

Encyclopedia

# IDIOTICA




History's Worst Decisions  
and the People Who Made Them

Stephen Weir









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For Jack, who was delivered just before this book

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# INTRODUCTION

History is strewn with mistakes. Many of them were made by well-intentioned people who were bright, intelligent, and capable but who just made the wrong decision. Many fall into the simplest category of error – they took Route A instead of Route B. And a lot of those decisions “seemed like a good idea at the time.” But there were also some monumentally stupid things. This book takes a journey through the sheer idiocy of humanity. Not honest blunders but really, really dumb ones. They are not just poor choices but choices with very nasty implications for the rest of us. Inclusion in the *Encyclopedia Idiotica* demands idiocy that comes at a very high price, in lives or livelihoods, or sometimes even the end of countries and dynasties.

A book such as this needs operating principles. It's too easy to blame sheer stupidity. No one that dumb really gets to the point of making dumb decisions that truly matter (royal families and heiresses excluded). They are impelled by emotions outside their control to lose whatever sense they may once have had. Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century kindly categorized these types of emotions as the Seven Deadly Sins and you will find examples of each of these in the following pages. But it would be foolish to believe that only the wicked are stupid. So you will also find examples of each of the Cardinal Virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, impelling their true believers to utmost folly.

From Adam and Eve deciding to go for the apple, to those Asian governments who until the end of 2004 decided that tsunamis, which have occurred regularly every hundred years or so since Adam and Eve, just weren't worth the extra expense of early warning sensors; from the Crusaders traveling thousands of medieval miles to join up with the army of a great Christian leader who didn't exist, to Gerald Ratner who destroyed his own company in ten seconds, we meet some of history's famous and more obscure idiots. Those readers who welcome the opportunity to relive the idiotic mistakes of the past may be interested in the Santayana Historical Reenactment Society, who actually re-enact great idiotic events of history in the hope that people will awake to the famous phrase of their inspirer, George Santayana: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## IN THE BEGINNING: ADAM AND EVE, THE ORIGINAL IDIOTS

9 A.M. October 23, 4004 B.C., Ussher-Lightfoot calendar

**Main Culprits:** Adam (4004 B.C.—unknown), Eve (A little while later—unknown)

**Damage Done:** Original Sin

**Why:** The essential folly of humankind starts here with the original humans

*Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden*

—John Milton, “Paradise Lost”

*Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam He said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*

—Genesis 3:16–3:19

The original idiots, the ones responsible, effectively, for all the idiocy that came after them, all the idiots lambasted in these pages, were the two first humans, Adam and Eve. Most of the prime motivations of idiocy come into play here: envy of what others, if they existed, might have; gluttony—as symbolized by the apple; lust—what lay behind the fig leaf and why it suddenly appeared, conceivably for the Devil snake himself; greed for knowledge and whatever else lay beyond; certainly a strong element of faith that everything would be just fine even if orders were disobeyed. Not for nothing is the story of Adam and Eve the elemental creation myth.

The essential parable of Adam and Eve—Supreme Being creates Man, Supreme Being creates Woman from Man, Man meets Woman, Evil makes Man want Woman, Man and Woman fall from divine paradise to hell on Earth—recurs through most religions, languages, and cultures in one form or another. Oddly enough, scientists using DNA analysis have found there were indeed elemental and original men and women; all women get their mitochondrial DNA from their mothers, and it is possible working backward to find a common female ancestor, an earth mother, who lived 200,000 years ago, essentially, and give or take a generation, your 10,000th great grandmother. Science knows her as “Mitochondrial Eve.” Similar research using Y chromosomes puts “Y chromosomal Adam” only 90,000 years ago. What this means for the myth of Eve being created from Adam’s rib or some other part of him is anyone’s guess—possibly a male coverup to disguise the fact that woman is in fact older and wiser.

And conceivably, that’s a strong element in the whole myth, which essentially blames Eve for the Fall. She gets tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent, she talks Adam into trying the Forbidden Fruit, Adam the good, slightly naïve gardener who has been busy naming flora and fauna, suddenly finds he is naked, she is naked, and the good times are over (or just starting, depending on your point of view). Satan gets well and truly into the picture, the Bible (and the Talmud and the Koran) gets a proper villain, and there’s always someone to blame for everything thereafter.

The story is fundamentally the same in all the major religions: God created Adam, either from the earth or from clay (Adam in Arabic means

## **ALL ABOUT EVE**

“earthy” or “red”). Then Eve is formed from his body—Eve meaning, literally, living, the mother of all life. Different interpretations present the serpent as simply God’s testing his new creations, or as Satan, a Fallen Angel angry at this appearance of this new creature and God’s insistence that man is in his own image and must be bowed down to. Some sort of fruit is always part of the story, though the apple as such does not appear in the Book of Genesis. Greek mythology presents a similar story: Aristophanes tells us that Prometheus created humanity, again from clay, on orders from Zeus, and Minerva breathed life into the clay, then Zeus cut it into two halves when they rebelled. Love, in this version, is no more than humanity’s attempt to regain wholeness.

The Garden of Eden has been variously placed. The Bible gives only the description and the hint that it lies at the confluence of four rivers—the Tigris, Euphrates, Pison, and Gihon—though unfortunately, the latter two are no more to be found. The general area is typically thought to be somewhere in the Persian Gulf, or Anatolia in Turkey. Some have



ADAM AND EVE

claimed that in the post-Ice Age, as the waters rose, the Pison and Gihon and the fertile lands they created disappeared under the Persian Gulf, and it was the loss of this Paradise that resulted in the creation of the myth. Indeed, both the words Eden and Adam are suggested to mean, in a pre-Sumerian language, fertile plain and settlement, suggesting clearly that it was the loss of the land, attributed to God’s anger at Man, that led to a literal expulsion from Eden; and moreover, the end to the easy life of

Man, resident on land that gave ample goods, to a more complicated hunter-gatherer and nomadic existence.

However, Elvy E. Callaway, of Bristol, Florida, 43 miles west of Tallahassee, claims that mankind was created on the banks of Florida’s Apalachicola River. Callaway studied the matter for 75 years and, as proof, cites a passage from Genesis that reads: “A river went out of Eden to water the Garden and parted and became four heads.” He maintains that the Apalachicola was the only four-headed river system in the world. He also notes that the rare gopher wood tree, the *Torreya taxifolia*, grew only in two places: the Panhandle and Eden. And no one



who ever saw the Australian comedian Paul Hogan's comedy show can forget his brilliant proof that the Garden of Eden was actually to be found in Dubbo, New South Wales.

Wherever it was, Adam and Eve were most certainly not allowed back in. Cast out from Paradise, they did what most couples do in such dire circumstances and started a family—a dysfunctional one at that—with one of their sons killing the other. And there was always that unexplained mystery about where their children's spouses came from. The consequences of original idiocy? Everything that follows.

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## MOTIVATION

anger  
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gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## MENELAUS AND HIS LOST WIFE

1190 B.C.—1180 B.C.

**Main Culprit:** Menelaus (unknown)

**Damage Done:** Destruction of the city of Troy; decade-long abandonment of Greek territory

**Why:** Chasing a lost wife halfway across the known world

*So far there had been nothing worse than woman-stealing on both sides; but for what happened next the Greeks were seriously to blame; for it was the Greeks who were, in a military sense, the aggressors. Abducting young women, in their opinion, is not, indeed, a lawful act; but it is stupid after the event to make a fuss about avenging it. The only sensible thing is to take no notice; for it is obvious that no young woman allows herself to be abducted if she does not wish to be.*

—Herodotus, *The Histories*

The story of Helen of Troy, first related by the great Greek poet Homer in *The Iliad*, and still in 2004 the subject of fanciful reinterpretation—now cinematic rather than bardic—was widely disbelieved for many centuries. Homer's version is full of copulating gods disguised as animals, and dubious beauty contests, but there is little question that the later Greek bards and historians were describing events that at least in part took place, as the archaeological evidence proves. Homer wrote *The Iliad* some five centuries after the fact. It would hardly be surprising that he would have appealed to contemporary sensibilities and introduced the gods into a story otherwise rather hard to take and perhaps a little dull. It would have been scarcely more of a stretch to accept that Helen was the daughter of Zeus disguised as a swan than it is for us to accept Brad Pitt as Achilles.

The saga of the abduction of Helen and the subsequent Trojan Wars remains one of the finest examples of the dangers of lust. On the whole, history has shown it unwise to be a guest in someone's house and take his wife away with you. We add to this the categorical double idiocies of anger and envy, compounded when Menelaus insisted on old treaty rights and dragged the leaders of his entire nation and his neighbors on a 10-year revenge mission that the siege of Troy was. It took them the best part of 20 years to wage war and get back home, and actually killed most of them, leaving their homelands and families to rack and ruin, barely surviving, records suggest, raiding parties and perhaps some sort of natural disaster.

There have been attempts to cast the cause of the war—generally agreed as lasting ten years—as economic or political. Troy did indeed command from its hilltop the control over the Dardanelles and was a reasonably rich city as an entry point for Black Sea trade. But there is plenty of evidence that the Greeks didn't even know where it was, they were just following Helen's trail. And they certainly didn't gain much by hanging around for ten years and burning the place to the ground. The reasons for the war remain a mystery, and the accounts, not just from Homer but from others, suggest it truly does deserve a place in the worst decisions hall of fame.



MENELAUS

Certainly, plenty of those in ancient history believed in the legend. Xerxes, Alexander the Great, and Caesar all reputedly visited the site of Troy to pay their respects to the great heroes and absorb some of their bravery. Perhaps because the war was fought for an idiotic reason and not out of the desire for conquest or trade, the sheer bravery of the combatants had a resonance for the ages that far outweighs more tawdry conflicts.

It is indeed clear that the young nobleman Paris took Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaus, away with him. His mother dreamed that the baby would destroy his own homeland (pretty good prophecy, as it turned out) and left him on a mountaintop to die. Brought up by the usual ubiquitous shepherd, he became the most beautiful young man in antiquity and reclaimed his position in Troy. According to Homer, he was pulled into an argument among three goddesses over who was the most beautiful and had to present a golden apple to the one he chose. Each offered him glittering prizes. He picked Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, who bribed him with the greatest beauty of the age, Helen. The losers, though, were largely blamed for the disasters that followed.

MENELAUS SPENT A YEAR OR  
TWO BESIEGING THE  
WRONG CITY.

Even if you don't buy the goddesses' revenge thing, the heart of the idiocy displayed by Menelaus chasing across the Aegean to a place the Greeks had never heard of takes some explaining. For one thing, they spent a year or two besieging the wrong city. Clearly, Menelaus was not an especially inspiring man. Several kings feigned madness or pretended to be women to avoid their obligations. The scribes wrote about Agamemnon, about the brave Achilles, about the fair Helen, about the peripatetic Odysseus, but Menelaus, who just seems to have been "pissed" that his wife had been stolen, inspired not one word. He only got his kingdom in the first place by marrying Helen, and barely managed to get the fleet under way by making his brother Agamemnon kill his own daughter.

THE MOST  
FAMOUS  
WARHORSE

The tale of the war barely needs repeating. Menelaus finally set sail with his famous fleet of 1,000 ships and 100,000 men. They laid siege to Troy for ten mostly fruitless years. *The Iliad* recounts in excruciating detail the battles, duels, feuds, intervention by the gods, treacheries, and bravery of those long years. Finally, the Greeks came up with the infamous Trojan Horse, withdrawing their fleet and apparently leaving

a farewell gift to say “Sorry for all the trouble.” Perhaps they’d poisoned the water too because it is rather hard to see anyone falling for the trick, but the Greeks inside the Horse certainly brought the war to a merciful end, torched the city, rescued Helen, and tried to get home. Military historians have rather sadly and prosaically suggested that in other wars a similar horse-shaped object was used as a superior battering ram to take down stubborn city gates, but as always, Homer spins a much better story.

Troy was destroyed and a large number of the Trojans died for their prince Paris’s vainglory. It took Menelaus and Odysseus almost as long to get back to Greece as it did to fight the war. This was fortunate for literature in that the costly jealousy of Menelaus inspired three major fixtures in the canon of literary masterpieces, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. It also gave rise to numerous paintings, sculptures, weak novelizations, and trashy movies. Helen has a lot to answer for. Meanwhile, she was taken back by Menelaus, despite the fact that she had four children while she was in Troy and remarried after the death of Paris. Menelaus dealt harshly with the unfortunate man, and indeed, planned to kill Helen for her perfidy—but by the time they got back to Greece her charms had overwhelmed him again. Apparently they lived happily ever after. No, really.

But only 80 years after the war, it seems that the homelands of most of the Greeks who waged the war were overrun by Doric raiders. It does seem, not for the first time in recorded history or the last, that heading overseas for obscure reasons to take over a land you don’t know much about is not good for those back home.

Archeological investigations of the original site of Troy put the date of the war in the thirteenth or twelfth century B.C. It is more or less agreed that Troy was in what is now Anatolia, south of Istanbul in present-day Turkey, around the town now known as Hisarlik. Troy seems to have been destroyed around 1180 B.C. after being around for at least five centuries. It remained in the realm of myth until the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann found it, in the late nineteenth century. In his memoirs, Schliemann wrote:

As soon as I had learnt to speak, my father related to me the great deeds of the Homeric heroes. I loved these stories; they enchanted me and

MENELAUS GOT HIS KINGDOM  
ONLY BY MARRYING HELEN,  
AND BARELY MANAGED TO  
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BY MAKING HIS BROTHER  
AGAMEMNON KILL  
HIS OWN DAUGHTER.



transported me with the highest enthusiasm. The first impressions which a child receives abide with him during his whole life; and, though it was my lot, at the age of fourteen, to be apprenticed in the warehouse of E. Ludwig Holtz in the small town of Furstenberg in Mecklenburg, instead of following the scientific career for which I felt an extraordinary predisposition, I always retained the same love for the famous men of antiquity which I had conceived for them in my first childhood.

## **PAYING THE PRICE**

Schliemann left his apprenticeship in Germany to go to St. Petersburg, then traveled to California where he became a merchant during the beginnings of the Gold Rush. He returned to Europe, making a small fortune as a rather shady trader in the Crimean War. Armed with millions, he decided to follow his childhood dream, and with the assistance of the British consul in Turkey and a new Greek wife, set about excavating a hilly area they believed to be the site of Troy. Three years later the excavations had produced more than 8,000 objects and what Schliemann at least felt to be proof positive that the Trojan War had really happened, while many since—and still do—dispute exactly what was found. The city he excavated is referred to as Troy VII, the seventh major city on the site. It was burned to the ground, probably by Greek invaders.

The last word should probably belong again to the bards. Lucian describes the scene many centuries later, a wry comment on the idiocy of lust and where it leads—and for what:

*Menippus:*

But show me Helen; I can't pick her out on my own.

*Hermes:*

This skull is Helen.

*Menippus:*

Was it for this that the thousand ships were manned from all over Greece; for this so many Greeks and barbarians were killed and so many cities destroyed?

*Hermes:*

Ah, but you never saw the woman alive, Menippus, or you yourself would have said that it was excusable that they 'for a long

time suffer hardship for a woman like this' [*Iliad* III 157].

For if one sees flowers that are dried up and faded, they do indeed appear ugly; but when they are in full bloom and color, they are supremely beautiful.

*Menippus:*

Well, Hermes, what does surprise me is this; that the Achaeans didn't know what a short-lived thing they fought for, and how soon its beauty would fade.

*Hermes:*

I have no time to moralize with you, Menippus. Choose a place to lie down in, wherever you like; I'm off now to fetch some more dead.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## HANNIBAL AND THE AVALANCHE

Spring, 217 B.C.

**Main Culprit:** Hannibal (247 B.C.—182 B.C.)

**Damage Done:** Destruction of half his own army, ruining one of the great invasions of history

**Why:** An act of impetuosity caused an avalanche

*The track, which led down the mountainside, was both narrow and steep, and since neither the men nor the animals could be sure of their footing on account of the snow, any who stepped wide of the path or stumbled overbalanced and fell down the precipices. These perils they could endure, because by this time they had become accustomed to such mischances, but at length they reached a place where the track was too narrow for the elephants or even the pack animals to pass. A previous landslide had already carried away some three hundred meters of the face of the mountain, while a recent one had made the situation still worse. At this point the soldiers once more lost their nerve and came close to despair.*

—Polybius, *The Histories*

Hannibal (247–182 B.C.) really does this one all on his own—the hero of the hour, a great strategist, and the perpetrator at the same time of one of the most daring and dubious feats of military history, caused by arrogance and impetuosity, which conceivably cost him the one thing he desired more than anything else—the conquest of Rome. We are in the late 200s B.C. Hannibal was born in 247 B.C. in the middle of the Roman humiliation of his home state, Carthage, now Tunis. A great trading and seafaring nation, the Romans had figured out how to take on the Carthaginians at sea and had thrown them out of their island provinces of Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia. At age 10, with this first Punic War not four years over and civil war raging in Carthage, young Hannibal was taken to Carthage's territories in Spain by his father, the Carthaginian general Hamilcar, who conquered new territories in Spain, including what is now Cartagena, New Carthage. Hannibal grew up in Spain, marrying an Iberian princess. The Romans believed that Hamilcar instilled in his son a lifelong fierce hatred of them. After his father's death, Hannibal's brother-in-law reigned peacefully over the new territories. He was subsequently murdered and the 22-year-old Hannibal was elected commander of the Carthaginian army in Spain. He immediately switched back to his father's aggressive tactics and recklessly attacked and captured Salamanca, then laid siege to a major Roman town, Saguntum, moving his army rapidly across the whole Iberian peninsula. After Saguntum fell, the Romans, although occupied with other confrontations in their territories, had little choice but to declare hostilities. The second Punic War had begun.

It was in Hannibal's nature to take the attack to the enemy. The Romans knew there were only three possible ways onto the Italian mainland; they controlled all sea routes, there was a long overland route, and the impossible way over the Alps. A Roman army was dispatched to Marseilles to head off the invaders. But in 218 B.C. Hannibal set off from Cartagena and decided to go straight across the little-known mountainous region to conquer Rome with his 50,000 troops 9,000 horses and pack animals, and 37 elephants. The elephants were certainly a novelty in southern Europe and caused



HANNIBAL

IT WAS ENTIRELY IN  
CHARACTER THAT HANNIBAL  
HAD ALMOST NO IDEA  
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THE WAY.

much panic among enemy soldiers, though some reports have it that they were equally terrifying to Hannibal's own horses. It was to become one of the most second-guessed troop movements in history. It was entirely in character that he had almost no idea of the route or what he would find along the way; even now, no one is entirely sure which of a number of routes he took. His impetuosity was both a wonderful triumph and the seed of his ultimate failure. He made one fatal mistake along the way that cost him half his army, most of his animals, and left him unable to succeed in his main aim—the conquest of Rome.

He never could press home his advantage. Instead, he laid waste to the Italian countryside for 15 years before being forced back to Africa to defend Carthage itself, where he was convincingly beaten by Scipio Africanus at the Battle of Zama. He supposedly drank poison in the end to avoid capture by the Romans. No one disputes his abilities as a general, and he certainly had surprise on his side. Unfortunately, he had less than half his army and only a handful of his vaunted elephants left by the time he got to Italy, although his army hadn't fought a major battle and it had been less than a month since they had left Spain. Hannibal had, inadvertently but personally, been responsible for most of those deaths himself. There were many things Hannibal, born in Africa and brought up in southern Spain, didn't know about the Alps—and one of them is that they are notorious for avalanches.

## THE JOURNEY

The trip across the Pyrenees into France went relatively smoothly, but then the army faced the immensity of the Rhone River. Hannibal devised some form of buoyancy system for the elephants, probably formed from pigs' bladders, and built huge rafts to get the army improbably across safely. The way up proved far from easy; a number of fierce Gallic tribes launched a wave of ambushes and assaults on the army and casualties mounted. Only clever tactics on Hannibal's part prevented the army from being wiped out by the Allobroges, a tribe he had originally hoped would join his side. Already, things were not quite going as planned. Two days later they ran into another ambush. Hannibal protected what he considered his most important assets—the baggage train—simply by putting his infantry out in front, and lost many men. But that turned out to be the easy part.



It is interesting that our knowledge of Hannibal's exploits comes solely from his enemies, the Romans, specifically two historians, Livy and Polybius. For centuries after the story of Hannibal was told—and perhaps exaggerated—to remind the Romans of how close they came to being defeated by a surprise attack, and what a valiant enemy they finally vanquished. Nonetheless, there is no reason to disbelieve the essence of the story, since Polybius's version came from the eyewitness accounts of one of Hannibal's own soldiers.

Problems began almost immediately as they attempted the descent. With little knowledge of the paths across, and untrustworthy local guides, the army found going down much harder than going up. The terrain turned out to be a lethal mixture of mud with treacherous ice underneath—the ground never truly thaws. The horses and elephants in particular found the going hard and sank down into the ground. The following morning saw a disaster—an early autumn snowstorm laid feet of snow on top of the treacherous ground. It proved impossible to move at all, and if this was the beginning of winter serious problems lay ahead.

Hannibal was beside himself. Livy takes up the story:

But even so he was no luckier; progress was impossible, for though there was good foothold in the quite shallow layer of soft fresh snow which had covered the old snow underneath, nevertheless as soon as it had been trampled and dispersed by the feet of all those men and animals, there was left to tread upon only the bare ice and liquid slush of melting snow underneath. The result was a horrible struggle, the ice affording no foothold in any case, and least of all on a steep slope; when a man tried by hands or knees to get on his feet again, even those useless supports slipped from under him and let him down; there were no stumps or roots anywhere to afford a purchase to either foot or hand; in short, there was nothing for it but to roll and slither on the smooth ice and melting snow.

HANNIBAL WAS FAMOUS FOR  
NEVER ALLOWING OTHERS TO  
DO WHAT HE COULD NOT OR  
WOULD NOT DO HIMSELF.

According to the story, Hannibal also was famous for never allowing others to do what he could not or would not do himself. He was at the back of the march when everything came to a complete stop. Desperate to capitalize on the element of surprise, and furious at the delay, he came to the front, marched down the mountain, walking cane in hand, and slammed it hard down into the drift to prove there was solid

ground beneath and that everyone could pass safely if they just showed a little more determination.

**AVALANCHE  
ADVISORY**

There are more avalanches in the Alps than in any other part of the world. Of the nearly one million avalanches that take place every year, half happen in this small region. There are valleys where it is unsafe to do much more than whisper. In later centuries witches used to be held accountable and burned for avalanches. Annually there are enormous and deadly avalanches in the region that make international headlines. It doesn't take much to set off an Alpine avalanche and Hannibal's attack on the drift was apparently more than enough. It triggered an enormous slide. Many men and animals were buried; others fell off the narrow precipices trying to escape. It took four days for the rest of the army to dig themselves out and find a way of getting down the mountain. Fifteen days after charging into the Alps, less than half the original 50,000 men and only a handful of the elephants and mules emerged.

**UNDERMANNED  
BUT  
DETERMINED**

Undeterred by his losses, Hannibal charged down into the Po plain with what was left of his army. He picked up a few fresh troops from a Gallic tribe, impressed by his appearance, took the Romans totally by surprise, and won two rapid battles against unprepared small forces. A huge Roman army belatedly set out and met Hannibal's depleted force at the plain of Cannae. Hannibal fought one of the finest battles in military history and beat the Romans in a wonderful set piece. But he no longer had the numbers to attack Rome itself, and he knew it. The few elephants left were little more than a novelty, and his troops were exhausted and just too few in number. Hannibal had pulled off an amazing lightning assault, but at the cost of his campaign, when a little more of a level head might have seen his army safely over the Alps.

After Cannae, the Romans took a new tack. They realized Hannibal was too smart for them in open battle. They also realized that he was cut off from supply lines and could succeed only if he persuaded enough city-states and tribes to join him. He sent to Carthage for reinforcements and his brother Hasdrubal followed him to Andalusia in Spain. Hasdrubal was the opposite of his older brother, particularly as a tactician. It took him several defeats and three years to fight his way out of Spain. He then proceeded to follow Hannibal's route, elephants and all, across the Alps. But perhaps because of his more cautious



approach to life, he not only managed to get the entire force safely across, but added another 30,000 men from Gallic tribes that he was more successful in allying with. Unfortunately these forces never reached Hannibal. This time the Romans were ready and waiting, and totally destroyed Hasdrubal's army as soon as it entered Italy. Hasdrubal's head was thrown into Hannibal's camp, just to make the point. That was Hannibal's last hope—his army was too tired and too depleted. The Romans simply avoided open conflict. For 10 years they let Hannibal wander around southern Italy, but never engaged him head-on. Then, young Roman general Scipio Africanus simply took a reverse strategy; avoiding Hannibal entirely, he started to recapture the lost Spanish territories and finally moved over to Africa to launch an assault on Carthage itself. The Carthaginians recalled Hannibal, who had still never been beaten on European soil, and his bedraggled and tired army were routed by Scipio in northern Africa. The Romans demanded a fierce peace treaty and the Carthaginians were thrown out of Europe for good, never to return.

After losing the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C., Hannibal returned to Carthage and spent the next 20 years trying to make alliances and send another army to attack Rome. But as before, his temper and lack of tact put off almost all his potential allies, and he failed to raise any sort of army. Hannibal posed probably the greatest single threat to the rise of the Roman Empire close to its beginning. It was not seriously challenged for another six centuries. Victory for the Carthaginians—essentially an African power—could have led to a very different world from the one the Romans did so much to shape. Arguably, Hannibal's moment of anger and impetuosity, his catastrophic mistake with Italy at his mercy, changed the whole shape of European civilization.

Hannibal's trek over the Alps continues to provoke awe and is one of the most famous verifiable incidents of ancient times. You can today follow Hannibal's route across the Alps—or one of them, as there is a whole vitriolic literature arguing which route he actually took. The second Punic War is a war-gamer's paradise, the most popular version coming from a company appropriately called Avalanche Press. There's even a performance artist who recreates the entire trek in a kind of son-et-lumière spectacle using Zambonis as elephants. But few reflect on

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THE COST OF HIS CAMPAIGN.

the fact that although spectacular, Hannibal's brave charge and moment of idiocy in all likelihood destroyed his campaign before it had really begun, and he spent the following 40 years in increasingly angry and useless warmongering and petty diplomacy. The dogged tortoise Scipio Africanus ended up beating the harelike Hannibal to the line. It says something about what appeals to us today that we all remember the lovable loser instead.

## CLEOPATRA'S MEN

69 B.C.—30 B.C.

### MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprits:** Cleopatra (69 B.C.—30 B.C.); Marc Antony (83 B.C.—30 B.C.)

**Damage Done:** Two empires lost, the Ptolemaic and Roman

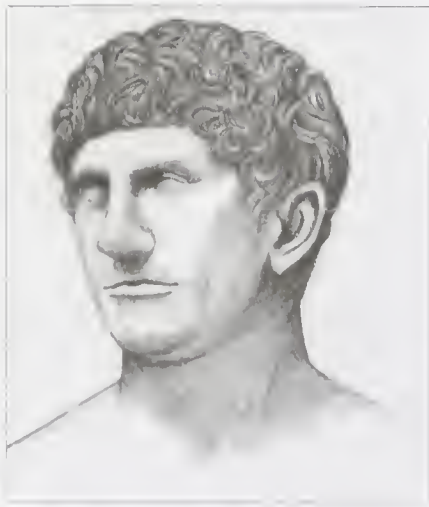
**Why:** A little too much lying down for the country

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety: other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies.*

*The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, burn'd on the water; the poop was beaten gold, purple  
the sails, and so perfumed, that the winds were love-sick with them, the oars were silver, which to the  
tune of flutes kept stroke, and made the water which they beat to follow faster, as amorous of their  
strokes. For her own person, it beggar'd all description.*

—Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

Isn't it odd that Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies, a legend far beyond her own short time on Earth, feminist icon, and one of the first *femmes fatales*, should have almost no images that we can positively identify as her own? She was a remarkable leader of the Egyptians, even though her attempts at strategic foreign policy seem to have been largely horizontal and ultimately disastrous. Of all the 300 years of the reign of the Ptolemaic dynasty (they were actually Greeks from Macedonia), Cleopatra VII was the only one who actually bothered to learn to speak and read Egyptian. At her accession in 51 B.C., at age 17, she was not really expected to take power. In a matrilineal monarchy such as this, the female leader had to be married—no matter whether to her father, brother, or son—in order to appear to be in power, but normally the men were the real rulers. The young Cleopatra married her younger brother Ptolemy XIII, and the generals confidently expected their power to be secure. This proved to be far from the case, and within a few years Cleopatra was forced by her brother and his cronies to flee Egypt. Cleopatra may not have had the beauty of Helen of Troy, nor was she the tough warrior princess of her contemporary, Boudicca. She was a formidable opponent, as her brothers would discover.



MARC ANTONY

The Egyptians were just hanging on to their independence at this time—just a few decades before the birth of Christ, with Julius Caesar supreme in Rome, and the Roman Empire approaching the zenith of its power from one end of the world—Britain—across the Middle East to Parthia. Egyptians had kept independent only by ingratiating themselves and paying due obeisance to Rome. Ptolemy, however, took this a step too far. The Roman general Pompey, fleeing Rome after losing the civil war to Caesar, came to seek refuge in Alexandria. Ptolemy had him killed instead. Caesar, who defeated Pompey, was in fact his son-in-law and considered this insolent act an affront to Roman dignity. He promptly pushed himself into the internal affairs of Egypt, arriving in Alexandria and announcing his intention to determine whether Ptolemy or Cleopatra would rule.

As the story goes, Caesar was presented with a fine carpet that, unrolled, revealed the 21-year-old Cleopatra inside. Suffice it to say she was rapidly returned to the throne. She spent the winter with Caesar

on a two-month cruise up the Nile, where she was greeted by her subjects with the type of reverence they used to accord the Pharaohs of old. She also bore him a son, Caesarion. The plan was to gain power and save her ailing nation by dynastically allying herself with the powerful Romans. This time the plan failed. Caesar, once he had returned to Rome, took up again with his wife, and far from proclaiming Caesarion as the new emperor, adopted his great-nephew Octavian as the next ruler of Rome. Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C., just when Cleopatra and her son were visiting Rome, perhaps to persuade Caesar to change his mind, but the strategy was now fully worked out in Cleopatra's mind, and she wouldn't let the next one go so easily. She genuinely appears to have respected and cared for Caesar.

The problem, though, was who the next ruler might be. Caesar was replaced by a triumvirate: Octavian, Lepidus, an aging senator, and Marc Antony, a proud general whose oratory swayed the crowd against the assassins at Caesar's funeral (at least in Shakespeare's telling). Meanwhile, Cleopatra returned to Egypt, had her brother killed, and "married" her son, ensuring herself complete control of the state. She attempted to turn the country back from famine and plague and rebuild its forces, while waiting for the next leader to emerge in Rome. By 41 B.C. that looked a lot like Marc Antony. Octavian was ill and Antony summoned Cleopatra to Tarsus for a conference. She arrived in as much style as perhaps has been mustered before or since, enough certainly to launch an abundance of movies. Antony, for all his generalship and oratory, was not a particularly bright man, known for his drinking, womanizing, and general vulgarity. He fell for Cleopatra's show-womanish absolutely.

Their relationship was immediate and intense, and resulted shortly in twins. After a sojourn back in Rome to attend to his feud with Octavian (and his marriage to Octavia, his sister, in an attempt to patch it all up), Marc Anthony set sail in 36 B.C., ostensibly to continue his war against the Parthians. In fact, he summoned Cleopatra immediately and from that point the two were doomed to a misbegotten relationship born of lust and greed. They could never honestly compete with the might of the Roman Empire once he had left his real power base, and the betrayal of Octavian's sister meant that eventually something would have to be done.

CAESAR WAS PRESENTED  
WITH A FINE CARPET THAT,  
UNROLLED, REVEALED  
THE 21-YEAR-OLD CLEOPATRA  
INSIDE.



**ANTONY FELL ON HIS SWORD  
TO AVOID CAPTURE.**

At first, though, the liaison was remarkable—another child, a son, was born. With Egyptian funds and his generalship, a large swath of the Middle East was taken; Syria, Asia Minor, Cyprus, Armenia, and Crete were all awarded to the young children. Cleopatra herself was named Queen of Kings; Caesarion, her son with Caesar, pronounced heir to Rome instead of Octavian. Octavia was divorced, and the dawn of a Roman-Egyptian dynasty was declared, with Cleopatra the new Isis.

In 31 B.C. Octavian had had enough, and launched a fleet in the first attempt to subdue Antony and Cleopatra. Both showed up at the Battle of Actium, but Antony was so outnumbered that Cleopatra fled without him. By all accounts he deserted his own beaten forces and chased after her. Octavian then launched a full-scale assault on Egypt and within a year had captured Alexandria. Antony fell on his own sword to avoid capture, losing his power base strength and life in his lust for his blue-blooded Nubian.

**BRINGING HOME  
THE PRIZE**

Cleopatra was made of sterner stuff, and she appears to have given it all one more try with Octavian himself, suggesting an alliance under the normal terms. However, it was soon apparent that he had no intention of making any compact with the woman who had seduced his sister's husband. He wanted to bring her back in chains to Rome. The grand procession, with the captive vassal queen leading the array of plunder, burdened with chains and quite probably not surviving until the end of the parade, was not for Cleopatra. She had, in any case, in true Pharaonic style, built a cozy mausoleum for herself after Actium, just in case Antony proved as useless at defending her on land as he was at sea. She locked herself away for three days until she was due to be taken to Rome, called for the now-emblematic figs and asp, and, possibly in the belief that the Egyptian religion guaranteed immortality with death by snakebite—died on August 12, 30 B.C. Her dynasty ended with her. Octavian, soon to be the Emperor Augustus, had little Caesarion strangled and Antony's children sent to Octavia in Rome, where all but one girl soon disappeared. Egypt fell under the direct control of Rome.

Regardless of whether the theology was correct or not, immortality was exactly what she attained. From Plutarch to Shakespeare, Shaw to Elizabeth Taylor, from Cleopatra's Needle obelisk on Victoria Embankment in London and Central Park in New York (both present-



ed in the nineteenth century and actually dating from well before her reign) to the myriad Cleopatra-related items selling on eBay at any given moment, the price of her idiocy was her dynasty, and indeed, independent Egyptian rule for many centuries to come. Not without reason was she known as the last of the Pharaohs. Perhaps somewhere she smiled as General Nasser won his victories over another set of conquerors during the Suez crisis centuries later.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## NERO AND THE BURNING OF ROME

JULY 19, 64 A.D.

**Main Culprit:** The Emperor Nero (37 A.D.–68 A.D.)

**Damage Done:** Burning down his own city

**Why:** Making room for his own new palace

*For six days and seven nights destruction raged, while the people were driven for shelter to monuments and tombs. At that time, besides an immense number of dwellings, the houses of leaders of old were burned, still adorned with trophies of victory, and the temples of the gods vowed and dedicated by the kings and later in the Punic and Gallic wars, and whatever else interesting and noteworthy had survived from antiquity. Viewing the conflagration from the tower of Maecenas, and exulting, as he said, 'with the beauty of the flames,' he sang the whole time the 'Sack of Ilium,' in his regular stage costume. Furthermore, to gain from this calamity too the spoil and booty possible, while promising the removal of the debris and dead bodies free of cost, allowed no one to approach the ruins of his own property; and from the contributions which he not only received, but even demanded, he nearly bankrupted the provinces and exhausted the resources of.*

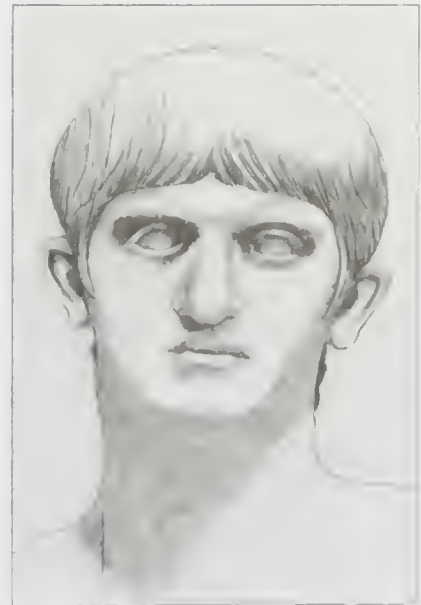
—Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*

The emperor Nero ruled Rome from 54 to 68 A.D. when he committed suicide, bringing to an end his rule during the dynasty founded by the emperor Augustus. He had become emperor at the age of 16, supposedly when his mother Agrippina poisoned the emperor Claudius after persuading him to make young Nero heir to the throne. He was born in 37 A.D., four years after the crucifixion of Jesus, and exiled in the Pontian Islands during the fierce reign of Caligula. In 49 A.D. the great poet and tragedian Seneca was appointed Nero's tutor, and in 53 A.D. he married Octavia, the daughter of Claudius.

He lived during the beginning of turmoil within the Roman world, which at that point seemed to be at the height of its power. It controlled more than 60 million people, a fifth of the world population, in 40 provinces. But Christianity, still an upstart secret religious sect, was beginning to make inroads. The word of Jesus was spread throughout the empire by the Apostles. Paul visited Rome in 60 A.D., and the Christians would play a significant role in the final phase of Nero's rule. The empire, however, continued to expand. Under Claudius, Britain was secured and gains were made in Thrace and North Africa.

History best remembers Nero from the reports of the historian Tacitus, who memorably depicted him as merrily playing his fiddle while Rome burned below his window. Tacitus blamed Nero squarely for having caused the fire in the first place, out of his greedy desire to build a fine new palace for himself on the site of the city. If indeed true, and despite all the attempts through the centuries to come up with alternative explanations, Nero still stands as the most likely suspect, he deserves his place in the annals of *Idiotica*, for not only did he clear the way for his own real estate project; he destroyed most of his city.

Famous fires usually have dubious causes. The Great Fire of London has its monument in Pudding Lane. Only in the last few years has Mrs. O'Leary's cow been publicly pardoned for the Chicago Fire. The conflagration that destroyed much of Rome is little different; in recent years attempts have been made to discredit the theories, some by recreating the fire in controlled environments, others by claiming that Christians were trying to bring about the teachings of the *Book of*



NERO

*Revelations* by torching the Seven Hills. But there is plenty in Nero's character to suggest that he was more than capable of doing anything to get what he wanted.

## NERO'S INTERESTS AND EXCESSES

Nero had a formidable interest in the arts, and was particularly obsessed with the aesthetic achievements of the Greeks. He loved writing poetry, acting, and dancing, and even went on tours of the empire, less to conquer than to perform. He was similarly fascinated by civil engineering and architecture. He introduced Greek games and arts contests to the Romans, and hired the famous lyre player Terpnus to tutor him. The instrument described by Tacitus was almost certainly a lyre, by the way, and not a fiddle.

Unfortunately, Nero also inherited some of the less attractive traits of his predecessors, especially Caligula. He had some interesting sexual proclivities; according to historian Dio Cassius, these included "fastening young boys and girls to stakes, and then, after putting on the hide of a wild beast, attacking them and satisfying his brutal lust under the appearance of devouring parts of their bodies." His mother Agrippina was clearly in charge; she had arranged his accession in the first place and in all probability had Claudius murdered. On coins Nero and his mother were depicted face to face, with Agrippina's name on the back, indicating she was more important. But within a couple of years Nero had thrown her out of the palace. When she started to favor his brother Britannicus, he had him murdered, and then Agrippina herself when she criticized his new mistress, Poppaea Sabina. Nero angrily responded according to the historian Suetonius, with various attempts on his mother's life, three by poison and one by rigging the ceiling to cave in while she lay in bed. Even a collapsible boat was built, which was meant to sink in the Bay of Naples. But Agrippina managed to swim ashore and only the boat was lost. Exasperated, Nero sent an assassin who clubbed and stabbed her to death (59 A.D.).

Poppaea, the wife of his best friend, apparently was behind some of Nero's worst excesses. Soon paranoia and terror reigned—by the year 62 A.D. Nero banished and executed his wife Octavia; Seneca and other trusted advisors were killed; anyone standing in the way of his will was summarily dealt with. In light of the subsequent fight with the Senate and Nero's rash actions relating to the fire, his temper and lack of control suggest that almost any action to get his way would have been acceptable to Nero.

Nero had devised a grand scheme, along the lines of his interest in Greek architecture, to rebuild Rome, or more specifically an elaborate series of palaces, villas, and pavilions. The Senate was appalled and refused to cooperate with the type of demolition he sought.

It seemed a coincidence to few when fire broke out on the night of July 19, 64 A.D., in shops lining the chariot stadium, the *Circus Maximus*. It was midsummer, and Nero was conveniently out of town in the coastal resort of Antium. Many eyewitnesses reported seeing the arson in progress. As Suetonius relates:

Nero sent out by different ways men feigning to be drunk, or engaged in some kind of mischief, and at first had a few fires kindled quietly and in different quarters... This state of things lasted not one day, but several days and nights running... For the soldiers (including the night watch) with a keen eye for plunder, instead of quenching the conflagration, kindled it the more... A sudden wind caught the fire and swept it over what remained. As a result nobody troubled longer about goods or homes, but all the survivors, from a place of safety, gazed on what appeared to be many islands and cities in flames. No longer was there any grief for private loss: public lamentation swallowed up this...as men reminded each other how once before the bulk of the city had been even thus laid desolate" by the Gauls. As with so much else in his Empire, Nero had lost control of his own land-clearing project. Greedy soldiers and the weather destroyed two thirds of his own city and killed untold numbers of his subjects.

Recent studies have cast doubt on the verdict of ancient historians, citing prejudice, the possibility of accidental fires, and that Christians or other malcontents had started the fire. But it's hard to deny the vision that has come down to us through history of Nero atop the remains of his own palace soon after the fire began, singing, according to Dio Cassius, playing the lyre, according to Tacitus, overlooking the burning city with, at the least, equanimity, before he fully realized the damage he had caused.

The disaster which the city then underwent had no parallel save in the Gallic invasion. The whole Palatine hill, the theater of Taurus, and nearly two thirds of the rest of the city were burned. Countless persons perished, according to Dio Cassius. The rebuilding started immediately. "Nero now began to collect vast sums both from individuals and

NERO'S ANGRY ATTEMPTS ON  
HIS MOTHER'S LIFE INCLUDED  
THREE BY POISON AND ONE BY  
RIGGING THE CEILING TO CAVE  
IN WHILE SHE LAY IN BED.



nations, sometimes using downright compulsion, with the conflagration as his excuse.

## **WATCHING ROME BURN**

Not surprisingly, both the citizens of the city and of the empire were less than impressed; for the urbanites their emperor had burned down their city and their homes and was now extorting money from them to build his dream mansion, his “Golden House” (*Domus Aurea*). Realizing the problems this might create, Nero looked for scapegoats and conveniently found them in the underground Christian movement. They were in any case less than popular with most Romans, their disapproval of Roman pagan rituals causing much disdain. Tacitus called them “depraved” and Suetonius proclaimed them to be “of a new and mischievous religious belief.” In any case, many were brutally murdered, burned, or torn apart by wild beasts. Rumor had it that Nero lit fires at his garden parties with the burning carcasses of the dead. It is even believed that the Apostles Paul and Peter died in this persecution.

Nero’s power never recovered from the fire. The damage was immense and the burden on the populace, more to build his Golden House than their houses, was enormous. Sedition galloped across the empire—there were revolts in Britain, Spain, and Judaea—and within the Senate. Senators had seen their own houses destroyed too. There were plots to replace Nero as emperor. Two uprisings were ruthlessly crushed. Finally they had had enough. Nero’s last words were, “What an artist the world is losing in me.” According to Suetonius, he killed himself as an assassination squad was coming to get him. He did leave an extraordinary temple, however. Severus and Celer were chosen by him as architect-engineers for the *Domus Aurea*. One of the most visible (and arrogant) features of the *Domus Aurea* was the Colossus Neronis, a 122-foot-high (37 m) bronze statue of Nero placed just outside the entrance. This monstrosity was erected in imitation of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The colossus was affixed with the heads of several emperors before Hadrian moved it to the outside of the *Amphitheatrum Flavium*. This building eventually took the name Colosseum in the Middle Ages, after the statue. The name stuck and is used to this day.



# ERIK THE RED'S DREAM ISLAND: THE FIRST REAL ESTATE SCAM

982–985

**MOTIVATION**

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Erik the Red (950–1003)

**Damage Done:** Brought hundreds of people with him to an uninhabitable land

**Why:** It was the only place that would take him

*Tuumasraq suddenly appears  
He has a true story to tell you  
Our rage is growing  
They pass you by with white faces  
Watch out they don't catch you  
To them you are nothing  
Together they incarcerate me  
Considering me a beast ...*

—Nuuk Posse

*Greenland is the biggest island in the world, hell of north in the middle of the Atlantic surrounded by icebergs, populated by polar bears, Inuits and a few Danes, where reindeer meat and seal fat are staple foods. Who would think that a country of about 50,000 people stuck smack in the middle of the Arctic north would also be the home of this most insanelly, ultimately chill hip hop-band? Nuuk Posse is the real thing...old school Greenlandic hip-hop!*

—Kamio and Pippilina, the Milkycat Secret Agents

It is always assumed that the European colonization of the world, especially North America, was an uninterrupted rhythm of successful arrival, destruction of the native population, and integration. That was not always the case. The concept of the “failed state” is thought of as a modern invention, but again, that is not always true. The largest island in the world, Greenland, proved too much for its first colonizers, who made a blunder of colossal proportions when they first set foot on its icy shore. Although Greenland had no trees, through arrogance the settlers decided to create a regular settlement. They ultimately failed, and quite literally disappeared.

The Vikings began voyages of exploration in the eighth century from their home base in Norway. They were tough, cruel fighters but also traders, probably as far-ranging as the Arab world. They established trading posts from Dublin to Kiev and undoubtedly reached the North American continent, definitely Newfoundland but perhaps much further into what is now the United States. They also developed several constitutional concepts of considerable importance for the growth of Western civilization, trial by jury and parliamentary rule among them. The Icelandic National Assembly, the Althing, established in 930, is the oldest assembly of its kind in Europe. Viking explorers had taken Iceland in 870 and established firm rule within those 50 years, declaring independence from Norway. Many dissidents and outlaws from Viking rule made their way to the new land. One of these was Erik the Red.

Erik’s name has come down through history as an intrepid and famous explorer, but in truth he was little more than an outlaw on the run. He had been forced to leave Norway in 980 with his father after a murder, but lasted in Iceland only two years before again committing a murder and being summoned to the Althing to answer charges. He was banished for three years but literally had nowhere to go, as he was a wanted man in Norway. So he sailed west.

He came upon a land mostly covered in ice with some low-lying green pastures. He spent three years exploring the island and decided effectively to make it his domain, despite the inhospitality of the climate even for Norsemen, and the fact that no trees could grow on the island. Nonetheless, Erik set up a colony on the southern coastline. In what may well have been the first real estate scam of all time, Erik named it

IN WHAT MAY WELL HAVE  
BEEN THE FIRST REAL ESTATE  
SCAM OF ALL TIME, ERIK  
NAMED HIS FIND  
“GREENLAND” TO ATTRACT  
SETTLERS.

ADVERTISING AN  
INHOSPITABLE  
LAND

“Greenland” to attract settlers. On his return to Iceland after his banishment he managed to get 25 ships full of would-be settlers to come with him. The only human inhabitants of Greenland were Inuits, essentially nomadic hunters, since regular settlement wasn’t really an option. They were less than friendly but apparently mostly kept out of the way, presumably laughing in their igloos. But Erik was undaunted, and set up an eastern settlement, using driftwood to build houses. Fourteen of the 25 ships survived the perilous journey and a later fleet set up a western settlement 400 miles (248 km) away.

