company, which usually tests for nicotine: just brand them as lying junkies. Make the data fit the theory.

These disgraces to science didn't stop with simply blaming the bereaved, shaming the shattered: some are actively urging other well-intentioned nimrods to kidnap smokers' children! "If Children's Aid Societies step in to protect children who are undernourished, maybe we have to step in when babies do not breathe clean air," the lead "investigator" blithely told this newspaper. A spokesperson for the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies agreed they're seriously considering doing just that. To between one fifth and one quarter of all parents. On the basis of a single unreplicated study of forty-four infants that proves nothing.

Doctors, if I can manage to find any molecules of alcohol, caffeine, cannabis, chocolate, sugar or any other enjoyable substance that some yahoo wants banned as a health menace in the lungs of any of your children, may I come to your houses with armed backup and apprehend the kids for their own safety?

The competition in international imbecility is heavy. How about those al-Qaeda geniuses who paid a fortune for weapons-grade plutonium that turned out to be medical waste, barely radioactive enough to make a Geiger counter snicker? Or all the Hindu and Muslim extremists pissing on Ghandiji's memory in India, each desperate to prove their religion is the most barbaric? Or Prince Philip's boffo Australian debut as a comedian, making spear-chucker jokes to aboriginals? Or the Pope's controversial debut as a Russian televangelist? But by God, Canada can hold its head as low as anybody. We've all entered the stupidity zone together.