The idea was apparently to live by trading. Traces of as many as 400 farms have been found, but the land was simply too poor to allow for subsistence farming. Erik sent his son Leif to establish trading routes. Leif came back instead with a quite different import—a wife from Norway, and a priest. Christianity had reached the Viking lands and Leif had converted. Erik, a devout follower of Thor, went further west and became almost without question the first European to set foot on North America, finding what he called Vinland, a land with grape vines, salmon, cattle, and with day and night of more or less equal length, well south of Erik’s settlement.

Erik died around 1002, leaving those who had followed him in their bleak landscape, forever reduced to foraging for driftwood for housing and fuel. They weren’t able to make the voyage to Vinland because they no longer had enough wood to make ships. Even journeys to Norway became few and far between. The western settlement was wiped out by an Inuit incursion. The Norse Empire had become Christian, and news of the Greenland outpost had reached the pope in Rome, who sent out an unfortunate to be his bishop there. The bishop was apparently instrumental in persuading the surviving locals that they were not really able to make it as an independent state anymore, and in 1261 the assembly, such as it was, became one of the few countries in the history of the world voluntarily to surrender their sovereignty without a shot being fired. They submitted themselves entirely to the Norwegian crown, presumably in the hope that the Norwegians would send some form of aid.



ERIK THE RED

But none was forthcoming—no subsequent bishop was ever sent, and gradually, contact was lost completely. By 1409 a voyager found the eastern settlement completely deserted. Some claim that the Mandan Indians, discovered by French explorer Pierre de la Verendyre in the upper Missouri valley in 1738, were white and European in bearing and conduct, but if this is even true they are likely to have been descendants of Leif's rather than the unfortunate Greenlanders.

## THE DEATH OF THE COLONY

No one really knows what happened to the unfortunate denizens of Erik the Red's settlement. Physicists using carbon dating techniques on the bones from old churchyards have discovered that the diet of the settlers changed dramatically; once the boats stopped coming, they started to eat much more like the Inuit, mostly fish. They also discovered significant signs of malnutrition, suggesting that because of the lack of essential raw materials, the Greenlanders literally starved to death. Oddly, this scientific breakthrough came about because of the lack of wood; without coffins, dead Greenlanders were simply wrapped in blankets and then preserved in the permafrost. Scientists have even been able to identify the bones of the one bishop who came to Greenland, as his diet was mostly Norwegian and more meat-based before his ill-fated posting. The diet changed over the 400 years of occupation from the 80:20 ratio of meat to fish of the Norwegians to a 20:80 ratio. Without the nutrition from whales and walrus that the Inuit used to supplement their fish diet, it simply was not enough.

In some ways it was remarkable that the outpost lasted as long as it did given the conditions—perhaps as many as 5,000 settlers at the peak of the colony lived there. As late as 1721 a joint merchant-clerical expedition was sent out to look for Europeans on Greenland, apparently more to check that they were not still Catholic than worrying about their health. Norway itself had by then become affiliated with Denmark, and the Danes assumed control over the island or what there was of it. Today, Greenland still has only 50,000 or so residents; it achieved self-governance from Denmark in 1979, a full 718 years after it gave itself up. But as you can see from page 37, the modern world has finally caught up even with Greenland, a failed state no more.

# POPE SYLVESTER AND THE END OF THE WORLD

December 31, 999

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprits:** The faithful

**Damage Done:** Unknown number of deaths before the end came

**Why:** Mass panic and superstition of the unknown

*It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.*

—R.E.M.

*The real end of the world is the destruction of the spirit; the other kind depends on the significant attempt to see whether after such a destruction the world can go on.*

—Karl Kraus



It doesn't say much for the second millennium that it was bookended by two outbreaks of mass idiocy on a global scale. Climbing mountaintops to await the end of the world was perhaps more understandable, given the extent of knowledge in the year 999, than cashing in frantically because the ATMs of the world were going to swallow your worldly wealth. There were plenty of outbreaks of foolhardiness over the course of the thousand years in between, especially belief in the evil of minorities and willingness to go along with their persecution, from the Jews in Nazi Germany to the witch hunts of early modern Europe and their more modern equivalent in McCarthyite America. But the apocalyptic panic that overwhelms otherwise sensible people is of a special quality.

The tenth century has been called the Century of Lead and Iron. The Saracens, the Spanish Moors, the Vikings, the Bulgars, and the Magyar horsemen all invaded Europe. The Chinese invented gunpowder.

What's now the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, was founded. The Hutu arrived in today's Rwanda, soon outnumbering the neighboring Tutsi, though they would wait until near the next millennium before trying to wipe them out. In Rome, rival popes imprisoned, starved, mutilated, and assassinated each other. Erik the Red probably became the first "white man" to reach the North American continent. The English had a king so feeble he was nicknamed "the Unready." Recurrent famines produced starvation in region after region, resulting in widespread cannibalism. Famines were followed by epidemics caused by eating infected grain.

Thus, in the year 999 an epidemic of terror of the end of the world spread among the masses. It hardly took the wandering monks and mendicants to suggest that the one-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ might have some

mystical significance in a world that brutal.

The tenth century was not a particularly bright time in the history of the papacy. One thousand years after the reign of St. Peter, a succession of popes was serially brutally murdered and deposed and the church endured 50 years of what was known as the pornocracy or



THE FAITHFUL



**THE REAL  
DARK AGES**

"Reign of the Harlots," during which strong women dominated the papacy. By the end of the century the Holy Roman emperors, originally supposed to be appointed by the popes, had more or less turned the tables and taken over control of who became pope. Benedict V lasted only a month in 964 before having the papal scepter broken over him and being carted off for life to a monastery. Benedict VI was strangled in 974 after the death of his mentor, the Holy Roman emperor Otto. Gregory V ascended to the papacy in 996, under the aegis of Otto III, and was the first German pope, but as such had to contend with an antipope put up by local Roman nobles. The unfortunate man was pursued and captured by papal and imperial troops, had his ears, nose, and tongue cut out, and was sent to a monastery also, where strangely enough he outlived the next five popes. Gregory didn't quite make it to the millennium either, dying in rather mysterious though not entirely unexpected circumstances on February 6, 999.

So a new pope would have to usher the Christian Church through the dark days of the end of the millennium. The only success the papacy had enjoyed in the previous century was spreading the word to Iceland, to the deep discomfiture of Erik the Red. Otto III's choice for pope was odd, perhaps, and guaranteed to panic an anxious set of believers.

On the last day of 999, in Rome, a mass of weeping and trembling worshippers waited for the dreaded Day of Wrath. Many poor entered the church of St. Peter's in sackcloth and ashes, having spent months doing penance and mortifying the flesh. Their fears were only heightened as they looked at the new pope celebrating the mass. He was Sylvester II, also known as Gerbert de Aurillac, the first French pope. To say they were waiting for the horns to appear on him would be an understatement.

Gerbert was born in the Auvergne region of France around 950. At 13 he went to the monastery of St. Gerald, where he was discovered by a traveling rich count from Barcelona, who arranged to take him to Spain for education when he was 17. Spain at that time was on the border of the Christian and Muslim empires. Gerbert spent some time in Barcelona, but more in al-Andalusia, in Seville and in Cordoba, whose largest library contained 4,000 volumes, four times the size of any collection in the Christian world. The young Gerbert learned mathematics; the Arabs had invented astronomy, the concept of the number zero,

their alphabet, and much else. Later he was to devise a type of steam organ and make use of the abacus. In 969 he was taken to Rome, at a time of relative peace within the papacy, and impressed both the pope and the emperor Otto, who hired him as tutor for his son. It was therefore no surprise when Otto II came to power that Gerbert was rapidly elevated to positions of ecclesiastical eminence, notably the archbishoprics of Rheims and then Ravenna. When Gregory suddenly died, the emperor had little hesitation in naming Gerbert as pope. He took the name Sylvester in honor of the fourth-century Sylvester I, a close associate of Constantine the Great.

However, it was by no means straightforward to introduce a man of such learning—such unorthodox learning especially—into an office more focused on simple survival than on teachings, religious or scientific. Rumors abounded about Gerbert: that he had won the papacy playing dice with the Devil and would deliver Christianity to the Devil at the stroke of midnight, that he had stolen a book of spells from an Arab philosopher in Spain and had escaped by sorcery; that he was in league with a rather unlikely female demon called Meridiana, and that he had invented and built a bronze head that had prophesized that the Devil would come back for him were he ever to preach in Jerusalem. Suffice it to say that Pope Sylvester was not among the many anxious pilgrims who descended on the Holy Land as 999 drew to a close.

RUMORS ABOUNDED THAT  
GERBERT HAD WON THE  
PAPACY PLAYING DICE WITH  
THE DEVIL, AND THAT HE  
WOULD DELIVER  
CHRISTIANITY AT THE STROKE  
OF MIDNIGHT.

In the end, the last mass, of course, passed peacefully though anxiously enough, and a celebratory *Te Deum* was sung in St. Peter's, while many rather sheepishly came down from mountaintops or wherever else they had decided to see the End of the World, much as others were to successfully use their ATM cards 1,000 years later. Gerbert, however, made the mistake of taking mass in the small Roman church of St. Mary in Jerusalem, and promptly fell ill. He did not help his own cause by reputedly having his hands and tongue cut out in penitence and asking his cardinals to cut him up and scatter his bones across the city. Instead, he was placed in a tomb with a rather strange inscription that gave rise to a long-living legend that his bones would rattle to presage the death of a pope.

# POPE ALEXANDER AND THE SEARCH FOR PRESTER JOHN

1165–1492

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Pope Alexander III (unknown–1181)

**Damage Done:** An entire crusade failed to meet a nonexistent army

**Why:** For more than three centuries, the Christian world of the West believed in a parallel, more glorious one in the East that did not exist

*This emperor, Prester John, holds full great land, and hath many full noble cities and good towns in his realm and many great diverse isles and large. For all the country of Ind is devised in isles for the great floods that come from Paradise, that depart all the land in many parts. And also in the sea he hath full many isles. And the best city in the Isle of Pentexoire is Nyse, that is a full royal city and a noble, and full rich.*

*This Emperor Prester John is Christian, and a great part of his country also. But yet, they have not all the articles of our faith as we have. They believe well in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost. And they be full devout and right true one to another.*

*This Emperor Prester John when he goeth into battle against any other lord, he hath no banners borne before him; but he hath three crosses of gold, fine, great and high, full of precious stones, and every of those crosses be set in a chariot, full richly arrayed. And for to keep every cross, be ordained 10,000 men of arms and more than 100,000 men on foot, in manner as men would keep a standard in our countries, when that we be in land of war. And this number of folk is without the principal host and without wings ordained for the battle. And when he hath no war, but rideth with a privy meinie, then he hath borne before him but one cross of tree, without painting and without gold or silver or precious stones, in remembrance that Jesus Christ suffered death upon a cross of tree.*

—Sir John Mandeville, *Travels*

If urban myths existed in medieval Europe, Prester John would have won any poll going as the number one myth. Urban myths don't matter all that much as long as you don't believe in them. But sending several thousand warriors off across the known world in the expectation that someone who doesn't exist will join up with you has to qualify for the sheer irrationality of faith.

### MAN OR MYTH?

As with most legends, a lot of truth—or truths, as Prester John remained a presence in European life for a number of centuries—lay behind the myth. Even now, it is hard to decipher exactly what was going on. The essence of the Prester John myth was created in 1165 when a letter arrived with the Byzantine emperor, with a copy to the pope and the Holy Roman emperor, from a great king in the East—somewhere in Asia—named Prester (or Presbyter) John. He was a Christian king who ruled over a vast and perfect Christian empire, dedicated to the defeat of Muslims and offering assistance with the ongoing Crusades. In fact, the Second Crusade had not long finished and had gone very badly for the Christians. In need of a shot in the arm, a verification of faith, the letter was well timed indeed.

The name was already familiar in the courts of Europe but until the letter arrived no one had really believed in him. Crusader Otto of Freising had reported news in 1144 of this great king, descended from one of the three Magi, who ruled over a wealthy and powerful kingdom, who had laid waste the armies of Medea, Persia, and Assyria, and who had sent an army to help the crusaders but had been turned back by the floodwaters of the Tigris. The letter confirmed what Otto had reported, though embellished by many fantastic tales of wealth, and placing Prester John in “the kingdom of the Three Indias,” a kingdom that stretched, so he said, from the Tower of Babel to the Rising of the Sun. The Second Crusade had been a total disaster, and the nonappearance of help for the hapless French and German crusaders who had been badly beaten by the Seljuk Turks and had failed even to take Damascus as a second prize was a convenient excuse for the embarrassed Christians.

The legend soon took hold. In 1177 Pope Alexander III sent his personal physician, Master Philip, to Prester John with a reply urging his help. Master Philip made it to Palestine but was never heard of again. Travelers, though, began to report that they themselves had been in



Prester John's kingdom and confirmed everything the letter said, with a few embellishments of their own. Giovanni Capini reported Prester John's army as soldiers made out of copper who were filled with fire and exploded when they reached enemy lines. Copies of the letter, each adding extra features, circulated for more than 100 years—the fountain of youth lay in Prester John's kingdom; giant women on horseback laid waste to the enemy; seven-horned bulls roamed the land. Thomas de Mandeville, a British adventurer, wrote the most fantastic account of all in the fourteenth century.

There were at least grains of truth to the story. St. Thomas, one of the Apostles, most definitely carried the word of Jesus to southern India. There is still a strong Christian sect in his name in Kerala, replete with a golden cross in honor of St. Thomas. The Nestorian church spread from there through some of Asia also, although by 1100 many had converted to the Muslim religion. Much of the embellishment in the letters corresponds precisely with reports of the battles of Alexander the Great in other chronicles—the Amazon women, the soldiers who burn, a magical salamander—so there is no doubt that these aspects of the Prester John myth were lifted from that source. And around the middle of the twelfth century, the time of the original letters, the army of Genghis Khan was indeed vanquishing Muslim armies in Central Asia; although of course, the Christian part was just wishful thinking.

By around 1400, though, enough real explorers, Marco Polo among them, had penetrated deep enough into Asia and returned safely without finding Prester John to make it pretty clear to everyone that there was no great Christian kingdom there. Undaunted, the true believers simply said they had made a mistake; by Asia they meant Abyssinia, the kingdom of Ethiopia in West Africa. Again there was no doubt that Christianity had spread that far; indeed, Rastafarians are essentially descendants of this group that had been converted by Coptic missionaries coming south from Egypt around the year 400. And in 1488 a prince from Benin visited the Portuguese court and reported a great and powerful king of the Mossi, which was interpreted as meaning the Kingdom

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS



POPE ALEXANDER



THE LEGEND—REGARDLESS  
OF THE FACT THAT PRESTER  
JOHN WOULD NOW BE CLOSE  
TO 500 YEARS OLD—LIVED ON  
UNTIL THE DISCOVERY OF THE  
AMERICAS AND THE SEARCH  
FOR EL DORADO.

of Moses. This set off all the rumor mills again, enough for the Portugese explorers that rounded Africa to be on the lookout, and for maps of Africa at the time to begin to show the land of Prester John in the approximate area of Ethiopia. The legend, regardless of the fact that Prester John would now be close to 500 years old, lived on until the discovery of the Americas and the search for El Dorado killed off Prester John for good.

But none of this really qualifies as *Idiotica*, any more so than belief in aliens today qualifies, unless damage really results. It seems likely that the original letter was written by the Holy Roman emperor Frederick Barbarossa as a deliberate attempt to destabilize the power of the papacy. If there was a perfect Christian kingdom elsewhere, then it clearly wasn't in Rome. Barbarossa definitely had met Otto. In an historical novel by Umberto Eco, the whole myth is put together by an adventurer, Maudlin, whom Barbarous had sent to study with Otto. Eco's book mixes fact with fiction and the quest for Prester John with the quest for the Holy Grail, but people really started to believe in all this, and sent thousands of men to futile deaths in crusade after crusade in the certain expectation that they would be met in the Holy Land by Prester John and his magical army to capture Jerusalem once and for all.

# GEORGE PODIEBRAD, THE LAST BOHEMIAN, AND WORLD PEACE

1458–1471

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** George Podiebrad (Jiri of Podebrady) (1420–1471)

**Damage Done:** For all his efforts, the last true Bohemian to lead his country for five centuries

**Why:** Attempting to create a union for trans-European peace guaranteed his fate

*The first documented plan for a European confederation, responding to the desire to establish lasting peace between the nations of Europe, was proposed in 1463 to Louis XI by the King of Bohemia, George Podiebrad; it consisted of creating a political assembly, a court of justice, a combined army and a federal budget.*

—European Commission Roundtable, 2004

The tag "Bohemian" has long been separated from the country that gave birth to the word. Probably originating from the arrival of Catholic refugees from Bohemia in France early in the fifteenth century, the term was intermingled with the advent of gypsies around the same time and eventually, the nomadic and dissolute life of the gypsies was called "Bohemian," a name that has lasted for many centuries. Shakespeare bizarrely gave Bohemia a coastline in *The Winter's Tale*. Thackeray and Walter Scott used "Bohemian" in the sense of a wanderer with no country. *La Bohème*, in the 1890s, positioned Bohemians in the Latin Quarter of Paris. In the 1950s we find Norman Podhoretz condemning Jack Kerouac, the Beats, and specifically what he saw as their suburban alienated followers as "Know-Nothing Bohemians." Meanwhile, Bohemia, though liberated from many centuries of foreign rule, is subsumed within the Czech Republic. But there was once a country of Bohemia that ever so briefly had a king and a place in a number of histories, including, sad to say, this *Idiotica*. Many leaders lost their king-

doms through abuses and the sins catalogued throughout this volume. But George Podiebrad lost Bohemia for the unpardonable crime of immense hope for the peaceful future of mankind. Almost forgotten by history, he can be found in the annals of Czech history as a footnote, and in the origins of the United Nations as one of the very first to come up with a charter for cooperation between nations leading to world peace, an idea that to this very day remains controversial. Ironically, the first manifestation of his dream died many hundreds of years later as the Nazis invaded his homeland one more time in 1938, ending 20 years of self-rule that was the first moment of Bohemian independence since the day of his death, back in 1461.



GEORGE PODIEBRAD

This suggestion seems too outrageous to be true. In 2003, in a major speech to the Council of Europe, the Danish Minister for Foreign Affairs commenced by crediting George Podiebrad with the first concept for a United Europe. The historian Robert Frank puts Podiebrad in league with Kant and Mazzini among the progenitors of European unity. But none of these very recent paeans of praise document what befell George and his kingdom, as a result of his wild scheme. It has taken history more than 500 years to

even acknowledge his role, let alone the fate that befell his countrymen.

Podiebrad came to power in a strange and tumultuous time for Europe. The Black Death had decimated much of the population in the fourteenth century. The Papal Schism of 1378 had driven the papacy from Rome to Sauvignon, reducing its power and putting it, in the minds of many, under undue influence from the French king. The Ottoman Empire was beginning to expand in a threatening manner from the East. It hadn't been that long before that Mongols had swept into Europe, specifically Hungary (the Magyars), and removed that part of what had briefly been a significant Bohemian kingdom under the banner of the Holy Roman Empire. German influence, specifically merchants trading under the banner of the Hanseatic League, was creating economic and political pressure to the North. The focal city of Bohemia, Prague, had seen golden days under the emperor Charles IV. But the dynasty that had ruled before had died out; Charles was from the House of Luxemburg, and on arrival in Prague could not speak a word of Czech. In 1348, he founded one of the great and first European universities, named after him, as well as building much of what still makes Prague one of the most elegant and beloved cities in the world. But he still wasn't seen as Czech and after his death, revolt started to foment in the Czech nobility, given voice and meaning by the beginnings of one of the great uprisings of the Middle Ages.

One of the first students at the university, and from 1408 its rector, was the priest Jan Hus. Strongly influenced by the Lollard heresy in England led by John Wyclif, he preached against papal indulgences and the power of the papacy. He was excommunicated and burned at the stake in 1415, but not before he had laid deep roots for what became the Reformation 100 years later, and initiated great discontent and nationalist pride in Bohemia itself. Charles's successors proved unable to keep the nobles in check. The Hussites themselves split into two factions and it was one of the nobles from the more moderate of the factions, the Utraquists, who was elected king of Bohemia by the Czech Diet in 1458. Even if you count the earlier Pemyslid dynasty as Czech—descended from the Good King Wenceslas of Christmas mythology—George was the first Bohemian king for centuries. He was also the last.

## BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

George was the son of a prominent noble family; at 14 he had distinguished himself in the Battle of Lipany as a prominent nationalist against Austrian and Hungarian forces. George was faced with immediate problems—the Turks had recaptured Constantinople in 1453 and were a fierce threat on one side; the pope, now back in Rome, refused immediately to recognize him as a member of the Hussite heresy and he was excommunicated. The Polish Jagellion dynasty, with the support of many Catholics, had tried to seize the throne before George was elected, which was seen as an act of defiance. A holy war was declared against him. At the same time, he inherited the mantle of Hus and issued a grand nationalist manifesto “Call To Arms in Defense of the Truth.” The printing press, invented in 1454, was already leading to the availability of literature in the Czech language. His manifesto read in part, “Having in mind above all God’s glory and the preservation of his holy truth and the calming of this Czech land, we understand that the pope, who should protect and defend that holy truth to his death, to the contrary wants to destroy that holy truth and moreover to destroy, wipe out, and utterly suppress the Czech language, merely to preserve his pride, his avarice, and the rest of his vices...he inflames and incites all the nations and languages of the surrounding lands against us.” This was remarkable not just for its risky condemnation of the pope but its protonationalism in defining the Czechs by their language and its awareness of the power of the unity of nations.

THE NEW PRINTING PRESS  
BECAME A TOOL FOR  
DECRYING THE POPE.

In 1463 George attempted to find at least one ally by marrying his daughter Catherine to the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus. Catherine, unfortunately, died the next year, and Corvinus soon declared himself an ally of the Bohemian Catholic nobles in support of the pope who declared George officially deposed.

Perhaps more out of desperation than anything else, George came up with his grand concept. Conceivably it was a last-ditch attempt to save his country. Certainly it was one born more from hope than anything else, and undoubtedly its audacity sealed the fate of his country. He sent his brother-in-law on a tour—seen by some as a pilgrimage—which was memorialized in a journal as a remarkable diplomatic mission and adventure:

On November 25, 1465, Leon de Rosmital, Czech lord, left Prague “to



visit all the Christian kingdoms as well as all religious and civil principalities on German and Roman soil and particularly the Holy Sepulcher and the tomb of the beloved apostle John." A great, very pious lord? Admittedly, but he adds that he wishes this voyage "to bring profits and advantages for his own life," and that he wishes to benefit from it "in the exertion of military art" and "in the study of the practices of various countries."

These official motivations hid a diplomatic mission, essentially secret. He left as an ambassador of the king of Bohemia, George Podiebrad, in order to convince the kings and princes of the countries he would adhere to a great project, a European federation of various kingdoms and principalities, independent of the pope and the Germanic emperor (two powers that obstructed his politics). The king of France, Louis XI, was seduced by the idea, which placed France at the head of this organization. In order to convince the other sovereigns, George Podiebrad offered to help them fight against Turkish advance in the Christian world by mobilizing this federation of states. Moreover, he proposed a permanent council charged with regulating the reciprocal litigations of the princes. In this way, Leon de Rosmital met, in addition to Louis XI, the duke of Burgundy, Philippe le Bon; the king of England, Edward IV; the king of Castille, Henri IV; the king of Portugal, Alphonse V; and the king of Aragon, Jean II. Each one of his hosts filled him up while making him visit the most famous sanctuaries of the kingdom, inviting him to great dinners, balls, several tournaments, and bullfighting on horses. But none of them took the invitation at all seriously. Pope Pius II was furious and redoubled his efforts to overthrow a leader who was not only religiously heretical, but whose suggestions of European unity he took as threatening less to the Turks than to the power of the papacy itself.

## **A SECRET MISSION**

Pius declared a crusade against Podiebrad and the Czechs. Matthias Corvinus, George's erstwhile son-in-law, was declared king of Bohemia by the pope and invaded. George won a famous battle in 1468, but the Hungarians took much of the east of the country.

George, exhausted from battling on all fronts, died on March 22, 1471. His attempts at securing European unity died with him. There was no creation of a dynasty here — forward-looking as ever, this was an elected kingship not a hereditary one — but so beleaguered a nation could

GEORGE'S GREAT PLAN HAD  
SO ISOLATED HIS COUNTRY  
AND TERRIFIED HIS  
NEIGHBORS THEY DECIDED  
THAT NOT ONLY HIS IDEAS  
BUT HIS NATION SHOULD BE  
SILENCED FOREVER.

find no one of stature within its own ranks to defend it. The members of the Diet gave themselves up first to the Polish kings, hoping for protection from the Hungarians, and 20 years later to the Hapsburgs, who, within two years, had removed them and the Czechs from power until the end of World War I. George's great plan had so isolated his country and terrified his neighbors that the combination of religious heresy and political nonconformity that he represented and so eloquently expounded was enough to persuade the surrounding nations that not only his ideas but his nation should be silenced forever.

The Prague spring of 1968, and the Velvet Revolution of 1989, and the subsequent ascension to power of playwright Vaclav Havel, perhaps give belated recognition to the strength of hope represented by George Podiebrad, even though his great plan resulted in the long suppression of his country.

# MOCTEZUMA AND THE RETURNING GOD

November 1519

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Moctezuma (a.k.a. Montezuma) (1466–1520)

**Damage Done:** Gave away his entire civilization

**Why:** Mistaking the Spanish conquistador for the return of the lost God Quetzalcoatl, Moctezuma welcomed the conquerors into his city with open arms

*O our lord, thou has suffered fatigue, thou has endured weariness, thou hast come to arrive on earth. Thou hast come to govern thy city of Mexico, thou hast come to descend upon my mat, upon thy seat which for a time I have guarded for thee...I do not merely dream that I see thee, that I look into thy face...The rulers departed maintained that thou wouldst come to visit to thy city, that thou wouldst descend.*

—Emperor Moctezuma to Hernando Cortés

Of all the gods in the Mesoamerican pantheon, the great god Quetzalcoatl was by far the most important; he was the creator of Heaven and Earth. Literally the name means “Plumed Serpent” but he could take many forms, including the human form of the high priest Topiltzin. The legend was that many centuries ago, in anger at the behavior of the Toltec peoples, Quetzalcoatl had taken off on the Eastern Sea for the Land of the Red on a raft of serpents, vowing one day, as gods are prone to do, to return and take power. Legend goes on to say that he had made his exit in the guise of Topiltzin, a fair man with a beard. It is possible that this rather odd depiction was caused by the unexpected appearance of the Irish priest St. Brendan on the coast. In any event, the ground was laid for perhaps the most extraordinary feat of misjudgment in our pantheon, the greeting of a marauding conqueror by one of the most powerful men in the world, not as an annoying insect to be crushed, but as a god. It led to the subsequent downfall of an entire civilization. Moctezuma, (a.k.a. Montezuma), emperor of the Mexica (cultural descendants of the Aztecs, but actually a different tribe), ruler of Tenochtitlan, in an act of idiocy caused by faith, greeted the conquistador Hernando Cortés as the returning Quetzalcoatl. On this mistake turned the fate not just of the Mexican empire but a whole continent.

## **GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY**

It hadn't taken long from the time of Columbus's accidental discovery of the New World for the Spanish Empire to set up a base for exploration, discovery, and plunder. They chose Cuba as the base, a short hop to Florida and not so far across the Gulf of Mexico (known to the Mexica, logically, as the Eastern Sea) to Yucatan. Two expeditions had made some progress, some friendly contact, and some pitched battles with the Maya, but enough to make it clear that the locals had no knowledge of gunpowder and that most of the artifacts they found or were offered were made of gold. The second expedition also found signs of human sacrifice and cannibalism. They discovered that the coastal tribes lived under the control of the Mexica in a giant inland city—and would be willing to ally with anyone who might free them of that yoke. The prospects were therefore exciting indeed—the chance for glorious imperial conquest, the opportunity to convert the heathen, and plenty of gold for the taking. So Hernando Cortés, not the wild barbarian that history suggests but a highly literate lawyer, student of

law and Latin at the University of Salamanca, from a noble but illegitimate and poor branch of a leading Castilian family, and by now a magistrate in Santiago, the Spanish capital of Cuba, led the third expedition from Cuba in 1519. Unlike the two previous expeditions, he had with him not only heavy artillery, but horses and dogs. He also had an advantage over the empire of the Mexica that he could not possibly have foreseen.

History depicts the Spaniards as having wiped out the Aztec civilization. Moctezuma and his kingdom had worked their way south over the centuries and established themselves as the most powerful group in the region. They built their capital, Tenochtitlan, on a rocky island in the middle of the Lake of Mexico. They ruled neighboring tribes, including the remnants of the Mayan civilization and the Toltecs, and dominated at least 30 tribes. They had established themselves around the 1420s in a bloody series of struggles with the Tepaneca, and Moctezuma was the sixth emperor to control the region, extracting mostly tributes in kind that helped to make for an immensely rich capital city. The Mexica worshipped a god of war, but combined this with the remnants of the Aztec belief system, including the legend of Quetzalcoatl as creator of the world. It made for a formidable and much feared combination. Tenochtitlan itself—now Mexico City—was by the time of the Spaniards' arrival perhaps bigger and grander than any European city of the time, with a system of canals that reminded the Spaniards of Venice. They were extremely skilled in design and sculpture, metalwork, woodwork, and mosaics. They had complex ball games and grand pageants of music and dance. They also, perhaps most devastatingly, had a most hospitable demeanor. They had a wonderful and beautiful city, but failed to make key advancements in civilization; they had not invented the wheel or gunpowder, and had no knowledge of seafaring. Moctezuma's costly leap of faith would probably not have occurred if they had.



MOCTEZUMA

There is no doubt that the Mexica were aware of strange happenings on the coast from the beginning of the century. As a civilization, they



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appear to have had very little contact with the outside world and very little curiosity about it. Word spread of the fair-haired, bearded men with their strange animals and fierce weaponry that moved over the ground so easily. The more Moctezuma heard, the more nervous he became. The priests had predicted the return of Quetzalcoatl from across the Eastern Sea that very year. The new arrivals fit the descriptions all too vividly. For all his power and pomp and ceremony, these belief systems and superstitions apparently weighed heavily on Moctezuma. Even without his superior weaponry, and certainly beyond his wildest dreams, Cortés had essentially already beaten the enormous empire of the Mexica as his small expeditionary force of 400 or 500 made their way across the mountains to the famed Tenochtitlan. Emissaries from the two sides had met in the mountains and exchanged gifts—garments for the Spaniards that turned out to be fashioned for a returning god—while those returning to Tenochtitlan were apparently anointed with fresh sacrificial blood, their reward for having met with the god.

## THE BRIDGE IS CROSSED

In November 1519 Cortés walked onto the southern causeway linking the mainland with the capital. Moctezuma descended from his jewel-encrusted litter and greeted Cortés with the most ironic speech ever given to an opposing army in history, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter.

After that, it was all over; there really wasn't any fighting. Moctezuma had essentially handed the kingdom over to the newcomer. Within three days he was a prisoner in his own palace. After two months Moctezuma had formally accepted vassalage to Charles V, king of Spain. By all accounts Cortés and Moctezuma got along famously over the succeeding months and even discussed alliances and conquering China. But by April 1520 word got back to Cuba of the improbable success of the expedition, beyond not only their wildest dreams, but also well beyond any orders that had been given. A force was sent, led by the deputy governor, to demand the renewed fealty of Cortés. He left the city to meet and ultimately defeat the Spanish troops; but while he was away his deputy Pedro de Alvarado, rather more skeptical of the whole surrender, took the opportunity to butcher the entire ranks of Mexica nobility at a fiesta, sparking an insurrection and siege.

Moctezuma was killed on the roof of his palace by his own people while trying to quell the fighting. Cortés returned to a bloodbath. By the time he retook the city a year later, many thousands of Mexica had died and the ruin of a great empire was complete. An entire civilization had surrendered itself to a conqueror on the foolish faith in an inherited belief, and the once-feared Moctezuma had become the stuff of history.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## JOHAN DE WITT, NEW AMSTERDAM AND PULAU RUN: THE WORST DEAL EVER MADE

1667

**Main Culprit:** Johan de Witt (1623–1672)

**Damage Done:** Dutch history was forever transformed by swapping Manhattan Island for a small Spice Island

**Why:** Thinking they had brokered a great deal, the Dutch monopoly on nutmeg turned out not to be worth the greatest city on earth

*Who were the Dutch and English to trade islands that didn't belong to them in the first place?*

—A native of the island of Run, quoted in *The New Yorker*

*Nutmeg—Convicts and sailors sometimes have recourse to nutmeg. About a tablespoon is swallowed with water. Results are vaguely similar to marijuana with side effects of headache and nausea. Death would probably supervene before addiction if such addiction is possible. I have only taken nutmeg once.*

—William Burroughs, appendix to *The Naked Lunch*

In earlier times, before soccer players and baseball players switched teams as they do now, in secret meetings held at the end of hostilities for the year, the great empires of the world would do much the same thing with some of their prize territories. Whoever had won or lost the most recent war would give up pieces on the world chessboard and maybe get something smaller in return to save face. By convention, the winner got to pick. But as with sports franchises, having first pick is not always the best option. In a slice of error from history caused by greed and pride, and, it must be said, some bad luck, the Dutch managed to hand over what was to become the most valuable real estate in the world in exchange for what is now a very poor, small island in the far-off reaches of Indonesia. And they thought they had a great deal! Such is the sad story of Manhattan and Pulau Run.

Among the early prizes of colonialism were spices. Peppers, cloves, nutmeg, and mace, were such extraordinary supplements to medieval European foodstuffs that they were highly prized, the most valuable commodities in the world. The Venetians controlled the trade and kept the specific origin of each spice as secret as they could. Nutmeg was perhaps the most precious of all, both as a hallucinogen and an aphrodisiac, even as a cure for the plague. The fall of Constantinople in 1453, though, closed the overland route to the spices that the Venetians controlled, and the race for a seaborne route began, Da Gama in one direction, Columbus in another. However, Vasco da Gama (who was actually trying to find the kingdom of Prester John) reached Southeast Asia and returned laden with spices in 1499. The next expedition, that of Albuquerque, brought the Portuguese the thriving port of Malacca in 1511. Two small Portuguese galleons sailed on through the Indonesian archipelago and reached Banda, the main island in the Moluccas, soon known as the Spice Islands. For 60 years the Portuguese more or less held sway in the region, but after Sir Francis Drake's expedition of 1574, the beginnings of major mercantile exploration from Britain took place, culminating in the signing by Queen Elizabeth of the charter of the East India Company in 1600.

## THE SPICE RACE

The Dutch, meanwhile, were also exploring furiously—Jacob van Neck had returned to Amsterdam with a million pounds of spices in the hold of his ship. But more by luck than judgment, a small British pin-nace with a crew of 10 had been pushed by a heavy storm toward the

smallest of the Banda chain, Run, which turned out to be one of the greatest sources of nutmeg ever found. The Dutch, meanwhile, much better organized and profit-driven than the more adventurous British, had almost entirely displaced the Portuguese by 1609, and after a particularly unpleasant run-in with some local cannibals, built a considerable fort on one of the Bandas. Only Pulau Run remained a British possession, indeed one of the very first of the nascent British Empire. James I was rather bizarrely known as king of England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Puloway, and Puloroon (Pulau Run).

Meanwhile, a separate but related competition saw British and Dutch explorers trying to find passages to the Spice Islands by way of the still unexplored North American continent. The Dutch hired the British explorer Henry Hudson for the task. Having failed to find the Northwest Passage, he sailed south from Newfoundland, past Cape Cod, and stumbled upon Long Island, and then a small, apparently fertile island at the mouth of what is now known as the Hudson River. Hudson was to be killed in a mutiny on his next trip, but the Dutch took a liking to the island he had found, and established a small colony at the tip of the island, building an exact duplicate of their fort on the Bandas. They decided to purchase the rest of the island from the locals for 60 guilders, and "Fort Nieu Amsterdam" was born.

THE DUTCH MEANWHILE,  
MUCH BETTER ORGANIZED  
AND PROFIT-DRIVEN THAN  
THE MORE ADVENTUROUS  
BRITISH, HAD ALMOST  
ENTIRELY DISPLACED THE  
PORTUGUESE BY 1609.

Hostilities between the two nations continued off and on in the Indies throughout the seventeenth century, mostly in the nature of minor skirmishes. At one point, when the British left Pulau Run unmanned, the Dutch local commander Coen sneaked onshore and had all the nutmeg trees cut down. Nutmeg was being sold by now in Europe for something like a 6,000 percent markup. Its popularity was enormous. The Dutch policy was to replace the native population wherever possible with settlers from the Netherlands and to create a monopoly on the trade. Three naval wars broke out in Europe during this time period between England and the Netherlands, ostensibly over European matters but actually, part of the battle was over these trade routes. The colony of Nieu Amsterdam was not especially successful though; religious tolerance was not the strong point of the Dutch, and although they had set up some trading colonies along the Hudson River, they had made little use of their new foothold on the North American continent. During the second war, while they made substantial headway in



Europe—the famous burning of the British fleet in the Thames—they lost Nieu Amsterdam to a British fleet in 1664.

When it came to a settlement—the Treaty of Breda in 1667—all possessions were effectively on the trading block. The British were not all that enamored of their new island, and offered to trade it for the Dutch sugar holdings in Surinam in South America, but were refused. Finally they agreed to keep to what was to become Manhattan in New York in return for ceding the by now nutmeg-free island of Pulau Run, so that the Dutch could at least feel they had the monopoly that meant so much to them. Both sides were remarkably pleased with themselves, although the British of course were proud possessors of the island for only just over another 100 years (see *Boston Tea Party*), so they added their own piece of foolishness to the equation.

Nutmeg, though indigenous to the Banda Islands, proved remarkably easy to grow elsewhere. When the British briefly invaded the Bandas during the Napoleonic Wars they took the opportunity to replant many thousands of nutmeg trees across the British Empire, especially the Caribbean island of Grenada. Finally, the giant sleeping volcano of Gunung Api woke up and destroyed much of the crop. Nutmeg's use in oils increasingly became replaced by chemicals, although to this day entrepreneurs are trying to grow nutmeg again in quantity, and claim their entire crop is purchased by Coca-Cola, for which it is the secret ingredient. But for all that it was hardly a fair trade for the mercantile hub that Manhattan was to provide the new America.

Pulau Run is now part of Indonesia, which finally gained its independence from the Dutch through a bloody insurrection after World War II. The Bandas were used by the Dutch as a cruel penal colony, overrun by the Japanese, and the capital city was nearly leveled by American bombing. It is hard even to find Pulau Run on a map. It has perhaps 1,200 inhabitants, no fresh water, and the rusting remains of a Dutch colonial nutmeg factory. Manhattan is, well, Manhattan. Just over one and a half million people strong and probably the greatest city in the world. Could the Dutch have known? Obviously not. Their greed was largely responsible for the Spice Islands never fulfilling their promise; the Dutch East India Company disbanded, millions of guilders in debt thanks in part to the worst trade in history.

## UP FOR GRABS



JOHAN DE WITT

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## LORD NORTH AND GEORGE III'S TEA PARTY

December 16, 1773

**Main Culprit:** Lord Frederick North (1732–1792)

**Damage Done:** Loss of the American colonies

**Why:** Trying to rip off the settlers

*Once vigorous measures appear to be the only means left to bringing the Americans to a due submission to the mother country, the colonies will submit.*

—King George III

*FAREWELL the Tea-board with your gaudy attire,  
Ye cups and ye saucers that I did admire;  
To my cream pot and tongs I now bid adieu;  
That pleasure's all fled that I once found in you.  
Farewell pretty chest that so lately did shine,  
With hyson and congo and best double fine;  
Many a sweet moment by you I have sat,  
Hearing girls and old maids to tattle and chat;  
And the spruce coxcomb laugh at nothing at all,  
Only some silly work that might happen to fall.  
No more shall my teapot so generous be  
In filling the cups with this pernicious tea,  
For I'll fill it with water and drink out the same,  
Before I'll lose LIBERTY that dearest name,  
Because I am taught (and believe it is fact)*

*That our ruins is aimed at in the late act,  
Of imposing a duty on all foreign teas,  
Which detestable stuff we can quit when we please.  
LIBERTY'S the Goddess that I do adore,  
And I'll maintain her right until my last hour,  
Before she shall part I will die in the cause,  
For I'll never be govern'd by tyranny's laws.*

—Anonymous,

**“A Lady's Adieu to her Tea Table”**

The East India Company is a frequent presence in these annals. Time and again it appears as a significant player at moments of folly, normally requiring a government bail-out of one sort or another. The year 1773 in England is a case in point. The company had stockpiles of tea and nowhere to sell it. Prime Minister Lord North in a prime example of idiocy caused primarily not really by greed, but by arrogance, thought it would be a capital idea to undercut the merchants of the American colonies and allow the company to sell, export, and sell direct. It wasn't the first time, and certainly not the last, that companies called in political favors to salvage their own disasters (see the chapter on Enron for a contemporary example). But in this case, the consequences were extreme indeed, igniting the rebellion that led to the loss of the American colonies, the War of Independence, and a huge hole in the nascent British Empire.

The Tea Party itself was essentially an act of mercantile rebellion against iniquitous taxes from London. The idiocy of George III here and his ministers essentially came down to a misunderstanding of the American colony and how it differed from the other British colonies that then existed. This wasn't India or some other settlement where British rule depended on force or uneasily sat alongside native government. The Americans had established a free colony and by the late eighteenth century were not prepared to be treated like vassals. It seems that George had no idea at all of this—he lost control of the land with the greatest potential of any colony in history.

In 1766 the reign of the new King George III, who had ascended to the throne in 1760, began to be plagued by financial problems. Pitt the Elder lost control of financial affairs and under intense pressure the government was forced to reduce the Land Tax by 25 percent. Charles Townshend, a fiery and witty politician who had been instrumental in helping himself and his friends out by reducing the tax, resolved to make up the shortfall by a series of acts to tax commerce in and out of the American colonies, introducing taxes not only on tea but on other staples such as glass, paper, even silk handkerchiefs:

"An act for granting certain duties in the British colonies and plantations in America; for allowing a drawback of the duties of customs upon the exportation, from this kingdom of coffee and

## TEA AND TAXES

cocoa nuts of the produce of the said colonies or plantations; for discontinuing the drawbacks payable on china earthenware exported to America; and for more effectually preventing the clandestine running of goods in the colonies and plantations.

"WHEREAS it is expedient that a revenue should be raised in your Majesty's dominions in America, for making a more certain and adequate provision for defraying the charge of the administration of justice, and the support of civil government, in such provinces where it shall be found necessary; and towards further defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing, the said dominions;"

— Charles Townshend, Tea Act

Englishmen of all people should have known that you can get away with taxing all kinds of things, but you can't mess with the morning "cuppa."

John Hancock had been arrested and charged in 1768 with smuggling. This followed two Stamp Acts in the mid-1760s that had caused much

uproar among the merchants of the states. He organized a boycott of China tea coming in from the East India Company, a boycott especially interesting historically because it relied on women. Tea was widely replaced by coffee and infusions of local berries. The response was the Tea Act, felt to be clever in that it would reduce the price of tea to the end consumer by cutting out the middlemen completely and evading the boycott. It completely misfired. All over the colony, the East India Company found ports closed to its tea ships. In Boston, however, the port remained open, and on December 16, 1773, 150 men, known as The Sons of Liberty, under the leadership of Samuel Adams and cheered on by a crowd of some 5,000,



LORD NORTH

boarded three incoming ships, broke open 342 tea chests, and hurled them into the harbor. Similar acts of rebellion broke out around the colony as word spread. British action was immediate and futile; in four acts of 1774, the Coercive Acts, Massachusetts was to be severely punished for its crimes and for refusing to pay for damaged property. Self-



government was summarily reduced, far from gaining more representation. The port was closed and armed reinforcements sent in. Within two years the colonies were at war, the Declaration of Independence had been signed, and the Americas were lost. Soon the British would face a series of other blows—the fear engendered by revolution across the Channel, the downfall of the French monarchy, and the aggrandizement of Napoleon. No serious effort would ever be made to recapture the colonies, except the farcical attempt of 1812. Even in 2005 the British don't treat their former colonial subjects with quite the respect they think they deserve, and tea is most certainly not the national drink; indeed, it even gets iced.

Professional historians, weighed down with theories and economics and the need to sell their books, tend to downplay the obvious, especially the real motivation of people at the time and the impact the foolhardy actions of others have. Of course it wasn't about tea, they opine, it was just an excuse. But sometimes the obvious explanation is the right one. There was only a minimal interest in rebellion and independence at the accession of George III. The Sons of Liberty were seen at the time as a rather dangerous terrorist organization, as no doubt any group of people taking direct action against taxes would also be seen today. There was no historical inevitability about losing the American colonies. The 13 colonies were far from secure; the French and the Spaniards were also claiming parts of the continent and from north and south lay significant threats to the safety of the colonies. British military protection was not entirely a bad thing. Benjamin Franklin, of all people, was horrified by the Boston Tea Party and offered to compensate the British government out of his own pocket. Sometimes it really is one stupid move that goes too far. It really was about the tea. The PR buzz makers who today dictate so much policy would perhaps have advised differently. Either way, the Americas were lost by the British.

THE SONS OF LIBERTY,  
UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF  
SAMUEL ADAMS AND  
CHEERED ON BY A CROWD  
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BROKE OPEN 342 TEA  
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INTO THE HARBOR.



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## NAPOLEON, THE MARCH TO RUSSIA— AND FRANKENSTEIN

June 1812–June 1816

**Main Culprit:** Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821)

**Damage Done:** Destruction of the French army

**Why:** Overwhelming self-confidence betrayed by a strange encounter with a story

*The idea so possessed my mind, that a thrill of fear ran through me, and I wished to exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the realities around. I see them still: the very room, the dark parquet, the closed shutters, with the moonlight struggling through, and the sense I had that the glassy lake and white high Alps were beyond. I could not so easily get rid of my hideous phantom; still it haunted me. I must try to think of something else. I recurred to my ghost story—my tiresome unlucky ghost story! O! if I could only contrive one which would frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night! Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. 'I have found it!' What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow." On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story. I began that day with the words, It was on a dreary night of November, making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream.*

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

*Do you think I have come all this way just to conquer these huts?*

—Napoleon, July 1812, in Vitebsk

*We have to take our possessions and flee. I'm very good at that. I was the men's freestyle fleeing champion two years in a row.*

*Imagine your loved ones conquered by Napoleon and forced to live under French rule. Do you want them to eat that rich food and those heavy sauces?*

—Woody Allen, *Love and Death*

The appearance of Napoleon Bonaparte in this book should not come as a surprise. His costly mistake in the invasion of Russia in 1812 was not a very good idea. There are a number of theories as to what went wrong and why, ranging from simple megalomania to painful kidney stones to heroic Russian resistance, which to be truthful mostly and rather wisely consisted of moving backward faster than Napoleon could move forward. Unquestionably, as they pushed further into Russia and into trouble, Napoleon made a number of uncharacteristic errors of judgment that resulted in eventual disaster—but it is not enough simply to have made mistakes. Many histories see the crucial turning point not as the retreat from Moscow, or the Battle of Borodino, but an apparent and seemingly inexplicable change of mind in the city of Vitebsk in what is now Belarus that seems to have been caused by uncontrollable anger at a very strange turn of events.



NAPOLEON

Four years after the fateful events of Vitebsk, with Napoleon now defeated at the Battle of Waterloo and in exile at Elba, it was fashionable and safe again for the poets and intellectuals of England to wander the courts and byways of Europe. On the night of June 16, 1816, while in Vienna, the 19-year-old Schubert was having his first work performed at a concert in honor of Salieri. Not far away, in Geneva, Switzerland, Lord Byron was regaling his guests at home in the middle of a mighty gale with ghost stories. One of the guests, Mary Shelley, was to leave that night with the idea for her great novel, *Frankenstein*. The genesis of that story links Napoleon to one of the great blunders of history.

It isn't quite fair to assume that the whole enterprise of the Long March to Russia was as stupid as it subsequently appeared to be, or as pointless. Czar Alexander posed a genuine threat to the French Empire. Napoleon's armies had almost without fail destroyed the armies of Europe stacked against him. His enormous arrogance was not without justification. Hegel, in 1806 proclaimed Napoleon "the Emperor, the soul of the world. It is a marvelous feeling to see such a man who, concentrated here, on a single point, sitting on his horse, extends himself over the world and dominates it all." He controlled all of Western

## MASTER AND COMMANDER

Europe, from the Portuguese border to the edge of the Ottoman Empire. He had soundly defeated the Austrians at Austerlitz in 1805, the Prussians at Jena in 1806, and the Russians at Friedland in 1807. As a result, he had control over all of what is now Poland, large parts of Austria and Prussia, and his empire stretched to the Elbe. He had faced and seen all too clearly the weakness and poor leadership of the Russian army. He correctly deduced that the English, his chief adversary, would be diverted by the American War of Independence. But Russia meanwhile had made peace with the Turks to the south and appeared ready to go head to head with Napoleon, though they could muster an army of only a quarter of a million against the French elite and client states' amalgamation of over 680,000 men. If anyone thought invading Russia was a bad idea, they probably also correctly deduced it would be a worse idea to say so.

After the march to Moscow began, Napoleon's troops found the roads very bad. Supply wagons failed to keep up. A smaller, more dedicated, faster-moving army would have been preferable. After the last of the cattle were slaughtered, there was nothing around them to eat. The Russians were leaving behind them little but scorched earth. Hunger, dysentery, diphtheria, and typhus killed 60,000 of Napoleon's troops before a shot was fired. Horses with nothing substantial to graze on died by the thousands. Napoleon was losing from 5,000 to 6,000 men a day through sickness or desertion.

A NUMBER OF  
CONTEMPORARY  
REPORTS SUGGEST

NAPOLEON SUFFERED  
FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL  
IMBALANCE.

On July 29, Napoleon and his army staggered into Vitebsk, after only a minor skirmish between his troops and a Russian rear guard. Vitebsk was a ghost town. Napoleon was advised that he would soon have no cavalry left. He held a war council, and his three top-ranking subordinates urged a halt to the campaign. Napoleon agreed, saying that they were not going to repeat the folly of Charles XII of Sweden. By the following day he had changed his mind. There are a number of contemporary reports suggesting psychological imbalance and strange behavior. Some thought he did not want to admit folly or show weakness. One scribe described the following discussion:

*General:* There is the necessity of organizing liberated Lithuania, of setting up hospitals and supply depots, of establishing a central point for recuperation, defense, and subsequent departure on a

line of operation which is growing longer and longer everyday — shouldn't all this make us decide to stop here on the border of old Russia?

*Napoleon:* Do you think I have come all this way just to conquer these huts?

28 July, 1812

Napoleon accused his top subordinates of being too soft. He claimed to be eager to meet Czar Alexander in battle, considered then the only way to achieve a victory, and he believed that such a battle would come either at Smolensk or at Moscow, places he believed that Alexander would not be willing to abandon.

There is plenty of evidence to confirm that Napoleon had seemed willing to stop, even to winter, at Vitebsk, call for reinforcements, get supplies, and hold up. While the entire battle plan, like most of Napoleon's plans, had been based on surprise and speed, both were now lost, and even he seemed to accept that Vitebsk would be a good base. He had been promising his troops a rest at Vitebsk. Admittedly, the Russians had left much of the city deserted and in ruins so that Napoleon would find little food there, but even so, leaving was inadvisable. Napoleon forced the army to march on to almost inevitable disaster, the retreating Russian army fooling him even beyond the gates of Moscow. Indeed, the 15 days in Vitebsk not only did little to provide rest and food for his own forces, they allowed the Russian general Barclay enough time to fall back and meet another Russian division and prepare for the meeting at Borodino. The disaster was irrevocable: Barely 10,000 of Napoleon's men made it back after he left Moscow in October. French casualties are estimated at between 400,000 and 550,000 men and 175,000 horses. Napoleon abandoned this sorry rabble as they crossed the Nieman River and went back to Paris. Within a month, the Prussians and Austrians had pushed French troops back over the Elbe and the Napoleonic Empire was over.

There is a little-known and remarkable explanation for Napoleon's rash decision to leave Vitebsk. Intelligence officers brought to Napoleon a box full of papers they found. It appeared to have considerable military significance—papers relating to an Englishman aboard a Russian ship and relating to the activities of French royalists. The letters were

**SOMETHING  
HE READ**



ON THE TENTH EVENING,  
NAPOLEON LOST HIS  
TEMPER AND ORDERED  
THE PAPERS BURNED.

mostly in English, and four officers with language skills were summoned to translate and read aloud the papers to the emperor. Their reports survived and subsequently they recognized the elements of what they read in Mary Shelley's novel that brought this strange story to life. For ten evenings they read to Napoleon; apparently it was soon clear that there was no intelligence utility to the papers, but they seemed to weave a strange magnetic spell over the emperor and he frequently interrupted the story to make comments and thank Providence for giving him the papers. On the tenth evening, Napoleon suddenly lost his temper and ordered the papers burned. The translators feared for their lives, given the fearsome temper of the emperor, but were nonetheless so intrigued that they disobeyed orders and read the rest of the papers and kept them. The French army, which was already settling in, was on the road to Moscow and ruin within two days. This whole story could of course be a modern urban myth, but there is no question that the surviving translators were there—one was killed at Borodino—and subsequently wrote about the story once the war was over. Conceivably, the Frankenstein connection was invented secretly by Mary Shelley to give cachet to her story. There is no doubt that she, like others, was fascinated as they traveled Europe by the suddenness of Napoleon's demise as much as the dynamism of his reign. No report explains Napoleon's sudden anger at the story. Let us at least speculate that the allegory of the fall of a man who sought to conquer nature and the world—many would perhaps at the time have drawn the connection between Frankenstein's monster and the desires of Napoleon—proved too much for the increasingly fragile psyche of the emperor.



# THE WAR OFFICE VERSUS THE LADY WITH THE LAMP: DISEASE IN THE CRIMEA

June 1854–January 1856

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprits:** Dr. Sir John Hall (1795–1866), Sir Benjamin Hawes (1770–1860)

**Damage Done:** 30,000 die from disease in the British army during the Crimean War

**Why:** Total lack of interest from the War Office in the barbarous conditions of their troops

*I stand at the altar of the murdered men, and, while I live, I fight their cause.*

—Florence Nightingale

*Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon in front of them  
Volley'd and thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
Boldly they rode and well,  
Into the jaws of Death,  
Into the mouth of Hell  
Rode the six hundred.*

—Alfred Lord Tennyson

The Crimean War usually summons thoughts of Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," and odd clothing named apparently randomly after British generals—the Cardigan, the Balaclava, and the Raglan sleeve. But this entry in the annals of *Idiotica* celebrates none of that. The Charge of the Light Brigade was caused by an honest mistake and probably exacted no more casualties than any similar military misadventure. It would not even have a place in our history books were it not for the stunningly memorable poetry of the good Lord Tennyson. One other famous personage arose from the Crimean War, though. The carnage, not from the fighting but from disease, caused by the sloth of the authorities whose ignorance was only matched by their lack of interest in the men they sent to their deaths, brought her to the fore. She fought to prevent further tragedy, and that puts the Crimean War and those in charge of the British Army in the record.

A force of 94,000 British army soldiers embarked for the East in 1854. The British were seeking, with their allies the French, to control Russian ambitions in the Balkans, given the imminent breakup of the



FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Ottoman Empire in the region. The British were anxious about Russian expansionism in many areas, especially any threat they might pose to India, part of the anxiety that led to the Indian Mutiny (see later chapter). Theoretically, the British and French were fighting over the custody of the holy places in Jerusalem but that was a convenient excuse for controlling the Russian threat. The Russians had seized the Crimea, a peninsula on the north shore of the Black Sea, now part of Ukraine, in 1783 from the ailing Turks. In 1853 they used the ports as a base for launching an attack on the Turks and invading the Balkans. They sank the Turkish fleet at Sinope and launched a land grab. The British and French determined to stop them and set

sail for the Crimea. In the meantime, the British in particular were doing much the same thing as the Russians, seizing small strategic parts of the Ottoman Empire in Egypt, Aden, and the Sudan. But the ability of the Russians to reach the Mediterranean through control of the Black Sea, and essentially find an easier route into Persia, Afghanistan, and India, could not be countenanced.

The British army had not seen much action since they had routed Napoleon with the help of the Prussians at the Battle of Waterloo, and lost the United States forever in the War of 1812. The British navy was close to its famed position of “ruling the waves.” Britain had avoided the internal upheavals of 1848 and, apart from skirmishes in the empire, the army had not really performed for the best part of half a century. Nor had they ever fought in a region like the Crimea. Learning little or nothing from what had befallen Napoleon in Russia—and caring less—a good number of army personnel and politicians in London did not even know where the Crimea was, let alone what the conditions would be like; the men they sent were woefully unprepared. Later reports found administrative confusion, laziness, timidity, callousness, and stupidity, with massive shortages of food, clothing, animal fodder, and shelter. Essentially, the High Command had no idea at all how to conduct the campaign. Of the 94,000 men who embarked, 2,660 were killed in action. Casualties from disease and illness were nearly 30,000 in the British ranks. The French and Russian casualties from the fighting were no doubt higher but it was this death or disabling from disease of 30 percent of the army that finally hit home and led to major changes in the army administration. In 1856 a Board of Review determined in true military fashion that all this was very regrettable but just part of the cost of war. “Nobody was to blame,” it concluded. The government and the public were all anxious to agree—but not everybody.

Florence Nightingale is deservedly one of the most famous women of the nineteenth century. She has been the subject of many hagiographies over the years, the “Lady with the Lamp” living on as one of the icons of British history. But later research has shown her to be opportunistic, ruthless, power grabbing, publicity-hungry, and all in all, a much less likeable person and a much more determined political infighter than has ever been realized. Fortunately for generations of soldiers, it was these qualities that in the years following the Crimean War actually led to reform rather than the wonderful nurse wandering around the wards at Scutari.

Nursing was, in the nineteenth century, still a very religious vocation without a great deal of skill involved. On a trip to Egypt, the young Florence had what she described as a series of encounters with God, who instructed her to be a nurse. But she was horrified in her training.

## THE LADY WITH THE LAMP

Her letters describe high-minded, affected spirituality and stupid nursing routines. She demanded that nurses in her command should actually help patients physically and morally rather than worshipping while patients died in their own filth. This turned out in the eyes of the British army to be a dangerously revolutionary doctrine. Oddly enough, many years later it was exactly what detractors accused Mother Theresa of doing.

The other true hero of the war was W. H. Russell. It isn't as if allowing troops to die of disease was new over the centuries; what was new was that everyone knew about it for the first time and the medical knowledge and means to do something about it existed. Cholera, typhus, and complete lack of sanitation, as well as inadequate supplies for winter, decimated the army, after the Battle of Balaclava in particular. He excoriated the High Command: "Are there no devoted women amongst us, able and willing to go forth to minister to the sick and suffering soldiers of the East in the hospitals of Scutari? Are none of the daughters of England, at this extreme hour of need, ready for such a work of mercy?" (*The Times*, September 15 and 22, 1854). The British navy, for example, had by 1800 discovered the cause of scurvy and radically changed their methods and routines and the diet of the seamen who served, and had more or less eradicated it completely. The army was just not interested. Russell was one of the first-ever war correspondents. He sent back dispatches to *The Times of London* describing in passionate detail not just the details of the battles and the war but the horrific sanitary conditions and the dreadful death rate. The impact on the breakfast tables of 1854 London was similar to the impact of the first photographs of napalm-burned children in Vietnam. For Florence Nightingale, rather ineffectually engaged in running a sanitarium on Harley Street, her time had come. Using her considerable skills in propaganda and determination, she took over the various ladylike volunteer efforts that sprang up. The army brass were willing to allow her to go to Turkey but no further, and wanted the whole nursing mission, if one was really necessary, to be under the aegis of the church. They specifically disliked interference in their affairs, and medical officers were subject to military authority in all things. They might have been able to beat the Russians, but they were no match for Florence Nightingale.

"ARE THERE NO DEVOTED  
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SUCH A WORK OF MERCY?"  
—W.H. RUSSELL, THE TIMES



Strangely enough, it doesn't appear that she was either a particularly good nurse or administrator. Her letters are all about power and control—she took on and defeated everyone, from religious leaders to the British ambassador in Constantinople and even her own nurses (especially the Irish Catholic ones, whom she loathed and who were less than happy with her regime). Her goal was to get herself into the heat of the fighting and get power to set up, whether the military liked it or not. With strong newspaper support from *The Times* and careful manipulation of politicians and society at home, she succeeded in her power grab. And without question, during her three visits to the Crimean war zone the death rate did drop dramatically in British war hospitals. The death rate from typhus alone dropped from 46 percent to 2 percent.

Her real war, against the benighted Army High Command, had only begun. She determined to be the avenging angel: "I stand at the altar of the murdered men, and, while I live, I fight their cause," she wrote on her return in 1856. She refused to accept the "no blame" verdict of the first enquiry and with support from Prime Minister Palmerston down, and even with the support of the queen after she had inveigled a royal audience, she set her sails at demolishing those she held responsible: namely, Sir Benjamin Hawes, permanent secretary to the War Office and Sir John Hall, the army chief medical officer in the Crimea. In the end, the War Office more or less held together and most of her recommendations were turned down, but there were real improvements in army sanitary reform, a new awareness of the need to improve sanitation in barracks and in hospitals, and a permanent army hospital was constructed. The guilty men were never brought to the type of justice they probably deserved, but the ignorance that led to losing more troops to disease than to the enemy was thoroughly and forever quashed. Unfortunately, Florence Nightingale's medical beliefs soon ended, as she lost touch with reality. She felt, for example, that quarantine was useless and ineffective, and was deeply suspicious of vaccination. But her place in history is confirmed, and the deaths of the thousands in Crimea were not, in the end, in vain.

## THE BIRTH OF AN ACTIVIST



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## THE WAR OFFICE VERSUS THE INDIAN ARMY: MUTINY AND BEEF FAT

May 10, 1857– September 1858

**Main Culprit:** Major General George Anson (1797–1857)

**Damage Done:** 11,000 British soldiers and many thousands of Indians

**Why:** Fuel for the fires of discontent: The new rifle cartridge was covered in grease from sacred animals

*The double doors at the end of the courtyard were flung open again and the ladies ordered out. But they refused to move and tightened their grips on the verandah pillars and on each others' arms and waists, trying to keep from crushing their weeping children underfoot ... the Sepoys declared it impossible to separate them or drag them out of the building and backed out of the yard ... Now the jemadar (senior Indian officer) ordered his men to stand outside the doors and windows on one side... at a signal from the jemadar, his men thrust the barrels of their muskets through the window shutters along the one wall ... Twenty Sepoys aimed their muskets into this wave of bodies and opened fire at point blank range. The first volley pared some of the foremost layer of women and children away, and may have wounded a few beyond. The Sepoys backed away from the smoking windows and a second squad moved in to take their places. From behind a pillar Mrs. Jacobi suddenly lunged forward and knocked one of them down with one blow ... his comrades came to his rescue. First they hung her daughter Lucy on a hook by her chin and then silenced her mother by cutting her throat.*

—Eyewitness report quoted by Andrew Ward from *Our Bones Are Scattered*

It is a truism that history is written by the victors, and another, perhaps less well known, that the popular cause of something is often the real one. Both are demonstrated well by the events of 1857 in India. Wars have raged through the years over control of commodities crucial to life, like water, or salt, or precious metals, or indeed, oil. But no other fighting, let alone as savage as these 18 months, was sparked by beef fat.

The East India Company had been trading in India for 150 years, and had gained such a foothold that other companies had demanded an end to their monopoly in the 1830s. Expansion had brought Sind under British rule in 1843, the Punjab in 1849, and the colony extended to the foothills of the Himalayas. There was concern about Russian expansion through the Kazakhs toward Afghanistan and the northwest frontier. The British had just concluded the Crimean War with the Russians fighting for control of the Black Sea. But the 1850s were the start of the Golden Age of Imperialism, and the British government expected a lot from the jewel in the crown. Partly it was glory and prestige—within 20 years Queen Victoria would declare herself “Empress of India,” perhaps the high point of the empire. Partly it was financial, especially as the East India Company itself was under pressure to pay more money to the London government. The Americas were lost but not a threat, embroiled in their own affairs leading up to the Civil War; Western Europe was peaceful—Napoleon had been defeated, Germany did not yet exist as a nation. Queen Victoria’s reign of prosperity and utter self-belief was in full swing. Britannia did indeed rule the waves.

Pressure built on the individual kings and *maharajahs* of India to pass power over to the British and pay substantial taxes. More than a dozen independent *rajahs* were annexed between 1848 and 1854. Most of this was little more than a land grab. Of all people, Karl Marx, writing in 1853 for the *New York Daily Tribune*, excoriated the British for their hypocrisy:

While they prated in Europe about the inviolable sanctity of the national debt, did they not confiscate in India the dividends of the rajahs, who had invested their private savings in the Company’s own funds? Did they not, in India, resort to atrocious extortion when simple corruption could not keep pace with their rapacity?



QUEEN VICTORIA

**ON A MISSION**

But there were other pressures on traditional India too. The British Empire had a missionary bent, not just in terms of converting “the natives” to Christianity, but imposing the values of Victorian England. The famous historian Thomas Babington Macaulay laid the issue out in two speeches to the British Parliament in a debate on India in 1833 and 1835:

It is scarcely possible to calculate the benefits which we might derive from the diffusion of European civilization among the vast population of the East. It would be, on the selfish view of the case, far better for us that the people of India were well governed and independent of us, than ill governed and subject to us; that they were ruled by their own kings, but wearing our broadcloth, and working with our cutlery, than that they were performing their salams to English collectors and English magistrates, but were too ignorant to value, or too poor to buy, English manufactures. To trade with civilised men is infinitely more profitable than to govern savages. That would make it an useless and costly dependency, which would keep a hundred million men from being our customers in order that they might continue to be our slaves. It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.

By the 1850s this educational mission had mostly shown itself in attacks on the Hindu rituals most alien to the British sensibility, especially the custom of *suttee*, the burning of widows after the death of their husbands. Stamping this out had caused widespread unrest among local populations.

However, all of this failed to spark more than hostility. It was an act of plain old idiocy that set off what the British call the Indian Mutiny, the Indians call the First War of Indian Independence, and is generally now called the Sepoy Rebellion. We might these days call it an insurgency. By 1857 there were 40,000 British troops in India, not nearly enough to control a country that size. They had trained and established a local army of some 200,000 soldiers, known as *sepoys*.

The Lee-Enfield rifle is one of the most famous weapons in the history of warfare. It was named for Enfield, just north of London where the factory was located, and for James Paris Lee (1831–1904), a Scottish-born American arms inventor who designed, among other things, the box magazine that allowed for the development of bolt-action repeating rifles. The rifle was still in its infancy in the 1850s when it was deployed for British army use around the world. It fired a .303 caliber ammunition that had to be manually loaded. This involved biting the greased end of the cartridge, for which the manufacturers used pig fat and beef fat. The pig of course is forbidden to Muslims; the cow is sacred to Hindus. Perhaps if less attention had been paid to Macaulay's arrogant dismissal of Indian culture, and even a little thought from anyone gone into the situation, what followed would have been averted. It's not as if these sacred rites were secret. In January 1857, Captain Wright of the Rifle Instruction Depot overheard a *khalasi*—a lower-caste laborer—berating a Brahmin who would not share water with him. "You will soon lose your caste, as ere long you will have to bite cartridges covered with the fat of cows." Out of pride, the British army overlooked a crucial fact of the lives and beliefs of the soldiers they were expecting to protect, not only their empire but their families as well.

Throughout the early months of 1857, small rebellions took place across British India. By May soldiers were imprisoned if they refused to bite the cartridges. On May 10 members of the third light cavalry regiment in Meerut were jailed, but the 11th and 20th regiments, called to guard them, turned on their commanding officers and freed their compatriots. All hell broke loose. Indian regiments and then *rajahs* joined the revolt. Indian forces massacred British families at Cawnpore in June and laid siege to Lucknow for two terrible months. British vengeance was savage and terrible—prisoners were at best hanged, at worst tied in front of the muzzle of cannons, which were then fired. By year's end the insurgents were losing, though given the might of the British Empire they did well to last as long as they had. Thousands died in bloody battles and the acts of revenge that followed until peace was signed on July 8, 1858. British casualties amounted to some 11,000—Indian and *sepoy* many thousands more. Much of the country was ruined and plunged into enormous debt. In 1859 the British Crown

## STRETCHED THIN

THE METHOD OF  
GREASING THE NEW RIFLE  
WAS SACRELIGIOUS  
TO MUSLIMS AND  
HINDUS.

"YOU WILL SOON LOSE YOUR  
CASTE, AS ERE LONG YOU  
WILL HAVE TO BITE  
CARTRIDGES COVERED WITH  
THE FAT OF COWS."  
—BRAHMIN WARNING

established direct rule over the whole of India, no longer trusting the East India Company to rule on their behalf.

Bizarre proof of the eternal importance of the beef fat issue came up 150 years later. In 2001 three American-based Hindu businessmen sued McDonald's, claiming they used beef fat in the initial stages of preparing their French fries, widely sold throughout India. Right wing Hindu extremists attacked a McDonald's in Bombay and called on the Indian prime minister to shut down the franchises. Finally the company admitted its mistake and agreed it had failed to give "complete" information when it switched to vegetable oil in 1990, as it still used a "minuscule" amount of beef fat for flavoring in the supply stage. The apology and backdown was a technique that the British army might have considered using. The McDonald's India web site now proudly insists on the purity of its vegetable oil alongside the McAloo Tikka and Broccoli'n'Mushroom Vegetable McCurry Pan. The recent opening of McDonald's Lucknow offers even more ground for philosophical consideration of the world and its ironies than this volume will allow.



# THOMAS AUSTIN'S RABBITS

Christmas 1859–present day

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Thomas Austin (unknown –1871)

**Damage Done:** Millions of acres of land and up to 70 percent of domestic species destroyed

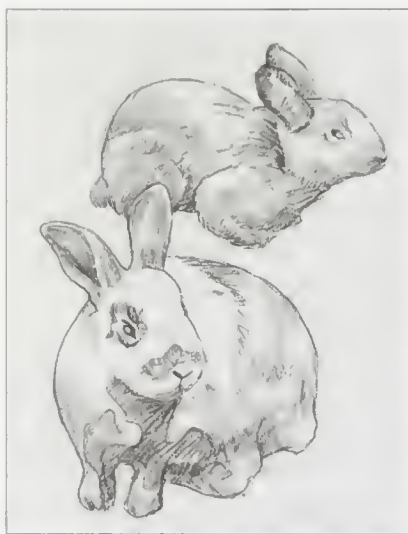
**Why:** Rabbits brought in for recreational hunting purposes did what rabbits do best

*E sort o' takes it personal, yeh see.  
'E used to 'awk 'em fer a crust, did Mick.  
Now, makin' 'im play rabbits seems to be  
A narsty trick.  
To shove 'im like a bunny down a 'ole  
It looks like chuckin' orf, an' sours 'is soul.  
"Fair doos," 'e sez, "I joined the bloomin' ranks  
To git away frum rabbits: thinks I'm done  
Wiv them Australian pests, an' 'ere's their thanks:  
They makes me one!  
An' 'ere I'm squattin', scared to shift about;  
Jist waitin' fer me little tail to sprout.*

*"Ar, strike me up a wattle! but it's tough!  
But 'ere's the dizzy limit, fer a cert —  
To live this bunny's life is bad enough,  
But 'ere's reel dirt:  
Some tart at 'ome 'as sent, wiv lovin' care,  
A coat uv rabbit-skins fer me to wear!*

—*The Moods of Ginger Mick*, C. J. Dennis, ballad of an Anzac soldier

In 1859 Thomas Austin, a member of the Victorian Acclimatisation Society, decided to have a Christmas hunt on his land at Winchelsea, near Geelong, Victoria, about 60 miles west of Melbourne, Australia.



AUSTIN'S  
RABBITS

Envy of the life in the mother country and gluttony for hunting precipitated one of the great ecological disasters in history, coupled with the forlorn hope of migrants and settlers the world over, that the alien and hostile landscape they found themselves trapped in, in their exile, could somehow be made to approximate their homeland by the addition of familiar flora and fauna. He had asked his brother to send 24 rabbits from England, and released them onto his property. They came out on the *Lightning*, sailing from Liverpool to the newly established port of Geelong, where, oddly, given the consequences, the contents are celebrated in one of a series of bronze and glass “cargo boxes” public art sculptures adorning the water-

front. They bred. In 1866 more than 14,000 rabbits were shot on Austin's estate alone. He had also been kindly shooting all the possible predators—hawks, eagles, and cats—on his land. And they spread. In another two years, 3,120 square miles of farmland surrounding his estate had to be abandoned, stripped bare of vegetation by the rabbits. By 1886, the devastation spread as far as 2,000 miles north to Queensland. By 1900 it was 3,000 miles across the desert to Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The rate of migration of the rabbit in Australia was the fastest of any colonizing mammal anywhere in the world. By contrast, rabbits were introduced into southern England by the Norman Conquerors in 1066 and as late as 1950, had scarcely made it 500 miles (310 km) north to Scotland.

## RABBITS RULE

Rabbits turned out to be perfectly attuned to the dry Australian landscape. They are one of the most fertile animals on earth, and the lack of any natural predator, coupled with the ideal benefits of the rabbit warren to protect them from the heat, led to their enormous success. The area damaged by rabbits is estimated at over 1.5 million square miles.

Early efforts at control included shooting, poisoning, and the rabbit-proof fence. By 1883 the Rabbit Nuisance Act in New South Wales could put a child in prison for six months for letting loose a tame rab-

bit. In 1907 the West Australian government finished the longest anti-rabbit fence—715 miles long. It ran between Cape Keraudren in the north and Starvation Boat Harbour in the south, and was followed by two more. Though hardly a perfect solution, thousands of rabbits could be found piled up against one side of a fence, with none on the other side, and apparently the resulting differences in vegetation growth could be seen from space. An entire trade of rabbit killers and skimmers came into being; to this day one of the founding clubs of the Australian Rugby League are known as the “Rabbitohs” from the calling cry of the rabbit skimmers as they went through the town. Rabbits were often the main source of protein for Australians during the Depression, and indeed, their commercial potential for skins and furs (especially the Australian akubra hat) frequently mitigated the more stringent calls for their extermination.

By the 1940s the population was estimated in the hundreds of millions, to a maximum of 800 million, and each rabbit was figured to cost the country one dollar in damage. Rabbits have particularly devastating effects on local fauna and flora; on one island off the southern coast of Australia, their presence from 1906 to 1936 destroyed all three species of parrot and 23 out of 26 of the types of tree found on the island. In other areas it is estimated that 66 to 75 percent of native mammal species have vanished as a direct result of rabbit infestation.

## POPULATION EXPLOSION

Famously, the introduction of myxomatosis in the 1950s solved the problem. It killed 95 percent of Australia’s rabbit population. But that turned out not to be enough—the remaining 5 percent developed immunity and started all over again. Since 1996 the introduction of a new controversial Chinese calcivirus, called perhaps unfortunately on an Australian government web site a “final solution,” together with the European rabbit flea is starting again to reduce numbers, but the Australian government’s environmental management authority still reports plague conditions in the northwest suburbs of Sydney with considerable property damage and serious injuries, as citizens fall down rapidly developing rabbit warrens.

Such is the hatred for the unfortunate rabbit in Australia to this day that there is a strong move to fire it from its Easter perch as animal of choice. The Easter Bilby is being promoted, particularly by a pressure

group (the Foundation for a Rabbit-free Australia) to the point of having its chocolate image now vigorously sold in stores. The bilby is a highly endangered species of bandicoot, an Australian marsupial, ironically a type of rabbit-eared bandicoot. The rabbit is largely responsible for the fact that there are a lot more chocolate bilbys than the real thing; also they are entirely nocturnal, which makes them rather less than appealing to the youth audience.

The same year that Thomas Austin called for his rabbits, Charles Darwin published at last *The Origin of Species* and transformed the way we think about animals and adaptation. Marsupials had puzzled him somewhat on his trip in 1836. "On seeing the marsupials in Australia for the first time and comparing them to placental mammals: An unbeliever . . . might exclaim 'Surely two distinct Creators must have been at work,'" he wrote then, and was little more impressed with the marsupials than he was with the aborigines. In *The Descent of Man*, he clearly places the marsupials on a lower order than other mammals. It is perhaps not all that surprising that Australia had an ambivalent attitude, not just to the original human inhabitants but the local animals, and set about doing something about it. There was a purpose to the Victorian Acclimatization Society—to "civilize the Australian bush." They also introduced European fish—salmon, trout, goldfish, tench—as well as plant life. Their counterparts in New South Wales had the aim of "spreading over the length and breadth of the land inestimable acquisitions to the wealth and comfort of the people." They tried to assist in the manufacture of red dye, which comes from the cochineal insect, by introducing its host plant, the prickly pear, which also spread disastrously throughout the new land. The Victorian Society didn't just manage to import trouble; it exported four possums to New Zealand in 1863. They wreaked havoc in the forests and grew to a population of millions. The Society also dumped carp into the Murray-Darling River system, which also caused enormous ecological devastation. Recent scholars have termed this behavior "ecological imperialism" but it still counts as idiocy in this book.

James Austin was transported to Australia in 1803 for stealing beehives and honey. His nephew Thomas moved to the new city created

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DOLLAR IN DAMAGE.



## GOOD SHOOTING

around Port Philip—what would become Melbourne—in 1845, and married the sister of a landowner, building himself an estate, Barwon Park. He had visited his brother in England and enjoyed shooting rabbits, among other things, so much so that he asked his brother to ship the rabbits over to him, along with hares, partridges, sparrows, starlings, thrushes, and the hawthorn bush, all of which were introduced into an alien landscape for the first time. But his interest seems to have been less that of an ecological imperialist than a man who simply enjoyed shooting animals. And it wasn't as if the potential was unknown; it was hardly a scientific revelation that rabbits bred. Moreover, some had come over with the First Fleet but fortunately had only bred and ravaged the offshore island of Tasmania—so ignorance cannot exculpate Mr. Austin. Indeed, even after their spread and damage became only too self-evident, Austin would gladly ship a box or two of rabbits to anyone who asked for them, and indeed promoted his game to royalty. Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, came not once but twice to "The Shooting at the Rabbit Warren."

Austin himself built an impressive mansion, bred winning racehorses, and dispensed largesse around the neighborhood, such as a hospital in Melbourne, still named for its original benefactor, little suspecting the devastation his desire for blood sport on the weekend had wrought on his adopted country in the century and a half that lay ahead. He died with his grand house, now open on occasion to the public, still unfinished, ironically like Nero nearly 2,000 years before him, having created a wonderful building on top of the devastation he himself had created.



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
**pride**  
sloth

## GENERAL CUSTER AND LITTLE BIG HORN

June 26, 1876

**Main Culprit:** General George Custer (1839–1876)

**Damage Done:** Destroyed his own division to the last man, and the repercussions destroyed the Lakota

**Why:** Overenthusiasm and contempt for his opponents led to one of the great self-destructions in American history

*The only good Indian is a dead Indian.*

—General Philip Sheridan

Americans—and Australians—somehow like to portray their expansion into the hinterlands of their colonial expropriation of other people's land as different from the evil imperial ways of their former masters in Europe. Certainly it was different in that the goal was takeover of the land for settlement—impossible in the case of most of Australia—rather than economic exploitation of the local inhabitants as labor or as a potential marketplace. As a result, the outcome for the Native Americans and Native Australians was, if anything, worse than those who were colonized by the Europeans. They were not there to be exploited; they were just in the way. Attempts at wholesale genocide—the distribution of smallpox-covered blankets—or simply all-out crushing warfare largely succeeded in forcing the natives onto small reservations on land so poor that it was of no use to settlers, or just extermination. Today, the role of these unfortunate populations is a laughing-stock or bizarre freak show, the stuff of TV shows on the Wild West, toy tomahawks, Disney movies on Pocohontas, Rainbow Serpent legends, and children's songs. An infomercial on cable TV features a man with a striking likeness to Sitting Bull selling Lakota Joint Care products over the Internet, and the Americans, like the Australians, can take pleasure in their closeness with nature and their indigenous ancestors by buying "natural" products.

Only 130 years earlier the Lakota were engaged in a quite different struggle. Manifest Destiny, the *Lebensraum* of its day, saw the American settlers, once they had dispensed with their own local dispute of the Civil War, moving rapidly across the continent. They took over the land and pushed the Plains Indians onto reservations with little or no compensation, backed by whatever military or legislative power they cared to invent. Much of the early groundwork was laid during the Civil War itself; the coast-to-coast telegraph line was finished in 1861, the Pacific Railroad Act in 1862, the same year as the Homestead Act allowed citizens to settle on up to 160 acres of unclaimed "public" land and receive title to it after five years. In 1864 Kit Carson force-marched 8,000 Navajo across New Mexico to their new "home." The Sand Creek massacre saw 200 Cheyenne men, women, and children ambushed and



GENERAL CUSTER

killed by a volunteer force. Idaho was organized in 1862, Arizona in 1863, and Montana in 1864. In 1862 President Lincoln, the great liberator of the slaves, had no problem ordering the mass hanging of 38 Santee Sioux after the New Ulm uprising.

IN 1862 PRESIDENT LINCOLN,  
THE GREAT LIBERATOR OF  
THE SLAVES, HAD NO  
PROBLEM ORDERING THE  
MASS HANGING OF 38  
SANTEE SIOUX.

General Sheridan, whose fine words open this piece, was appointed commander of U.S. forces in the West in 1866. His peace plan was to exterminate the buffalo, which in his view also meant exterminating the Indians. The 1867 Medicine Lodge treaty and 1868 Fort Laramie treaty essentially created reservations, whereby Indian tribes surrendered their land rights in exchange for designated properties where they could theoretically live in peace. Those tribes, or groups of tribes, who would not abide by these enforced treaties were left in little doubt as to the likely outcome. The Fort Laramie treaty, in particular, settled with the Lakota tribe their rights over the Black Hills.

Colonel George Custer, before the outbreak of misguidedness that led him into these pages, had the rare distinction of being court-martialed twice. At West Point, from which he graduated at the bottom of his class, he failed to stop a fight between two cadets he was responsible for. He was saved because of the desperate need for Civil War officers, and indeed, distinguished himself in the first Battle of Bull Run. He came to the attention of General Sheridan, who appointed him a lieutenant colonel of the Seventh Cavalry in the Western arena. He was again court-martialed after a muddled campaign against the Southern Cheyenne in 1866. Reprieved by Sheridan, he was sent to the Northern Plains in 1873, and in 1874 commanded an expedition to the Black Hills against the Lakota, whose only crime appeared to be occupying the land they had been granted six years earlier.

**HASTE  
MAKES WASTE**

Custer led one of three divisions whose sole aim was to defeat the Lakota. Indian Inspector E. C. Watkins had issued a report in late 1875 that the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne had joined forces and were hostile. Perhaps more to the point, as ever, gold had been discovered in the Black Hills, and the Lakota had turned down an offer of \$6 million from the U.S. Senate to move on out, and indeed, had the temerity to proclaim that they would defend their lands if attacked. On January 31, 1876, all Lakota chiefs were required by federal authorities to report to their designated reservations, and refused. The divisions were

supposed to act in concert, surround the Lakota, and then crush them. One of the divisions, though, was held up by Crazy Horse at Rosebud Creek. General Crook's division had been forced to halt. Custer, meanwhile, with his customary fearless aggression—every one of his units in the Civil War had higher than average casualty rates—had made speed faster than he was supposed to. His cavalry had far out-sprinted Gibbons's infantry. Scouts reported the presence of Lakota and Cheyenne forces at a village on the Little Big Horn River, in Montana country, on June 24. Spurred on to commit one of the more famous acts of tactical ineptitude in world history, a mixture of pride coupled with ambition and arrogance, prompted Custer to ignore his orders, the advice of his scouts, and indeed, believe the rhetoric of his leaders that the Indians were incapable of fighting. Details are hard to come by, and much debated, but Custer essentially charged a force at least three times greater than his under the able command of Sitting Bull, better armed, and well fortified. Every last man of his force was killed, and Custer's Last Stand became part of history.

The skirmish alone though does not put the Battle of Little Big Horn into the book; this would be a very lengthy tome if every impetuous general who rode with his men to their deaths on a futile and misguided mission was included, though to his credit, at least Custer did ride and die with his men. Their casualties numbered 210, Indian around 40—no more than an average day out in the Indian Wars. But the totality of defeat, the larger-than-life reputation of Custer and his apparent personification of the values of the new American West, and the extraordinary propaganda campaign that followed meant that this act of impetuosity had tragic consequences that far outweighed the events of one brief day's fighting.

Custer was already famous throughout the country before his last stand. He had published a book, *My Life on the Plains*, with a New York publisher in 1874. Immensely tall and strong, in great physical condition, he was renowned as an athlete might be today, his idiosyncrasies ignored because of his exploits—11 horses had been shot from under him, and so forth. His wife of 12 years, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, had accompanied him to the West. News of the defeat, soon dubbed a massacre, reached the East Coast on July 4, 1876, the centennial of the

## CUSTER'S LEGEND

ONE EPITAPH FOR CUSTER

SIMPLY READ,

"THIS WAS A MAN."

Declaration of Independence. Fueled by the grieving widow, it didn't require TV coverage to whip the American public into a frenzied need for revenge and an end to the scourge of the vicious Indians. "Libbie" was only 34, but devoted to her husband and beloved throughout the army and well known in Washington. Spurred into action by Grant's decision to hold Custer culpable for the shambles at Little Big Horn, Elizabeth Custer devoted the rest of her life to rehabilitating and rewriting the events not only of that day, but his entire career—and by extension, the righteousness of the Indian Wars. Poets, painters, novelists, and songwriters weighed in to commemorate the disaster and extol the bravery of the few, who, it was now recalled, were so outnumbered (ignoring the fact that it was no one's fault but Custer's that he had failed to wait for reinforcements). One epitaph simply read: "This was a man."

The Bismarck Tribune led the media frenzy

MASSACRED.

GEN. CUSTER AND 261 MEN THE VICTIMS.

NO OFFICER OR MAN OF 5 COMPANIES LEFT TO

TELL THE TALE.

3 DAYS OF DESPERATE FIGHTING

BY MAJ. RENO

AND THE REMAINDER OF THE SEVENTH.

SQUAWS MUTILATE AND ROB THE DEAD.

VICTIMS CAPTURED ALIVE AND TORTURED IN MOST

FIENDISH MANNER.

WHAT WILL CONGRESS DO ABOUT IT?

SHALL THIS BE THE BEGINNING OF THE END?



Elizabeth Custer's *Following the Guidon*, published by Harper in 1890, is still in print, as are her diaries. She remained alive until 1933, and so powerful was her reputation that it was only after her death that a reassessment was made of Custer and his actions. She was buried next to him at West Point. Even within recent years, the decision to rename the Custer Battlefield National Monument as the Little Big Horn Battlefield National Park, and incorporate sculptures commemorating the Lakota warriors alongside those commemorating the dead cavalry, aroused controversy.

The repercussions for the Lakota were immediate and deadly. As much as 40 percent of the entire U.S. army was assigned to the Black Hills. Within a year, the Lakota were forced into total and bloody surrender, and Congress repealed the Fort Laramie treaty adding 40 million more acres of Lakota land for good measure. The Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890 was the final chapter in the wholesale destruction of the tribe.

## LAKOTA'S DEMISE

Sitting Bull managed to escape to Canada, whence he reemerged on occasion, once to star in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, before finally being killed by his own tribe, Lakota policemen acting under orders to subdue him in the Ghost Dance controversy that led to Wounded Knee on December 15, 1890. That same year a cartographer declared that for the first time, no frontier line need be drawn on the map of North America. Whether the end result for the Indians would have been any different had Custer not lost his head is probably highly doubtful. But the end was bloodier and faster and more popular as a result, catapulting what was seen in the East as a distant and rather unnecessary conflict into a matter of national significance.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## KING LEOPOLD AND THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

1879–1900

**Main Culprit:** King Leopold II of Belgium (1835–1909)

**Damage Done:** Pillage of a continent

**Why:** The ultimate in copycat crime; “I want an empire too”

*There are no small nations...only small minds.*

—King Leopold of Belgium

*Listen to the yell of Leopold's ghost  
Burning in Hell for his hand-maimed host  
Hear how the demons chuckle and yell  
Cutting his hands off, down in Hell.*

—Vachel Lindsay

In this era of postcolonial mania, colonialism perhaps has been given an unreasonably bad press. Both for the countries that were instrumental in becoming colonial powers, and at least some of those countries that saw development of agriculture, industry, and governmental and legal structure, it is possible through the layers of domination, financial exploitation, and cruelty of empire, that some good came of it in due course—not to everyone, and not everywhere, but many of today's most successful developing nations owe their infrastructure to their former colonial masters.

None of this can be said, though, about the infamous and fatuous “Scramble for Africa,” an undignified, costly, and bloody land grab at the end of the nineteenth century that resembled little more than something from Alice in Wonderland's tea party—a board game played by the insane but with real people. The whole sordid affair was borne of envy, that some European powers had what the latecomers did not, and of course, the colonial staple of greed. Ironically enough, it was the weak and cruel empires that in the end took the longest to fall apart, which clung late into the twentieth century to African countries they still claimed as their own. The legacy for these countries has not been burgeoning economies or stable governmental systems, but decades of war, poverty, and death. A separate entry in this volume relates one of the disasters of postcolonial Africa—Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

The “Scramble” came against the backdrop of surging nationalism in Europe. Three of the worst-behaved powers in Africa—Belgium, Germany, and Italy—had been born as independent countries only within the previous 50 years and were keen to demonstrate their prowess as world powers against the likes of Britain, Spain, France, and the Netherlands. And some, like Portugal, which had long since lost their empires, came in late just to prove that the tides of history had not left them behind, with the most horrific consequences for the unfortunate lands they occupied: Angola and Mozambique. At the same time simmering tensions in the Balkans, the failing Ottoman Empire, and problems in Central Europe caused by the unification of Germany under Prussian control, meant that the countries involved were in many



KING LEOPOLD

cases taking out animosities and frustrations that, for the moment, they felt unable or unwilling to fight out in Europe itself. For now, Africa provided an appealing blank space to carve out for some of the fatuous rulers of the new Europe not satisfied with their lot.

## EYES ON AFRICA

Up until around 1850, colonial activity in Africa had been limited by a number of factors: lack of knowledge of the interior coupled with a lack of resources worth pilfering. The importance of coastal settlements in West Africa had diminished with the abolition of the slave trade, belatedly in the United States. The British controlled—or tried to—much of southern Africa for its importance as a trade route on the way to India until the Suez Canal was built. Thereafter, the discovery of gold and diamonds took over. Northern Africa had clear geopolitical significance even before the discovery of oil, especially as the Ottoman Empire declined in power. For centuries, but more significantly during the nineteenth century, Islam was spreading southward through the continent, to the horror of the growing Christian missionary movement, especially in the United Kingdom. Added to growing missionary zeal was the upshot of Darwin's scientific discoveries and explanations of the appearance of civilization. Africa appeared to many in Europe to be not only a vast "dark continent," which might offer resources and riches—the essential motivation behind earlier exploration and exploitation—but a target for the combined Victorian passions of science and Christian zeal. The development of the machine gun didn't hurt either.

Africa needed to be explored, claimed for God and country, and rescued from the Muslim expansion and its own heathen ways. So, during mid-century, Africa was prodded and taken over. The expeditions of Mungo Park in the early years, the search for the source of the Nile, then the missionary expeditions of Dr. Livingstone, opened up much of the heartland. The Great Trek saw the Dutch Boers move north from the English-dominated Cape Colony in South Africa to carve out new lands for themselves in the south.

Much of this newly discovered land was indeed claimed by the old colonial powers—the British and French in West Africa, the British in Kenya, the French in Morocco and Algeria. But a great deal lay unclaimed by 1879, mostly too impenetrable or hostile or resource-poor to be of use to the established powers. The colonization to this point

could hardly be described as unreasonable; most areas were worth something to their new claimants. Within 20 years only Ethiopia, which famously had defeated the hapless Italians, and Liberia, with some protection from its origins and links with the United States, remained independent.

The chief culprit in sparking the partition and the land grab was King Leopold of Belgium. Belgium had become independent in 1830, after years of association with the Netherlands and being under the rule of half the countries in Europe. Seizing the opportunity of the new Europe following the defeat of Napoleon, the largely Catholic region of Belgium rebelled against the Dutch Protestants in 1830. Napoleon had seized the region from the Austrians, who, rather strangely, had control of what was called the Austrian Netherlands. The Dutch had been in control of Belgium only since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and then only to help create a stronger buffer state against the French, and to compensate them for the British walking away with the valuable colonies of Ceylon and Cape Colony. Rather unfairly, the Dutch had been deemed to be on Napoleon's side during the long war. The Belgians, though, were less than thrilled at being under Protestant rule. Not known for their bellicose nature, they were finally impelled to riot by an opera, known as *Dumb Girl of Portici*, of all things, in 1830. They fought for independence for nine years, and in the end the countries of Europe deemed the region not worth fighting a war for and forced the hapless Dutch to grant Belgian independence.

THE CHIEF CULPRIT IN  
SPARKING THE LAND GRAB  
WAS KING LEOPOLD.

Their first king, Leopold I, was a popular and reforming king, one of the first to introduce child labor laws, for example. He was succeeded in 1865 by his second son, who became Leopold II. The second Leopold was obsessed with two things (aside from the fact that in later life he illegally married a prostitute)—building great, imposing, ugly edifices in Brussels, and an empire abroad—supposedly to help defend his country. His subjects were reasonably excited about the first obsession and not the least by the second. Leopold was not one to give up easily. After the American explorer Henry Morton Stanley returned from presuming correctly and saving Dr. Livingstone, he remarkably entered the personal employ of King Leopold in 1879, with the job of carving out a colony from the region around the Congo River where he



had tracked down Livingstone. Stanley, originally an illegitimate Welsh child named John Rowlands, who had come to the U.S., and worked for both sides in the American Civil War before becoming a journalist, was a bounty hunter, for want of a better description. He had found Livingstone for ample reward from his newspaper rather than any sense of rescue mission and already had a reputation for being unusually cruel to his entourage on the expeditions. Stanley did as he was asked and delivered to the eager Leopold a territory 80 times the size of Belgium itself. This land was deemed Leopold's private property, a personal domain probably without precedent in history.

## **DIVIDING THE SPOILS**

It sparked a huge land grab throughout the region: Bismarck took the first four areas he could get and then tried to negotiate land from others to create a wide swathe of German Empire across the middle of Africa. The Portuguese, French, and British anxiously annexed anything they could then find. The notorious Conference at Berlin of 1884–1885 confirmed the European powers' seizure of this land in its entirety, including the personal granting of the "Congo Free State" to King Leopold. It also laid down ground rules for what was left—planting flags was not enough; genuine exploitation of the land and country was required to prove ownership. This didn't turn out to be a problem for Leopold; he was in any case now personally in debt, having financed the entire expedition himself. He embarked on a regime probably unparalleled in its pointlessness and cruelty. Tax collectors were sent to extract whatever they could from the unfortunate Congolese, who probably weren't at all aware whose property the Europeans had made them. Rubber and ivory were collected, slavery established to ensure more were grown, and intense cruelty marked the whole enterprise. Mutilation, whipping, murder on a massive scale—one estimate sees the population of the Congo reduced from 20 million to 10 million over a 20-year period following Leopold's rule. Gradually, word got out to a horrified world about the atrocities. The American poet Vachel Lindsay, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Booker T. Washington all spoke up. Oddly, so did Roger Casement, later hanged by the British in Ireland but then British envoy, who wrote a horrifying indictment of the cruelty he witnessed. Finally the Belgian parliament demanded that their king cede his land to the Belgian government, which he did in 1908, though apparently after spending two weeks burning records of his extortions

LEOPOLD WAS OBSESSED

WITH TWO THINGS—

BUILDING GREAT, IMPOSING,

UGLY EDIFICES IN BRUSSELS,

AND BUILDING AN

EMPIRE ABROAD.

and cruelty and remaining unrepentant. Stanley, meanwhile, had gone back to his childhood home of Wales, married a poet, and become a Unionist member of Parliament, while the victims of his work died in their millions.

By then the great African land grab was already falling apart. The more organized of African ethnic groups had begun revolts. Soon the Europeans would be butchering each other and would forget for the most part about their African lands. But Congo did not forget them. As late as 2005, a statue of King Leopold erected in the now Democratic Republic of Congo, was taken down and disappeared hours after it had been put back up.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## NICHOLAS, ALEXANDRA, AND THE MAD MONK

1902–December 16, 1916, around midnight

**Main Culprits:** Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov, Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias (1868–July 17, 1918); Czarina Alexandra of Russia (nee Her Grand Ducal Highness Princess Alix von Hessen und bei Rhein)

**Damage Done:** The end of the Romanov dynasty

**Why:** Nicholas and Alexandra relied on a lunatic sexual predator not only to cure their ills but for political advice

*His death came too late to change the course of events. His dreadful name had become too thoroughly a symbol of disaster. The daring of those who killed him to save their country was miscalculated... in raising their hands to preserve the old regime they struck it, in reality, its final blow.*

—Grand Duchess Maria Pavlova

*There lived a certain man in Russia long ago  
He was big and strong, in his eyes a flaming glow  
Most people looked at him with terror and with fear  
But to Moscow chicks he was such a lovely dear  
He could preach the bible like a preacher  
Full of ecstasy and fire  
But he also was the kind of teacher  
Women would desire*

RA RA RASPUTIN  
Lover of the Russian queen  
There was a cat that really was gone  
RA RA RASPUTIN  
Russia's greatest love machine  
It was a shame how he carried on

—Boney M, the German girl band of the 1970s

It is unusual in the annals of history for a pop song to celebrate one of the main protagonists, let alone one that so accurately reflects reality. More unusual still is that the protagonist's pickled penis has recently been put on display in a new Moscow museum. But Rasputin was no ordinary man. Many argue about how potent his influence over the Russian court really was, but in hindsight that is less important than what people believed it to be at the time, and what the consequences of that belief were. The now-legendary death of Rasputin and the decline of the czars are, in any event, dramatic enough to strain belief.

RASPUTIN WAS FASCINATED  
WITH AN OFFBEAT SECT OF  
THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX  
CHURCH, THE SKOPSTY, WHO  
HELD THAT THE BEST WAY  
TO REACH GOD WAS BY  
COMMITTING SINS AND THEN  
CONFESSING AND  
REPENTING.

Gregory Efimovich Rasputin (1869–1916) was born January 10, 1869, in a Siberian village, Prokovskoe, to a typical peasant family. As a young and apparently exceptionally dissolute youth, he became fascinated with a peculiar offbeat sect of the Russian Orthodox Church, the *Skopsty*, which held that the best way to reach God was by committing sins and then confessing and repenting. This suited young Gregory well, and he did his holy best to become a highly accomplished sinner within their ranks, adopting the monk's habit and soon getting a local and then national reputation as a *staretz* or holy man. After a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he came to St. Petersburg in 1902 accompanied by glowing recommendations to the higher clergy of the Russian Empire. He was no less dissolute than before but much more accomplished as a speaker and blessed with apparent healing powers. However, his reputation soon dissuaded the Orthodox establishment from having anything to do with him, and although he made some (female, naturally) friends in high places, he soon left, seemingly never to return.



NICHOLAS II

Europe was approaching the turmoil that was to end in World War I (see *Crimea*, *Scramble for Africa*, *Franz Ferdinand*), and most countries were busily rearming and preparing for some sort of conflict. Many, such as the Austria-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, were internally rent with conflict and in no shape to enter such a battle. The great czarist empire in Russia was not in much better condition. The proud inheritors of the legacy of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine The Great had become dissolute and, more crucially,

inbreeding with too many European princesses had introduced a terrible disease—hemophilia—into the royal line. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 had initiated a series of democratic reforms that had done nothing but excite the middle classes as well as the peasants, and seriously weaken the absolutist royal power. To a great extent, czarist power at a time when it was really needed depended on the strength and character of the czar and czarina themselves. To put it mildly, Nicholas and Alexandra were the wrong couple for the job. Utterly devoted to each other, disorganized, antisocial, preferring the company of dogs to humans, they would have made, as was said at the time, excellent country squires. Unfortunately, Mother Russia required a much stronger hand.

### **AN HEIR OF UNCERTAINTY**

Czar Alexander III, apparently a healthy and robust man, died suddenly of nephritis in 1894, in his early 50s. Neither he nor anyone in the royal court, especially his son and heir, had expected this to happen for years. Nicholas was 26 but had been given no direction or teaching in running the affairs of state, and had been coddled by an overprotective mother. The only thing he had done on his own was find a princess to marry, much against his parents' wishes. In the end they had consented, only because the need to produce an heir to perpetuate the Romanov dynasty was of such importance and they doubted their feeble son's ability to find anyone else. It says much for Nicholas's affection for his father that the royal marriage took place less than a week after the death of Alexander. Several hundred died at the coronation as Nicholas made a mess of handing out traditional gifts.

The new czarina was Princess Alexandra (Alix) of Hesse, one of Queen Victoria's favorite granddaughters, and also Nicholas's third cousin. Although the link with Britain dynastically was a good thing, her melancholy nature and also her German-ness worked against her throughout her life—much as Marie Antoinette's Austrian ancestry was used against her during the French Revolution a century earlier. The couple was by all accounts very happy but also isolated and remote both from their subjects and even their court. They rapidly produced four daughters in succession, confirming Nicholas's mother's worst fears about her son and his wife, but also causing real concern in the court as to the need to produce a son and heir. After the fourth daughter's birth in 1901, a desperate Alexandra started to look beyond the



medical profession for help. Her brother, Alexander Michaelovich, said she “professed an open preference for medical men. She turned toward religion...but her prayers were tainted with a certain hysteria.”

Alexandra’s belief in mystical power was much enhanced by the subsequent birth of a son and heir, Alexis, on July 30, 1904. The happiness of the royal couple soon turned to dismay as the boy showed signs of hemophilia, which ran in the bloodline of Queen Victoria. Doctors warned there was no hope of a cure and a great likelihood of death. One of the czarina’s closest friends, Anna Vryubova, was a major supporter of Rasputin, whom she credited with her recovery after a bad train accident, and she suggested that the *staretz* visit Alexis in secret. The idea of using holy healers was not that strange; Nicholas’s father had sent to Kronstadt for a famous healer when his diagnosis was made. But Rasputin was strange. He was also effective, and brought the small boy almost instant relief. However, his boasting of his relationship with the family soon reached the czar’s ears and he was once again banished, only to return, for good, in 1905 after Alexis fell dangerously ill once more.

Totally distracted by his son’s illness, the state of Nicholas’s mind and his inability to rule began to have serious consequences. A nonsensical war against Japan only showed how weak Russia was compared to the militarization of other countries. Nicholas had nearly been killed on a royal trip to Japan and hated the place. Although nominally allied with England and France, Nicholas was heavily influenced by his wife’s connections with the Kaiser and the German royals. In January 1905 more than 1,000 demonstrators had been killed in a ridiculous overreaction by police. A year later a constitution had been declared, and the czar had to contend with a genuine reform movement emanating from the *dumas*. Rasputin acquired more and more influence at the Russian court; Nicholas referred to him as “our friend.” Rumors circulated of affairs that Rasputin was supposedly having with the czarina, with her young daughters, with almost every woman in the court, insinuations often circulated by him in endless drunken orgies. He seems not to have had a particular political agenda, other than retaining his own privileged position, but it was not surprising that others, especially aristocrats who now found their expected access to the czar blocked, would not find that convincing. Nicholas and Alexandra seemed as oblivious to the worsening situation in Europe as they were to the domestic

THE HAPPINESS OF THE  
ROYAL COUPLE SOON  
TURNED TO DISMAY AS THE  
BOY SHOWED SIGNS OF  
HEMOPHILIA, WHICH RAN IN  
THE BLOODLINE OF QUEEN  
VICTORIA.

political chaos that would overwhelm them. When war broke out, the Russian army was hopelessly ill prepared. With the blessing of Rasputin, Nicholas appointed his cousin, Grand Duke Nicholas, to head the army. Hearing things were going badly, Rasputin telegraphed an offer of help by coming to bless the troops. He received the curt reply: "Do come. I'll hang you." Shortly thereafter, Rasputin had a vision that only the czar himself could save his country by leading them in wartime. Nicholas shuffled off to the front, leaving government in the hands of Alexandra and, effectively, Rasputin. Leading public officials were fired and replaced with cronies.

Finally, the court had had enough. Prince Felix Yusupov, *duma* member Vladimir Purishkevich, and the czar's cousin, Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovitch Romanov, decided the country must be rid of the "evil genius." In December 1916, Yusupov invited Rasputin to his home, ostensibly to meet his beautiful wife, then poisoned him with cakes laced with potassium cyanide. The plotters then shot Rasputin, tied him up, wrapped him in a blanket, and threw him into the Neva River. In almost Frankensteinian style, he was last seen trying to swim through the icy waters, but finally, his body was found three days later. The conspirators were banished by the furious czar, a lucky break for them in fact as they avoided the fate that awaited the rest of the royal family a few months later.

RUMORS CIRCULATED OF  
AFFAIRS THAT RASPUTIN WAS  
SUPPOSEDLY HAVING WITH  
THE CZARINA, WITH HER  
YOUNG DAUGHTERS, WITH  
ALMOST EVERY WOMAN IN  
THE COURT.

Rasputin had predicted that, in the event of his death, the czar and family would fall. He saw himself, it seems, as something of a revolutionary, proof that a peasant could hold his own with skill and guile against the aristocracy at court. It is not uncommon, of course, for seers and mystics to predict doom should anything unfortunate befall them, but it is certainly true that the loss of their confidant destroyed any resolve the royal family had left to avoid the impending end of Romanov rule in Russia. The speed and willingness of his abdication, barely three months after Rasputin's death, seems ample evidence of the absolute dependence the royal family displayed in their adherence to the charismatic Rasputin.

## ISMAY'S LIFEBOATS

11:40 P.M., April 14, 1912—2:20 A.M., April 15, 1912

### MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** J. Bruce Ismay (1862–1937)

**Damage Done:** 1,503 deaths

**Why:** The unsinkable ship failed to carry enough lifeboats for its passengers

*I remember Titanic. Everything was so stately and beautiful. The linens were of a fine white and as soft as the clouds. I remember my mother having such a sense of dread and my father exclaiming that this ship was unsinkable. My mother told him that we should all perish because that was flying in the face of God himself.*

—Edith, Survivor

*This is exactly what might take place and what will take place, if the liners are sent to sea short of boats.*

—**William T. Stead** (*Pall Mall Gazette* 1886, “How the Mad Steamer Went Down in the Mid-Atlantic by a Survivor.” Stead was a British spiritualist and writer who in 1912 was on his way to a peace conference at Carnegie Hall ... on the *Titanic*.) He did not survive.

Just because an event is famous enough to become a cliché—"Ship Sunk by Huge Metaphor"—as the spoof headline from *The Onion* later described it—does not mean its place in the annals of *Idiotica* is not deserved. The extraordinary pride and arrogance that led to the destruction of *Titanic* on its maiden voyage makes it a natural for these



J. BRUCE ISMAY

pages. It was not so much the design fault that led to the flooding of the lower levels; mistakes in themselves are not idiotic. Nor was it even the route taken—the ship, after all, hit a particularly wayward southern-located iceberg that had no business being there. But the failure of the designers and owners of the ship to believe in the possibility of an accident and fail to put enough lifeboats on *Titanic* was an act of gigantic foolishness that cost the lives of all 1,503 who died on that fateful night.

There have been many engineering catastrophes over the years. Victorian technology at its height yielded amazing results: the spanning of waterways,

the coming of the railways, tunnels and bridges around the world. Disasters were inevitable, many commemorated in poetry and literature, from the dreadful William McGonagall tribute to those who died on the Tay Bridge to more established and better writers. Boat travel also had its fair share of tragedies over the years, though mostly in bad weather or through enemy action in wartime. Certainly the death toll of *Titanic* was substantially less than what befell returning German prisoners on the *Wilhelm Gustoff* in 1945, estimated at a loss of life of between 7,000 and 9,000.

## HUBRIS DEFINED

*Titanic*, though, was different. It was perhaps understandable to coin the "unsinkable" phrase as an early piece of PR hype. There was a considerable battle going on between the Cunard Line, whose flagship *Lusitania* would meet its own terrible fate sometime later, and the White Star Line, which, determined to win the corporate battle at any cost and, funded by J. P. Morgan, decided to build the ultimate ship. Actually, *Titanic* was to be one of three sister ships aimed at dominating the transatlantic route. The construction was a joint project between J. Bruce Ismay, president of White Star, and Lord Pirrie, chairman of



Harland and Wolff shipbuilders in Belfast. Bruce Andrews, managing director of Harland and Wolff, was the ship's designer and went down with the ship, not before realizing exactly what had gone wrong and giving captain and crew the precise time at which the ship would sink. A crew of 14,000 men worked on the construction, which took three years. At the time, *Titanic* was the world's largest moveable object.

At 880 feet long, 92 feet wide, 60 feet (268x28x18m) from water line to boat deck, *Titanic* was about the same length and height as London's Tower Bridge. Its 29 boilers were fired by 159 coal-burning furnaces, and a top speed of 23 knots ensured a quick crossing of the Atlantic. Of the famous four funnels, only three were actually usable; one was just for ostentation. In addition to the usual luxuries, a Turkish bath, squash court, and four elevators were new add-ons to the normal luxury liner repertoire. The design and functioning of the watertight compartments, tragically flawed as they turned out to be, led the trade magazine *Shipbuilder* to hail *Titanic* as "practically unsinkable." The phrase soon stuck in everyone's mind, especially as it set off for its maiden voyage from Southampton, via Cherbourg, on April 10, 1912.

Capacity was supposed to be in excess of 3,500 people, but it was carrying only 2,210—in fact, more than expected because of a coal strike that led to poorer passengers being transferred. The cost of the trip lived up to the PR hype for first class. Despite being at only two-thirds capacity, the provision of lifeboats was woefully inadequate. *Titanic* carried a total of 20 lifeboats, 14 of them wooden, and each had a capacity of 65 persons. Two were woodcutters with a capacity of 40 persons each and four were collapsibles (wood bottoms and canvas sides), each capable of carrying 47 persons. The total capacity of all 20 lifeboats was 1,178 people. If every lifeboat left *Titanic* filled to the max, 1,023 persons would have been left behind.

The cause of the disaster is too well known to go into—hitting the iceberg on the side and at full speed ruptured too many of the watertight compartments. *Titanic* could withstand four of the compartments being filled with water, but the hole in the hull was so big that six compartments were full and the ship was doomed. Unfortunately, for the first two hours of the tragedy, that fact was not apparent to the passengers, who in first class were less than enthused at the prospect of leaving

#### THE DESIGN

#### OF THE WATERTIGHT

#### COMPARTMENTS, TRAGICALLY

#### FLAWED AS THEY TURNED OUT

#### TO BE, LED THE TRADE

#### MAGAZINE SHIPBUILDER TO

#### HAIL THE *TITANIC* AS

#### "PRACTICALLY UNSINKABLE."



their staterooms for wooden lifeboats on an icy Atlantic night; in third class, most people didn't have the opportunity anyway.

Very few lifeboats were filled when they were lowered from *Titanic* into the icy water. This caused the death toll to rise dramatically. When the order came from Captain Smith to commence loading the lifeboats, *Titanic's* officers were probably unaware of the magnitude of the situation. There were never any lifeboat drills and the crew had not been informed that each lifeboat could be safely lowered when filled to capacity.

### **THE LIFEBOAT SHORTAGE**

Why so few lifeboats? As ships increased in size over the years, the lifeboat requirements stayed the same. *Titanic* was designed to carry a total of 48, but the White Star Line decided that passenger comfort was more important. They believed that an increase in the number of lifeboats (beyond 20) would have cluttered the decks and taken up valuable space. Harland and Wolff tried to persuade the White Star Line to install more lifeboats, but eventually gave up the fight. Moreover, it was widely believed that White Star chairman Ismay, the one who overruled Harland and Wolff on the number of lifeboats, also was responsible for insisting that Captain Smith keep sailing full steam ahead on the same course, although reports of icebergs had come in. Ismay famously found himself, almost by accident by his own account, one of the few men actually in a lifeboat, and survived the tragedy, staying on as an executive of the White Star holding company. He lived another 25 years but may have wished he had indeed gone down with the ship. He was held responsible by all for the disaster; a town in Texas called Ismay changed its name. One of his critics said, "He is one of those human hogs whose animal desires swallow up all finer feelings" and "whose heart is atrophied by selfishness."

Many maritime laws were introduced as a result of the disaster, such as more lifeboats, better distress signals, and 24-hour ship-to-ship radio communications. And a standard morality tale of corporate greed and hubris was born.

# WORLD WAR I TRILOGY

FRANZ FERDINAND, GALLIPOLI, AND TRENCH WARFARE

It is doubtful that any period in world history offers so prolonged, useless, pointless, and terrible an example of waste as Europe from 1914 to 1918. World War I wins almost every conceivable award for idiocy that one can imagine. The causes, 90 years later, are so obscure as to be laughable. The casualties are mind-boggling.

Not only that, within a mere two decades, the grand masters of Europe were ready to go at it all over again, this time involving almost every country of the world. At least this time there were heroes and villains, right and wrong, someone to cheer and someone to boo. A whole panoply of books, movies, TV shows, and mythology has sprung from World War II, which also had its share of atrocities, dreadful enough, and also its share of idiocy. "Man's inhumanity to man" was never more evident than during World War I. At a rough estimate, the dead numbered more than 8 million in combat alone. It is doubtful that more than a handful could have pointed to what they were actually fighting for, other than their country.

MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

# GAVRILO PRINCIP'S DELI SANDWICH: THE ASSASSINATION OF FRANZ FERDINAND

June 25, 1914

**Main Culprit:** Gavrilo Princip (1894–1918)

**Damage Done:** The beginning of World War I

**Why:** The infamous spark that ignited the conflagration—assassination that went beyond its aims

*What is the good of your speeches? I come to Sarajevo on a visit, and I get bombs thrown at me.  
It is outrageous!*

—Franz Ferdinand, Sarajevo 1914

*Our ghosts will walk though Vienna  
And roam through the palace  
Frightening the lords.*

—Gavrilo Princip, 1918

Political assassination has always been a double-edged sword. Frequently, within the plan lies the hope of redemption, but all too often the mistaken notion that removing one person somehow makes a difference proves itself horribly wrong. All too often it is a suicide mission; in more recent decades it's the prelude to the 15 minutes of fame. Usually, history remembers the dead leader, no matter how evil, as the victim of a dastardly plot, and the assassin, no matter how heroic, or well intentioned, as the wicked or crazed perpetrator. And the *Idiotica* law of unintended consequences has a tendency to backfire on the assassin and his or her cause, especially if their aim is not true. Countless leaders are remembered for their survival rather than why anyone would have wanted them dead in the first place. And, like rock stars, the legacy of some of those leaders may shine much brighter for their world coming to an untidy and bloody end before their music became schmaltzy or Camelot fell to ruins around them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, assassination was in vogue. President McKinley had been shot; Teddy Roosevelt was saved by his diary; in Ireland and throughout much of Europe, improved gun technology had rendered the assassination of rivals a lot easier than before.

## THE ILLUSION OF PEACE

In hindsight the nineteenth century had been a period of peace and prosperity throughout Europe. The diplomatic peace of the Congress of Vienna of 1815, masterminded by Metternich and Talleyrand, had created the concept of the balance of power to prevent the emergence of another Napoleon, and the peace had worked pretty well. Europe had held together through the crises of 1848. The emergence in the later years of two unified countries, Italy and Germany, had changed the players somewhat, but a complex ever-changing series of alliances held the balance intact. Leaders were more content to industrialize their countries and find and exploit their new worldwide colonies than fight one another again. But by 1914 the giant Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires were creaking and failing, and the power vacuum was apparent to emergent nationalists. The still-young and expansionist German regime stood ready to take any advantage that might accrue from this power failure in the center and east of Europe. Modern technology had provided much that was new and deadly in the period since the Napoleonic wars, including the machine gun, the railroad, the submarine, and by the end of the war, the airplane. War became much bloodier and more protracted than ever before. Indeed, it was the exact

workings of the balance of power that led to the major problem that made the whole thing so terrible—neither side, or group of alliances, was ever really strong enough to wipe out the other. In the end, it took the entry into the war of the Americans and the true globalization of the conflict to provide enough of a shift in power to produce at least a temporary result.

War was by no means inevitable in 1914, but it was very close. Diplomacy was wearing thin as a means of resolving issues. The Germans had kept a war plan in place since at least 1905, which they assumed assured them of victory in a few months. They seriously miscalculated in two areas though, resulting in what then became a bloody stalemate. But the saber-rattling of early 1914 was believed by the war-mongers at the time, if it came to blows, to produce a conflict that would be all over in a few months. Perhaps they would have thought twice had they known.

## **EYES ON BOSNIA**

During the late nineteenth century the hotbed of nationalism had been, not for the first or last time, the Balkans. The Ottoman Empire began to fall apart; Serbia and the Balkan region were the most insistent on autonomy, emboldened by the successful independence movement in Greece, which succeeded in 1830, so beloved of Lord Byron and his pals. To the north, the Hungarians were granted equal footing with the Austrians in 1867; the Russians were supporting uprisings in Turkish regions throughout the Balkans. Part of the compromise following the Crimean War, which the British and French had fought to hold back Russian expansionism in the Near East, was to force the Turks to grant more autonomy to the Balkans. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania were granted independence. The Serbians immediately laid claim to more land than they had been given, as did the Bulgarians, who had been somewhat short-changed. They annexed land to their south immediately and the area around Skopje, their part of Macedonia, in conjunction with the Greeks in the Second Balkan War of 1913. By then, the Ottomans had been thrown off the mainland of Europe and their part in the upcoming war was at best peripheral, though as we shall shortly see, many soldiers laid down their lives on that periphery.

More significantly and fatally—and again, not for the last time—the Serbians laid claim to Bosnia and its capital, Sarajevo, which had been



handed to the Austro-Hungarian Empire at Berlin. The Slavs of Bosnia and Herzegovina had been perfectly content to accept the imperial trade, but Serbian nationalists continued to stir up agitation. However, they weren't taking on the failing Ottoman Empire, whose Sultans could at least vaguely appreciate that their days were numbered, and the Serbians had in any case been protected and encouraged in their independence by international treaties and benevolent Russian assistance. Bosnia was of little significance to anyone but the Hapsburgs. Although the Great War was to prove to be their undoing, that was far from obvious to anyone in 1900. Vienna, if anywhere in the world, was the cultural and intellectual capital city. The Western powers were mightily sick of revolting Balkans in any case by then. The Austrians sought to take advantage of this by annexing Bosnia completely in 1908 and indeed, were fighting Serbia off and on through to 1911. The Russians were as alarmed by this as the Austrians were by the Serbian/Greek land grab of Macedonia in 1913. Meanwhile, fear of German expansionism had led Britain, France, and Russia to form an alliance. The Russians formally abandoned their close relations with Austria and Germany. Though this was not widely realized at the time, the Berlin government had made it clear to the Viennese leadership that no more lines would be broken or diplomatic compromises reached. The world would remain at peace only so long as no one tried anything foolish.



GAVRILO PRINCIP

On June 18, 1914, someone did.

Franz Ferdinand was heir apparent to the Hapsburg Empire. He had been third in line to the throne, but Crown Prince Rudolf had infamously died in the hunting lodge of the palace at Mayerling with his mistress, Marie Vetsera. Conspiracy theorists inevitably claim they were murdered, to the point that the body of the unfortunate 19-year-old Baroness Vetsera was stolen in 1992 and subsequently examined by experts to determine cause of death, which, oddly enough, tended to confirm murder rather than the double suicide theory. Rudolf had decidedly liberal tendencies compared with his archconservative father. The emperor's brother Karl Ludwig, already in his 60s, suddenly became heir, and decided perhaps in preparation for this unexpected

role to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, drank from the River Jordan, and promptly contracted typhus and died. His son, Franz Ferdinand, assumed the role of heir; two years later his aunt, the emperor's wife Elisabeth, was stabbed by an Italian anarchist as she boarded a steamer on Lake Geneva. And two years after that, in 1900, his marriage to a mere countess so infuriated the emperor that he was forced to renounce his children's succession to the throne, perhaps not the wisest of moves for a dynasty already under nationalist pressure and with an increasingly poor track record of staying alive. Although initially favorable to liberal causes, the pressure of his uncle began to bear down on Franz Ferdinand, and he was seen as increasingly conservative and opposed to aspirations to self-rule. He was outraged at being booed and rioted against on a visit in 1906. By 1914, still not emperor, Franz Ferdinand was a solid and morose 50-year-old, in no mood for a trip to Sarajevo. The only thing that continued to make him happy was his devotion to the wife he had defied the emperor to marry. He had very little influence in court at Vienna, though, and it was far from clear that he ever would.

FERDINAND WAS OUTRAGED AT  
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The 1908 annexation of Bosnia seemed proof of all this to young men in Sarajevo, who were attracted to a rather disunited nineteenth-century rebel movement, *Young Bosnia*. Most of the new adherents to this old movement were sons of men who had moved from peasant life into the cities, scraped together the rudiments of an education, but found themselves blocked for any real advancement in life by political and economic rule from a disinterested Vienna. They traveled also. Danilo Ilie ventured to Switzerland to meet with Russian Mensheviks. Much of this was talk, of course, but a group of three *Young Bosnians*—Ilie, Gavrilo Princip, and Vladimir Gaciovie—fell under the spell of a more shadowy and sinister Serbian, Colonel Apis, founder of the *Black Hand* movement. *Black Hand* was more genuinely anarchist and revolutionary than any group in Bosnia; indeed, Apis had played a major role in the assassination of King Alexander of Serbia in 1903. He was easily able to pull together the Bosnians and persuade them that assassinating Franz Ferdinand would be the prelude to a great Bosnian nationalist uprising that would strike a fatal blow into the heart of the Hapsburg Empire. It all blew up with an act of enormous rashness based on foolish hope for a better future; assassins of this sort were rarely evil,

instead acting on misplaced belief. It may have helped that the assassin, Princip, was deathly ill at only 19 with tuberculosis.

The actual attempt was a fiasco. The initial troika had recruited four more conspirators, armed with guns and bombs supplied by Colonel Apis. As Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie's car rolled through the city, the first conspirator found a policeman next to him; the second lost his nerve, not realizing a woman would be in the car. The third threw his bomb but it bounced off the car and exploded in the crowd, injuring many. In the chaos, Princip, armed with a pistol, failed to recognize the car and another conspirator was overwhelmed by the panicked crowd. The archduke reached the town hall, gave his speech, and then decided to go to the hospital to visit the wounded, who included Austrian officers. Ninety minutes had passed and the conspirators had basically given up by now. Princip had gone to buy a sandwich, and walking out of Moritz Schiller's delicatessen, was astonished to see the archduke's car he had failed to recognize earlier. It had taken the wrong route to the hospital, without its escort, and slowed to a crawl directly in front of him. He pulled out his Browning and fired. The first shot missed the archduke but bounced off the side of the car and hit Sophie in the abdomen. The second shattered Franz Ferdinand's jugular vein and with his last words to Sophie, he died. She was to die less than an hour later. Princip was too young to be executed, but sick as he was with tuberculosis, survived only a few years in the Austrian fortress of Theresienstadt in what is now the Czech Republic. (It was later used by the Nazis as their infamous "model" concentration camp.)

The consequences of this rather pathetic incident were horrific, and not at all what the conspirators had in mind, although they created rather more of an impact than they had anticipated in their wildest adolescent imaginings. The warmongers in Germany and Vienna, who couldn't care less about Franz Ferdinand, jumped at the opportunity. Serbia, which had done nothing more than be the home of Colonel Apis, was blamed, given impossible conditions to fulfill, and then invaded anyway. Half a million Serbs, a huge proportion of the population, died in the impending invasion; well over a million Austrians would die, and the Hapsburg Empire would indeed be doomed, though not in the way Princip might have expected, and with his goal of independence for Bosnia many bloody years and wars away still.

## THE SHOT HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## WINSTON CHURCHILL AND THE DISASTER AT GALLIPOLI

February 1915–November 1915

**Main Culprit:** Winston Churchill (1874–1965)

**Damage Done:** At least 400,000 dead on both sides; over a third of the ANZAC forces in their first-ever battles

**Why:** Vainglorious and pointless attack on an impregnable peninsula

*And the band played "Waltzing Matilda,"  
As we sailed away from the quay,  
And amidst all the tears and the shouts and the cheers  
We sailed off for Gallipoli*

*How well I remember that terrible day  
When the blood stained the sand and the water  
And how in that hell that they called Suvla Bay  
We were butchered like lambs to the slaughter*

*Johnnie Turk, he was ready, he'd primed himself well,  
He showered us with bullets and he rained us with shells  
And in five minutes flat he'd blown us all to hell  
Nearly blew us all back to Australia*

*And the band played "Waltzing Matilda."*

—"The Band Played Waltzing Matilda," Eric Boyle



We have seen the borderline status of the Ottoman Empire in the prelude to the war; nonetheless, the region became one of the arenas of battle in the conflict. The Dardanelles was a 31-mile (50 km) strip of land that controlled the passageway from the Aegean Sea into the Sea of Marmara, which itself passed into the Black Sea at Constantinople. Gallipoli was a heavily mountainous area of the Dardanelles. It was under Turkish control and going to stay that way. It was extremely defensible, with high mountains overhanging a small beach area.

The young Winston Churchill, whose name could easily appear in later chapters of this book relating to the fall of Singapore and the Bengal rice famine, is without doubt best represented here. In London the new Churchill museum opened in February 2005, and one of the exhibits is his early school report from 1883. The young Churchill was reported to be “very naughty” by his form masters at St. George’s School, Ascot. He was “good” in history but “weak” in geography. No kidding. One can almost hear the hollow laughter of those who died on the shoreline of Gallipoli.

## THE YOUNG LION

Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty. He was itching to get into the fray somehow, but the war was a land affair. There was only one major naval battle—Jutland. Later, the pioneering use of submarines by the Germans would cast a different light on everything, but in the early years there wasn’t much for a bellicose First Lord of the Admiralty to sink his teeth into. Before the Ottoman empire even formally entered the war, in October 1914, Churchill ordered the bombardment of the Dardanelles, an action that reminded the Turks of the importance of mining the waterways and building up their defensive positions. The war council had rejected Churchill’s immediate request for an attack as being too risky, but after the Russians requested help by the terms of their alliance against an invading Turkish force, they decided to let Churchill have his way, albeit with very limited support. The Russians soon beat the weak Turkish army—it was obvious to all from early on that the Turks had everything to lose and no real way out of losing it. The strategic possessions that were of importance within the Turkish Empire—Suez, Jerusalem, the Iranian oil wells—were fought for successfully by



WINSTON  
CHURCHILL



Allenby and his men on land. There were vague hopes of inducing the Balkan states and Italy to attack Austria, but it is not clear to this day that there was the least strategic value to the war effort in getting through the Dardanelles. This wasn't the Crusades; nobody really wanted to sack Constantinople again. It was little more than pride and vain-glory that propelled Churchill onward into the fiasco that followed. Even Carden, vice-admiral in charge of the eastern Mediterranean region, was on record condemning the idea's recklessness.

Resources were limited. Most of the fleet had to stay in the North Sea. Army supplies were extremely limited because of the bloodbath starting on the western front. Only one division of British forces, the 29th division, was not needed in France. The Royal Naval division sent by Churchill was a hodgepodge bunch of irregulars and marines, barely a fighting force. Australian and New Zealand forces, just arrived in Greece and barely trained, let alone battle-ready, were co-opted. No one expected them necessarily to fight. They were really garrison forces that would be sent in once the naval bombardment had done its work. But it did not do its work. From February 19, 1915 to March 18, six of the sixteen ships assigned to bombard had been destroyed by Turkish mines and apart from breaching the limited coastal defenses, no real progress was made. Carden was replaced and it was determined that the assault would have to be an army one, on the beaches of Gallipoli.

## **AN HISTORIC BLUNDER**

What happened next lives on in history—not so much for the British, who were used to their men being sacrificed by their generals, but for the New Zealanders and Australians. For them, April 25, 1915 is now known as Anzac Day, the first day those newly independent nations saw battle. And for the Turks, the genesis of the new secular country of Turkey under Kamal Ataturk would start with the fierce defense of Gallipoli in the ensuing months, a source of pride for a homeland defended in stark contrast to the decadent and weak rule of the Ottoman Empire. Churchill, too, would go on to greatness in World War II. Three countries would create legends from the thousands about to give their lives with extraordinary courage in a stupid and ridiculous assault with inexperienced soldiers against an impregnable terrain with no strategic importance at all.

The dreadful details, the errors of judgment—half the Australians landed at the wrong beach—and the awful death toll, need not be dwelt on

too much. One-fifth of the New Zealand force died that first day. None of the assaults, brave as they were, made any significant headway. A good number of troops had not even been able to make it ashore. A recommendation for evacuation was rejected. The scenario soon to be repeated at the Somme, sending thousands of men across No Man's Land in an attempt to take heavily fortified defenses, saw many deaths and no progress. By November, casualties were high enough for London to take notice; more troops had been requested and Lord Kitchener himself visited Gallipoli in November 1915 and ordered evacuation instead.

Casualties were indeed high: 120,000 British, 27,000 French, lower figures for the Anzac expeditionary forces, but high percentages—25 percent of the New Zealanders, more for the Australians. Turkish casualties numbered perhaps 250,000.

Churchill was initially held responsible for the debacle, lost his position in the War Cabinet and was excluded from government. Indeed, he went to the trenches in France as a lieutenant colonel, before returning to office as Minister for Munitions in the 1917 Lloyd George government. He was reappointed to the admiralty position on the first day of World War II—a signal went out to all ships: “Winston’s back”—and of course went on from there to glory. He never appeared to have any remorse about Gallipoli; indeed his eastern Mediterranean strategy was markedly similar. On the eve of the 1944 Anzio landing, commander in charge, Major General John Lucas, wrote unhappily in his diary: “This whole affair has a strong odor of Gallipoli and apparently the amateur [i.e., Churchill] is still on the coach’s bench.”

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Defenders of Churchill point to lack of support from the War Office in London and poor leadership on the scene. Since he was both part of the War Cabinet and in charge of the appointment of officers, these arguments seem weak at best. In the lustrous career that was to follow—eventually—Gallipoli is seen as a blip. But the reappearance of very similar types of decision-making—fight to the last man, attack the impregnable, Britain at all costs—will show up again in this book in Singapore, Bengal, and Iran. His view of troops from the empire as cannon fodder did much during World War II to turn Australia away from the British empire toward the protection of MacArthur and the American sphere of influence. Gallipoli never has been forgotten in Australia.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## TRENCH WARFARE, GENERAL HAIG AND THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

July 1, 1916–November 1916

**Main Culprit:** Field Marshal Douglas Haig (1861–1928)

**Damage Done:** Over one million dead, including 420,000 of his own army

**Why:** Suicidal attacks over No Man's Land for month after month

*If you want to find the old battalion*

*I know where they are, I know where they are*

*If you want to find the old battalion*

*I know where they are,*

*They're hanging on the old barbed wire.*

*I've seen 'em, I've seen 'em*

*Hanging on the old barbed wire*

—“*Over The Top*,” anonymous, soldier's song

Of all the perpetrators of stupidity within these pages, it is hard to beat General Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force. Much of the war was turning out to be a virtual stalemate. The Germans had quickly advanced and taken Belgium and northern France, and the Allies sought to remove them. Repeated French and British offensives in 1915 had gained little and lost little. The Germans, though, struck a blow against the French in a successful attack on Verdun in February 1916. French Commander Joffre had planned an attack on the Somme but was forced to hand over control of the operation to Haig, whose early strategy was simply a mistake, but to continue in the mass slaughter thereafter was the height of idiocy. Assuming that he wasn't a murderous psychopath, he was presumably drawn to his continued strategy through pride and, charitably, hope that the day would somehow be won despite all evidence to the contrary. And with luck he had faith too that the men he consigned to certain death day after day after day somehow were going to a better place than the trenches of northern France.



GENERAL HAIG

The plan was to use the modern British guns to bombard the German forward defenses for eight straight days and then mount a full frontal assault. The Germans were in a better position, on higher ground, and had strongly fortified positions. The bombardment had no effect at all on the barbed wire and concrete defensive positions. Haig had at his command 750,000 men in 27 divisions.

On the first day of the charge, 7:30 A.M. on July 1, Haig ordered General Rawlinson's men forward. By day's end, 58,000 British casualties were counted, the worst single day of losses in the entire history of the British army. Incredibly, he ordered a repeat performance for the next day. And the next. The British Army HQ in Paris issued this statement on July 3:

The first day of the offensive is very satisfactory. The success is not a thunderbolt, as has happened earlier in similar operations, but it is important above all because it is rich in promises. It is no longer a question here of attempts to pierce as with a knife. It is rather a slow, continuous, and methodical push, sparing in lives, until the day when the enemy's resistance, incessantly hammered



at, will crumple up at some point. From to-day the first results of the new tactics permit one to await developments with confidence.

On July 13 they made a small gain but German reinforcements repelled them; on July 27, Pozières was captured. By September, French forces using tanks were able to join in, but still made little progress. As winter drew on, Haig ordered attacks every day the weather would allow until he finally gave up in December. He had killed 420,000 of his own troops, maybe 620,000 Germans, and around 200,000 French. At the very height of the success of the Somme campaign, 7 miles (12 km) of territory were gained; by the end, practically none. Over one million casualties in six months for absolutely no gain whatsoever.

Was there method to the madness, as some claim? Here is Haig himself explaining his battle orders before it all started in May:

The First, Second, and Third Armies will take steps to deceive the enemy as to the real front of attack, to wear him out, and reduce his fighting efficiency both during the three days prior to the assault and during the subsequent operations. Preparations for deceiving the enemy should be made without delay. This will be effected by means of—

- (a) Preliminary preparations such as advancing our trenches and saps, construction of dummy assembling trenches, gun emplacements, etc.
- (b) Wire cutting at intervals along the entire front with a view to inducing the enemy to man his defenses and causing fatigue.
- (c) Gas discharges, where possible, at selected places along the whole British front, accompanied by a discharge of smoke, with a view to causing the enemy to wear his gas helmets and inducing fatigue and causing casualties.
- (d) Artillery barrages on important communications with a view to rendering reinforcements, relief, and supply difficult.
- (e) Bombardment of rest billets by night.
- (f) Intermittent smoke discharges by day, accompanied by shrapnel fire on the enemy's front defenses with a view to inflicting loss.

BY DAY'S END, 58,000 BRITISH  
CASUALTIES WERE COUNTED,  
THE WORST SINGLE DAY OF  
LOSSES IN THE ENTIRE  
HISTORY OF THE BRITISH  
ARMY. INCREDIBLY, HAIG  
ORDERED A REPEAT  
PERFORMANCE FOR THE  
NEXT DAY, AND THE NEXT.



(g) Raids by night, of the strength of a company and upwards, on an extensive scale, into the enemy's front system of defenses. These to be prepared by intense artillery and trench-mortar bombardments.

Philip Gibbs, a journalist, watched the preparation for the major offensive at the Somme in July, 1916.

Before dawn, in the darkness, I stood with a mass of cavalry opposite Fricourt. Haig as a cavalry man was obsessed with the idea that he would break the German line and send the cavalry through. It was a fantastic hope, ridiculed by the German High Command in their report on the Battles of the Somme which afterwards we captured.

In front of us was not a line but a fortress position, twenty miles deep, entrenched and fortified, defended by masses of machine-gun posts and thousands of guns in a wide arc. No chance for cavalry! But on that night they were massed behind the infantry. Among them were the Indian cavalry, whose dark faces were illuminated now and then for a moment, when someone struck a match to light a cigarette.

Before dawn there was a great silence. We spoke to each other in whispers, if we spoke. Then suddenly our guns opened out in a barrage of fire of colossal intensity. Never before, and I think never since, even in the Second World War, had so many guns been massed behind any battle front. It was a rolling thunder of shell fire, and the earth vomited flame, and the sky was alight with bursting shells. It seemed as though nothing could live, not an ant, under that stupendous artillery storm. But Germans in their deep dugouts lived, and when our waves of men went over they were met by deadly machine-gun and mortar fire.

Our men got nowhere on the first day. They had been mown down like grass by German machine-gunners who, after our barrage had lifted, rushed out to meet our men in the open. Many of the best battalions were almost annihilated, and our casualties were terrible.

A German doctor taken prisoner near La Boisselle stayed behind to look after our wounded in a dugout instead of going down to safety. I met him coming back across the battlefield next morning. One of our men were carrying his bag and I had a talk with him.

He was a tall, heavy, man with a black beard, and he spoke good English. "This war!" he said. "We go on killing each other to no purpose. It is a war against religion and against civilization and I see no end to it.

And explaining himself in his war memoirs:

George Coppard was a machine-gunner at the Battle of the Somme. In his book *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai*, he described what he saw on the 2nd July, 1916.

The next morning we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of our trench. There was a pair of binoculars in the kit, and, under the brazen light of a hot mid-summer's day, everything revealed itself stark and clear. The terrain was rather like the Sussex downland, with gentle swelling hills, folds and valleys, making it difficult at first to pinpoint all the enemy trenches as they curled and twisted on the slopes.

It eventually became clear that the German line followed points of eminence, always giving a commanding view of No Man's Land. Immediately in front, and spreading left and right until hidden from view, was clear evidence that the attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead, many of the 37th Brigade, were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high-water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as though they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. From the way the dead were equally spread out, whether on the wire or lying in front of it, it was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of the attack.

Concentrated machine gun fire from sufficient guns to command every inch of the wire, had done its terrible work. The Germans must have been reinforcing the wire for months. It was so dense that daylight could barely be seen through it. Through the glasses it looked a black mass. The German faith in massed wire had paid off.

How did our planners imagine that Tommies, having survived all other hazards—and there were plenty in crossing No Man's Land—would get through the German wire? Had they studied the black density of it through their powerful binoculars? Who

told them that artillery fire would pound such wire to pieces, making it possible to get through? Any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before.

Sixteen months later the Germans launched a furious artillery attack firing over 3,000 shells per minute. This was followed by storm troopers—lightly equipped, but with devastating weaponry including flame-throwers and machine guns—to rout the Allies. Over 21,000 British soldiers were taken as prisoners on the first day of the offensive and their commanders lost control of the situation that so many had died for.

After the war, Haig was posted as commander-in-chief of home forces until his retirement in 1921. Haig devoted the rest of his life to the welfare of ex-servicemen via the Royal British Legion. He was made Earl Haig in 1919 and then Baron Haig of Bemersyde in 1921. Douglas Haig died in 1928. To this day he remains highly controversial—excoriated by many for the catastrophic loss of life of those men under his command, still defended by some for his leadership.

## **HONORED FOR HIS ROLE**

MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## MAGINOT'S LINE

1929–1940

**Main Culprit:** André Maginot (1877–1932)

**Damage Done:** Millions of francs spent building the wrong type of fortifications in the wrong places

**Why:** Fighting the last war instead of preparing for the new technologies of the next one

*Fixed fortifications are a monument to the stupidity of man.*

—General George S. Patton

The philosopher George Santayana wisely wrote: "Those who are ignorant of the past are condemned to repeat it." Rarely was this more true than in the case of the Maginot Line, a string of fortifications built by the French after World War I to protect themselves from another invasion by German forces. The fierce fighting that had seen Alsace-Lorraine change hands after the Franco-Prussian War and then go back to the French after World War I had been won, left the French determined never to allow such an invasion to happen so easily again. The Germans had, at the beginning of World War I, made a lightning sweep into France by way of Belgium, essentially going around the north of France and coming in from the side. The French, in their wisdom, decided not to fortify the Belgian border but to focus their defenses on the direct route through. Shockingly, in 1940 the Germans followed the same route—through Belgium—and rather than tackle the Maginot Line head on, they simply went around the side, but this time with tanks. Rarely can such an expensive and complex system of defense have been rendered so totally useless so quickly. The German *blitzkrieg* had them in Paris in days. The thinking behind the Maginot Line is not that easy to deduce. It mixed a bit of classic Gallic pride and arrogance with faith that history would not repeat itself.



ANDRÉ MAGINOT

André Maginot was undersecretary of war at the outbreak of World War I, a position he resigned to fight with honor in the trenches. The French government was in the hands of the generals who proclaimed that they had won the war. Marshal Joffre first proposed the plan, though there was resistance both from pacifists and from those such as Reynaud and later President de Gaulle who wanted investment in aircraft and heavy mobile tanks, both of which had come into play toward the end of the war. Marshal Pétain persuaded him to rejoin the War Department in 1928 to become minister of war, finding a ready ally in his insistence that the "War to End All Wars" was no such thing and that the Germans still posed a threat. Appeasers had agreed that the French would withdraw early from the occupied Rhineland, which gave added impetus to the program. Indeed, Maginot was spectacular-

## DRAWING THE LINE



ly successful in his fund-raising. He convinced the right wing that it would be good for the military, and the left wing that it would create jobs—this was the time of the development of the New Deal. The forts were specifically for defensive purposes so even the pacifists were willing to agree. Three billion francs were allotted to build a series of fortifications along a line from the Swiss border on the south to the Ardennes Forest in the north—108 massive forts at 9-mile (15 km) intervals, connected by a series of tunnels, totaling over 62 miles (100 km) in length, and hundreds of artillery emplacements, in all to be manned by thousands of soldiers. French pride in this achievement, built fast and effectively in only a few years, was enormous; the phrase “Maginot Line” meant something impregnable, at least before the war; afterward, Maginot’s name became linked with the shortsightedness of relying on only one outcome.

FRENCH PRIDE IN THIS  
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“MAGINOT LINE” MEANT  
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AT LEAST BEFORE THE WAR.

The certainty in French minds that they were protected had a major impact on their foreign policy, when a clearer more aggressive stance against Hitler’s remilitarization might have been considerably more effective. Indeed, at the beginning of the war, when Hitler invaded Poland, the Germans did not dare attack the Maginot Line; all the way through the war, in fact, only one of the 50 forts ever fell to the Germans. But unfortunately, by then the Germans were on the other side of the fortifications. Not only did the Line not extend far enough and give the French an entirely false sense of security, but it was based around a World War I mentality, a war fought by soldiers in trenches attacking fortified lines, and it would have been brilliantly effective for that style of static, defensive combat. But World War II was to be fought using tanks and heavy artillery. The Ardennes Forest, the end of the Line, was judged to be impenetrable and probably was by traditional infantry, but the Panzer divisions rolled straight through it and into France. The name Maginot also became synonymous with a regular military shortfall of fighting the last war. The Germans’ counter ploy, a similar series of fortifications along their western frontier, called the Siegfried Line, may have just been a bluff.

Another problem had been placing trust in the alliance with Belgium, which seemed firm until 1936 when Belgium abrogated the treaty and declared neutrality. Having been decimated in the first war, Belgium

responded to German rearmament by hiding and hoping no one remembered them. It didn't work, of course. But the Line was hastily and not very well extended a little to cover the border, although the Ardennes section was left unguarded. Shockingly, the Germans were well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the Line. The forces lined up against the border, which the French were so pleased with themselves for, were nothing but a decoy while the *blitzkrieg* opened up on May 10, 1940. The Manstein Plan, as it was known, was approved by Hitler in February 1940—oddly enough, the whole idea of using tanks in this way had been developed in the early 1920s by a Briton, Colonel John Fuller, in two books on warfare published after the British army had shown no interest in the strategy. The Germans, however, most certainly did take notice, and the Manstein Plan was designed around the capabilities of the Panzer tank divisions, with the aim of avoiding the Maginot Line and reaching the English Channel instead. Erwin Johannes Rommel, then a young lieutenant colonel but a student of infantry warfare with a book of his own on the subject, published in 1913, led the assault through the forest, which, to be fair for a moment to the hapless French, was a raid of unprecedented speed and brilliance. Even Rommel, soon to be promoted to general, in his own journal was perhaps a little surprised by the results:

The people in the houses were rudely awoken by the din of our tanks, the clatter and roar of tracks and engines. Troops lay bivouacked beside the road, military vehicles stood parked in farmyards and in some places on the road itself. Civilians and French troops, their faces distorted with terror, lay huddled in the ditches, alongside hedges and in every hollow beside the road. We passed refugee columns, the carts abandoned by their owners, who had fled in panic into the fields. On we went, at a steady speed, towards our objective. Every so often a quick glance at the map by a shaded light and a short wireless message to Divisional H.Q. to report the position and thus the success of 25th Panzer Regiment and to assure myself that there was still no resistance and that contact was being maintained to the rear. The flat countryside lay spread out around us under the cold light of the moon. We were through the Maginot Line! It was hardly conceivable. Twenty-two years before we had stood for four and a half long years before this self-same enemy and had won victory

EVEN ROMMEL WAS  
SURPRISED BY THE SUCCESS  
OF HIS RAID ON THE FRENCH.

"WE HAD BROKEN THROUGH THE  
RENOWNED MAGINOT LINE AND  
WERE DRIVING DEEP INTO ENEMY  
TERRITORY. IT WAS NOT JUST A  
BEAUTIFUL DREAM.  
IT WAS REALITY."  
—ROMMEL

after victory and yet finally lost the war. And now we had broken through the renowned Maginot Line and were driving deep into enemy territory. It was not just a beautiful dream. It was reality.

French defenses were totally compromised within five days, and while the Alpine section of the Line held the Italians back, the Germans took control of the whole of northern France, and the surrender on June 22 came with barely a shot fired from the wonderful Maginot Line. Maginot himself died in 1932, blissfully unaware that his masterpiece has turned into a laughingstock. Shockingly, the French remanned the Line after the end of the war and only when they had built up their independent nuclear deterrent was the Line officially abandoned in 1969.

# WINSTON CHURCHILL STRIKES AGAIN: THE MAP OF IRAQ

March 12, 1921–present

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Winston Churchill (1874–1965)

**Damage Done:** An artificial country was created with totally disparate communities and disastrous consequences to this day

**Why:** Ignorance and lack of caring about the fate of the decolonizing nations

*I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes*

—Winston Churchill

One result of World War I was that the Ottomans' foolish last-minute alliance with the Kaiser and the Austrians led to the almost complete dismemberment of their empire. Turkey itself, empowered to some extent by the victory in the Dardanelles became a secular state bridging Europe and Asia. The rest of the empire was left without rule, but not entirely in chaos. The Byzantine nature of the empire meant that provinces were to some extent self-governing and could soldier along on their own. The British had effectively won the war in the Middle East, though to a large extent with forces drawn from India, alongside groups of what, for want of a better word, were adventurers such as T. E. Lawrence. But shattered by the loss of manpower and money from the European campaign, there was a lack of will or ability to simply move in and claim the Middle East for the British Empire—not all of it, anyway. The move to implicitly support the Jewish claims to a sovereign state in Palestine in 1917—the Balfour Declaration—had embittered many Arabs and infuriated many in the Colonial Office in Britain who were pro-Arab. Threats from other countries that might expand north from their new African colonies had effectively evaporated; the British were literally the last empire standing. The new nationalisms that had exploded in the Balkans and had begun the whole decline of the Ottoman Empire swiftly spread into the newly liberated Ottoman provinces, and bitter riots against any attempt at British rule began. The home audience had no stomach for this:

THE NEW NATIONALISMS  
THAT HAD EXPLODED IN THE  
BALKANS SWIFTLY SPREAD  
INTO THE NEWLY LIBERATED  
OTTOMAN PROVINCES, AND  
BITTER RIOTS AGAINST ANY  
ATTEMPT AT BRITISH  
RULE BEGAN.

"How much longer are valuable lives to be sacrificed in the vain endeavor to impose upon the Arab population an elaborate and expensive administration which they never asked for and do not want?" asked *The Times*.

Had the British realized that the rumored oil reserves in the region held the key to world power for the next century they might have been a little more concerned to get things right. But out of exhaustion, sloth, and arrogance, they didn't. Perhaps the only one who really did care was Sir Mark Sykes appointed by General Kitchener in 1915 as his personal representative to a prime ministerial committee to determine the future of the Middle East. He had worked tirelessly to establish proper British control in the region, backed by Prime Minister David Lloyd George, plotting to ensure that local leaders would be on the side of the British, matching the aspirations of sheikhs and other aspirants to



power, working essentially to take over the Ottoman Empire. But in 1919 Sykes unexpectedly died. Lloyd George could not find anyone to take on the role, and under extreme political pressure, turned in the end to the one man who has appeared more than any other in this book, and who became colonial secretary in 1921—Winston Churchill.

Churchill had no time for any of this policy. He wanted the army demobilized; he wanted the Arab rebellions put down, and the map redrawn. Egypt was to remain British; control over the Suez Canal and the route to India was of massive strategic importance. The Syria/Lebanon area was complicated by French refusal, as tragically elsewhere in North Africa, to give up its small remaining colonial influence. But the rest of Arabia had to be dealt with, and since it was deemed to have no particular value, to be dealt with as easily as possible.

British forces had rather half-heartedly taken Baghdad in 1917. They had suffered a particularly unexpected defeat at Kut, south of Baghdad, where in a half-flooded cemetery can still be seen the graves of some 40,000 British soldiers who perished there. A British protectorate was finally set up in 1917, but the hold on Iraq was tenuous, to say the least. There was strong opposition throughout the region to British rule, partly because the British proved a great deal more adept at tax collection than the Turks had been. The Ottomans had divided the region into three provinces, more or less ethnically centered around Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra in an attempt to keep the warring Sunni and Shiite populations apart. Baghdad also had a sizeable Jewish population and a significant Assyrian Christian one; this is not counting the Kurds, whose province was the closest to Turkey but who opposed British dominion even more fiercely than Turkish. By 1920 all of this had boiled over into full-scale revolt across the region. Horrifically, Churchill was not the least bit interested in working out what to do with whom. His view was pithily expressed in the opening epigraph to this piece, and indeed, despite continued official denials, there seems almost no doubt that Saddam Hussein was far from the first to use chemical weapons against the Kurds. Led by some young generals who had missed the fun in World War I but were eager to practice for next



WINSTON  
CHURCHILL

time around, poison gas was regularly used across the region to put down the revolt.

"If the Kurds hadn't learnt by our example to behave themselves in a civilized way then we had to spank their bottoms." said Wing Commander Gale. Wing Commander Harris, notable in later life for the firebombing of Dresden for which this can be seen as a warmup, also noted "The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage. Within forty-five minutes a full-size village can be practically wiped out and a third of the inhabitants killed or injured." Airpower, the dropping of bombs containing gas, was used extensively for almost the first time in history to save ground forces and expense; indeed, the whole revolt was put down with the loss of 2,000 British soldiers, a tiny matter compared to the losses of World War I (an interesting note of comparison with the current campaign). Gas was also used around the same time to keep down revolts in Afghanistan (and the West wonders why "they don't like us"). Indeed, recent documents reveal that Churchill, even in 1940, was buying huge stocks of chemical weapons from the Americans for potential use in Germany. ("It is absurd to consider morality on this topic when everybody used it in the last war without a word of complaint from the moralists or the Church.")

The problem remained of what to do with Iraq once the revolt had been put down. Essentially, the decision was made to hand over all of Arabia to whatever local strongmen could be relied on to support British rule in return for being allowed unlimited control over local populations. It didn't really matter which populations, whether they wanted to be under that leader, or who their new countrymen might be. The careful planning of Sykes was all for naught. Churchill held a 10-day conference at the Semiramis Hotel in Cairo on March 12, 1921, to work out the new frontiers.

## **THE QUESTION OF IRAQ**

Ibn Saud was one of the strongest men in the region and was effectively given the heart of Arabia to reinstate the rule of the House of Saud (Saudi Arabia). Two Hashemite brothers from Mecca, Faisal and Abdullah, were recruited to be kings of Iraq and Transjordan respectively. The Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra were no longer to be separate but were thrown into the new state of Iraq, a new word for the region that meant "well-rooted country," a designation

deep with irony. Local observers were horrified. An American missionary noted, "You are flying in the face of four millennia of history." The British civil commissioner in Baghdad, Captain Arnold Wilson, warned that it was a recipe for disaster because the enduring Shia-Sunni conflict would result in "the antithesis of democratic government." But since Churchill was not the least bit interested in democratic government anyway, it was of little importance. The Kurds were lured into the new kingdom, rather than becoming part of Turkey, by promises of self-rule, not the first or last time such a promise from the West was instantly broken.

Abdullah had already assumed power in Transjordan, and Faisal was supposed to do so in Syria, but French hostility kept him out there. So he was more or less just handed the keys to the kingdom. In order to create borders that could be more easily protected for the two new kingdoms, the conference blithely gave a large portion of what should have been Saudi Arabia—west of the Euphrates—to Iraq. In return, Ibn Saud was given control of most of the historic Kuwaiti kingdom, all but cutting off Iraq from wide access to the Persian Gulf.

The consequences are all too apparent today. Rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iraq remains. Three times Iraq has laid claim to Kuwait and been thrown back, most recently precipitating the First Gulf War. The total lack of interest in laying down sensible borders for the country resulted in what was at the time predicted—never-ending rivalry between the Shiites and the Sunni. This was complicated by the uncomfortable and unwanted presence of the Kurds, the imposition of someone who was considered an outsider as king; and the lack of interest on behalf of the British in imposing anything other than a sphere of influence or proper governmental systems to replace the Ottomans. This resulted in internal catastrophe and the endless succession of coups that led to the coming to power of Saddam Hussein.

The chances for democracy emanating from this fractured series of decisions was—and maybe is—ever remote while the borders of Iraq remain so artificial and internally challenged. But the legacy next door, in Iran, turned out slightly differently. Despite the best efforts of the British, within 30 years the Iranians had managed to institute a democratically elected government, a beacon for Western progress in the region, and a harbinger of promise for the future. Well, not to worry—the Americans soon put an end to that, as we shall see.

SADDAM HUSSEIN WAS FAR  
FROM THE FIRST TO USE  
CHEMICAL WEAPONS  
AGAINST THE KURDS. POISON  
GAS WAS REGULARLY USED  
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MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

# STALIN AND THE GREAT PURGE

(1936–1938)

**Main Culprit:** Joseph Stalin (1879–1953)

**Damage Done:** Destruction of the whole elite of the army, as well as millions of Russians

**Why:** The paranoia of the all-powerful at full throttle

*These scenes of terror and slaughter were not what they had looked forward to that night when old Major first stirred them to rebellion. If she herself had had any picture of the future, it had been of a society of animals set free from hunger and the whip, all equal, each according to his own capacity...instead—she did not know why—they had come to a time when no one dared speak his mind, when fierce, growling dogs roamed everywhere, and then you had to watch your comrades torn to pieces after confessing to shocking crimes.*

—George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

*With the eyes of Yezhov—the eyes of the people.  
Yezhov is on the watch for all poisonous snakes  
And he smoked out vermin from den and lair.  
He annihilated all types of scorpions.  
With hands of Yezhov—the hands of the people.  
And the Order of Lenin, burning flame,  
Was given to you, faithful Stalinist People's Commissar,  
You—a sword, unsheathed, calm and stern...  
You—a bullet for all scorpions and snakes,  
You—eyes of the country, clearer than a diamond.*

*Gray chronicler, witness of an era...  
The million-voiced resounding word  
Will fly from the people to the fighter Yezhov:  
Thank you, Yezhov, that, raising the alarm,  
You stood on guard for the country and the leader!*

—Dzhambul, Bard of Kazakhstan



History is full of purges, ethnic cleansing, forced deportations, and great evils committed on a nation's own subjects by rulers of all ages, castes, beliefs, and races. Improvements in technology and communication over the centuries have only seemed to make the process of slaughter more intense and, in the end, more public, but no matter how fierce the barbarity of those who have gone before, each genocide is rapidly pursued by one just as bad right behind it. The reasoning behind these cleansings is frequently warped and always evil, but not normally idiotic as such. There is usually, for the perpetrators, some genuine sense of injustice or fear that warps itself into the need to utterly destroy their own subjects or neighbors. Even the horrors of the Holocaust have done nothing to stop others from pursuing similar paths—Rwanda, Cambodia, even the descent of supposedly civilized Europe back into the medieval Dark Ages in the Balkans within the last 15 years, stand as testimony to this.



JOSEPH STALIN

Not surprisingly, Hitler and Stalin, the two worst tyrants of the twentieth century, stand head and shoulders above the others. Interestingly, both of their worst excesses were at best disbelieved, at worst deliberately ignored, by those in other countries whose vested political interests deemed it better to be looking in another direction. Hitler's crimes are now well known, the numbers and extent documented by dint of German efficiency, even in mass extermination. The untold millions who died as a direct result of Stalin's tyranny are even to this day highly debated. Hitler had a point to prove, no matter how evil, and some sort of plan in place. Stalin's terror in retrospect was scattered, insane, and in one specific aspect, utterly idiotic, with severe consequences not only for those unfortunate victims but for world affairs in general. Leaving aside sheer insanity, it was essentially paranoia and fear that led Stalin not only to dispose of many millions of his own people, all of those who helped him win the Revolution, but also on an unprecedented level to wipe out the upper echelons of his own armed forces. The purge of the Red Army left the Russians apparently unprepared to defend their own territory and prompted Hitler to think he could outwit Napoleon and invade Russia. The disaster of Operation Barbarossa was no thanks to Stalin's idiocy in destroying his own generals.

**UNCLE JOE'S  
SECRET**



The Red Army emerged as an organized form of the Red Guards, armed groups of workers who were the troops at the forefront of the Russian Revolution and the ensuing civil war. Originally, the army was thought to symbolize too much governmental power, but of course, as in all revolutions, the moment an oppressed group seizes power from an evil government, it rapidly acquires the means, techniques, and terminology of the old regime. The Red Guards were not organized enough to take on the resistance of the White Army, and under Leon Trotsky—the People’s commissar for war—they were rapidly organized into what became known as the Red Army, formally coming into being on February 23, 1918, known and celebrated thenceforth as Red Army Day (later, Defenders of the Motherland Day). From the beginning there was fear about setting up a professional military cadre that might challenge or question the Revolution. Each army unit had a political commissar working alongside the unit commander. Many of the units were essentially formed and run by prerevolutionary czarist officers in the early years, so to some degree caution may have been justified. A professional office corps was seen as part of the “heritage of czarism.” By 1935 though, with the active cooperation of German experts, this decision was reversed and a general staff came into being. The situation in Europe and its increasing volatility made the haphazard nature of the Red Army a little too weak for comfort.

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TERMINOLOGY OF  
THE OLD REGIME.

This professionalization of the army coincided uneasily with the height of the power of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, responsible among other things for internal security and the *gulag* forced labor camps. For years, hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens had been deported to far reaches of the Soviet Union, ostensibly for political disobedience or what was known as “wrecking,” a loose term for failing to meet economic targets among other things, which could be applied to almost anybody at will. Article 58 of 1927 deemed punishable any action that could be seen as making one an “enemy of the workers”—not just Soviet workers but the international solidarity of workers. There was also massive relocation on ethnic lines of populations, resulting in millions of deaths on forced marches and inhumane conditions. But by the mid-1930s, the power of the NKVD reached new heights under Nikolai Yezhov, and a reign of terror began, reaching deep into Soviet society but more crucially into the higher echelons of the party itself. Yezhov

typified the new Soviet regime in many ways. A tailor's assistant in St. Petersburg, he joined the Bolsheviks at Vitebsk (see *Napoleon*) in May 1917. He worked his way through the bureaucratic ranks, holding positions such as Deputy People's Commissar for Agriculture and acting head of the accounting and distribution department for the Communist party. He rose to secretary for the Central Committee in 1934, and in 1935 wrote a paper for Stalin arguing that political opposition must inevitably lead to violence and terrorism and must ruthlessly be purged. This approach appealed to Stalin's increasing concern about his own authority, the continuing thorn in his side of the other founders of the Revolution, and Yezhov. In 1936 he became People's Commissar for Internal Affairs (head of the NKVD); to the surprise of few, his predecessor was found guilty of treason at one of the famous show trials in 1938 and shot. A glorious revolutionary history was invented for Yezhov, the savior of Kazakhstan during the Civil War, but it is far from clear that he ever actually went there. And at 5'1" on a good day, he was no heroic revolutionary soldier.

It did not take long for the new professional Red Army to fall afoul of what became known as Yezhovschina. They were far from alone; it is thought that at least half of the entire leadership of the country, the political and military establishment at all levels, were killed during the next two years. The infamous Order No. 00486 of August 15, 1937, extended automatically guilty verdicts against anyone and to their wives and children over 15 who were deemed "socially dangerous." There was, in particular, deep suspicion of anyone negotiating or influenced by outside powers. Since the new corps of the Red Army were German-trained, that essentially included all of them. It was this kind of idiocy—creating a corps with German assistance to train the army against the growing German threat, then killing them for consorting with Germans—that passed beyond even the normal barbarism of internal security forces. The purge was supported by fabricated evidence that German counterintelligence had introduced through an intermediary, President Bene of Czechoslovakia. This forged evidence purported to show correspondence between Marshal Tukhachevsky and members of the German high command. Tukhachevsky had in fact just returned to Russia from leading a delegation to London for the funeral of King

## **PURGING THE GERMAN ELEMENT**

George V, and visiting also France and Germany, when he was recalled to Moscow, arrested, and executed two days later. He was widely credited for the modernization of the army, and had been one of the chief architects of the victories against the White Army and the Russian army in 1920–1921—having at the same time a furious disagreement with Stalin over Poland. The purge of the army removed 3 of 5 marshals, 13 of 15 army generals, 8 of 9 admirals (the purge fell heavily on the navy, which was suspected of exploiting its opportunity for foreign contacts), 50 of 57 army corps generals, 154 out of 186 division generals, 16 of 16 army commissars, and 25 of 28 army corps commissars.

**HITLER'S FOLLY** It seems likely that Hitler was, in the end, persuaded that this self-destruction of the Soviet army gave him an opportunity too good to miss. Indeed, so demoralized and leaderless was the Red Army that Hitler's early gains were enormous; the Soviet air force barely left the ground and hundreds of thousands of the initial 1.5 million soldiers were rapidly surrounded and killed. Only by declaring a Great Patriotic War, abandoning for the moment the tenets of class struggle and extolling defense of the Motherland was Stalin able to mobilize an army of 15 to 20 million to defeat the Germans, and perhaps lose 7 to 10 million of those in the process. Yezhov, the architect of the stupidity, a bureaucrat with power gone to his head willing to lap up his distortions, lies, and self-destruction, was long dead, a victim of false accusations betrayed by his own successor, Beria. Famously, well before the advent of computer technology, he was "disappeared" from a photo of him walking with Stalin. That the damage he inflicted on his own cause was not fatal to the Revolution was no credit to Stalin or to anything other than the sheer volume of the Russian population and their willingness to die for their country.

# SHENTON THOMAS'S LITTLE MEN AND THE FALL OF SINGAPORE

December 8, 1941–February 15, 1942

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Sir Shenton Thomas (1879–1962)

**Damage Done:** The fall of the jewel of the British Empire

**Why:** Main fortifications facing the wrong way

*Well I suppose you'll shove the little men off.*

—Sir Shenton Thomas, December 8, 1941

Everyone remembers December 7, 1941, the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and precipitated the American entry into World War II. The very next day, Japanese forces landed on the east coast of South Thailand and North Malaya, embarking on an invasion that no one, especially those about to be invaded, had ever imagined possible in their war planning. The cornerstone of the British Empire in Southeast Asia, one of the jewels of the whole empire, would fall to a small Japanese expeditionary force, undermanned, underfed, and traveling mostly by bicycle, 55 days later. A combination of pride and sloth, contempt for an as yet misunderstood enemy, and total lack of foresight take the fall of Singapore outside the realm of normal military blunders into the pages of the *Encyclopedia Idiotica*.

In truth, there is plenty of blame to go round. Many blame Winston Churchill and London's generals and colonial leaders. Mostly it was Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, who was in charge of Allied forces in Malaya. But Percival didn't arrive until 1941, and while he made tactical errors along the way, given the hand he had to play, nothing could probably have stopped the advance. No, partly as the Crown's representative in Singapore since 1934, and partly on behalf of the many men at the end of the colonial era who had no business running anything, the responsibility belongs to Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Malay States from 1934 to 1942, Sir Shenton Thomas.

**FROM THE  
CLASSROOM TO  
THE WAR ROOM**

He had no military experience; his position as commander-in-chief was just a title. Shenton Thomas was educated at St. John's at Leatherhead in England, which specialized in educating the clergy. His father was a vicar. He graduated from Queens' College, Cambridge, and was a teacher for seven years at Aysgarth Preparatory School in Yorkshire. He joined the Colonial Service in 1909, serving in Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, and the Gold Coast before becoming governor of Nyasaland in 1929. He returned to the Gold Coast in 1932 as governor until 1934 when he was appointed governor and commander-in-chief of Malaya. A.H. Dickinson, inspector-general of police in Singapore and close friend of Shenton Thomas, said of him that he would have made a first-class headmaster. After the fall, a hastily commissioned report on the fiasco was assembled by General Wavell and issued out of New Delhi on May 30, 1942. Of Shenton Thomas, it said:



The name of Sir Shenton Thomas will go down to history as the most abused Englishman and the Malayan Civil Service will be named as one of the most incompetent institutions which has ever existed. Most civilians resent what they regard as gross and calculated deception on the part of Sir Shenton Thomas in that he repeated, both in public announcements and privately, assurances that there was no need to think of evacuation as Singapore would not fall.

At the beginning of 1941 no one in London was paying much heed to the Asian situation. The Japanese had entered the war but essentially were preoccupied in Manchuria and Indo-China and everyone expected any ongoing hostilities to be with the Russians. The Americans were concerned but expected to be able to repel the Japanese by economic blockade. The situation in Europe was much more serious; the Germans had overrun almost all of the continent. The British had evacuated from Dunkirk and, despite winning the Battle of Britain, had very little prospect of taking back any of the losses. Australian troops, far from protecting Southeast Asia, had been summoned to defend North Africa. But the collapse of Europe had left the rich islands of the French and Dutch colonies more or less wide open to invasion. In October 1941 General Hideki Tojo, an aggressive expansionist, became prime minister of Japan and embarked on a rapid war plan to take the whole region and destroy American naval power. Everyone in Europe was too preoccupied with Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet Union to notice much of this. Anyway, Singapore was impregnable to the only possible attack on the island, from the sea. As unprepared as the Americans were for Pearl Harbor, the residents and generals sipping gin in Raffles Hotel were equally unaware and unprepared for the Japanese.



SHENTON THOMAS

AS UNPREPARED AS THE  
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The island of Singapore lies at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. When Sir Stamford Raffles landed there in 1819, it was an almost uninhabited island, mostly jungle. Singapura—Lion City—had supposedly been named by a Sumatran prince who landed there in the thirteenth century and saw what was probably a tiger. It had been a minor trading post for various empires over the following centuries. The British, however, had seen the Straits of Malacca as a major sea route early in

the eighteenth century—on the trade route from China through to India—and Raffles, on behalf of the British East India Company, had been given a free hand to find and establish bases for British imperial expansion. Singapore was set up as a tariff-free port and rapidly became both a leading British colony and an important trading center in its own right. Indeed, as an independent country, it has made its mark in the world in much the same way centuries later. Singapore was ruled as part of the Straits settlements, along with Malaya, rich in tin and rubber. British colonial rule, immortalized in the writings of Somerset Maugham and epitomized by the luxury of the hotel named for Raffles, was as secure as any in the world. The population was, as it remains, an eclectic mix of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, ruled over by a reasonably benign series of second sons of wealthy vicars and third-rate generals.

LARGE GUNS WERE PLACED  
AROUND THE NAVAL BASE TO  
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WERE STATIC AND COULD  
NOT BE TURNED.

In 1921 the Committee of Imperial Defense recommended that a major British naval base be built in Singapore. It was finished in 1938, even though Japan had left the League of Nations in 1933 and was quite clearly a military threat in the region. It had been determined that the only threat to the island came from the sea. Five hundred miles (310 km) of dense Malayan jungle lay to the north, over a causeway, and no possible threat could come from there. Large guns were placed around the naval base to fire on enemy ships. They were static and could not be turned. Although blame was later placed squarely on the hapless General Percival in his attempts to defend Singapore, he really had no hope, with his only strong remaining defensive artillery permanently pointed the wrong way.

The essential idea was that Fortress Singapore could hold out for a “period before relief” when land forces could be sent down from India, in the unlikely event of attack. Malaya was left unprotected—a country, which in 1939 was producing 40 percent of the world’s rubber and 60 percent of the world’s tin—with 1,000 miles (620 km) of coastline. Belatedly, in August 1937, according to the memorandum by Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall, who had been sent to Singapore in 1941, the British government decided to build proper air-bases and send warships to defend Malaya. But there was no coordination among the army, navy, and air force. Pownall warned, “It was obviously not only wasteful but dangerous to make new airfields unless

there was a reasonable certainty of a strong and efficient Air Force to use them and to cooperate in the defense as a whole." In August 1940 Pownall found 84 aircraft in Malaya; by December 7, 1941, despite an assurance of 582 aircraft, there were only 158, a fourth of them obsolete. The fleet that was supposed to provide the "relief" had mostly been recalled to the Mediterranean. Still, even Pownall did not foresee the chance of attack from the north, through the jungle. And Churchill wasn't interested. He wrote: "The political situation in the Far East does not seem to require, and the strength of the air force by no means permits, the maintenance of such large forces in the Far East at this time." On November 6 all Japanese civilians were evacuated from Singapore. Reports throughout November from British Intelligence of Japanese troop movements were largely ignored. Finally, on December 2, two British warships, the new battleship *Prince of Wales*, and the *Repulse*, arrived in Singapore Harbor.

Recent and still unconfirmed findings suggest that something rather more sinister than ignorance was at work. Top-secret War Cabinet memoranda from 1940, apparently incorporating some of Shenton Thomas's more gloomy predictions from a prewar visit, were apparently en route — via the real slow boat to China — when they were intercepted by Japanese agents. It is possible therefore that the London government was well aware of the shortfall in Singapore's defenses, and that the Japanese knew it too. Either way, Shenton Thomas's continually fatuous remarks to the citizens of Singapore that it was impregnable, coupled with his total failure to erect even the most rudimentary fortifications, look even more idiotic in the light of what would appear to be a much more knowing view of the situation.

## IGNORANCE AND MORE

On December 5, interestingly for Americans two full days before Pearl Harbor, Thomas met with Air Chief Brooke-Popham to discuss clear indications that an invasion was about to be mounted. There was a defense plan for Malaya of a sort, Operation Matador, hastily worked out over the previous few months by Pownall. They decided it would be wrong to proceed, as, it might worry the citizens too much.

Within three days of Pearl Harbor, the whole defense plan, if it could be called one, was in ruins. The Japanese Zero fighters attacked the British air bases in Singapore the same day as Pearl Harbor and wiped



out 90 percent of the aircraft. No air raid sirens went off in the city and the lights remained helpfully on all night long. When the Japanese army landed, Sir Shenton Thomas said to the army commanders, "Well I suppose you'll shove the little men off." The British army had a fleet of World War I Rolls-Royce armored cars against lightweight Japanese tanks. *The Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* sailed on December 8 to take on the invading force, but without air support. Both ships were sunk two days later. Churchill reported, "I put the telephone down. I was thankful to be alone. In all the war I never received a more direct shock."

Within two days the one and only decisive land battle of the campaign had been lost decisively by the British, but still there was certainty that the Japanese could never make it through the jungle into Singapore and still nothing was really done to shore up the defenses. Churchill commanded, "There must be no thought of sparing the troops or population; commanders and senior offices should die with their troops. The honor of the British Empire and the British army is at stake." As it turned out, the Japanese army had no intention of sparing anyone. Japanese soldiers were instructed, "When you encounter the enemy after landing, think of yourself as an avenger coming face to face at last with your father's murderer. Here is a man whose death will lighten your heart." Part of the speed of the invasion force was the directive that any prisoner or wounded should be immediately killed—nothing should slow down the advance. On December 30, Governor Thomas had the sharp idea of asking the Chinese population to help build some defenses around the city perimeter. There were none. He was still insisting that all was well, even though the extent to which he was ignorant of events right up to the surrender was shown when G. Weisberg, the prewar colonial treasurer dropped in and asked how the war was going. Shenton-Thomas replied, "Honestly, Weisie, I don't know. They tell me nothing, although I am a member of the War Council."

WHEN THE JAPANESE ARMY  
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By the end of the following month, January 1942, the Japanese were at the causeway linking Singapore with Malaya. The last remaining British soldiers retreated over the causeway, which was blown up. Much is made of Percival's mistakes, not the least that in fact he had three times the army of the Japanese, part of whose quest for speed lay in their knowledge that they had only days of food supplies left. But

without air power, sea power, or crucially, any artillery, there was nothing he could do to stop the Japanese from crossing into Singapore. The Japanese forces were battle-hardened, experienced from years of fighting in Manchuria, and well used to jungle warfare, invasions, and speedy movement. Percival had little of help to say to the population: "Our task is to hold this fortress until help can come, as assuredly it will come, this we are determined to do." At the same time, the brand new and unused £60 million naval base was abandoned without a fight. The forces that were in Singapore had never been in combat and were psychologically in shock. Everyone knew no help was coming. The last boatload of evacuated civilians never made it out of Singapore Harbor.

The island was lost within six days. The Japanese army wiped out everything in sight. Everyone in the Alexandra Hospital—patients, nurses, and doctors—was massacred. On February 15 Percival surrendered unconditionally.

Over 100,000 men were taken prisoner, along with the entire British civilian population. Many of the military prisoners, perhaps 9,000, died on the forced construction of the Burma-Thailand railroad. The Chinese civilian population of Singapore, though, were even less fortunate. Up to 50,000 of them were slaughtered. British power suffered a blow from which it never recovered. It was the Americans who finally turned the tide of the war at the Battle of Midway and defeated Japan. Both symbolically and strategically, the whole hemisphere slipped from British control the day the guns couldn't turn.

## A HEAVY TOLL

On September 5, 1945, when the Japanese surrendered at City Hall to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the prisoners in Sime Road Camp (who included this author's father, grandmother, and aunt) held their own ceremony. At the place of honor by the flagstaff was Lady Daisy Thomas, the wife of the governor, who had been interned there. When the Union Jack was hoisted up the camp flagpole, the freed prisoners cheered three times for King George V and three times for Lady Thomas. In the face of the stupidity of their leaders, the prisoners kept their Englishness throughout.



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## SUHRAWARDY, PARTITION, AND THE BENGAL RICE FAMINE

October 1942–October 1943

**Main Culprit:** Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892–1963)

**Damage Done:** 4–5 million dead of famine during good growing weather

**Why:** Deliberate hoarding of crops to avoid them getting into the hands of an enemy that never came

*Bengal famine was one of the greatest disasters that has befallen any people under British rule and damage to our reputation here both among Indians and foreigners in India is incalculable.*

—Field-Marshal Lord Wavell

There have been many famines throughout history, not least in India. A disastrous famine in the eighteenth century killed as many as 10 million. A catastrophe not far short of that befell India during World War II, killing maybe four to five million. Initially it was just considered to be, well, one of those famines. But later research has established that it was far different, one of the most bitterly debated yet at the same time least-known disasters in modern history, with a casualty rate of almost 60 percent of those who died in the Holocaust at the same time, yet in a country almost entirely untouched by the ravages of the war in terms of fighting. Its aftermath led to some extraordinary developments, scholarly, political, and economic. As with any disaster of this magnitude, there are complex reasons for its coming about, but we can certainly identify greed. It is puzzling in that it defies belief that those who created the problem appeared oblivious to its unfolding before them and then were incapable of stopping it. Many have been blamed for this famine, but we can isolate at least one man as the cause, a man who rose later to substantial political power and remains much revered—by some—as a founder of his nation, though his idiotic actions in 1943 would in fact seem to have killed many of his would-be countrymen before his nation even was born.

Bengal under the British Empire included what is now North India and Bangladesh, or what was to become East Pakistan at Partition in 1947. Its history dates back many thousands of years and it had its own empire before the arrival of the Mughals and then the British, and a substantial culture. It stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas through to the populous Ganges delta. Calcutta, its main city, was to all intents and purposes the capital of British India, being the center of commercial trade for the British East India Company. In all, it is one of the most densely populated parts of the world. Dating back to the battle of Nabadwip in the thirteenth century, it has had both sizeable Hindu and Muslim populations and competing rulers. Bengal and Calcutta had for years been the intellectual and literary capital of India, and the birthplace of the nationalist movement in the twentieth century. In 1906 the Muslim League was born in Dhaka and briefly and disastrously, East and West Bengal was partitioned. The capital of



HUSEYN  
SHAHEED  
SUHRAWARDY

British India moved to Delhi after the subsequent riots. Gandhi's peaceful campaigns of civil disobedience were born in Calcutta, and the fight for independence was given strength by the advent of the war; one Indian leader even joined with the Japanese and set up a provisional government in exile to encourage Indians to fight against the Allies. Calcutta in 1946 was the scene of terrible riots as the full force of independence and partition split Bengal in two. By then, though, the province had suffered tremendously from the Bengal Famine.

**A FADING EMPIRE** The roots of this serious disaster can no doubt be traced to the worsening turn in the war situation. Singapore had fallen early in 1942, ending British dominance in Southeast Asia and seriously diminishing the aura of power that the British Empire possessed, including its ability to protect its dominions, including the jewel in the crown.

As it was, there had been rising demands for independence and tensions between nationalists and the imperial forces, as well as a growing push by the Muslim minority for self-rule in certain provinces, and unrest among the Hindu population. The capture of Burma by the Japanese in early 1942 had led to the sudden cessation of imports of much-needed rice into the Bengal region. At the same time, in a far more sinister development, the British decided to institute a policy of "denial" within the area of India—Bengal again—deemed to be most vulnerable to Japanese invasion. This included actually destroying or physically removing products deemed essential to an invading force, including foodstuffs. Rice, in particular, was targeted, and supplies were diverted to the major city of Calcutta, which was deemed more important and more defensible, leaving many of the rural provinces short of rice.

For some years afterward, it was claimed that a drought led to the famine. This was fundamentally disproved by the Indian economist Amartya Sen, who showed that the rainfall figures were at the least normal, if not above normal, during 1942–1943. He used this to develop a complex economic theory of scarce resources and their distribution according to social standing in the community. There was no shortage of rice. This theory in part earned him a Nobel Prize for Economics. However, later research has pointed out that there was a dip in rice production, partly because of the higher rainfall noted by

Sen and a serious outbreak of the fungus *Helminthosporium oryzae*, which causes brown spots in rice and could conceivably have ruined 90 percent of the crop. Other theories abound. The hostility between Hindu and Muslim still pervades heated discussion about the famine to this day on Internet exchanges.

There is no doubt that unusual natural problems and the British denial policy played their part in the famine. But while hindsight is 20:20, it often is the case that the contemporary view of events is closest to the real truth than subsequent political or religious explanations with an ax to grind. And locals seemed in no doubt about whom to blame for allowing four million people to die while food was available. The Calcutta newspaper *The Statesman* and other local dispatches blamed the local provincial government and its leader, H. S. Suhrawardy, a controversial figure at the time and even more so later in his life, when he became the fifth prime minister of the new country of Pakistan.

Once the 1937 elections were over, Suhrawardy became minister for labor and by 1943 was minister for civil supplies. He formed the only Muslim League Government on the subcontinent. In 1949 he founded the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, and in 1953, the United Front in Dhaka, which captured the 1954 general elections. The same year he joined Muhammad Ali Bogra's ministry as law minister. However, with the change of government in 1955, Suhrawardy became leader of the opposition. H. S. Suhrawardy rose to become the fifth prime minister of Pakistan on September 12, 1956. During his tenure, he tried to remove economic disparity between the two wings. In October 1957, Suhrawardy resigned from his premiership due to the president's refusal to convene a meeting of Parliament for seeking a vote of confidence. A chronic heart patient, he died on December 5, 1963.

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Most accounts agree that his policies led to severe hoarding of rice supplies, and heavy profiteering by some of his political allies. Much less than Sen's market forces, it was deliberate manipulation of the war situation and the food supplies for personal—and perhaps political—gain that led to the situation getting out of hand. Rice prices doubled every week or so and soon rose way beyond the ability of the average citizen to buy. The famine, which affected the rural areas, swept out of control as hundreds of thousands descended on Calcutta, hearing that food was



available. M. H. Ispahani, a friend of Suhrawardy and a leading Calcutta-based Muslim business magnate, was appointed the sole procuring agent. The Famine Enquiry Commission later noted: "Government control over purchase made by this (Ispahani) firm was inadequate and undue profits were made by this firm." In the food debate in the Bengal Assembly, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee identified Ispahani and company as the main culprit. Dr. Mukherjee also spoke against the preferential treatment to Calcutta and its urban hinterland. In his opinion, "the activities of the government seem to suggest that whatever food grains may be available will be kept in the greater Calcutta area and the rest of the province will be left to its own tragic fate." It later turned out that Ispahani was a major financial backer of Jinnah's Muslim League, leading to at least the suggestion that there was a political edge to all this. The fact that the majority of the dead were Muslims rather than Hindus makes the tale even more shocking.

#### **CATASTROPHE CONDEMNED**

"This sickening catastrophe is man-made. So far as we are aware, all of India's previous famines originated primarily from calamities of Nature. But this one is accounted for by no climatic failure; rainfall has been generally plentiful. What the province's state would now be had drought been added to governmental bungling is an appalling thought..." *The Statesman* declared. British Field Marshal Wavell, appointed in 1943, was appalled when he realized what had happened. He wrote to Churchill: "Bengal famine was one of the greatest disasters that has befallen any people under British rule and damage to our reputation here both among Indians and foreigners in India is incalculable." But even after his intervention, Suhrawardy was reluctant to open up supplies or use anything other than distribution networks controlled by the government. Finally, a combination of British government pressure and local humanitarian demands got the situation under control but not before between two and four million Indians had perished unnecessarily.



# WAKEFIELD'S NUTS

1949–1950

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** John Wakefield

**Damage Done:** \$100 million worth of a cash-strapped post-war Britain's money and a mockery to later aid efforts

**Why:** Massive aid effort to grow peanuts where peanuts can't grow

*On the Groundnut Scheme, I think they could have gone ahead with many other schemes of that nature—both from the point of view of trying to assist the countries in Africa as well as to help the food policy here. Because that scheme failed they rather got cold feet, but I think that was a pity.*

—Michael Foot, Former Leader of the Labor Party, 2002



PEANUTS

THEY SPENT MILLIONS OF  
DOLLARS TRYING TO GROW A  
CROP ON LAND WHERE IT  
COULDN'T ACTUALLY GROW.

At the end of World War II perhaps the only true Socialist government in British history was elected, under Clement Attlee as prime minister. The British Empire was lost for good and the process of decolonization had begun in earnest. At the same time, food rationing prevailed in Britain and many basic goods were in short supply. Unlike some other colonial powers, many in the British government were determined to try to help their former colonies and help establish them as independent nations with some chance of survival. They did not often succeed, as the history of Africa attests, but with a genuine desire for charity, they often invested money in schemes. Unfortunately, the utter ignorance of the officials who put together the plan to grow groundnuts—peanuts—in Tanganyika, now Tanzania, not only cost a great deal of money but to some degree put an end to the whole concept of promoting self-sufficiency in developing decolonized countries. The basic problem—the word “basic” is used advisedly—was that they initially spent half a million pounds—millions of dollars in today’s currency—trying to grow a crop on land where it couldn’t actually grow.

The original proposal came from the managing director of the United Africa Company, Frank Samuel. He was charged with finding vegetable oil for Unilever’s soap and margarine. The oil was in short supply and there was significant rationing of these products in the U.K., which was politically uncomfortable for the government. Samuel realized that a project of the scale he was thinking of could be handled only by a government, so he presented a five-year plan to the new Labor government to clear 20,000 acres for a test project. A government study was commissioned and former Director of Agriculture John Wakefield was put in charge of the study.

Wakefield immediately saw the huge potential in Samuel’s plan, less to bring profit to Unilever, or even soap, to the by-then long unwashed British public, but as a way to solve major economic problems in African nations, including famine and problems of cultivation of the land. He was concerned that solutions had to be found to prevent major crises in the future as the countries became independent. African farmers could not just be told about modern agricultural techniques; they

had to see them in a practical demonstration of their superiority, and show how marginal land could be bought into use by promoting new crops. He was, in short, proposing the peanut plan as the base for a massive agricultural revolution. And given what happened in Africa over the subsequent 50 years, and the number of famines and lives lost in those years, the disaster that overwhelmed the plan may indeed have caused a loss higher than purely financial.

The importance of the plan for Wakefield overwhelmed his report. The land he chose, the Kongwa region in the Central Highlands, had major problems, not the least being that it was on the borderline of adequate rainfall. Massive clearing of the native brush was needed; it was assumed in the report that the government could both find and pay for the major machinery to clear the land. The great explorer Henry Morton Stanley—the one who found Dr. Livingstone—called this scrub “an interminable jungle of thornbushes.” It was almost impenetrable, even for animals, except snakes. The southern region was in fact much more suitable land but had no port or rail connection, whereas Kongwa could be reached relatively easily from Dar-es-Salaam, the capital. Wakefield, in his enthusiasm to do good, ignored the obstacles and put through a positive report, which the government, equally enthusiastic, rapidly put into effect. By the time Wakefield had finished, Samuel’s plan for 20,000 acres had become 3.25 million acres.

They hit trouble almost immediately. The scrubland turned out to hide hordes of very unpleasant bees. Ship anchor chains were needed to link bulldozers together to clear the trees, then the roots turned out to be almost impossible to get out of the ground. Within the first hours, they destroyed the machinery that had been sent over. Finally, a small fraction of the land planned for, slightly less than half what Samuel had originally suggested, 10,000 acres, was successfully cleared and the crop planted. Unfortunately, the soil, though fertile, was rock hard underneath and although the peanut plants grew above the ground just fine, the actual nut grows underground and turned out to be virtually impossible to harvest. The entire project had failed utterly to consider the fact that the land could not actually sustain the crop. No matter how hard they worked, how much money they put into it, how badly the operation might have been run—and much blame was showered on

## HOSTILE TERRITORY

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NOT ONE NUT IN ANY FORM  
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all of those culprits—nothing could overcome the essential problem of trying to force the land to grow a crop that was entirely unsuited for it. Worse still, peanuts are grown successfully in other regions of Africa—just not there. Wakefield was so overcome with the importance of what he was trying to do, and had such faith in the burgeoning technologies of the postwar world, that he assumed all obstacles could be overcome for the greater good. It was touching in its faith but utterly disastrous in its execution.

Not one nut in any form ever reached the British marketplace. Four thousand tons of peanuts had been purchased in 1947 to produce seed. By 1949 only half that amount had been harvested. A staggering total of £49 million, then worth well in excess of \$100 million and in today's terms massively more, was spent to produce half of what had been purchased as seed. By 1950, in an attempt to salvage something from the land, sunflowers were planted. The next year saw a total rain failure and even that crop failed. The plan was officially abandoned.

## A GOVERNMENT PLOT

To this day, economists argue about what went wrong with the peanut plan. It is offered as proof that private companies, not governments, should tackle big ventures of this sort. Bureaucrats were blamed and blamed each other. But it did create a bigger impact in seriously undermining future plans that might have really made a difference in the region. Certainly, other plans followed, especially during the Cold War as the Americans and Soviets competed in the region, but their interest was always about political influence and not in helping subsistence agriculture. The unfortunate Tanzanians were subjected to the Canadian wheat plan of the 1970s—the Barbeig cattle herders were moved off thousands of acres they had tended for centuries for a large-scale effort to plant prairie wheat that proved slightly more successful than peanuts but less fruitful than the cattle herds that had been there in the first place. And Lake Victoria is still under threat after perch were put into adjacent ponds to encourage fish-farming, escaped into the main lake, and subsequently ate 180 of the 300 species that used to live there.

More significantly, the failure of the peanut plan has been used to argue against intervening in the affairs of developing nations and as proof of the foolishness of foreign aid plans. In early 2005 peanuts again are in the news as the Senegalese government is under pressure from the

International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to privatize the peanut industry, the second biggest export of the country, in exchange for relief from debt. Their attempt to do so only a few years ago disastrously left millions of peanut farmers and their dependents on the brink of starvation, and they are reluctant to take the route once more, but have little choice. The grand charitable plans of the John Wakefields have been replaced by a far different way of extracting money for nuts. As Michael Foot, leader of the Labor party and a major figure in British and world politics for more than 40 years, notes in the epigraph, the tragic legacy of the failure of the peanut plan was profound indeed. The litany of debt, disaster, war, and famine in Africa over the last 50 years could perhaps have looked different if the grand scheme envisaged by John Wakefield had actually come off. But he allowed his enthusiasm to overcome his own good judgment and disaster resulted.



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## MOHAMMED MOSSADEGH, TIME'S MAN OF THE YEAR, AND DEMOCRACY IN IRAN

1951–August 21, 1953

**Main Culprit:** Allen Welch Dulles (1893–1969)

**Damage Done:** A laughingstock made of the concept of democracy in the Middle East

**Why:** British and CIA meddling

*Nat that he was the best ar the worst ar the strongest, but because his rapid advance from obscurity was attended by the greatest stir. The stir was not only on the surface of events: in his strange way, this strange old man represented one of the most profound problems of his time. Around this dizzy old wizard swirled a crisis of human destiny... There were millions inside and outside of Iran whom Mossadegh symbolized and spoke for, and whose fanatical state of mind he had helped to create. They would rather see their own nations fall apart than continue their present relations with the West. ... Mossadegh does not promise his country a way out of this nearly hopeless situation. He would rather see the ruin of Iran than give in to the British, who, in his opinion, corrupted and exploited his country. He is not in any sense pro-Russian, but he intends to stick to his policies even though he knows they might lead to control of Iran by the Kremlin. ... The fact that Iranians accept Mossadegh's suicidal policy is a measure of the hatred of the West—and especially the hatred of Britain—in the Near and Middle East.*

—*Time* magazine, “Man of The Year,” 1951

*So this is how we will get rid of the madman Mossadegh in Iran.*

—U.S. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, 1953

*The United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh. The Eisenhower administration believed its actions were justified for strategic reasons. But the coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development and it is easy to see why so many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affair.*

—U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright, March 16, 2000

Although oil played only a peripheral part in the events surrounding the creation of Iraq, it had become by World War II highly significant. The first war had shown the world the importance of oil reserves to keep a fighting machine going long enough to win the type of war that was being fought. Indeed, it was Germany's inability to control the flow of raw materials that was highly significant in its eventual defeat. As oil reserves began to appear in the Middle East, both American commercial and political interests began to bring them into conflict with their British allies. The Americans had been happy to allow the British control over the region for a while, but as domestic oil reserves, which had been 70 percent of global oil production in 1914, began to dwindle, and oil started to gush from the desert, the situation changed, until today, when 67 percent of global oil reserves are in the Gulf region. American oil companies made a huge deal with Ibn Saud, cementing his dynasty in power until this day and also involving the United States inextricably in the affairs of the region, and inextricably, with one of the most despotic rulers in the world. Arrangements were made, cleverly, with the Emir of Bahrain before oil was actually discovered. Soon the British found themselves outflanked in many parts of a region they considered their domain but hadn't bothered to secure.

World War II brought even more significant changes. The Cold War saw both geopolitical threats to the stability of the region, and the disappearance of many rich oil fields firmly behind the Iron Curtain. The British remained confident, though, of their influence, both in Iraq under the regime they had set up, and in Iran where a constitutional monarchy, with the Pahlavi family established as *shahs*, kept firm control over affairs, or firm enough. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, set up by treaty in 1919, was of extreme importance both to the Iranian economy and the British, though very much weighted toward British interests. In 1941 the British and Russians, now allies against Germany, moved into Iran to secure the oil fields in a joint operation. In 1943, indeed, the Iranian capital of Tehran was the seat for the first major conference between Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill to discuss tactics for the remainder of the war, and to offer Iran particular protection and to guarantee its independence.

The postwar situation did not work out as planned, however. Soviet troops refused to leave northern Iran without oil concessions. Iran

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suddenly became an important pawn in the Cold War, a buffer state between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf. And having gotten the Russians out of the country, there was increasing nationalist anger in Iran that they could get no better deal on their oil from the British government, which they felt was exploiting their oil resources.

## MAN OF THE HOUR

Onto this scene came Mohammed Mossadegh, a French-educated, Iranian politician who had been in and out of minor political offices and exile since 1914. He had been a strong opponent of the imposed oil deal in 1919, and consistently opposed the *shah's* acquiescence to the agreement. After the abdication of the first Pahlavi *shah* in 1941, and the succession of his son, Mossadegh was allowed again to run for Parliament and was elected easily. His opposition to banning foreign intervention in Iranian oil matters became very popular, and with an unlikely coalition of Socialists who sympathized with the Soviets and the radical Muslim *ayatollahs*, he was elected prime minister in March 1951. He immediately tried, and failed, to renegotiate the oil royalty deals. Within months his National Front alliance had moved to nationalize Iranian oil and throw out foreign control from the oil fields and the Abadan refinery, the largest in the world. Although this was a unilateral and radical action, it was not necessarily illegal. Indeed, Mossadegh won the approval of the International Court in The Hague in June 1952, which ruled in favor of Iran. By this time his charm and idiosyncratic ways, which included turning up at Parliament in his bathrobe, had won him worldwide notice. He was *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1951.



ALLEN WELCH  
DULLES

The British, though, were not impressed. They immediately put into place a massive economic blockade on Iranian oil, backed by the British navy in force, effectively shutting down the economy. A substantial propaganda campaign was launched against him, focusing on his supposed ties with the Soviet Union. By the time of The Hague court decision, the British under Prime Minister—who else?—Winston Churchill had persuaded Allen Welch Dulles, director of the CIA to support them in a plot to overthrow Mossadegh who, just to be clear, was a democrati-

cally elected prime minister whose policies were uniformly popular within his own country.

Operation AJAX was mostly a CIA operation once the Americans had signed on to the plan. It was run by Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt. An Iranian general, Zahedi, was hand-picked to succeed to power in Iran after the coup. After several abortive attempts to displace Mossadegh, the prime minister demanded control over the military. The coup was moved forward, but still without success. On August 16 the *shah* unilaterally removed Mossadegh from office. Massive rioting broke out on the streets of Tehran when word got out. Within hours the *shah* was forced to flee to Italy. Statues of the *shah* and his father were torn down around Iran. Three days later General Zahedi mobilized tanks and charged through the streets to the prime minister's residence, plundered and burned it to the ground, arrested the prime minister, and the *shah* flew back to Iran and power — until the Americans withdrew support from him too, some 26 years later.

Mossadegh refused to engineer a rival coup or cause bloodshed and gave himself up, remaining under house arrest for the rest of his life, until his death in 1967.

In itself, the coup was not especially illogical; it may be emblematic of a number of similar covert CIA operations across the globe during the Cold War. But there were clearly strategic reasons, both political and economic, which strongly indicated that Mossadegh was a danger to Western interests. And the immediate aftermath was not that bloody, mostly through his refusal to allow it to be, and accepting his fate to avoid bloodshed. And in that Iranian oil continued to flow steadily into the West from that point on, including during the oil crisis of the early 1970s, no doubt many in the U.S. government considered the coup a success, and indeed the truth about the CIA involvement in the matter was successfully kept secret for many decades.

But from the vantage point of 50 years later, the consequences seem more dire and the coup more foolhardy than ever. Certainly, greed was involved, and the refusal to allow countries to exploit their own resources was a throwback to the old colonial days. Certainly, pride that an upstart politician could not be allowed to thumb his nose at

## COUP'S AFTERMATH



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government or corporate control. But overwhelming those, the rampant hypocrisy of willingly and deliberately overthrowing the only democratic regime in the region, showed everyone living in the Middle East precisely what democracy and freedom as offered by the West actually meant in practice, if that democracy did not agree with what the West wanted. The lesson did not go unlearned. Today, hundreds of web sites hail the legacy of Mossadegh as a martyr, a hero of national sovereignty and democracy whose name stands alongside Gandhi, Mandela, and King as a symbol of peaceful resistance and demand for respect from the world for their cause and country. It is hardly surprising, as Albright herself admitted, that the Iranians show no great enthusiasm for democracy or the overthrow of the radical government they embraced once the Americans dumped the *shah*, the same *shah* who as puppet, oversaw the end of democracy in the Middle East.



# THE BRITISH NUCLEAR LEGACY: THE BLACK MIST OF MARALINGA

1952–1963

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia (1894–1978)

**Damage Done:** Unknown numbers of British and Australian servicemen and aboriginal tribes died over 40 years

**Why:** Last chance for the Brits to keep up their pretensions of world power—at any cost

*The Americans bagged around 50 grams of plutonium-contaminated soil and put it into a military repository under lock, key and guard. Australia, by comparison, has put 100 times that amount of plutonium into several large unlined, unguarded holes in the ground.*

—Gregg Borschmann, ABC Radio

Between 1952 and 1963 the British government, with the agreement and support of Australia, carried out nuclear tests at three sites in Australia: the Monte Bello islands off the coast of Western Australia, and two sites in South Australia. By 1956 Maralinga was the permanent site for all nuclear testing. Two major trials, Operation Buffalo in 1956 and Operation Antler in 1957, and a number of other operations were carried out at the facility until 1963. Maralinga was officially closed following a clean-up operation in 1967, and remains closed to this day. It will probably take the better part of the next 250,000 years for the land to cease to be radioactive, despite continued reassurances that it will be handed back safely.

### **NUCLEAR WARNINGS**

The successful explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and later N-bomb tests at Bikini Atoll, had alarmed the British government, still clinging to the grandeur of Empire and desperate to develop its own independent nuclear deterrent, presumably more out of envy at American success and the obvious Soviet ability to match them than for any other reason. They were determined to speed the process no matter the cost, and that process involved testing. Australian Premier Sir Robert Menzies tended to Anglophilia and would do whatever he was told, perhaps in the hope that Australia might pick up a weapon or two. They ended up having to settle decades later with a number of U.S. missile bases on Australian soil.



**SIR ROBERT  
MENZIES**

In 1984, after much pressure from veterans who served at Maralinga—essentially as human guinea pigs in an operation that 10 years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki was obviously fraught with serious danger—a Royal Commission was established. In general, it takes 25 to 30 years after exposure to radiation for the victim to die. The closeness of the commission to that 30-year date and the likelihood that most victims would be dead by the time the deliberations were over was not felt to be a coincidence by many. The servicemen, though, were not the only casualties.

Maralinga is in the dead center of the arid wastelands of South Australia. A geopolitical map from the 1980s marks it as “no significant use c.1960.” Unless you count the explosion of nine major nuclear bombs, and six other tests. And the fact that not only were servicemen stationed there, but thousands of the Tjarutja, Pitjanjatjara, and Kokatha peoples were actually living there at the time of the tests. They

were forcibly removed from their land, but through miscalculation, ignorance, and simple indifference, an untold number died in the immediate aftermath of the blasts or from airborne radiation over the next decades. Blindness and cancer are common among the peoples whose oral memories refer to the “black mist” that came from nowhere. Of the 8,000 known to have been moved, less than 2,000 remain alive today. Some were given one-way train tickets to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia; others were herded into camps or reservations. Some clearly were left to their fate.

Government admissions as to what happened and why have been remarkably slow over the years and in direct contradiction to eyewitness accounts. There remains a refusal to admit that experiments were carried out to examine the effect of radiation on humans and that servicemen were simply used as guinea pigs. In 2001 the British government finally admitted to what it described as “clothing trials.” They admit that 76 Australian and New Zealand servicemen were required to crawl, walk, or drive through zones contaminated by a bomb the size of Hiroshima in a variety of protective—and nonprotective—clothing. As late as 1997 a government spokesman in court had denied even this and said it would have been “an act of indefensible callousness” to have done so. Too right. Additionally, some thousands of servicemen were required to observe the blast from a supposedly safe distance, some watching through dark glasses. One soldier described a “vivid flash and even with your eyes shut and you’re looking through your hands, you can see an X-ray of your hands.” Trucks were assigned to drive through the dust and shower them with contaminated soil; various washes were used on them to see if they were radioactive. British and Australian air force personnel were ordered to fly planes into the mushroom clouds, taking air samples and photos. One hour after the blast, servicemen were walking freely into the zone, eating food and drinking water entirely covered in red dust.

It has become clear that experiments involving swallowing radioactive substances were carried out at the Aldermaston base in England in the 1950s and at other locations around what was left of the Empire. This was revealed after one of the government agencies announced it had to erase its database of 40,000 veterans who served in these potentially dangerous testing zones. Other documents proving that plans existed to run an ever-bigger experiment in 1959 were found in a garden shed

MARALINGA IS IN THE DEAD  
MIDDLE OF THE ARID WASTE-  
LANDS OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.  
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in Western Australia. None of these documents were provided by either the British or Australian governments to the 1984 Royal Commission.

In 1967 Operation Brumby conducted by the British government determined that the land was clean and the Australian government meekly absolved the British government of any further responsibility for the land. Twenty years later a fact-seeking publicity-hungry group of politicians and journalists flew by helicopter over the stricken land. They saw the skeletons of one whole group of aboriginals, who were later determined to have been killed after one test, when the wind shifted direction and whose deaths had been unacknowledged and unknown. They landed on one of the hot spot sites, eager to prove how clean the land now was, only to sprint back and take off some 30 seconds after the Geiger counters went off the scale. Subsequent more serious investigation points to sloth and total ignorance of the effects of nuclear radiation, or even the remotest idea of how to clean it up, as the excuse for this massive environmental degradation, the deaths of servicemen, and what many activist groups call the genocide of many thousands of aboriginal peoples.

## **A JOB UNFINISHED**

Quite apart from the explosions themselves, the later cleanup was grossly inadequate. Most of the contaminated materials were buried in shallow pits, no more than 10 feet (3m) deep; some of the plutonium-contaminated materials were found covered by mere inches/centimeters of soil. The soil itself in many cases was contaminated, and much of it blew away in subsequent dust storms across the desert. The pits were supposed to be concrete-capped but only 19 of the 21 were, and the caps of two of the 19 were so damaged as to be useless. The followup to the Royal Commission's report was to hire contractors to deal with these issues, but as late as 1998 these projects were failing badly to clean up the mess. A former government adviser-turned-whistle blower described what a government official had described as the "world's best practice" as not even suitable for the disposal of household garbage, let alone plutonium. In 2001 it was deemed that all but 329 square miles (450 km) could be handed back safely to the aboriginal peoples, the remaining marked by flags with a life expectancy of 50 years for land that by best estimate will be habitable in 240,000 years. The same government officials and contractors are proposing a massive nuclear waste dump repository in the same state, South Australia.

# SIR ANTHONY EDEN, SUEZ, AND SPEED

1956

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
**pride**  
sloth

**Main Culprit:** Sir Anthony Eden (1897–1977)

**Damage Done:** End of British imperial power

**Why:** One last imperial foray went wrong

*Egypt has resolved to show the world that when small nations decide to preserve their sovereignty, they will do that...*

—President Nasser of Egypt, Sept, 15, 1956



In many ways the Suez crisis, though on the surface a rather trivial affair compared with many others in the sorry tale of imperial history, marks a major watershed in the recent history of the world. The loyal servants of the British people and government, so prominent in these pages, will hardly be seen again in this context. After that the ability to cause actual damage became increasingly internal. It marks the last time the British tried to do anything on the world stage without the approval of the Americans; even the Falklands War had prior go-ahead from the White House. It marks moreover one of the last times when imperial matters outweighed the geostrategic demands of the Cold War.

The crisis started as a very imperial affair, and ended as an example of Cold War *détente*, to the humiliation of the British and their prime minister Sir Anthony Eden. Increasingly, the annals of *Idiotica* will be filled more by the malfeasance of global corporations and less by countries.

#### **THE SHORTCUT**

The very traffic on the Suez Canal was a mark of the changes the world had experienced. Built in 1869 as a French-Egyptian project, the British government had bought out the Egyptian share when they realized the strategic importance of the canal. It cut the route from Southampton to India by almost 11,500 treacherous miles around the Cape of Good Hope to 6,500 miles, linking the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. It wasn't quite the modern marvel it was claimed to be—the ancient Egyptians had a working canal from the thirteenth to eighth centuries B.C.—but it performed three essential functions for the British Empire: It helped profits by cutting distance and time; it allowed for quicker troop movement to help quell disturbances (see *Indian Mutiny*); and it dramatically lessened the need to worry about protecting the overland route and worrying so much about Russia. They did have to start worrying about the Middle East though, and Africa and protection of Suez became important during the partition of Africa as well as World War I and II. It didn't explain Gallipoli, but nothing did really. It did account for why Britain played such a big role in the redrawing of the map of the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. But with the loss of India in 1947, much of this need just melted away. The canal, though, had found a new importance. The huge jump in Persian Gulf oil production found its way to Europe straight through the Suez Canal; by 1955 two-thirds of canal traffic was oil and two-thirds of Europe's oil supply came through the canal.

Strategic imperial issues were now more straightforwardly economic as British banks and companies owned 44 percent of the canal, which was pulling in profits of \$25 million a year.

In the new era of decolonization, and without the huge need for the canal to get to India, Britain was happy to discuss independence with Egypt. It had become a sovereign state after the Ottomans, but with the establishment of a British-supported puppet government under King Farouk. In 1936 the British were guaranteed a garrison of 10,000 men in the Suez Canal Zone, but in the postwar period the Egyptians became increasingly nationalistic and militant, anti-British, and opposed to the monarchy. By 1952 Farouk had been overthrown by generals, and by 1953 Egypt was a republic, bringing to an end a 5,000-year monarchy. The British had to send warships and rattle sabers to hold their own, but were not prepared to intervene further. Under pressure they agreed to withdraw from Suez by 1954. Radical Muslim elements also tried to force their way into power, but by the end of 1954 General Gamal Abdel Nasser had full control of the country. Nasser, taking a cue from Mossagedh in Iran, started a much more aggressive foreign policy.

The other major new postwar components of what was to become the Suez Crisis were the establishment of Israel in the region and the beginnings of the Cold War. The sudden appearance of a new country in the region had seriously destabilized the area and already a number of skirmishes and wars were breaking out as Arabs tried to deal with an unwanted newcomer in their midst. And the Soviet Union slowly began to realize that the newly independent states offered an opportunity to expand their sphere of influence, perhaps even establish ports that could free the fleet from the confines of the Black Sea. Oil, as in Iran, had become a complicating factor, bringing the Americans into the picture with substantial economic interests as well as moral and soon economic support for the state of Israel.

Much of all of this seemed to pass the British government by. Perhaps, given his role in a number of earlier incidents, it will not come as a great surprise that the prime minister in the buildup to all this was Winston Churchill. To a great extent he was not the great wartime leader but a figurehead, back in power since 1951 after the Labor government of

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THE CANAL.

## A NEW TWIST

**SIR ANTHONY EDEN**

Attlee. The foreign secretary of the government, and clearly the heir apparent, was Sir Anthony Eden, a dashing and accomplished man who had been instrumental in aggressive foreign policy before the war, becoming foreign secretary in 1935 at the age of 38. By 1955 he was more than a little frustrated at still being in the same role in the new administration. Churchill showed remarkably little interest in retirement. Additionally, and unknown to anyone at the time, Eden had developed an alarming medical problem. In 1953 a routine gallstone operation had gone wrong when doctors ruptured his bile duct. In considerable pain, and prone to infection, doctors in the drug-excited 1950s (see *Thalidomide and vaccine/AIDS*, following) had prescribed Benzedrine, a new wonder drug. Bennies proved popular with writers and the young Bohemians of the later 1950s.

Better known as speed, the drug caused violent mood swings and a tendency to paranoia, and was highly addictive. Not that much of a problem if you are a poet and artist, rather more so for a prime minister, which is what Eden became on April 7, 1955.

He rolled straight into an escalation of the crisis in Egypt. General Nasser started to turn to the Soviet Bloc for trade and to build armed forces against Israel. Arms for cotton deals were made with the Soviet Union. Cotton was exported to China. Czechoslovak tanks started to arrive. One month after Britain started its planned withdrawal from Suez, the United States abruptly withdrew its financial support for the huge Aswan Dam capital project, citing Egyptian connections with the Soviet Union. On July 26, 1956, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, claiming the need for the profits to finance the Aswan Dam project. Not only British pride, but British financial interests, were hurt. Eden imposed a trade embargo, and raised patriotic indignation in Britain, comparing Nasser to Mussolini. Nasser sank ships in the canal to block it, and the British formally reneged on their deal to withdraw.

The British and French started secret talks and came up with a unilateral plan that sounded great in principle—and within its limits worked well. Operation Musketeer called for Israel to attack Egypt, then call on Anglo-French help, which would give them an excuse to invade and

take back the canal. The invasions duly took place and by October a substantial force had seized Suez. Unfortunately and idiotically, no one checked first with the real new superpower, the Americans.

America was highly preoccupied with the Soviet threat, and was busily condemning the Soviets for their brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising the very same year. Faced with the almost unanimous condemnation of the Anglo-French invasion by the United Nations, the United States found it impossible to endorse one invasion while condemning another; moreover, the Soviet Union had substantially raised the Suez bar by announcing that they would intervene on behalf of Egypt during November. Eden, meanwhile, the architect of the whole idiotic operation, had been sent to Jamaica on what appeared to be a vacation but was actually an attempt by doctors to get him off speed.

By December the Americans had forced a ceasefire, and withdrawal by Anglo-French forces came on December 24. Nasser nationalized other British interests in Egypt, and by March 1957 a humiliated Eden was forced to resign. British power and influence in the region—and to some extent in the world—was forever relegated to secondary status. The new world era set up by the events of World War II had really begun, precipitated to no small extent by the pride of Sir Anthony Eden, and his little pills. In 2004 the man who had offered such promise was voted the least effective British prime minister of the twentieth century.

NASSER SANK SHIPS IN THE  
CANAL TO BLOCK IT, AND THE  
BRITISH FORMALLY RENEGED  
ON THEIR DEAL TO  
WITHDRAW.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## GRÜNENTHAL'S OUTSTANDINGLY SAFE DRUG: THALIDOMIDE

December 25, 1956–November 28, 1961

**Main Culprit:** Grünenthal (drug company)

**Damage Done:** Horrific birth defects in thousands of children

**Why:** Bringing untested drugs too soon to market

*Distavel can be given with complete safety to pregnant women and nursing mothers without adverse effect on mother or child...Outstandingly safe Distavel [thalidomide] has been prescribed for nearly three years in this country.*

—Ad for thalidomide



If it weren't for recent examples of pharmaceutical companies marketing drugs that turn out to be deadly, it would perhaps be easier to put down the tragedy of thalidomide to mistake. Idiocy it certainly was, caused by rapacious greed to get a wonder drug on the market before it had been properly tested. Drug companies in many parts of the world jumped on the appearance of an apparent new wonder drug that was to have devastating consequences.

Thalidomide was developed in the 1950s by German drug company, Grünenthal, as a sedative. The end of World War II heralded an era in which factories involved in churning out chemicals for the mass destruction of human beings switched to the development of wonder drugs to cure their every ill. In the rubble of war-torn Germany in 1946, a factory employing 1,500 workers engaged in producing soap and detergents formed a subsidiary company called Chemie Grünenthal, which began operations in an abandoned copper foundry near Hamburg. For several years it produced antibiotics, some for the American drug company Lederle, with which it had close links. Then, in the early 1950s came a series of failures as a number of its drugs produced severe adverse reactions including deaths. Though these were well reported and documented by several doctors, Chemie Grünenthal ignored the serious risks and moved into the profitable field of sedatives and hypnotics, which included thalidomide. It proved successful and popular and also to be remarkably effective against morning sickness for pregnant women. By 1957 it was being aggressively marketed in 50 countries around the world. In the U.K., in particular, the Distillers Company made a special point of its safety and utility for pregnant women.

Thalidomide apparently passed through to the placenta and blocked the development of blood vessels. This led to serious deformities in affected fetuses. It needed to be taken only once during the first trimester to have an impact, especially during the first 25 to 50 days of pregnancy when some women were not even aware they were pregnant. The birth defects normally involved missing or badly deformed limbs. It is estimated that 15,000 fetuses at a minimum were affected in 46 countries, of which 12,000 were born with birth defects and of those, one-third died in their first year. Most of the others are still alive today. Many have gone on to

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successful careers in one field or another, but all live with their deformities for life. Thomas Quasthoff, one of Germany's leading baritones, was born in Hannover in 1959, with severe disabilities. His parents, unable to care for him, sent him to a medical institution where he was brought up. Music schools turned him down despite his burgeoning voice because he was unable to meet their entrance requirements, which involved the playing of a musical instrument, due to the fact that he has only vestigial arms. Although Quasthoff went on to create a fine career for himself as a performer, he is the exception rather than the rule.

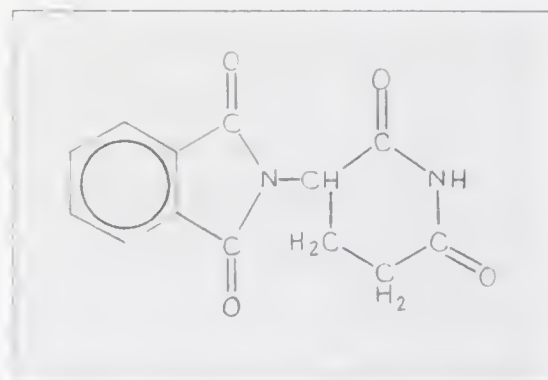
### **EARLY WARNING SIGNS**

In retrospect, there was trouble from the very beginning. Although nothing adverse supposedly showed up on tests, there were deformities among children of parents who worked for the pharmaceutical company. The first thalidomide baby is now thought to have been born on Christmas Day, 1956, although the drug did not go onto the market until October 1, 1957. By 1960 sales of Thalidomide were stepped up, despite reports of malformations caused by the drug, which now poured in from all over the world. It was being marketed by 14 firms in many countries under 37 different trade names and sold without prescription. It was combined with other drugs such as aspirin and prescribed widely for headaches, migraine, coughs, colds, flu, asthma, neuralgia, nervous debility, to calm frisky babies, and to give pregnant women a good night's sleep. Globally, thalidomide was the big winner

and dominated prescriptions. The British pharmaceutical company Distillers produced thalidomide for morning sickness and it was distributed throughout the British Isles, Australia, and New Zealand under the trade name Distavel.

By 1960 thalidomide was so successful around the world that Grünenthal decided to seek an FDA license to sell in the United States. Part of its success lay in the fact that it was almost impossible to commit suicide with the drug, a big issue for a sedative or sleeping pill.

Grünenthal's web site still maintains that the drug was useful, and that "the catastrophe was due to a lack of knowledge and perhaps attention." It goes on to tell us that "it exemplifies above all the meaning of 'Post Marketing Surveillance.'" Subsequent evidence from many hear-



**CHEMICAL FORMULA  
FOR THALIDOMIDE**

ings around the world cast much doubt even on the veracity of the lack of knowledge claim. In August 1959 a doctor in Basel described thalidomide as "a horrible drug. Never again," because of its impact on the nervous system.

A number of medical heroes swiftly emerge onto the scene. The first is Frances Oldham Kelsey, a young woman who had recently joined the FDA. She was unimpressed by the studies she was shown purporting to demonstrate the safety of the drug, partly because her research area was on toxicity in pregnancy. In theory it had proved safe in animal testing. Still, claiming that the failure to notice the problem proves the weakness in both drug companies and government reliance on animal testing as any sort of proof of safety in humans; others suggest that the tests were either not performed adequately or their results incorrectly understood. The fact remains that Kelsey refused to clear thalidomide for sale in the United States. Despite considerable pressure from the local drug company, it remained off the shelves until the true extent of the disaster was discovered in the rest of the world. Thousands of lives were saved as a result of this uncertainty and in 1962 Kelsey was awarded the highest civilian award in the United States by President Kennedy for her role. In light of later events one might speculate as to whether the FDA is still as careful today, or whether it was just fortunate that it was a young and enthusiastic woman who was responsible, and who had a specific interest in pregnancy. Whatever the reasoning, the fact remains that later claims by the drug companies in Europe that they had no reason to doubt that thalidomide was safe must be cast in considerable doubt by the refusal of the FDA to grant a license. Interestingly, France also refused a license. And as one of the later investigators pointed out, the Iron Curtain countries of the time also did not allow the drug to be marketed and "viruses do not stop at the Berlin Wall." The argument that there was no reason to doubt the safety of the drug seems extremely weak.

In April 1961 a doctor at Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney, Australia, Dr. William McBride, was taken aback by three rapid limb and bowel formations in babies delivered in quick succession. His research soon showed thalidomide to be the only link he could find in the three mothers. His urgent warnings were generally dismissed; he

LATER CLAIMS BY THE DRUG COMPANIES IN EUROPE THAT THEY HAD NO REASON TO DOUBT THAT THALIDOMIDE WAS SAFE MUST BE CAST IN CONSIDERABLE DOUBT BY THE REFUSAL OF THE FDA TO GRANT A LICENSE.

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“VIRUSES DO NOT STOP AT  
THE BERLIN WALL.”

notified the representatives of Distillers in Australia about his suspicions of the link between Distavel (thalidomide) and the deformities. Distillers in England claim they never received the written report. Sales promotion of the drug was stepped up and 250,000 leaflets distributed, saying thalidomide is “harmless even over a long period of use” and “completely harmless even for infants”—this despite later evidence that in December 1959 and January 1960 a Dr. Somers in Distillers’ own lab had written internal memos querying the apparent high toxicity of the drug. Desperately McBride wrote a letter to *The Lancet* medical journal: “Thalidomide and Congenital Abnormalities,” published in December 1961. Coincidentally, in West Germany, a Dr. Widukind Lenz had become concerned by a series of limb and ear malformations and by mid-November had come to the same conclusion as Dr. McBride. He called Grünenthal to express his concerns on November 16, but it still took 10 days and increasing pressure from the press for anything to happen. The drug in its various forms was withdrawn on November 26, 1961, in West Germany and a few days later in Britain and Australia, though in other forms it remained on shelves until at least March. However, it remained for sale in many other countries inexplicably—in Brazil until June 1962, in Spain until May, in Italy for another 10 months, and in Japan, in an over-the-counter form, until 1963.

## CASE NOT CLOSED

What followed was far from impressive on behalf of drug companies, but the failure to admit fault or properly to compensate victims falls into a darker realm. The Grünenthal web site to this day is far from forthcoming and in places positively extraordinary in its indignation. In 1972 the *Sunday Times of London* produced a stunning article, one of the precursors of pioneering activist journalism, openly condemning the failure of the Distillers Company to provide adequate compensation for victims and seriously questioning the motivations that had led them to rush the drug to market. They also uncovered reports from Germany from as far back as 1950 reporting effects of thalidomide on the nervous system of young children. The response was an immediate legal writ, the quashing of follow-up articles, and a court case that finally ended up in the European Court of Justice in 1979. The case resulted in a major victory for journalism and free speech. Even now, pressure



groups are pushing for more than the paltry compensation paid around the world by companies that peddled this drug.

There have been books and articles and accusations back and forth over the years as to how this was allowed to happen. Certainly, both testing and government regulations have been massively tightened as a result. Some of the accusations have been wild indeed, stretching back to suggestions that the scientists who manufactured and tested the drug in the first instance in Germany did not just inherit the Nazi approach to the manufacture and use of drugs, but were actually the same individuals who had escaped prosecution after the war. And it was perhaps ironic that Widukind Lenz himself was the son of one of the first perpetrators of racial eugenics, in 1921 writing a book suggesting that one-third of the population bearing "unsound hereditary traits" should be sterilized. Even more ironic is the fact that Widukind Lenz's unseen and unknown fellow discoverer William McBride, still investigating and crusading 40 years later, again wrote to *The Lancet* last year, issuing a warning that it appears the toxic nature of thalidomide could pass on genetically.

This may yet have consequences because thalidomide has made an astonishing comeback. It turns out that it has very strong and positive effects on AIDS and on leprosy and may even inhibit cancer growth, oddly through the very same inhibiting characteristics that made it so lethal in pregnant women. It has this time been provisionally approved by the FDA, but only under the name Thalomid to remind everyone of the history and genesis of the drug, rather than the generic name the manufacturers wanted to use. As the Grünenthal web site so charmingly puts it, "As a result of this, medicines with the active ingredient thalidomide are required once again today." It would be perhaps nice if they had added that a proportion of the profits they stand to make would go to those who are still suffering from the last time it was "required." The site also tells us, "We can now assume that we have recognized and described all the adverse effects of thalidomide"—all of which seems to suggest that their policy now is much the same as it was then: Push a drug onto the market and see if anyone gets ill.

## THE COMEBACK



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## VACCINES, AIDS, AND THE CHIMPS OF THE CONGO

1957–1960

**Main Culprits:** Scientists unknown

**Damage Done:** Potentially, the introduction of AIDS into the human race

**Why:** Alleged improper care in preparation of vaccines in massive polio immunization project

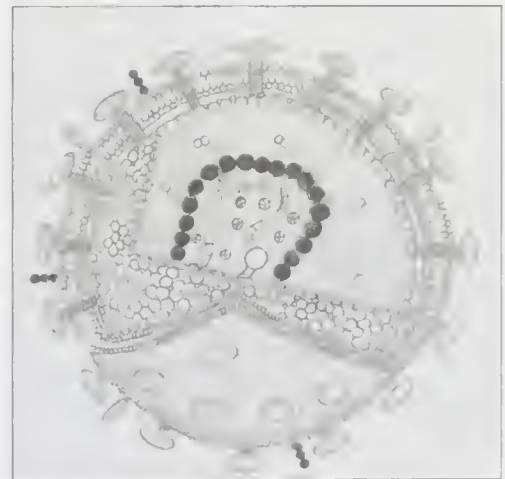
*Some in our common world consider the questions I and the rest of our government have raised around the HIV-AIDS issue, the subject of the Conference you are attending, as akin to grave criminal and genocidal misconduct. What I hear being said repeatedly, stridently, angrily, is—do not ask any questions!*

**—President Thabo Mbeki, 2000**

Much of what we now recognize as stupidity was not so recognized at the time, either because of lack of information about what really happened, or lack of knowledge of the eventual consequences. Some of the examples may well not be based on what really happened at all, but on the subsequent rewriting of history by later generations. Other events may be seen in very different ways by the perpetrators as opposed to the victims. This chapter does not offer a verdict of any sort as to the truth of the claims made by either side in what has become an increasingly controversial and nasty issue. It simply reports the existence of one hypothesis, which, if true, would undoubtedly rank the events in the Congo in 1960 right up there with the worst of them. There is no suggestion of malice, just an attempt to uncover the origins of a disease that has ripped through the human race at a rate almost unprecedented in history—at least 3 million dead and up to 40 million people infected, according to United Nations statistics. These are the casualties of AIDS since its first appearance among humans in the early 1960s. In some countries 40 percent of the adult population is thought to be infected. Not since the Black Death killed two-thirds of the population of China and one-third to one-half of the population of Europe has a pandemic so affected the world. It is noticeable that the fears of population explosion and subsequent world famine that so dominated doom-mongers' discussions of 30 years ago are now hardly ever heard.

Conspiracy theories abound as to the introduction and spread and causes of AIDS—and no less as to its cure. A recent study suggested that 12 percent of African-Americans believe AIDS was introduced by the CIA, as many as half that it was deliberately man-made and targeted at minorities. South African President Thabo Mbeki's statements querying the paramount importance of AIDS in health care aid to South Africa has been taken as brutal, uncaring, and detrimental to the population of his country. What he actually said was that AIDS needs to be taken as part of the overall health—and more important, poverty—crisis that is overwhelming the continent of Africa, and that subsidized condoms and expensive medications may not be the most important concentrations for the South African health system.

NOT SINCE THE BLACK DEATH  
KILLED TWO-THIRDS OF THE  
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ONE-THIRD TO ONE-HALF OF  
THE POPULATION OF EUROPE  
HAS A PANDEMIC SO  
AFFECTED THE WORLD.



THE AIDS VIRUS

**MYSTERIOUS  
ORIGINS**

What is beyond most doubt is that the HIV virus originated in Africa and is a variant of the SIV virus, which is prevalent throughout much of the monkey population (but does them no harm). The question at issue is how the transmission took place from one species to another with such devastating consequences. Essentially there are two major theories of origin that seek to explain how humans acquired the pandemic AIDS virus (HIV-1) from the common chimpanzee host to the immediate viral ancestor. These two theories are the natural transfer hypothesis, the bushmeat theory (which has various subsidiary versions), and the OPV theory. The bushmeat (or "cut hunter") theory proposes that HIV-1 crossed from a chimpanzee to a human in the course of the hunting, butchery, and eating of chimpanzees. While perfectly plausible, this theory fails fully to explain why it should suddenly transfer and appear in the 1960s and not hundreds of years before. There is an add-on to this theory, which brings in the appearance of needles at around the right time, but it isn't entirely convincing. The alternative theory sounds farfetched and quite possibly it is. But it is at least plausible. Its detractors have been so vocal and their attempts to denigrate the theory so forcible without ever quite answering the questions are not completely convincing either.

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WELL INTENTIONED AS A  
POLIO VACCINE COULD HAVE  
HAD SUCH DISASTROUS  
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FARFETCHED TO BELIEVE.

The OPV theory proposes that HIV-1 crossed via an oral polio vaccine (OPV). The United Nations had in the 1950s embarked on a mass polio vaccination program throughout Africa. It was one of those grand public health projects that was a sign to the world of the new United Nations at work, and it could do nothing but good. If what is suggested did actually go wrong, then the entirely laudable aim of saving the lives of a million children, an act of enormous hope and charity that perhaps was less well funded and managed than it might have been, has resulted in a widespread global disaster.

The center of the vaccination operation was in Stanleyville, in what was still the Belgian Congo (and named after H. M. Stanley, see *Scramble for Africa*). One million Africans received the vaccine in a clearly defined group of villages in an area that now includes Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. Around 10 years later the first major incidence of what is now known as AIDS showed up in precisely those villages; as many as 76 percent of the early cases can be linked back to the vaccine. There may,

however, have been earlier cases but these remain in some dispute. The dispute lies in what happened at the local facility—the supervising doctors in the United States were supposed to make all the vaccines—macaque monkeys were commonly used to provide the tissue culture in which safe quantities of the vaccine were cultivated, and these were shipped over. Not just in Africa, but in other countries, it may have been customary to use the initial shipments as a base from which to increase the amount of vaccine being used. It is suggested that green monkey or chimpanzee kidneys were used at the local level, both carriers of SIV-1, and that the vaccines therefore became contaminated with the virus that became HIV in humans. There was a chimpanzee research facility a few miles from the laboratory and evidence from other countries that booster cells were used; scientists in French equatorial Africa, for example, used cells from baboons to top up the vaccines they were receiving from the Pasteur Institute in Paris, without any apparent bad side effects—baboons are not SIV-1 carriers. Some evidence from local workers at the laboratory confirms that this was happening in a more or less unsupervised operation, with the best of intentions, to allow the vaccine to go further. The supervising doctors hotly deny this, and also deny the possibility that the virus could have been transmitted to humans through an oral intake of a vaccine. The vaccine was not injected. On the other hand, the vaccine was being given to young children for the most part and it is thought, among other things, that AIDS can be transmitted through breast milk, for example.

Most scientists and AIDS researchers, and certainly the scientific establishment, solidly refute this thesis—and no doubt there are good nonscientific reasons why they should do so, not least the deep, and these days totally unwarranted, suspicion that vaccinations might be dangerous, which is leading to increasing refusal to accept them and the concurrent return of some contagious diseases. Plus the concept that anything so basically well intentioned—we are not talking about rapacious drug companies or profiteering here—could have had such disastrous consequences seems perhaps too dreadful, too idiotic and far-fetched to believe. Yet even the Black Death reached Europe innocuously enough—on boats containing infected rats arriving from traders who had been to plague regions of Asia.

## **LINGERING SUSPICIONS**

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## MAO AND THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

1958–1960

**Main Culprit:** Mao Zedong (1893–1976)

**Damage Done:** 20 to 40 million of own his country men died of famine

**Why:** Taking all the farmers off the land to initiate an industrial revolution they could not sustain

*Now know the Soviet Union and its allied nations, but particularly know China. China is flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood. China is colored, and knows to what the colored skin in this modern world subjects its owner.*

—W.E.B. duBois

*Struggle hard for three years. Change the face of China. Catch up with Britain and catch up with America.*

—Official slogan of The Great Leap Forward



It says something for the level-headedness of the Chinese that the most populous nation in the world makes only one appearance in the annals of idiocy. It could be our ignorance of some of the more disastrous moments in their history, but as might be expected, when it goes wrong, it goes wrong in a big, big way. The problem for China since time immemorial has been how to feed its huge population. Most regimes have done this by exercising strict central political control in one way or another and restricting the movement of people, and certainly their expressions of freedom or liberty. At the end of the 1950s, a number of different influences came together to create one of the worst disasters in human history, one caused entirely by man and not by nature—indeed really by one man—Chairman Mao Zedong. The motivation was not that of Stalin (see *Stalin and the Great Purges*) or even of Pol Pot in Cambodia, who sought to reengineer his people by killing a third of them first. There seems to have been little greed or anger. The very phrase that describes—*Da yue jin*, the Great Leap Forward—suggests nothing more than an act of faith in the future of his country. Without question it was pride that stopped him from realizing the monumental nature of his error until it was too late.

Since grasping power after the Great March, Mao's Communist regime in China had been closely allied with the Russians. The year 1956, however, saw an end to Stalin's rule and an apparent weakening of Soviet power with an insurrection in Hungary and uprisings in Poland. Khrushchev was seeking "peaceful coexistence" and that type of policy was not going to get the Chinese anywhere.

Mao decided that the Chinese economy must compete with the West, but on revolutionary, Communist terms. The Eighth National Congress of 1956 heard this speech:

On the basis of actual conditions in our country, the Central Committee has thus defined the Party's general line in the period of transition: to bring about, step by step, socialist industrialization and to accomplish, step by step, the socialist transformation of agriculture.

The aim was to out-produce the British steel industry within 15 years. In essence, he proposed a commune system for the production of steel. Farmers across the country were given quotas for steel production to the exclusion of all else. Rice fields were planted over, lakes filled in, regular agriculture ignored, apart from the revolutionary command to plant

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WORTHWHILE.

three times as many seeds in the same spot for the land to be more productive (in fact, they all died instead). Tens of millions of people were ordered to produce steel, and in their backyards built homemade furnaces that produced in the end almost nothing worthwhile. The villagers had just thrown the whole metal content of their villages—spoons, plates, old machinery, anything—into the furnaces to meet enormous production quotas. As many as 23,500 commune-based plants were set up, but with little or no training and the most basic of equipment, the villagers had no idea how to make the steel. Every available resource was used to support the plan; other factories, even schools and hospitals, turned all their efforts to making the Great Leap Forward.

Indeed, to start with, the statistical gains were impressive: 45 percent growth in 1958, 30 percent over each of the next two years. But once the easily available supply of iron gave out and the side effects of the effort began to take hold, production plummeted again, by 1961 below, in fact, what it had been before the whole thing started. By what the Chinese central government named the Three Years of Natural Disasters, coincidentally occurring over the exact same time period as the Great Leap Forward, horrific famine conditions overwhelmed China.

**STEEL VS. RICE** Famine, of course, was nothing new to the enormous Chinese population—natural disasters, flood, pestilence, earthquake, drought, could easily tip the fragile balance between feeding the population or starving. By 1959 that population was in excess of 680 million people. It was not surprising that there would be another famine and that it could be blamed on natural causes. But in fact there was no natural cause. The plowing up of rice fields and the massive movement of the working population out of agriculture into steel led to a drop in crop production, from an estimated two million tons in 1958 to under one and a half million in 1960. The birth rate dropped, the death rate more than doubled, and in 1961 the population of China had actually dipped to 655 million. By conservative estimates 20 to 25 million Chinese died of starvation as a direct consequence of the Great Leap Forward, some put that figure as high as 40 million or higher.

What was perhaps even more extraordinary than the calamity that was unfolding in front of everyone was the complete refusal to admit to it. The Great Leap Forward had followed a strange two-year campaign, the Hundred Flowers, during which Mao, apparently upset that all the local Communist officials and intellectuals were silent about improvements

that could be made, and problems within the regime, first encouraged, then demanded, letters from all across the country so that a variety of views could be expressed and changes made. "Our society cannot back down, it could only progress...criticism of the bureaucracy is pushing the government towards the better. Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend." Officials were rightly suspicious of this move from the beginning, and indeed, once the complaints started to flood in, the campaign was swiftly stopped and orthodoxy reigned again. "Counterrevolutionaries" started to be rounded up. This made everyone even less likely to tell the truth when the famine started.



MAO ZEDONG

By 1961 the project was quietly abandoned and everyone returned to what was left of their farms. Mao kept something of a low profile for a while; but as criticism started to mount within and without the party as the awful truth inexorably came to light, he commenced the terrible crackdown on dissidents and intellectuals known as the Cultural Revolution, which to some extent could be seen as a further consequence of the horrors of the Great Leap Forward. It was only after Mao's death, much like Stalin's, that it was possible to begin to tell the truth about the Great Leap Forward. The Three Years of Natural Disasters became the Three Years of Economic Difficulty—not much of an improvement, to be sure, but a step.

Paradoxically, it is steel that is China's biggest growth industry in 2005. China is the world's biggest producer and market, and will yield 350 million tons of steel. The toll on lives is still considerable, as the staggering death rate in coal mines will testify. The cost to the environment also may be considerable as China's demand for fossil fuels and creation of pollution bring another industrial revolution into the world. This time, it is highly unlikely that the people will starve and that the projects will collapse from underfunding. But the essential idea—that China must become an industrial nation to survive and thrive in the globalized world, and cannot continue just to ensure that its people can eat—is the same idea as the one that Mao put forward. Mao managed to kill more of his own subjects than any other leader in these annals.

"OUR SOCIETY CANNOT  
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—MAO ZEDONG

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## ROBERT MCNAMARA'S TERRIBLE WRONG: AGENT ORANGE

April 12, 1961–January 1971

**Main Culprit:** Robert McNamara (1916– )

**Damage Done:** Disease and birth defects for thousands of American soldiers, and millions of Vietnamese to this day

**Why:** Quadrupling the safe dose of a pesticide to clear the Vietnamese rain forest

*We were wrong, terribly wrong.*

—Robert W. McNamara, April 1995



Agent Orange was an herbicide developed in the 1940s and used extensively in agriculture in the United States in the 1950s especially. It isn't actually orange, but a colorless liquid; the barrels used to transport it had an orange stripe to distinguish them from other chemicals. No particular problems were associated with its use during crop spraying in the United States. Some time early in the Vietnam War a bright idea was sent on through to Command. The National Liberation Front, the North Vietnamese guerrilla movement, was hiding in the dense jungle, and tracking them down from the air was next to impossible. If pesticides could prove so effective in clearing land for agribusiness, why not use them in Vietnam to clear the jungle. They turned out to be deadly to humans, not just Vietcong guerrillas but the entire civilian population and the American and Australian soldiers combing the jungle looking for the guerrillas. Though hotly debated, and with liability and responsibility still being evaded in 2005, there is little doubt that the sloth in not bothering to check what was being dropped on their own troops, and anger in wanting to hurry with the war, were responsible for the calamities that followed. To this day, contamination remains in Vietnam, especially around Danang, and birth defects abound.

Agent Orange was a combination of two chemicals used widely. It worked by mixing plant hormones and mimicking compounds that destroy plants by interfering with their normal metabolism. One of the chemicals also has a tendency to produce high quantities of dioxin, a by-product of a variety of industrial processes that in high doses can prove deadly to humans, but more significantly, causes birth defects by working itself into the food chain. It is also highly carcinogenic. The foliage of poisoned trees dies within two to three weeks, but the half-life of dioxin within the soil is at least three years, and may be longer. Dioxin also occurs through other waste products, even the burning of waste in incineration plants, and was used late last year in the poisoning of Ukrainian presidential candidate Victor Yushchenko. Dioxin has been involved in serious chemical spills—Love Canal in the United States, Seveso in Italy. A full 95 percent of the residents of Bin-hoa near Ho Chi Minh City have 200 times the safe level of dioxin in their bloodstreams today. Much as attempts have been made to deny linkages between Agent Orange and the resulting damage, no other possible cause for this level of dioxin



ROBERT MCNAMARA



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THOUSANDS OF BIRTH  
DEFECTS.

poisoning has ever been suggested. The U.S. government still denies any positive proof of linkage, although the Veterans Administration guidelines on disability payments to veterans and their families take a very different line. The likelihood seems to be that only those veterans who came into direct contact with the chemical were affected. The actual spraying was not toxic, but the effect on the food chain carries through now into a third generation with hundreds of thousands of birth defects. It is conservatively estimated that 150,000 Vietnamese children have birth defects stemming from Agent Orange contamination.

On April 12, 1961, Walt W. Rostow, a foreign affairs advisor to President Kennedy, forwarded a memo on Vietnam to the president recommending nine specific courses of action, setting into motion a series of events that led to the decision to send Air Force C-123s to South Vietnam to spray herbicides. The fifth action on the memo recommended that a military hardware research and development team go to Vietnam to work with the chief of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Army Lieutenant General Lionel C. McGarr, to explore the usefulness of various "techniques and gadgets" then available or under development. Aerial defoliation became one of these unspecified "techniques." By May, White House approval had been given to start work, and test runs started in August 1961. Defense Secretary McNamara approved use in November 1961, and bombing with Agents Purple and Pink started almost immediately.

## **AN UNKNOWN QUANTITY**

Agent Orange appears to have been tested a few times for military use in the late 1950s but no full-scale testing was done, even on animals, until after serious problems began to emerge. It was only after massive carcinogenic results appeared in rats that use of Agent Orange was curtailed. It was very effective in its military application, known as Operation Ranch Hand. It was part of a larger operation called Operation Trail Dust that also involved road and riverside clearing of vegetation, and crop destruction. Each plane could destroy 350 acres of forest per run. A spray run took less than four minutes, used 1,000 gallons (3,780 L) of Agent Orange, and was often sprayed by three planes flying side by side. That meant one run equaled 1,000 acres of jungle destroyed. Though terribly good at doing what it was supposed to do, the whole idea was tragically flawed. The Vietcong never had any problem in obtaining all the food they needed from local sources, and, worse, they were much too adept at hiding out in the jungle to be caught out by

the clearing of roadside vegetation. The American soldiers, on the other hand, who were actually on the roads, could easily be seen and picked off by the Vietcong in the jungle and became sitting ducks.

In October 1967 the Rand Corporation, which had worked on the original plans in 1961, issued two reports concluding that the crop destruction program had an insignificant effect on Vietcong consumption of rice, had not resulted in any significant food shortages among Vietcong units, had harmed residents in the vicinity of crop destruction targets, had alienated the rural South Vietnamese population from the government, had aroused much hostility toward the United States and its South Vietnamese allies, and was not considered necessary or useful by the rural population, and might well be counterproductive. The Joint Chiefs of Staff rejected this report and kept on spraying. Operation Ranch Hand did not fly its last mission until January 1971, 10 years after operations had started and 4 years after the point of the exercise had been seriously questioned. Indeed, 1968, the height of the war, saw the greatest use of chemical herbicides in the war effort.

In 2005 U.S. Federal Court Judge Jack Weinstein, himself a great advocate of class action suits, especially against the asbestos industry, found he had no option but to refuse a class action suit brought on behalf of four million Vietnamese against the various drug companies that manufactured Agent Orange under government contracts. Many of those companies had in 1984 reached a settlement with U.S. war veterans for \$180 million. The judge's ruling stated that the contractors had no control over how the chemical was used by the military and no liability since they had originally manufactured the herbicide to kill plants and there was no intention to cause pain to humans, since there was no criminal intent on behalf of the companies. The military was using Agent Orange at concentrations many times greater than the safe levels laid down by the drug companies. The Vietnamese cannot pursue in the courts the only other possible defendant, the U.S. government itself, although at an intergovernmental level there has been significant work done on helping to clean up hot spots and further research the damage. Indeed, there seems to be good sense to the ruling. The idiocy of Agent Orange lies not in its manufacture or use as a herbicide (though it is now banned for that use too) but in the willful use of the product as a weapon.

## NO LIABILITY

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## MURPHY'S LAW AND THE MISSING HYPHEN

July 22, 1962, 09:21:23 to 09:22:16

**Main Culprit:** NASA

**Damage Done:** Destruction of expensive hardware and nearly the end of man's exploration to other planets

**Why:** A missing hyphen caused the *Mariner* rocket to burn too soon

*If it can go wrong, it will.*

—Edward Murphy, Jr.

*The most expensive hyphen in history.*

—Arthur C. Clarke

There have been of course many mishaps in the history of discovery and exploration. Columbus might have graced these pages had he not been fortunate enough to discover a great continent, even though he thought he was on another one. Many died trying to find lakes, passages, and treasures that did not exist. Others such as Burke and Wills or Captain Scott or George Mallory gave their lives in futile attempts to go, literally, where no man had gone before. Space travel was very much the same. Disasters have happened, of varying magnitudes and loss of life, mostly through a combination of human error and technological breakdown, or sometimes almost culpable negligence through cost cutting in the wrong place. But the fate of several missions in the space program stand out monumentally as an example of sloth. One, early on in space exploration, nearly brought an end to planetary exploration. The others (see *Lockheed Martin, Columbine, and the Metric System*) cost a lot more money and are perhaps less well known, but one stands out especially because of its startling similarity to the first, and proof yet again that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.



NASA'S LOGO

Not for nothing, as it turns out, was Murphy's Law promulgated during the rocket sled "G-force" tests in the 1950s that were early stages of the space program. Edward Murphy, Jr. was an engineer at the tests who had to report to Lieutenant Stapp who had nearly died on one test that, in fact, the sensors had been put in backward. Ironically, a recent disaster of the space program—the crash landing of the interplanetary probe *Genesis* full tilt into the Utah desert in late 2004—turned out to have the same cause: The decelerators had been installed back to front. These two bookends of the space program, exactly 50 years apart, stand as a testament to some strange behavior with very high monetary costs.

## THE ORIGINAL MURPHY'S LAW

The first disaster cost the United States an enormous amount of money and nearly brought an early end to the whole proceedings of space exploration. The *Mariner 1* space probe was brought down—by a missing hyphen.

## HYPHEN DASHES HOPES

When the "space race" between the United States and the Soviet Union began in the late 1950s, NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab had come up with grand plans for a series of large, sophisticated interplanetary space



probes, to be named *Mariners*. However, the launch of such large space probes was dependent on the development of a new and powerful booster, the Atlas-Centaur, and this development program proved troublesome. JPL finally had to settle on a less-sophisticated design, based on the simpler Ranger Moon probes. The stripped-down *Mariner* was originally named *Mariner Ranger* or just *Mariner R*, and would be launched on the available Atlas Agena B booster. Still, the *Mariner* program cost more than \$500 million.

*Mariner I* was supposed to be the first interplanetary spacecraft. It was the first of the *Mariner* series of unmanned probes, which were supposed to explore the nearby planets of Venus, Mercury, and Mars. *Mariner I* had wings with solar cells to help power its voyage, and it was equipped with instruments for studying Venus, its planned destination. The probe was put on a rocket and launched on July 22, 1962. About four minutes after liftoff, however, the launch vehicle made an unscheduled maneuver and started to veer off course. The NASA official in charge of safety had less than a minute to decide whether to terminate the flight (and destroy millions of dollars worth of time and equipment) or let it continue (and risk having the errant space probe crash into a populated area or the shipping lanes). He decided to abort the mission.

The mishap had two causes, according to a subsequent NASA investigation. First, there was a problem with the rocket's radio guidance system. But the mission's planners had prepared for that eventuality and a guidance computer was supposed to take over. Unfortunately, the guidance computer had a tiny programming error. A single character, a hyphen, was missing from the program. As a result of the missing hyphen, possibly a typo or a programmer's mistake, the spacecraft started making unnecessary course changes. The hyphen (indicating smoothing) was omitted from the expression "R-dot-bar sub n" ("n" smoothed value of derivative of radius). The program should have read "R-dot-bar sub-n." This error led the software to treat normal minor variations of velocity as if they were serious, leading the computer to swing automatically into a series of unnecessary course corrections with erroneous steering commands, which finally threw the spacecraft off course. The programming mistake wasn't caught ahead of time since the radio guidance system had never failed during tests. The report stated,



"Somehow a hyphen had been dropped from the guidance program loaded aboard the computer, allowing the flawed signals to command the rocket to veer left and nose down ... Suffice it to say, the first U.S. attempt at interplanetary flight failed for want of a hyphen." The vehicle cost more than \$80 million, prompting Arthur C. Clarke to refer to the error as "the most expensive hyphen in history."

Fortunately for NASA, they had another similar spacecraft ready to go. It's plausible that had *Mariner 2* not been ready within a month or two, the huge financial loss would have ended the nascent interplanetary program before it had started. *Mariner 2* launched successfully and completed the mission.

In between the two space shuttle disasters, in the late 1990s, came a series of less well-known but very odd and very costly mistakes, though no human lives were lost. The causes are remarkably similar to the *Mariner* disaster, far removed from the spacecraft themselves being at fault.

THE SPACECRAFT COST MORE  
THAN \$80 MILLION,  
PROMPTING ARTHUR C.  
CLARKE TO REFER TO THE  
ERROR AS "THE MOST  
EXPENSIVE HYPHEN IN  
HISTORY"

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## BERNARD DOWIYOGO'S BIRD DROPPINGS

1968–2005

**Main Culprit:** Bernard Dowiyogo, President of Nauru (unknown–2003)

**Damage Done:** Bankruptcy of country

**Why:** Failing to manage or preserve the country's one real asset

*Being very conservative, they've blown between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion since 1968. And they haven't done it on their own. Every shonky (Australian colloquialism for shady) financier in the world descended on Nauru, gave them bad advice. I think Australia's responsibility is to sort it out because we don't want a rogue state taken over by the mafia in the Pacific. If they're really short of money they should sell the island ... sell it to a company that will develop it for tourism, for its fishing resources and for its mineral resources, pay them \$100–200 million for it and give them an annual income.*

—Helen Hughes Center for Independent Studies

Nauru, which lies halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii, is the world's smallest republic, covering just 8 square miles (14 sq km). It is also the setting for one of the most flagrant examples of *Idiotica* one can imagine—the bankrupting of one of the world's richest per capita countries in a matter of years by sheer greed. The story, remarkably, brings together the Russian mafia, the British West End stage, Collins Street in Melbourne, Afghan refugees, North Korean scientists, and bird droppings—a lot of bird droppings.

Called Pleasant Island by a passing British ship captain in 1798, it did not remain pleasant very long. By the time the Germans claimed it as a colony 90 years later, the inhabitants had used the guns left by passing whalers to kill each other, and 40 percent of the small population had died. Shortly after the Germans pulled out, the islanders realized that the island was covered in *guano*, dropped by seabirds over the centuries, which mixed with the decaying microorganisms from the ocean floor and, with the natural coral and limestone that formed the island, made for the richest and purest source of phosphate in the world. Exploitation under an imperial model immediately began, with a number of colonial masters exploiting the wealth that came from the middle of the island, essentially a littoral beach with a highland in the middle comprising pure phosphate. Nauru had very little natural water of its own and essentially, no other resources. It is perhaps the most remote country in the world.

Five separate colonial rulers controlled Nauru over the next 60 years or so, culminating in the cruel Japanese invasion and settlement; their idea of helping the locals deal with a leprosy outbreak was to take the afflicted out to sea in a boat and sink it. American air raids destroyed the Japanese phosphate facilities, which was useful for the war effort but unfortunately, took away Nauru's only source of income. The Australians ended up in charge of Nauru after the war, and so poor and run down was the island that they actually offered to move the 600 remaining locals wholesale to Fraser Island off the Queensland coast and abandon the island forever. The locals refused and opted instead for a form of independence, which would theoretically give them control over the phosphate mining process.

## WHAT THE BIRDS LEFT BEHIND



BERNARD  
DOWIYOGO

THE LOCALS RELIED ON  
IMPORTED FOOD, RESULTING  
IN A 50 PERCENT INCIDENCE  
OF DIABETES, A HUGE  
OBESITY PROBLEM, AND  
A MALE LIFE EXPECTANCY  
OF 55.

And so, spectacularly, it did. Nauru achieved, for want of a better word, independence in 1968. By the 1970s it had the greatest per capita income in the world. Newer technology and eager mining companies no longer held back by slothful colonial administrators mined the phosphate eagerly and efficiently. Nauru's population swelled to 12,000. Sadly, there really wasn't very much to do with the money—most of it was held in a trust that made investments across the world—real estate in Australia, including a 50-story Nauru House in Melbourne, an investment in a West End musical based on the life of Leonardo da Vinci that lasted just under three weeks and lost millions, and many other dubious schemes, or simply jet-set living for government officials. The locals relied on imported food and developed a taste for the less healthy items of Western cuisine, resulting in a 50 percent incidence of diabetes, a huge obesity problem, and a male life expectancy of 55. The only real recreation was drinking imported beer and driving around the 18-mile (29-km) circular road and crashing into each other; the road death rate was the highest in the world.

Even this version of the good life had to come to an end. The phosphate began to run out in the early 1990s, the money had pretty much all gone, and the interior of the island, known as "topside," had turned into an ecological nightmare, a desolate wasteland of jagged coral sticking up as high as 75 feet (23 m) in the interior of the island, much like a moonscape. The country's few international assets were seized when GE Capital essentially put the entire island into bankruptcy to recover \$91 million in debts. It is estimated that over \$1.5 billion dollars of cash and assets were squandered by mismanagement and greed, together with the effective destruction not only of the country's only natural resource, but the country itself. Locals in increasingly desperate poverty cling to the coastline and eke out what beer money they can. The phosphate will run out completely in three years.

**EASY COME,  
EASY GO**

The world is a strange place though, and the inhabitants of Nauru are nothing if not cunning and resourceful, though perhaps not the best investors in the world. The mixture of their temporary wealth and insistence on independence did give them membership in international organizations and the United Nations, and the ability to act in certain ways as international agents that most countries choose not to. Once

upon a time, this type of activity was limited to issuing attractive stamps with tropical scenes, or even, as with Liberia, acting to license commercial shipping around the world as “flags of convenience.” But by the 1990s there were much more lucrative alternatives: Nauru established itself on the Internet as the freewheeling offshore banking capital of the world. The Russian mafia, in particular, also coming into prominence at the same time, allegedly used Nauru’s “facilities” to launder as much as \$70 billion. Nauru had decreed that it was not necessary to keep records of deposits or withdrawals, in fact, any banking records at all, and that money vanished without a trace. Terrorist organizations also took full advantage of the Nauru willingness to issue passports to, well, anyone, so much so that Nauru ended up by 2001 on the Americans’ list of rogue states.

## **CIA’S STRANGE DEAL**

It would appear then that the Americans made a strange deal with the government of Nauru. They would wipe out all debt and put in money to rebuild the island in exchange for a CIA-sponsored initiative. The Nauru government would formally approach China, abandon its acknowledgment of Taiwan, and open an embassy for the sole purpose of allowing North Korean nuclear scientists to defect. There would be a couple of listening posts set up topside for good measure. Sadly, this all went wrong, as the Chinese had doubts about the supposed trade alliance, not least because Nauru had nothing left to trade and no money to buy anything with, and also because the embassy was staffed and paid for entirely by Westerners. The Americans pulled out of the deal, though using once more the strange ways of the modern world, the Nauru government took the CIA to international court to demand their money anyway, an interesting end gambit to what was supposed to be a top-secret deal. Nonetheless, as part of the deal the Nauru government had terminated the offshore banking and passport business and so were again completely at a loss for income.

Almost immediately, another almost bizarre income stream turned up—quite literally, in the form of a leaking wooden boat carrying an assortment of refugees from Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the civil war in Sri Lanka, en route to Australia. The refugees’ boat, as it was sinking, was fortunate enough to have been spotted by a passing Norwegian cargo vessel and rescued. However, Prime Minister John Howard, in



the midst of a general election campaign in which immigration and the status of refugees had become a major issue, refused permission for the refugees to land. Stateless and homeless, they had little choice but to stay on the Norwegian ship for weeks on end. Eventually, what Howard perhaps unfortunately called the "Pacific Solution" was hit upon. A refugee camp would be set up on Nauru, the nearest landmass to the ship, and the Australian government would pay millions in "aid" to the Nauru government in return for the refugees being given safe haven. It says much for what has happened to Pleasant Island in the last 200 years that upon seeing their new island "home," fighting broke out, with the refugees demanding to stay on board rather than be offloaded into the desolate wasteland that idiocy has made of the once beautiful tropical island of Nauru.

# DRINKING JIM JONES'S KOOL-AID: THE JONESTOWN SUICIDES

November 18, 1978

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprits:** The 900 followers of Jim Jones

**Damage Done:** Their deaths

**Why:** Drinking poisoned Kool-Aid before the authorities came to get them.

*Take our life from us. We laid it down. We got tired. We didn't commit suicide. We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.*

—The last words of Jim Jones, caught on tape

During the fifth century B.C., according to Thucydides, a small group of believers at the Temple of Juno on the island of Corcyra (now known as Corfu) took their own lives en masse when they realized their cause was lost. In the chaos and ruins of the People's Temple in Georgetown, Guyana, in November 1978, charismatic leader Jim Jones persuaded more than 900 of his followers to drink cyanide-laced Kool-Aid.

Jonestown was in many ways the Perfect Storm of the 1970s—the intersection of the heritage of Black Panther radicalism, the beginnings of tele-evangelism, the lifestyle of the 1960s hippies, and the appearance and belief in strange cults, coupled with the deep violence of the era, and the ease of belief in the coming apocalypse in the nuclear age. The United States was barely out of Vietnam, its cities on fire, its leading politicians and leaders gunned down, its prestige and values in tatters. It is way too easy to blame it all on the evil of one man, as has popularly been done, or even on the folly of those who believe in cults. It was all much more complex than that. Nonetheless, 900 or so people willingly drank poison out of faith in the words of one man. There is little evidence though that any of them thought they were going to a better hereafter. That at least would somewhat mitigate the idiocy if not the end result of their actions. Jones did not preach the life hereafter and the glories of Heaven. He had a much more apocalyptic and political message. Those who drank the Kool-Aid, with the exception of the unfortunate children whose own mothers poured it down their throats, believed their act to be one of “revolutionary suicide.” Once it was clear their cause was lost, they chose to end their lives. From the few who escaped, there is little evidence of true coercion, and none that they believed they were on the way to a better world.

CALIFORNIA PROVED FERTILE  
NOT JUST FOR THE GRAPES  
THAT THE PEOPLE'S TEMPLE  
GREW AND SOLD, BUT FOR  
ITS PEOPLE'S WILLINGNESS  
TO SEND IN MONEY.

Jim Jones was raised in Indianapolis. In the early sixties he became heavily involved in black radical politics and as a white man was subjected to much abuse, especially after attending and being deeply influenced by a Paul Robeson rally in Chicago. He was also heavily influenced by Philadelphia self-styled black messiah Father Divine, a contemporary of Marcus Garvey and a believer in the black redemptive quest that there was no future for black people in the United States, that they had to go elsewhere. As early as 1962 Jones spent two years in Brazil looking for a place to colonize. He set up in his hometown the

People's Temple, a mixture of this radical Pentecostalism with liberal human services, such as food kitchens and the like, together with a political agenda in favor of civil rights and fiercely opposed to segregation. By 1964 Jones had found a property in Mendocino, California, having rejected an offer of land in San Francisco as being too prone to nuclear attack, and a literal caravan of predominantly black families had followed him there. Slowly they were joined by refugees from the counterculture of California, white middle-class families mixing somewhat uneasily with the solidly working-class black refugees from Indiana. It was most certainly far from an idyllic community but it did grow and by 1970 a center had been opened on Geary Street in San Francisco where many people heard Jones preach his mixture of radical socialism and apocalypse. Still, Jones sought a way out of Babylon, and as his fame and notoriety grew in California, he found in Guyana a possible place for his flock to move to, and started clearing land.

California proved fertile not just for the grapes that the People's Temple grew and sold, but for its people's willingness to listen to radio broadcasts emanating from Jones, and to send in money. Much of the fortune amassed by the Temple came from money willingly sent in by an eager if gullible populace — this was the time of the appearance elsewhere of Jimmy Swaggart and others. But unlike some of the others, Jones did not appear to have engaged in personal accumulation of wealth or shady business practices. Nor did he ever preach everlasting salvation in return for the money. It was all about a strange mixture of revolutionary socialism, black radicalism, and getting away from Babylon, the evil of capitalism. It is not perhaps surprising that this was a heady mix for many in the 1970s, a peculiarly American mix at that. In fact, during the mid-decade Jones became heavily politically involved, especially in the election of George Moscone to the mayoralty of San Francisco. This involvement led to increasing investigation of the Temple's financial structure and general lifestyle. Jones had a much more revolutionary end in mind than mere party politics and, as in Indiana before, had a tendency to provoke fervid opposition. Money was filtering out at an increasing



JIM JONES

rate to the agricultural mission in Guyana, and a series of defections from the Temple aroused publicity. Then there was what looked like the beginnings of a tax investigation. Jones met with Black Panther Huey Newton, in Cuba, but wasn't interested in armed struggle against the state any more than he was in local politics.

## **CUSTODY BATTLE**

Throughout 1978 the true followers slowly made their way to Guyana. By now a group of relatives had raised serious concerns about the fate of their loved ones, launching a series of legal struggles over the fate of children from estranged families. No matter how far they had gone to form Zion, the group of Concerned Relatives would now follow them; they themselves were well funded and had an excellent PR machine. There was going to be no Promised Land for the People's Temple. Arriving at the mission the settlers found privation, as their many predecessors fleeing religious persecution had in the past. The Pilgrim Fathers probably wouldn't have fared too well if at the first Thanksgiving they also had to contend with the media and the IRS. The Guyanese authorities got caught up in the legal battles over custody. The Concerned Relatives were able to enlist a local congressman and a TV crew to head for the People's Temple. Leo Ryan and a group of journalists made the trek in November, and arrived at the camp on November 16. Angry negotiations and recriminations followed, but a settlement was reached and a small number of defectors were allowed to leave with Congressman Ryan. At the airstrip the group was ambushed by a tractor full of armed men and one of the defectors opened fire on Ryan and the journalists, three of whom died with Ryan and one of the defectors in the ensuing gunfire.

The likelihood is that this event was carefully staged by Jones as the instigating act that would anger his followers sufficiently to join him in the revolutionary suicide that he had clearly been planning in the previous month. A 100-pound (45-kg) container of potassium cyanide had been delivered, along with the herbicides and fertilizers being used for agricultural purposes, a week or so earlier. It seems probable that he was in serious ill health and was dying. He also knew there was no chance that the group would be left in peace or survive out there. A tumultuous meeting took place where Jones persuaded the group that armed forces would descend on the camp and kill them or imprison them. He was undoubtedly correct, in that the murder of a U.S. congressman would



indeed have forced the hand of the authorities. Some remonstrated against the plan, and a few tried and managed to escape. Jones's last words, heard on tape, were, "Take our life from us. We laid it down. We got tired. We didn't commit suicide. We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world."

What is interesting in the mayhem that followed is the actions of some of the adherents who weren't in the Temple. Some had fled with the Temple's proceeds in an attempt to hand the money over to the Soviet Union, but they were arrested. One woman who was in a house in Georgetown hiding out from her estranged husband, one of the Concerned Relatives, killed herself and her children with a butcher's knife. The Temple's U.S.-based PR man called a press conference a few months later in Modesto. After trying and failing to defend the Temple against the inevitable cult accusations, he delivered a speech to the assembled journalists saying, "I can't disassociate myself from the people who died, nor do I want to. The people weren't brainwashed fanatics or cultists; the Temple was not a cult." He went into the motel bathroom and shot himself in the head. Gradually, other survivors agreed with the deprogrammers that they had been duped by an evil cult leader. People fought much more readily for the \$10 million in assets that the Temple left behind than the bodies of the dead. The lawyer appointed to wind up the business affairs awarded himself fees of \$480,000, while more than 200 unclaimed victims were buried two to a coffin in unmarked graves in California.

Of course, the 900 deserve their place in these pages: Chugging down cyanide-laced Kool-Aid is a desperate act. But for the most part, they harmed no one except themselves and their immediate families. They faced at best an uncertain future, probably jail for many, in a society they truly despised. Given the chance, most of those who had been deemed by their families to be there against their will had not taken the opportunity to go with Congressman Ryan. They weren't drugged, they weren't hypnotized, and while the point they were seeking to make was lost in a welter of media sensationalism and breast beating, the reader will find many more idiotic gestures in this book that caused a great deal more damage and were a lot less explicable than the Jonestown 900.

A TUMULTUOUS MEETING

TOOK PLACE WHERE JONES

PERSUADED THE GROUP THAT

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## MOTIVATION

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## UNION CARBIDE'S COST CUTTING: BHOPAL

December 3, 1984

**Main Culprit:** Union Carbide of India

**Damage Done:** Perhaps 20,000 dead and horrific aftereffects

**Why:** No care or attention as opposed to the delights of saving money

*The poison cloud was so dense and searing that people were reduced to near blindness. As they gasped for breath its effects grew ever more suffocating. The gases burned the tissues of their eyes and lungs and attacked their nervous systems. People lost control of their bodies. Urine and feces ran down their legs. Women lost their unborn children as they ran, their wombs spontaneously opening in bloody abortion.*

—Anonymous eyewitness account, from a survivor's web site

The explosion at the Union Carbide chemical factory in Bhopal, India, claimed many lives and stands tribute to the craven indifference of those who ran the plant to the well-being of those working there. So poor were the safety measures, so determined was the company to maximize profit, and so slovenly were both the design of the plant and the procedures that went into it, that this early experiment in outsourcing and globalization will hopefully serve as a warning to those companies eager to save money by outsourcing. Sloth and greed are the defining factors.

The aftermath of the incident still rankles many in India, and some 20 years later, many still claim their suffering has not been properly compensated, and blame is still disputed. The chief magistrate of Bhopal issued an indictment for criminal homicide in 1992 for the murder of 20,000 people, which has never been answered in court. Union Carbide, now part of Dow Chemical and long disassociated from the Indian company, claims the disaster was an act of sabotage and that they have amply compensated the victims, and indeed, established the web site [www.bhopal.com](http://www.bhopal.com) to maintain that claim.

Certain facts are beyond dispute. Union Carbide established their Indian operation in the 1930s. The Bhopal factory was built in 1969, based on the design of a similar West Virginia plant but without the same standards of construction or materials. The plant was built in a highly populated part of the city. Bhopal is the capital of the Madhya Pradesh province in the center of India. Shortly after midnight on December 3, 1984, methyl isocyanate gas leaked from tank 610 at the Bhopal pesticide plant and the explosion killed at least 3,800 people immediately in a fearsome gas cloud that spread over 12 square miles (20 sq km) within minutes. Methyl isocyanate (MIC) was used to make the pesticide Sevin. It is a derivative of phosgene—better known as the poison gas used in World War I. Mixed with water, MIC boils and becomes unstable, which is what happened on the night of December 3. At least 150,000 people are thought to have been in some way disabled by the blast, and 20,000 is the generally accepted death toll. The city's miscarriage rate remains seven times the Indian national average, and 4,000 people a day still line up for treatment at 23 special gas relief hospitals. An eyewitness of that night, Rashida Bi, a survivor who lost five gas-exposed family



WARREN  
ANDERSON

members to cancers, said those who escaped with their lives “are the unlucky ones; the lucky ones are those who died on that night.”

By 1989 a final settlement had been reached with Union Carbide for \$470 million to be paid to families of victims and survivors, against an initial claim of \$3 billion. By 1992 Union Carbide had pulled out of its ownership of Union Carbide India and the land itself, removing themselves, in their mind, from all further liability in the case. The average disabled survivor receives \$2.35 a month from the compensation plan. In 1999, when the official lease ran out, the plant was simply abandoned. The Indian government claims it lacks the massive resources necessary to clean up the site. Children play on land suffused with toxic chemicals, perhaps 5,000 tons of waste materials. Shareholders of Dow Chemical sued to prevent the purchase of Union Carbide, fearing that liability would not, in fact, go away, especially after Dow agreed to settle outstanding asbestos claims relating to Union Carbide of some \$800 million. A 2004 European Commission reported that leaking chemicals are still affecting water supplies in the region. A 1999 Greenpeace report claimed mercury levels at nearly 6,000,000 times safe levels.

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The essence of the problem lay in the plant’s control room. The pressure gauge that would have indicated the fatal buildup of MIC pressure wasn’t actually there at all. Other gauges had malfunctioned so often that even though they were showing problems in the hours leading up to the explosion, the operators tended to ignore them. One gauge was showing an empty tank as being 22 percent full; others had been incorrectly calibrated. Before the explosion, MIC gas engulfed the control room. The operators did not have oxygen masks and had to flee for their lives, ending any faint hope that an operator could have saved the day. Not one of the six safety systems was working properly and, sabotage or not, cost-saving measures had clearly led to serious cuts in safety procedures. The work crew of the MIC unit had been cut from 12 to 6; the maintenance crew from 6 to 2. The dangers of water mixed with methyl isocyanate were well known. There had been at least three major incidents in the four years immediately preceding the disaster, killing one worker and seriously injuring 35, all from phosgene. Remedial measures had been taken at the West Virginia plant—but not at Bhopal. Four different safety systems were in place to prevent just such an occurrence. All failed. Flares should have come on to burn off the escaping gas and didn’t; a missing piece of pipe had not been



replaced; caustic washes could have neutralized it but didn't because they weren't turned on until it was too late. The refrigeration unit that would have kept the gas cool and avoided any issues with water entering the tank had been shut off to save money. And finally, the warning sirens had been turned off so as not to cause false alarm within the local community. Other investigations showed more problems that had led to these maintenance disasters; personnel problems and desperately weak training plans meant most operators had no real idea of the materials they were dealing with, much less the dangers. Instructions were written in English but operators spoke only Hindi. Organizational rigidity led to no action being taken after the three earlier incidents involving MIC. Many of these issues had come up in a Union Carbide safety audit of 1982—nothing had been done.

Though controversy reigns, it seems likely the plant had been losing money and that cuts had been ordered. Demand had gone down because of a prevailing drought and there is clear evidence of deliberate cost cutting. Regardless of whether water was deliberately introduced into the tanks or not, and although the commissions found that it was, no reason appears to exist for the act of sabotage itself. The company claimed their safety systems were in place to prevent water from leaking in, rendering the need for the other safety mechanisms less necessary, since what did happen couldn't happen. The absolute failure of safety precautions, which no one really denies, in a plant using what amounted to poison gas in a third-world country points to a level of neglect that chemical companies all agree should never be repeated, and supposedly will never happen again. In 1991 the local government in Bhopal charged Warren Anderson, Union Carbide's CEO at the time of the disaster, with manslaughter. If tried in India and convicted, he faces a maximum of 10 years in prison. However, Mr. Anderson has never stood trial before an Indian court. He has, instead, evaded an international arrest warrant and a summons to appear before a U.S. court. For years his whereabouts were unknown, and it wasn't until August of 2002 that Greenpeace found him, living a life of luxury in the Hamptons. Neither the American nor the Indian government seem interested in disturbing him with an order of extradition.

## **COST CUTTING**



## MOTIVATION

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## ROBERT MAXWELL AND THE MIRROR PENSIONERS

1984–November 5, 1991

**Main Culprit:** Robert Maxwell (1923–1991)

**Damage Done:** The first (but not the last) to raid his own company's pensions funds

**Why:** Multi-millionaire “borrows” from employees pension funds then throws himself off yacht when he can't repay

*He left me reeling from his charm ... his amazing panache and the sheer speed at which his brain worked. He was my inspiration and my hero.*

—Anne Robinson, former Maxwell journalist and now famous TV game show host

*Like a woolly mammoth stomping through a primeval forest, not immoral so much as pre-moral. You could at moments feel something bordering on pity and affection for him.*

—Peter Jay, former U.K. ambassador to the United States

Jan Ludwig Hoch—a.k.a. Cap'n Bob, a.k.a. The Bouncing Czech, the man who revolutionized academic journal publishing—owned one of England's most famous tabloids. He twice led the corporate world into new methods of scandal now commonplace. He had to resign his position as a Member of Parliament, allegedly was a Mossad spy, died under most mysterious circumstances falling off his yacht, and was buried honorably on the Mount of Olives. There need be no one in the cast of this drama but the man himself—Robert Maxwell.

Under enormous pressure from banks and the media, and based on his inability to accept the imminent failure of his business empire, Robert Maxwell helped himself to the entire proceeds of the pension funds of his many employees across the world to save the flagging fortunes of his company, and lost them, ruining tens of thousands of families, from print workers at the *Daily Mirror* to New York publishing executives at Macmillan. After Maxwell's mysterious nautical death, with no one to prosecute but his hapless sons, and no money left after the corporate banks were paid off, these pensions were never recovered. At the time, this wasn't even illegal. It had never occurred to the authorities that an owner would do anything so stupid and so heinous. They underestimated Robert Maxwell, as many others had in the past.

Jan Ludwig Hoch was born in a tiny village in the Carpathian mountains in what was then Czechoslovakia in 1923. His parents were Orthodox Jews who apparently died at the hands of the Nazis. He claimed never to have had a pair of shoes until he was seven. He fled to England at the age of 17, lied about his age, changed his name to Ian Robert Maxwell, joined the army, and fought with great distinction during World War II, as his early employees had daily cause to remember. When he came into work they had to rise and say, "Good Morning, Captain Maxwell." His war career, at least, was genuine enough. He was in the second wave of the Normandy landings and won the Military Cross for bravery under German fire in Holland. Maxwell stayed in Germany as part of the information division of the victorious Allies restructuring the German newspaper industry. Soon after, he saw a gap in the scientific publishing world that had previously been largely conducted in German, and started his own company, Pergamon Press. Relocating to England, he found himself in the company of many

MAXWELL JOINED THE ARMY  
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Central European refugees, who revolutionized book publishing in this period. Always keen to embrace his homeland, Maxwell entered politics, and, somewhat incongruously, given his rapidly growing wealth, he became a strongly left-wing member of the Labor party in 1964. In 1968 he tried and failed to buy BPCC, the leading British printer. The following year a planned sale of Pergamon to raise money for another shot at BPCC came to disaster. Serious questions were raised about accounting practices, mostly connected to dubious profits reported from transactions with other Maxwell companies. Especially interesting in the light of subsequent events, Maxwell was accused of buying up Pergamon shares with money from one of his own private companies in Switzerland to inflate the Pergamon share price and make the company appear more profitable and valuable than it was. So serious were the charges that he lost control of Pergamon and was forced to resign as a Labor MP. A Department of Trade and Industry tribunal reached, after a three-year inquiry, what at that time was an almost unprecedented conclusion: "We regret having to conclude that, notwithstanding Mr. Maxwell's acknowledged abilities and energy, he is in our opinion not a person who can be relied on to exercise proper stewardship of a publicly quoted company." This conclusion only makes the willingness of investors and banks to allow Maxwell to create the subsequent catastrophe even more extraordinary.

#### **THE COMEBACK KID**

For 10 years Maxwell regrouped. He was horrified by what had happened to him as owner of a public company, and determined that the disgrace should never happen again. He did not appreciate others meddling in his control over his empire and determined not only that "nobody could tell me how to run my companies," but that no one, not even his family, would fully understand how he was running them. He set up a private trust in the principality of Lichtenstein and set out to buy back all he had lost—and more. No criminal charges were ever brought against him, and only a few years later he was allowed to buy a public company again. First he bought back Pergamon, but this time privately, and made it more profitable than ever. Then he finally bought BPCC, and by 1984 fulfilled one of his deepest ambitions by buying the *Daily Mirror*, Britain's most left-wing tabloid newspaper, where he frequently graced the front page with his gargantuan presence himself, often in support of charitable or patriotic causes. BPCC became

Maxwell Communications Corporation. In 1987 he returned to his initial business of book publishing and attempted to buy Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in the United States. So horrified was Jovanovich, himself born not 20 miles (33 km) away from Maxwell, and son of a Polish miner, that he bankrupted himself and his company, buying back shares so that the hated Maxwell could never take control. Undeterred and increasingly out of control, Maxwell bought and invested in a number of different interests, including: cable TV, more printers, publishers in the United Kingdom and United States, banks and security companies, as well as fashion house Christian Dior.

In 1988 Maxwell purchased the mighty U.S. publisher Macmillan. Macmillan became Maxwell Macmillan, with himself as chairman and chief executive. It is still unclear whether by now any of this mélange of companies was actually making any money. Certainly there was little holding any of it together other than the mighty ego of their owner and the continued willingness of banks to fund the spree. A number of books attempting to expose some of Maxwell's practices were written, and Maxwell hired libel lawyer Anthony Julius (later to become Princess Diana's divorce lawyer) to use whatever means possible to stop the books from appearing. This even included buying out the paperback publisher of one of the books.

By 1990, though, even the banks were nervous. The American journalist Seymour Hersh published allegations about Maxwell's potential links with the Israeli Secret Service, the Mossad. The editor of the *Daily Mirror* was fired for even mentioning another allegation about the connections between Maxwell's private life and his serious connections with international intelligence agencies. Some of the companies were sold off for immediate cash, even Pergamon. Famously, Maxwell sold Berlitz language schools to a Japanese publisher, only for lawyers to discover after money had been exchanged that the company's ownership deeds were missing. Maxwell had already mortgaged Berlitz to a bank and not told anyone. His new daily newspaper *The European*, was losing money at a fantastic rate. In the middle of all this, Maxwell bought New York's *Daily News*. But a few months later he disappeared from his yacht off the



ROBERT  
MAXWELL



Canary Islands. His bloated body, identifiable only by its considerable bulk, washed up a day or so later, and after no apparent autopsy, flown to Israel where, to the astonishment of all in the United Kingdom, he was given an immediate and most formal state burial and interred on the sacred Mount of Olives.

It was in Robert Maxwell's nature to leave behind a scandal much greater than anything even he had concocted in his lifetime. In this case, he managed two. One, the mystery of his death—he had talked to his wife, his sons, his business associates, his libel lawyers, hours before his death and given no hint of depression or suicide. It was not even easy to envisage a man of his bulk lifting himself over the side of a substantial luxury yacht. To this day, conspiracy theories reign, the most recent that he had been spying for the Mossad for decades, publishing the works of famous international celebrities being a wonderful cover for undercover work. Running desperately short of cash, he approached the Israeli government for financial help, then threatened to uncover all of the Mossad's activities when none was forthcoming, leading to an assassination plot. Then as the theory goes, the assassination was covered up by the funeral in which Maxwell was ceremoniously buried next to Israel's most revered heroes.

A FEW MONTHS LATER  
MAXWELL DISAPPEARED  
FROM HIS YACHT OFF THE  
CANARY ISLANDS. HIS  
BLOATED BODY, IDENTIFIABLE  
ONLY BY ITS CONSIDERABLE  
BULK, WASHED UP A DAY OR  
SO LATER.

But for his almost 35,000 worldwide employees, things were much worse than anyone had imagined. He had learned rather more from the mistakes he made in 1969 than the regulators ever had, and had done a substantially better job covering his tracks. And it has to be said that he laid the ground for similar corporate offenses against employees in the United States some 20 years later.

By the time the investigations (contained in a 500-page U.K. Department of Trade and Industry report) were completed, it emerged that Maxwell had siphoned some £450 million from his own employees' pension plans. This seems to have started around 1985, when he borrowed money from one of the plans but paid it back the same year and didn't show the transaction on the books. No one noticed or cared, and as anyone who worked for Maxwell would attest, no one involved was going to say anything. Emboldened by this, the borrowing became more and more endemic and complicated. As 16 years previously, Maxwell boosted his company's share price by buying his own shares



from offshore private companies he also owned, except this time with his employees' money rather than his. No one ever really suggested that he didn't intend to repay as he did before; after all, from Maxwell's point of view, his companies were expanding, and were better every day. What safer way to take care of his employees' futures than by investing their money in his company for them? So complex were the ownership schemes that the fund managers for the plans, (let alone the pensioners themselves), were not aware that their investments were all being earmarked for Maxwell companies. Decades later, employees in major U.S. companies were at least told their salaries were invested in their own companies, even if they were given little choice. In 1988 Maxwell Communications borrowed £3 billion to finance the purchase of the U.S. publisher Macmillan and Official Airline Guides. He used the pension funds as collateral on the loans. In 1990 he was forced to repay some of this money and had to empty the pension funds to do so. No institution, none of his accountants or legal staff, appeared able or willing to stop him. And no auditor or financial regulatory institution seemed to notice. But only the pension moneys were now holding the whole edifice together. Still he bought companies; after all, the more employees he had, the more pension money he had to spend. Not satisfied with the 20,000 or so employees of the Mirror Group, he now had substantial numbers of U.S. employees as well. Finally, in late 1990 an astute financial journalist noted that the Maxwell pension plans were not invested in any of the top 100 blue chip companies in the U.K., save one, Maxwell Communications Corporation. Questions were beginning to be asked, and there is no doubt that the looming disaster and shame this would bring were on Maxwell's mind that fateful night on his yacht.

Enormous media outcry led to a number of parliamentary review committees that took years to report, and attempts to introduce more regulation to protect employees.

In June 1992 a trust was set up to help the 32,000 dispossessed pension fund holders.

A second trust was set up as an emergency charity organization and raised £16,000 to help the very elderly and most needy. Twin sisters Sylvia and Cynthia Hilton worked for Maxwell for 38 years at Nuffield

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—GOVERNMENT

PRONOUNCEMENT

Press in Oxford, England. They were laid off in 1992 as Maxwell's empire crumbled and found themselves on unemployment, with six years left before they could qualify for state pensions, and without the £60,000 pounds they had supposedly safely invested in the pension plan. Stress led to much illness, and by estimates, as many as several hundred fatalities among suddenly insolvent retired workers.

By 1997 the main trust had raised £7 million to attempt to pay back and reinstate the plans. Much of the money came from those city institutions that had allowed the fiasco to happen in the first place and whose role in the idiocy was beginning to become very clear. Not much advance on £480 million. But as late as 2002 the British government wrote to the pensioners telling them that their pensions would be half of what had been promised to them when the trust was closed.

Yet many who worked for Maxwell continued to defend, or at least attempt to explain, his actions as more than sheer greed. Robert Maxwell really believed in himself and that he could do no wrong.

"The most important lesson from all the events is that high ethical and professional standards must always be put before commercial advantage. The reputation of the financial markets depends on it," read the conclusion of the final British Department of Trade and Industry report on the Maxwell case. No one was ever successfully prosecuted for their role in the case. As a recent article in *The Independent* pointed out, many senior employees of the Maxwell group at the time now occupy high positions in the media and government circles. Although "to do a Maxwell" became a byword for corporate greed and idiotic business decisions, recent events have shown all too clearly that the piffling £3 million fine levied on Coopers Lybrand, Maxwell Communications' auditors for their failures in the case, did little to stop it all from happening again.

# THE SOVIET NUCLEAR LEGACY: CHERNOBYL

April 25, 1986

## MOTIVATION

anger  
 charity  
 envy  
 faith  
 gluttony  
 greed  
 hope  
 lust  
 pride  
 sloth

**Main Culprits:** Soviet management culture

**Damage Done:** Perhaps 100,000 slow deaths from thyroid cancer

**Why:** Complete mismanagement of nuclear power plant test procedure results in massive meltdown

*I can still picture the bright raspberry glow; the reactor radiated light from within somehow. I had never seen anything like it, even in the movies. Or read about it. When it got dark the whole town piled out onto their balconies, and people who didn't have one went to friends and neighbors who did. We were on the ninth floor, with great visibility. People took their small children outside, lifted them up and said, "Look, how beautiful! Don't forget this!" And these were people who worked at the reactor—engineers, laborers. And teachers. Physics teachers. We stood in the horrible black dust... talking... breathing... admiring. We did not know—that death could be so beautiful.*

—Unidentified eyewitness

Accidents happen, usually through a blend of human misadventure and technical breakdown, and cannot be attributed purely to idiocy. Most travel-related accidents, such as train, boat, or plane, are immediately blamed on the unfortunate driver or pilot, especially if they die in the crash and cannot defend themselves. All too frequently years later some government or corporate decision to cut costs turns out to carry the main responsibility—maintenance times extended, design flaws covered up, track safety privatized. But even the avarice of companies or the sloth of government does not quite qualify for a record in the annals of idiocy.

Such an incident happened on the night of April 25–26, 1986, in the Russian—now Ukrainian—town of Chernobyl, a name now synonymous with nuclear mishap. One moment worthy of Homer Simpson sitting in his office at the Springfield nuclear power plant led within 45 seconds to a nuclear explosion 100 times larger than that of Hiroshima. One could make the argument that the world's entire nuclear power program is potentially more deadly than any folly outlined in these pages, of course. And indeed whatever the nature of the idiocies involved that fateful night, the immediate impact was actually substantially less than that of thousands of other accidents. Only 31 people were killed instantly by the force of the explosion and another 50 or so rescue workers and firefighters in the immediate aftermath. It was the effects of the unleashed radiation that to this day remain unknown.

Chernobyl is situated 62 miles (100 km) north of Kiev, just south of the border with Belarus. It was a massive nuclear complex with four reactors, now closed down—only since 2000—and now the site of what is believed to be the largest movable structure ever built, a 370-foot (113 m), 35-story tall, 20,000 ton steel shell to enclose Reactor Number Four and allow machines and workers safely to continue work on the cleanup of the debris inside.

**SECRET TIPS** Two events in 1979 might have given cause for concern to the operators and workers at the complex. On February 21, 1979, future Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov, then chairman of the Ukrainian KGB, wrote a secret memorandum to the USSR Committee for State Security:

According to data in the possession of the KGB of the USSR, design deviations and violations are occurring at various places at

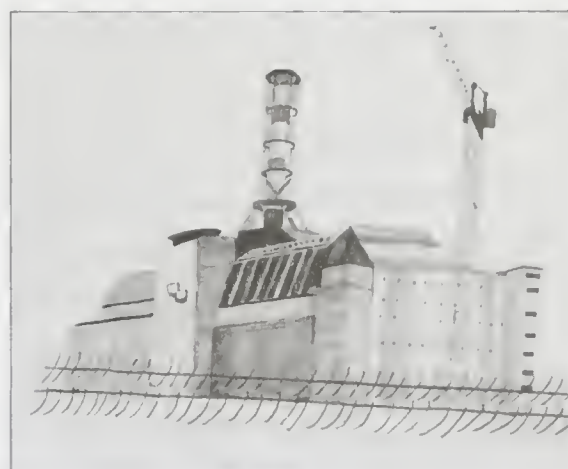


Chernobyl, and these could lead to mishaps and accidents...the leadership of the Directorate is not devoting proper attention.

One month later a partial meltdown occurred at Three Mile Island, an American nuclear facility at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which had been open for only a year. The reports into this incident over the years bear striking parallels with Chernobyl: poor design, inadequate training, weak systems, bad construction. Much has been made of Chernobyl as emblematic of the general malaise of the Soviet system, an allegory for the fall of the regime itself. But it is reasonably clear that the Three Mile Island incident was just one step away from a tragedy of equal proportion, and that one misstep, as happened in the Ukraine, could have had a similarly devastating effect on the entire eastern seaboard. Crucially, the chain of events leading to Three Mile Island began with the failure of a pressure valve. Operators believed incorrectly that safety systems would kick into place. By the time they realized what was happening, half the core had melted down and a major accident was only narrowly averted. Thousands had fled, a Roman Catholic priest had offered general absolution, and hysteria had prevailed for four to five days. The unfortunate residents of the town of Chernobyl didn't even get that warning; they just got nuked, quite literally. Even now, regulatory authorities define Chernobyl as a "unique event," point to safety regulations introduced since then, opine about Soviet mismanagement, and keep building the plants.

On April 25, prior to a routine shutdown, the reactor crew at Chernobyl-4 began preparing for a test to determine how long turbines would spin and supply power following a loss of the main electrical power supply. Similar tests had already been carried out at Chernobyl and other plants, despite the fact that these reactors were known to be very unstable at low power settings. The test was supposed to take place during the day shift when better-trained and more experienced workers were available. However, at 2:00 in the afternoon, as power was being reduced, an emergency call from Kiev for more power led to a nine-hour delay in the procedure. Power reduction restarted only 50 minutes before a shift change at midnight and was still in progress as the night shift came on. Within half an hour a mistake on shifting the

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CHERNOBYL REACTOR  
NUMBER FOUR



process to manual control had resulted in a dangerous lowering of coolant water. At 1:15 P.M. the automatic shutdown system was immobilized so that the test could continue. This test was not essential by any means but could be done only while the reactor was on its semi-annual shutdown, and great pressure was put on the operators to complete it. The night-shift operators were apparently completely unaware that the test posed any particular danger, let alone what those dangers might be or how to prevent them. Despite a variety of warning signals, insufficient cooling waters, and abnormal indicators from the reactor, the test began at 1:23:04 the morning of April 26. Up to now, even beyond this point, no actual accident had occurred, not even at the trivial Three Mile Island level; the entire disaster stemmed from a series of errors in every facet of the process, but still would never have happened had this last act of idiocy not taken place.

As the flow of coolant water diminished, power output increased. When the operator moved to shut down the reactor from its unstable condition arising from previous errors, a peculiarity of the design caused a dramatic power surge. The fuel elements ruptured and the resultant explosive force of steam lifted off the cover plate of the reactor, releasing fission products into the atmosphere. A second explosion threw out fragments of burning fuel and graphite from the core and allowed air to rush in, causing the graphite moderator to burst into flames. The reactor exploded at 1:24 A.M., 56 seconds after the test began.

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The results may not be fully known for years. Within days, yellow rain was dropping across the region. More than 131,000 local inhabitants were evacuated immediately, followed within a week by a quarter of a million more. Around 150,000 sq km of the region with seven million inhabitants is considered contaminated by cesium-137. Thyroid cancer rates have more than doubled and are ultimately expected to cause the deaths of up to 100,000 people. Birth defects remain high across Belarus, which took the brunt of the fallout, and Ukraine. Radioactivity was found at unusually high levels as far away as Wales, and remains significant in the soil across Scandinavia and Germany. One-fifth of the population of Belarus has been relocated, and 2 million acres of farmland cannot be used. In 2000, 5 percent of Ukraine's GDP was being swallowed up by disaster mitigation efforts. The total cost is anticipated worldwide at \$400 billion and a total of 200 years to rectify.

# AHMED BAHDIB, AFGHANISTAN, OSAMA BIN LADEN, AND THE CIA

January 1989–September 11, 2001

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprits:** The CIA through Ahmed Bahdib

**Damage Done:** Direct link to 9/11

**Why:** Arming potential enemy to fight another one, then losing interest

*For us, the idea was not to get involved more than necessary in the fight against the Russians, which was the business of the Americans, but rather to show our solidarity with our Islamist brothers. I discovered that it was not enough to fight in Afghanistan, but that we had to fight on all fronts against communist or Western oppression. The urgent thing was communism, but the next target was America. ... This is an open war up to the end, until victory.*

**—Osama bin Laden, April 1995**

Afghanistan has been the end of many an imperial dream, dating back many centuries. No more formidable empire found its nemesis in Afghanistan, however, than the Soviet Empire, which got bogged down in an Afghan adventure in the 1980s and left its army and its finances demoralized and bedraggled. The CIA and the Americans correctly saw the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan as a blunder that they could take full advantage of. As is the way of diplomacy, former enemies became friends and somewhat unsavory elements became even newer friends. Unfortunately, the fall of the Soviet Union found the Americans believing too much of their own rhetoric and with extraordinary and idiotic sloth, they allowed the anticommunist elements they had themselves armed to become an enemy, not only ideologically antagonistic but extraordinarily well armed. To aid and abet the arming of one's enemy on such an alarming scale led directly to a series of anti-American terrorist attacks across the world culminating in the events of September 11, 2001.

At the crossroads of Central Asia, Afghanistan has had a turbulent history. In 328 B.C., Alexander the Great entered the territory of present-day Afghanistan, then part of the Persian Empire, to capture Bactria (present-day Balkh). Invasions by the Scythians, White Huns, and Turks followed in succeeding centuries. In 642 A.D., Arabs invaded the entire region and introduced Islam.

**A REBEL  
BREEDING  
GROUND**

Arab rule gave way to the Persians, who controlled the area until conquered by the Turkic Ghaznavids in 998. Mahmud of Ghazni (998–1030) consolidated the conquests of his predecessors and turned Ghazni into a great cultural center as well as a base for frequent forays into India. Following Mahmud's short-lived dynasty, various princes attempted to rule sections of the country until the Mongol invasion of 1219. The Mongol invasion, led by Genghis Khan, resulted in massive slaughter of the population, destruction of many cities, including Herat, Ghazni, and Balkh, and the despoliation of fertile agricultural areas.

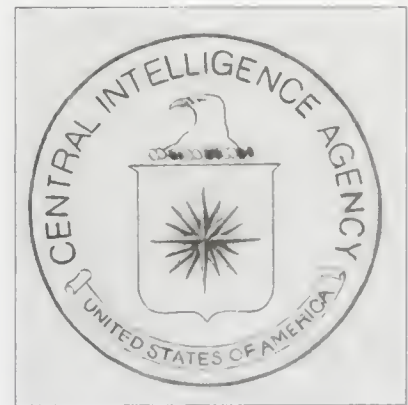
Following Genghis Khan's death in 1227, a succession of petty chiefs and princes struggled for supremacy until late in the fourteenth century, when one of his descendants, Tamerlane, incorporated Afghanistan into his own vast Asian empire. Babur, a descendant of Tamerlane and

the founder of India's Moghul dynasty at the beginning of the sixteenth century, made Kabul the capital of an Afghan principality.

In 1747 Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of what is known today as Afghanistan, established his rule. A Pashtun, Durrani was elected king by a tribal council after the assassination of the Persian ruler Nadir Shah at Khabushan in the same year. Throughout his reign, Durrani consolidated chieftainships, petty principalities, and fragmented provinces into one country. His rule extended from Mashad in the west to Kashmir and Delhi in the east, and from the Amu Darya (Oxus) River in the north to the Arabian Sea in the south. With the exception of a nine-month period in 1929, all of Afghanistan's rulers until the 1978 Marxist coup were from Durrani's Pashtun tribal confederation, and all were members of that tribe's Mohammadzai clan after 1818.

During the nineteenth century, collision between the expanding British Empire in the subcontinent and czarist Russia significantly influenced Afghanistan in what was termed "The Great Game." British concern over Russian advances in Central Asia and growing influence in Persia culminated in two Anglo-Afghan wars over the Afghan throne. During the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman (1880–1901), the British and Russians officially established the boundaries of what would become modern Afghanistan. The British retained effective control over Kabul's foreign affairs, until the partition of India brought an end to their influence. American influence had never been that great in the region. The first American contact was made by Josiah Harlan, an adventurer from Pennsylvania, who was an advisor in Afghan politics in the 1830s, and the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's story "The Man Who Would be King." Diplomatic relations were established in 1934 and thereafter, America made modest aid grants and the Peace Corps was active.

Muslim-governed Pakistan became a very different neighbor from British India, and when Iran, Afghanistan's neighbor to the south and east, fell under the *ayatollahs*, there were radical Islamist states on both sides. The disasters of the two wars against Israel had led to great disillusion among many intellectuals in the Arab world as to what had gone



SEAL OF THE CIA



wrong with Islam. And the oil crisis of the 1970s had put untold billions of dollars into the hands of many *sheikhs* across the Arab world, especially in Saudi Arabia. Strong radical elements saw the reigning monarchs and presidents of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia as dangerously modernist and Westernized.

Historically, the Russians saw Afghanistan as part of their sphere of influence. They were nervous also about the increase of Islamic extremism spreading into some of the Soviet Republics to the south that had heavily Muslim populations. An extremist regime in Kabul was a significant threat to the security of the Soviet Empire. Of course, the Americans saw no such thing. The year 1979 was perhaps no longer the height of the Cold War, but State Department thinking was still dominated by the certainty that the threat of communism superceded all others. The kidnapping and murder of U.S. Ambassador Adolph Dubs in February 1979 was significant however; suddenly the very same people who months before had wrested control of Iran from the fallen *shah* and were taking American hostages in the famous months leading to the downfall of President Jimmy Carter—the very same religious extremists who were anathema in Tehran—were freedom fighters a few miles up the road. It is hard to overstate the idiocy of this belief, not just with hindsight either, but from the bewildered perspective of many at the time.

#### THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

The irony of the disastrous support of the *Mujaheddin* in Afghanistan was that it was, in fact, very successful. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was indeed their version of Vietnam. Supported by American money, rebels armed with Stinger missiles wreaked havoc and the Soviets, unable to control the country any more than their historical predecessors had, withdrew in shame in 1989.

That was the year when the idiocy started, however. With the communist threat gone, the Americans simply lost interest. The State Department and the CIA, still reeling from the mistakes of Vietnam, had no desire to control the political process during the anti-Soviet *jihad*, and no interest at all in involvement in Afghani affairs after the Soviets had gone. The explicit policy was to focus on supplying arms to anyone who wanted to oppose the Soviets, regardless of their motivation. They left Pakistani and Saudi intelligence to sort out who was who



among the rebels. Congress appropriated covert funds; the money would be flown to Riyadh where Ahmed Bahdib, chief of staff to Prince Turki al-Faisal, chief of Saudi intelligence, had almost free rein with the money. Bahdib had been a schoolteacher. One of his students in Jeddah had been Osama bin Laden, who was a peripheral partner of Saudi intelligence at the time. Bin Laden used his own personal fortune as well as Saudi and CIA money to establish the infrastructure, not only of the anti-Soviet *jihad*, but laying the physical infrastructure for a Pakistani-backed Islamist regime in Kabul, as well as the arms and know-how for his own ongoing network—al-Qaeda. Thus, America was instrumental in arming the person who would become its own worst enemy, and letting him control a country that was to become the base for his operation, a base without which al-Qaeda and its predecessors had been doomed only to carry out small-scale bombings and terrorist outrages. The toll from this set of decisions, made from ignorance, lack of attention, laziness, and single-mindedness, is still being counted today.

THE OIL CRISIS OF THE 1970S  
HAD PUT UNTOLD BILLIONS  
OF DOLLARS INTO THE  
HANDS OF MANY SHEIKHS  
ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD,  
ESPECIALLY IN SAUDI ARABIA.

MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

# GERALD RATNER'S “CRAP”

April 1991

**Main Culprit:** Gerald Ratner (1950– )

**Damage Done:** Destruction of his own company

**Why:** Deriding his own product in public

*It was a total nightmare. One day I was on top of the world, Mr. Big Shot flying on the Concorde... the next, I was a complete laughingstock. It was such a seismic event. It's like BC—before crap and afterwards.*

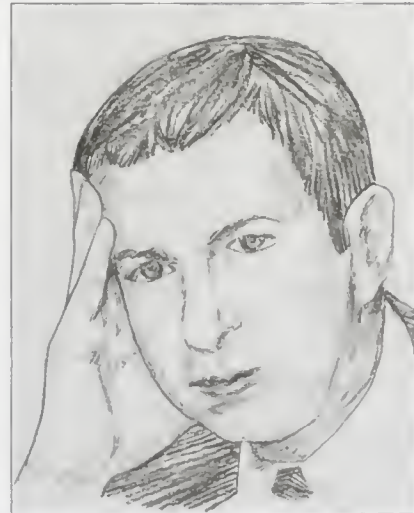
—Gerald Ratner, 2004

On April 27, 2005, Gerald Ratner took the stage at the annual convention of the United Kingdom Institute of Directors. Unremarkable in itself—a remade millionaire and Internet entrepreneur speaking to his peers at their annual shindig. But in this instance Ratner was the man who broke his own company in 10 seconds.

## SHEER IDIOCY

There are in this book many complex examples of idiocy, cases where blame could be spread across a number of people, or all sorts of different types of foolishness and stupidity came into play. This is not one of those. Rarely has one man destroyed his own life's work so dramatically and so straightforwardly as Ratner. Rarely has an adage, in this case, "no publicity is bad publicity," been disproved so assuredly. And rarely has a mild obscenity become so rapidly associated, in the minds, at least, of the British, with one event. The only issue is why he did it; without an analyst at hand, the only plausible answer seems to be anger, not, as might normally be the case, at the world, or against a specific individual, but against himself and his own company and his own work.

Gerald Ratner inherited his father's jewelry business in 1984. He turned a small retailer within six years into a multimillion dollar empire. Every British mall had a Ratner's store or one of the associated companies he had bought up. Similar in many ways to the Martha Stewart saga, Ratner was one of those businessmen in the public eye associated with his own product. Ratner's was where, to be blunt, working class boys bought rings for working class girls. The jewelry business remains a mystery to many observers, as one business that appears to be able to offer 70 percent discounts off a price forever and still be highly profitable. It is one that to a large extent depends not on designer labels, now changing a little after the successful branding of watches, but on the name and reliability of the retailer whose box you present the product in. Television advertising stresses that moment—the handing of the box to the girl, the moment of joy based not so much on the shiny nature of the item itself—most of us in all honesty are unable to tell fakes from real, or to identify the number of carats in the ring—but



GERALD  
RATNER

on the texture of the lining of the box, and the name thereon. In other words, it's an industry based on surface appearance, not really on the product itself. The editor of a leading jewelry magazine reported that it was not uncommon for men to go into Fifth Avenue jewelers in New York with their girlfriends, buy very expensive jewelry on their Amex cards, then call an hour later to replace the real diamonds with zirconium at a fraction of the cost, in the assurance that no one would ever know.

It is not uncommon for successful entrepreneurs to be asked to speak to "wannabees" about their success and how to emulate it. And Gerald Ratner personified that success. He had a chauffeur-driven Bentley, helicopter, boat, luxury homes in London and its suburbs, and a reserved suite at Sandy Lane, the celebrity-favored resort in Barbados. He rubbed shoulders with the entrepreneur-loving Margaret Thatcher at Number 10, and was known in London, not unreasonably, as the man with the Midas touch. So it was that Gerald Ratner was asked to speak at a conference luncheon for the Institute of Directors in London in April 1991, before an audience of 6,000 businesspeople and journalists. In questions after the luncheon, he was asked how it was possible for his company to be selling a sherry decanter for the extraordinary price of £4.95. In one stunning moment of stupidity, he answered:

RATNER HAD A CHAUFFEUR-  
DRIVEN BENTLEY,  
HELICOPTER, BOAT, LUXURY  
HOMES, AND A RESERVED  
SUITE AT A CELEBRITY-  
FAVORED RESORT IN  
BARBADOS.

"Because it's total crap."

He wasn't finished though. Warming to the task of self-immolation, he then proclaimed that his company "sold a pair of earrings for under a pound, which is cheaper than a shrimp sandwich from Marks and Spencer, but probably wouldn't last as long."

To this day no one really knows what he was thinking, how anyone could so misunderstand the nature of their own business, or whether, as sometimes is the case, they had misunderstood the dangers of speaking in an offhand manner in a supposedly private place about matters of import. Whatever the case, the impact was immediate and devastating. The media jumped all over the remarks, which became instant front-page news. It no longer became remotely possible for a ring to be presented in a Ratner's box, the word "crap" becoming the *mot du jour* throughout the country. The company's shares dropped £500 million in

a matter of days. Ratner was thrown out of the company, lost his entire fortune, and the company was forced to change its name and rebrand completely to stave off bankruptcy. Ratner himself lost everything.

Ratner stayed quiet on the whole issue until recently. He shut himself away, became obsessed with fitness and getting fit, and rather typically, then bought the gym he went to and sold it for much more money. In an interview early in 2005 with the *Sunday Times*, he explained what happened:

“When I took over my father’s jewelry business it was in trouble, The Ratners group that made £150 million a year bore no resemblance to what I inherited. Then, in that 35-minute speech I referred to a sherry decanter we’d discontinued as ‘crap.’ I wasn’t a polished businessman who put a spin on everything. But the publicity went on and on and share prices dropped to the point where I had to resign. There was no positive aspect to what happened to me. I loved what I did...everything in my life was wonderful and it was all taken away. It was a complete and utter disaster, and it still hurts.”

“IT’S TOTAL CRAP.”

—GERALD RATNER

It’s a strange and wonderful aspect of those who suffer from their own idiocy that so many years of reflection do nothing for their understanding of self. A man who in half an hour destroyed his own livelihood and wiped out not only his own wealth but also that of his investors, still thinks something was done to him not by him, presumably by the British newspapers. Not a hint of irony or awareness in his remarks.

## THE COMEBACK?

There is a rather strange twist at the end of this story though. Ratner in early 2003 decided to try to reenter his favorite industry, this time setting up an on-line business to undercut the very type of store he himself had owned. Of all things, he attempted to buy his own name, long unused by the company that had once borne it, to use for his web site. Strangely, they claimed it was a valuable asset and wouldn’t sell it to him, forcing him to use his own first name, Gerald. By all accounts, the on-line store is a great success, partly because of his own notoriety—which proves perhaps that all publicity is good publicity. Or that there’s one born every minute. Ratner’s comment on market research showing that consumers related well to his reappearance? “It’s perverse, isn’t it?”



MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

# THE BANGLADESH FLOODS AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE HIMALAYAN RAIN FOREST: THE BRITS AGAIN

1998

**Main Culprits:** The British East India Company and its corporate successors

**Damage Done:** More than 1,000 dead and 70 percent of the country flooded

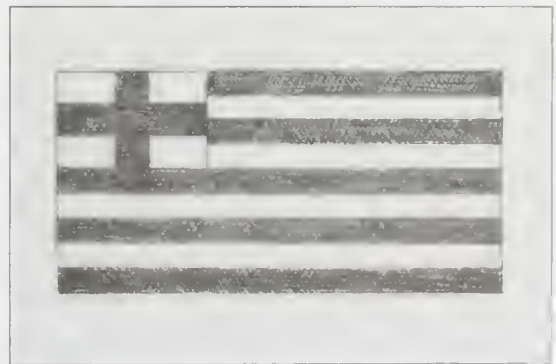
**Why:** Persistent deforestation of the lower Himalayas destroyed the natural order and flooded the low-lying regions

*My friend came to me,  
With sadness in his eyes,  
He told me that he wanted help,  
Before his country died,  
Although I couldn't feel the pain,  
I knew I'd have to try,  
Now I'm asking all of you,  
To help us save some lives.*

—George Harrison on Ravi Shankar, Bangla Desh (Concert for  
Bangladesh, Madison Square Garden, 1971)

Whether one believes in evolution over many centuries or Intelligent Design, there is little doubt that Mother Nature has created a very fine balance across the planet, of fragile ecosystems that depend on each other for survival, of the interchange between different creatures and landscapes. Elsewhere in these pages we see what happens with introduced species (see *The Rabbit in Australia*). But messing with one part of an ecosystem can have devastating effects thousands of miles away. Waterways do not like to be changed. In the 1990s parts of the Mississippi in the spring floods angrily reasserted their original routes through the center of America despite the decades of efforts by the Army Corps of Engineers to alter their course. Miles of the Murray-Darling River system in Australia are dead salt-mired dry lands following the aftereffects of well-meaning irrigation plans that stopped the natural salts from flowing out to sea. Even one of man's spectacular successes of watercourse management, the turning of the Chicago River, went strangely adrift in 1992, when a worker drilled a hole into one of the underground cattle tunnels and the river drained away. Earthquake, volcano, fire, tsunami, flood are part of nature's regulatory system and cannot be technologically made to end. Building on flood plains, on volcanic soil, in the middle of dry forests, on fault lines is going to end badly, if not in this century, then by the next. By the same token, nature has also protected some of its landscapes from these disasters (see *Tsunami of 2004*), so long as the idiocy of man doesn't mess it up. Perhaps the doom-mongers of global warming are correct—if they are, then this book will need a new chapter (or volume) to deal with the effects of the warming of the oceans. But damage-a-plenty has already taken place to give an example of the devastating effects of altering ecosystems.

Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country in the world, with the 91st largest area in the world. While 7 percent is water, most of the country lies below sea level. Its 134 million people live on the lower reaches of the Ganges River, where it meets the Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers and flows into the Bay of Bengal. It is the most dense-



THE FLAG OF THE  
BRITISH EAST  
INDIA COMPANY

ly populated area in the world, with high agricultural yields but great dangers from flood or famine.

The 1998 monsoon season produced the worst flooding in Bangladesh's 27-year history with 70 percent of the country submerged in floodwaters, and one million hectares of cropland destroyed. Between 30 and 40 million of the population of 126 million were affected. Floodwaters inundated most of the country for more than two months, destroying schools, government offices, and countless homes, and bringing diseases such as diarrhea and hepatitis. More than 1,000 people were killed and millions left without food or shelter.

**FLOOD ZONE** Bangladesh is a low-lying delta region in the northeast of the Indian subcontinent. More than 200 rivers, including the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna, pass through the country. According to the United Nation's Human Development Report—1999, an average of 10,928 are killed each year in Bangladesh by so-called natural disasters. The flood disasters are not natural but caused by deforestation in the Himalayas, and cultivation methods, in Bangladesh and those countries bordering it, that increase sedimentation and the silting up of riverbeds.

Every year, flooding particularly affects the poor in Bangladesh. According to the Human Development Report, 51.1 percent of rural Bangladesh is poor and 26.3 percent in urban areas. The report reveals that since 1985, "the absolute number of poor rose by 1.2 percent annually... faster than any historically observed rate."

Little has been done to prevent the annual flooding. In 1989 a Flood Action Plan was formulated at a cost of \$150 million, which aimed at constructing 2,174 miles (3,500 km) of embankments, some as high as 24.6 feet (7.5 m), for an estimated \$10 billion to \$15 billion. But major donors scaled down the project to \$5 billion before abandoning it altogether, citing various engineering, ecological, and social complexities. No alternative plan to control floods has been developed by the government or aid agencies.

According to some scientists, deforestation and mountainside cultivation in the Himalayas has increased the amount of sediment carried by the rivers to three billion tons annually, raising the riverbeds and increasing the likelihood of flooding.

In 1988 the country was ravaged by one of its worst monsoon floods. A quarter of the population was made homeless, an estimated 2,000 people died, and more than 160,000 were affected by water-borne diseases, snake bites, and other ills.

In 1991 a cyclone and accompanying storm surge killed an estimated 139,000 people and left another 10 million homeless. The worst affected were some of the most impoverished Bangladeshis who live on the char or shifting mud flats in the river delta near the Bay of Bengal. Most of these temporary islands are little more than a foot or so above the water and disappear within a decade.

A FLOOD ACTION PLAN  
COSTING BILLIONS WAS  
CONCEIVED, THEN  
ABANDONED. NO  
ALTERNATIVE PLAN TO  
CONTROL FLOODS HAS BEEN  
DEVELOPED BY THE  
GOVERNMENT OR AID  
AGENCIES.

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## LOCKHEED MARTIN, COLUMBINE, AND THE METRIC SYSTEM

APRIL 30, 1999

**Main Culprit:** Lockheed Martin

**Damage Done:** A couple of billion dollars of taxpayers' money disintegrated in space

**Why:** No quality control

*The software was verified at Lockheed Martin Astronautics in Littleton, Colo. The work force there already had been stung by 900 impending job cuts and the murder of 12 students and a teacher at nearby Columbine High School.*

—Todd Halvorson, *Florida Today*, May 8, 1999

*However it is important to remember that space missions are a 'one strike and you're out' activity.*

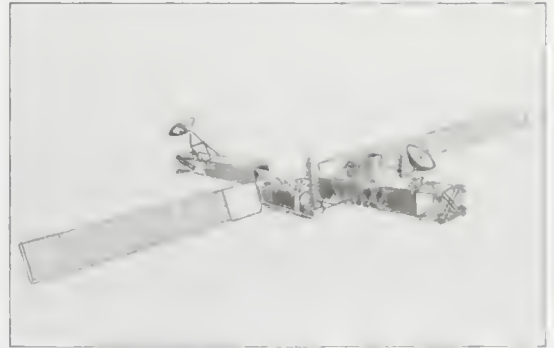
—Mars Program Independent Assessment team report, 2000

If not ready, do not launch.

—Final observation from the same report



Milstar—Military Strategic and Tactical Radar—was a program as important to U.S. defense needs as its name suggests. The first Milstars had gone up in 1994 and 1995, and with four near-geosynchronous satellites in space, were supposed to provide survivable, enduring, essential communications for the command and control of strategic and tactical forces through all levels of conflict. The missions were deemed crucially important and monumentally expensive. The first Milstar-2 satellite had upgraded equipment, improved satellite-to-satellite communications, and devices to prevent jamming. It was the 27th launch carried by a Titan 4 Centaur rocket. All three planned burns at the Centaur stage went off during the first orbit, within 89 seconds of liftoff, instead of over a six-hour period, putting the rocket hopelessly off course, and like *Mariner* so many years before, had to be blown up to avoid a potential crash. The reason finally given was that a decimal point was in the wrong place in the rocket's software (specifically, an engineer modified a similar file to recreate data but entered one parameter as -0.1992476 instead of the correct -1.992476). The mistake was caused, it was claimed in a PR attempt that almost qualifies in its own right as idiocy, by software engineers upset and angry about the Columbine (Colorado) school shooting. The inquiry pointed out that the company had no backup safety checks of software engineers' work.



MILSTAR-2 SATELLITE

The launchers for this type of mission cost \$433 million. The top-secret satellite was estimated to cost over \$800 million. The faulty software loaded into the rocket therefore cost the U.S. taxpayer somewhere over \$1.3 billion. Perhaps even more significant in terms of consequences, one of the surveillance targets of the satellite was post-Gulf War Iraq's missile program, which as we all know, the intelligence services got very wrong.

## YET ANOTHER MISCALCULATION

September 23 and December 3, 1999

While Milstar 2 was blown to pieces over Cape Canaveral, NASA's reputation rested on its new missions to Mars, whose successes would undoubtedly wipe out memories of the unfortunate Milstar incident. The launches at the end of 1998 and early 1999 had gone well, and although Mars landings were prone to danger and failure, Mars mis-

## LOCKHEED AND COLUMBINE

## THE METRIC SYSTEM

sions had restarted in earnest in 1994, and the safe arrival and extraordinary discoveries of *Pathfinder* in 1996 and 1997 had stimulated public excitement about Mars. The Mars Climate Orbiter was the next big mission, intended to orbit the planet for an extended period to investigate the climate, and launched in late 1998. On arrival at Mars on September 23, 1999, MCO plunged straight down into the atmosphere instead of finding orbit. The commission report concluded that the data provided for getting into orbit supplied by contractor Lockheed Martin had been supplied in imperial units, but had been ordered in metric units. Not such a big deal if you're driving through Europe but a fairly large problem half a billion kilometers from home.

### EXPENSIVE TOYS

While the MCO was in flight, the next mission was on the way, predestined also to ignominious failure through idiocy again. The twin Mars Expedition Rovers, *Spirit*, and *Opportunity*, failed to function once they landed because simple commands could not be understood. There is less certainty on this one since no contact was ever made, but it appeared to the commission that false signals were sent out. This suggested that the Mars Polar Lander had reached the surface safely when it was still some way off the ground; the engines promptly shut down and the unfortunate craft plunged to its destruction. The reason, familiar to any computer user, was that the file directory was full and could not accept commands. No provision had been made to delete the various files that had automatically been created as the craft made its way to Mars on autopilot.

# THE Y2K THAT NEVER CAME

December 31, 1999

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprits:** Most of the Western world

**Damage Done:** Hundreds of billions of dollars of wasted effort and stress

**Why:** Mass panic

*We may not have got everything right, but at least we knew the century was going to end.*

—Douglas Adams

*American (Airlines) has been a leading airline in addressing the year 2000 challenges. ...American has dedicated significant personnel and resources , including a budget of \$130 million, to address year 2000 compliance.*

—American Airline press release, December 1, 1999

One thousand years to the day after St. Peter's in Rome was filled with worshippers anxiously waiting for Pope Sylvester to grow horns and for the gates of Hell to open, a million or so people gathered in Times Square waiting for the ball to drop, planes to fall from the sky, elevators to crash to the ground, and their bank accounts to empty. While only a few around the world actually expected the physical world to come to an end, there were many more who expected their technologically sophisticated world to come crashing down around them, in perhaps the single greatest display of mass silliness ever experienced on earth.

As far back as 1958, a computer programmer drew attention to a potential problem in some early punch cards used for programming. To save money, the first two digits of the year were often eliminated. This meant that in 2000 all such programs would revert to 1900. No one took a great deal of notice, correctly surmising that neither the companies nor the hardware and software involved would probably still be around 40 years down the road. By the 1980s and 1990s, most potential problems had been identified and solved. But a series of doom-mongering books, the modern equivalents of the traveling monks predicting the end of the world in 999, managed to whip up storms of concern among an astonishingly credulous population.

In 2005 you can buy *Time Bomb 2000! What the Year 2000 Computer Crisis Means to You!* by Edward and Jennifer Yourdon for one cent on Amazon.com. Back in 1997, it was a different story, as the book's blurb proudly indicated:

*Time Bomb 2000* has become a worldwide best-seller because it doesn't just tell that there's a Y2K crisis on the way; it spells out how to evaluate your personal risks, and what you can do about them. As the crunch draws closer,

this new edition, completely updated to reflect Y2K news in every key area of the economy, is essential reading for everyone who wants to survive Y2K! As more than 140,000 readers can already attest, *Time Bomb 2000* is the most practical guide to the Y2K crisis. Based on the newest information available, you'll learn what problems are likely to occur, how they will impact individuals and society, and what you can do to prepare. This edition contains updated coverage of every major aspect of society, including communications, power distribution, transporta-



THE WESTERN WORLD

tion, finance, travel, medicine, social services, education, and employment. You'll find the latest expert assessments of the relative probabilities—and consequences—of failure. Best of all, the book presents practical contingency plans and fallback positions in the event the worst happens, for anyone worried about the Y2K problem, in other words, just about everyone.

Each chapter investigates a different area of computing and the possible effects of this disaster on each. From home PCs to world financial networks, the Yourdons explore a variety of "domino effects" that January 1, 2000, could trigger and the necessary time, effort, and cost to fix the aftermath. The impacts on real life could be anywhere between annoying and catastrophic, and the authors examine each extreme.

The role of the priests who were supposed to save the world's inhabitants of 999 from impending apocalypse, was played by the computer consultants. The "dot com" boom had so influenced everyone that any blip along the way seemed to spell catastrophe and anyone who could solve the issue made, well, a fortune. Rarely can so much money have been made to protect mankind against a problem that didn't actually exist. So dependent had Western civilization become on gadgets and items that they did not properly understand that they were willing to believe anything, no matter how outrageous. It is perhaps significant that the Wall Street peak of the '90s boom was reached on January 14, 2000. It's been downhill from there, and the impact on the economy of this artificial boom has perhaps still to be fully estimated. Since the boom was itself largely predicated on nonexistent profits by firms that barely existed, perhaps it was fitting that the bubble should peak in fixing a nonexistent crisis.

But why did so many of us panic? In the tenth century a variety of phenomena and the general uncertainty and desperation of the times led many to build up a head of steam for the panic. In the twentieth, perhaps it was not so different. The century after all had seen two catastrophic world wars and the Holocaust, followed by the nuclear threat that overshadowed the youth of many of those in power and supposedly at the peak of their maturity in 2000. The threat of nuclear annihilation had dropped considerably, but the willingness to accept the likelihood of the world blowing up tomorrow was present in many

## DÉJÀ VU

IN 2005 YOU CAN BUY TIME

BOMB 2000! WHAT THE YEAR 2000

COMPUTER CRISIS MEANS TO

YOU! BY EDWARD AND

JENNIFER YOURDON FOR ONE

CENT ON AMAZON.COM



minds. And the rumblings of environmental degradation and global warming since the 1970s persuaded many of yet another attempt by mankind to fulfill God's warnings and eject itself from Paradise.

**OUT OF FOCUS** One other consequence of the Y2K fiasco was a focus on what wasn't going to happen rather than more focus on what was. At not that much of a stretch, one could argue that slightly more focus on political concerns and security concerns might have spared mankind from the very real catastrophe that did come from the sky on September 11, 2001, and its consequences. There is always an opportunity cost in politics as well as in business. The celebration of the cleverness of mankind in inventing the information superhighway and the goodies thereon—and the possible loss of those to the strange workings of the Julian calendar—took minds away from the presence of much older threats, much more substantial animosities, and all too real danger.

# ROBERT MUGABE'S GREAT ZIMBABWE LAND GRAB

2000–2004

## MOTIVATION

anger  
 charity  
 envy  
 faith  
 gluttony  
 greed  
 hope  
 lust  
 pride  
 sloth

**Main Culprit:** Robert Mugabe (1924– )

**Damage Done:** Turning the breadbasket of Africa into a charity case

**Why:** Post-colonial dictator gets tired of waiting for land redistribution

*I should make it clear that we do not accept that Britain has a special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchase in Zimbabwe. We are a new Government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and as you know we were colonized not colonizers.*

—Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development, 1997

*It has been a phenomenal and absolute failure on every level.*

—Tendai Biti, Movement for Democratic Change

History does have a habit of repeating itself, but even by those standards the story of Robert Mugabe's attempts to right a colonial wrong is a sad one. These pages have seen famine (see *Bengal, Mao's Leap Forward*) visited on inhabitants by their own leaders before. And they have seen the land of Africa abused (see *Scramble for Africa*) and mocked (see *Wakefield's Nuts*). Robert Mugabe has managed both to mock the fertility of the land of his own country and abuse and ultimately starve his own people. Through a combination of anger, greed, pride, and envy a country that even after independence was bountiful in the extreme, a net exporter of food, now receives food aid and massive shortages are reported from many places. Not through drought, disease, or even warfare—the scourges that have led to dreadful famines in Ethiopia and the Sudan—not even through the optimistic leap forward of Mao who wreaked havoc on his people but at least was trying to do good, just through the stupidity and lack of patience of an old man whose job of nation-building he did not consider finished.

#### **BLAME THE BRITISH**

Certainly there is other blame to go around, not least, and not for the first time in these pages either, to the British colonizers. The British South Africa Company grew in the late nineteenth century on the model of the East India Company as settlers spread northward from the Cape Colony, especially as the Zulu and Boer Wars began to destabilize the region. Rhodesia, named for Cecil Rhodes, was put together as a colony in the early years of the twentieth century, and was always rich farming land. In 1964 most of the territory was given independence—Nyasaland became Malawi; Northern Rhodesia became Zambia. Southern Rhodesia remained a colony and in an unprecedented move, a group of militant white farmers, under the leadership of Ian Smith, declared independence on their own from England in 1965. For 15 years the white-dominated former colony remained a thorn in the side both of black Africa and of the United Kingdom, surviving sanctions of all sorts, relying to some extent on the white government of South Africa for support, and withstanding a civil war conducted by ZANU and ZAPU, two competing Marxist socialist, nationalist movements seeking majority rule in the country.

After a series of compromises and 15 bloody years of fighting, a major settlement was reached in 1980 at the Lancaster House conference in

London. Elections were held, the country became Zimbabwe, and its capital, Salisbury, became Harare. Not without incident and not for the last time, a controversial election was won by ZANU and Robert Mugabe. Among the many reforms promised by the British and the white settlers was land reform. Less than 1 percent of the population, all white, owned more than 70 percent of the land and essentially all of the farms, which had been simply appropriated in the early twentieth century as the property of the Crown Colony. The compromise promised “willing buyer, willing seller.” The British would supply money to help pay for land only when white settlers were ready to sell. To the credit of the Mugabe regime, though, for the most part, the transition to black rule was so peaceful that the majority decided to stay. Those who did go back to what they fondly remembered as “the mother country” found the land of the Sex Pistols and the Brixton Riots not to their liking. Gradually, through the 1990s the government, as Mugabe’s hold on power became absolute and he moved from being prime minister to president, became less voluntary and more compulsory. But the British simply started to withdraw their aid, so compulsory purchase, even when the land was voluntarily ceded, became of no use to the reform movement.

By 2000 Mugabe had had enough. He held a referendum—and lost—on compulsory purchase without compensation. Within two weeks, a shadowy group, the War Veterans Association, launched a violent and vicious campaign of seizing farms from the settlers. They murdered both them and their black workers, sometimes with great barbarity, and with no effort at all to stop them, indeed, with encouragement from the government. If it was intended as a type of ethnic cleansing, it worked. Of the 4,000 white farmers, only 300 or so now remain on the land. Most have fled to neighboring African countries, England, or to Iraq as security consultants. Unfortunately, neither the money nor the planning had gone into effective land transfer or information on how to actually plant and grow the crops. Most of these were not small holdings but major agribusiness enterprises, and without machinery or even money for fuel or seeds, the black farmers who did move onto the land had absolutely no hope of growing very much. Some farms can now be seen being plowed by horse, the heavy machinery having been stripped along with the contents of the farmhouses.



ROBERT MUGABE

MANY OF THOSE WHITES  
WHO DID GO BACK TO WHAT  
THEY FONDLY REMEMBERED  
AS "THE MOTHER COUNTRY"  
FOUND THE LAND OF THE SEX  
PISTOLS AND THE BRIXTON  
RIOTS NOT TO THEIR LIKING.

Moreover, much of the land simply seems to have ended up in the hands of the ZANU faithful and cronies rather than anyone with actual interest, let alone ability, in farming it. Crop production has sunk to around one-third of 2001 levels in just a few years, with almost no hope of going back up. In the last few months, even Mugabe has conceded that more than half the land seized now lies fallow. Many of the black urban middle classes have left the country because of food shortages and an inflation rate that is now hitting 600 percent as much of the country's exports have simply stopped flowing. Maize production fell from 1.5 million tons to less than 700,000, insufficient to meet domestic demand. And tobacco production fell 70 percent, exports falling from \$263 million to \$70 million. Over six million acres of prime land, in a continent where prime land is at a huge premium, lies fallow.

Whatever colonial wrongs existed, and however much the process should have been sped up, the idiocy of the process of making this happen, perhaps aided by Mugabe's Maoist leanings in his youth, makes the land grab a tragically contemporary but worthy addition to *Idiotica*.



# WALL STREET, ENRON, AND THOSE WHO BELIEVED

2001

## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

**Main Culprits:** Enron Corporation, accountants, brokers, and stock tipsters

**Damage Done:** Millions of lost investment and pension dollars

**Why:** Everyone wanted to believe in the success of a business that didn't really exist

**Williams:** *Ah, we want you guys to get a little creative.*

**Rich:** *OK.*

**Williams:** *And come up with a reason to go down.*

**Rich:** *OK.*

**Williams:** *Anything you want to do over there? Any...*

**Rich:** *Ah...*

**Williams:** *...cleaning, anything like that?*

**Rich:** *Yeah.Yeah.There's some stuff we could be doin' tonight.*

**Bill:** *That's good.*

—Taped conversation between Enron executive and Nevada power plant,  
January 16, 2001

A fool and his money are easily parted. Across the centuries the greedy have gambled and lost their fortunes on foolish ventures and nonexistent investment opportunities. They have readily fallen prey, from the South Sea Bubble to the “dot com” era, to the fabulous stories of railroads that did not exist and could never be built, riches that were not there, schemes that only needed a little capital to make millions—and then a little bit more. To some, the stock market has never seemed to be much different from the racetrack: There’s the gambler who studies the form assiduously, assesses the trainer or CFO’s abilities, gauges the going (wet and muddy, or oncoming recession), and then usually puts it all on a horse and company with their aunt’s maiden name, only spelled slightly differently. And both the inveterate horse gambler and stock market gambler listen intently to the analysis and tips of journalists and pundits whose only real unifying feature is that, if they really knew what they were talking about, they wouldn’t still be writing for newspapers and magazines. And the money in each case is put in the hands of a middleman. This could be an OTB, or a bookmaker, or increasingly, a Vegas- or Bahamas-based Internet entity for the Smarty Jones set, and a fancy-sounding investment bank with a good Manhattan address for the Dow Jones set. Both august types of institution are only too happy to give away the “hot tip” to ensnare you. And both, as recent years have demonstrated, are not averse to ensuring that the deck is stacked in their favor and to prove the old saying, “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

## **MONEY FOR NOTHING**

For every Damon Runyon man in a hat with a tip for the 4:30 horse race, there’s a pundit with his or her hands firmly in the till ready to pump up a stock. The massive frauds perpetrated at Enron were not unique, although their scale and arrogance were breathtaking. But for the most part, the only damage done in scams of this sort is the transference of large quantities of money from the rich to the cunning. The story of Enron and the State of California transcends the genre in a number of ways.

Enron transformed itself from a local energy company to a multimillion-dollar conglomerate through the cynical and extraordinary manipulation of many of the facets of modern technology and communication. Fired with the success of their Internet global energy trading scheme, they committed the fatal flaw of criminals of all creeds, races, and histories:

They got a little too clever for their own good. The company was formed in July 1985 as a result of the merger of Houston Natural Gas and InterNorth of Omaha, Nebraska. At the time they hoped to be one of the leading interstate natural gas pipeline companies. By 1995 they had determined they would become the world's leading energy company.

Staggeringly, as recently as spring 2005 the Enron web site allows a rare glimpse into the workings of idiocy in real time. Although the main site essentially is a listing of current bankruptcy proceedings and asset sales, lovers of the bizarre can still go to the Press Room section and find the following:

Enron Broadband Services is a leading provider of high quality, high bandwidth delivery and application services. The company's business model combines the power of the Enron Intelligent Network, Enron's Broadband Operating System, bandwidth trading and intermediation services, and high-bandwidth applications.

Enron is one of the world's leading electricity, natural gas and communications companies. The company, with revenues of \$101 billion in 2000, markets electricity and natural gas, delivers physical commodities and financial and risk management services to customers around the world, and has developed an intelligent network platform to facilitate online business. *Fortune Magazine* has named Enron "America's Most Innovative Company" for six consecutive years.



JEFFREY SKILLING

You won't find the Enron Intelligent Network anymore. But you will find the vainglory and idiocy of the Enron executives, their boasting about being the Number One e-commerce company in the world and Number 18 on the Fortune 500, preserved under "Company Milestones" and amazingly not removed. It charts the growth from a small provincial pipeline company to a massive conglomerate that claimed to be operating in 30 countries and have sales of \$101 billion, and to be the sixth largest energy company in the world. Yet it accomplished all this, according to the 2005 web site, with a growth in staff numbers from 15,075 in 1985 to 18,000 in 2000. No wonder everyone was so impressed! No wonder investment banks marched to the Enron tune. No wonder Chief Executive Davis hobnobbed with his good

friend the governor of Texas on his way to the White House. No wonder *Fortune Magazine* worshipped at the Enron shrine. A rudimentary knowledge of business would suggest something was very wrong with such growth and effectively no new employees. But apparently not. They claimed to be on the cusp of a new revolutionary age—a traditional provider of services (energy)—switching to become a provider of information, using the Internet pipeline rather than the natural gas pipeline. It turned out, of course, to be all smoke-and-mirrors accounting and wishful-thinking press releases. Rather more sinister was the pressure they exerted on financial analysts and journalists to keep pumping up the stock while CFO Jeffrey Skilling, among others, was rapidly selling his.

**THE TOLL** But what damage was done, other than to the unfortunate staff members and thousands of investors? It is important to remember that a lot of the appeal of Enron to investors was that it was still an energy company—the combination of a successful traditional business with assets and actual products gave a (totally false) sense of security when combined with the fly-by-nights of the PowerPoint “dot com” boomers. And it was the combination of the new arrogance of the Enron management coupled with their pure greed that led to a story that even now is only slowly becoming clear: the California energy crisis of 2001, a story that is still, in 2005, unfolding in a series of court cases.

Oddly enough, it was old-fashioned price gouging and blatant profiteering that led to the crisis. Enron executives realized in 2000 that they needed actual profits from somewhere and that the fake companies and partnerships and on-line scams could not go on forever. They realized that they had a stranglehold on the energy supply to California—by restricting supply they could raise prices to a phenomenal level and profit accordingly. They controlled 3,500 megawatts of supply, enough for two million homes. As early as 1998, Operation Silver Peak was created at Enron to learn how to manipulate the system to their advantage, and internal memos urged: “California gaming—we always say that we need to increase this activity yet we never do. Need to work more closely with cash, scheduling, and real time to maximize opportunities.” By 2000 Operation Death Star, fiendish in its brilliance, was in place, with the monopoly and the political backing to make it work.



Having created the shortage, they offered to sell power to Western states' utility companies that were desperate at wildly inflated prices. The conversation that serves as the epigraph to this article has been provided as evidence that Enron was deliberately closing down power plants at the height of the shortage. That next day, as rolling blackouts caused havoc across California, the Nevada plant in question had 52 potential megawatts of energy off-line. There's more than circumstantial evidence that senior executives used the power that their political contributions, both in California and in Washington, had given them to ensure that suggested caps to energy prices did not take place. When Enron went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2001, many of those companies took the opportunity to break those contracts. Enron promptly sued, and during the course of these lawsuits the truth of Enron's energy dealings began to emerge. One could argue that companies with as much to hide as Enron would do better to keep out of the courts, but there is more than enough idiocy to go around as it is. Current estimates from utility companies are that Enron took the energy companies, and obviously, by extension, their customers, for \$1.1 billion in "unjust profits," in the court's language. All in all, the California economy was drained of \$11 billion from the energy crisis in keeping utilities from bankruptcy. At its peak, energy that cost \$40 a megawatt-hour was being sold for \$1,000 a megawatt-hour. The impact on California's economy is almost immeasurable; it was a major factor in the downfall of the state's governor, and the massive cuts in government services are a direct result of the shortfall.

Ironically, if Enron could have just hung in there, its legitimate profits from the energy price hike caused by 9/11 could have been astronomical without resorting to any more than normal business practices. BP announced profits of \$2 billion in 2004 just from trading energy globally, much of their growth coming from the gaps in the market left by Enron's collapse. The distance between illegality and brilliance in the corporate world can be, to return to the racetrack, little more than a short head.

A RUDIMENTARY KNOWLEDGE  
OF BUSINESS WOULD  
SUGGEST SOMETHING WAS  
VERY WRONG WITH ENRON'S  
ABILITY TO GROW SO  
EXPLOSIVELY WITHOUT  
ADDING CONSIDERABLE  
STAFF.



## MOTIVATION

anger  
charity  
envy  
faith  
gluttony  
greed  
hope  
lust  
pride  
sloth

## WHY A TEN-YEAR-OLD BRITISH GIRL KNEW MORE THAN THE THAI GOVERNMENT: THE BOXING DAY TSUNAMI

December 2004

**Main Culprits:** South Asian governments

**Damage Done:** Perhaps 50,000 dead in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India

**Why:** Governments decided nuclear weapons are more important than undersea ocean sensors

*I didn't know what a tsunami was, but seeing your daughter so frightened makes you think something serious must be going on.*

—Penny Smith

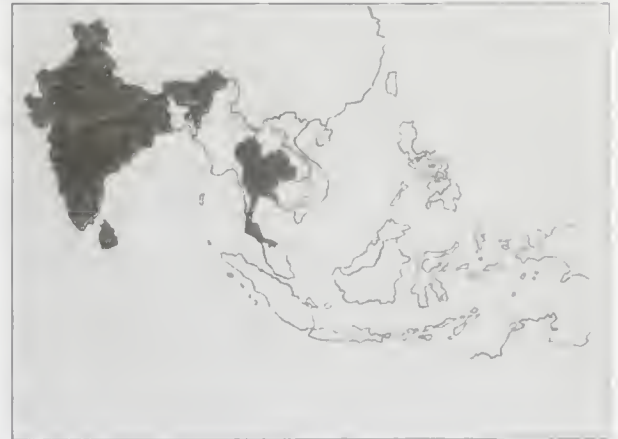
*All of a sudden the birds starting flying off in a great commotion...I looked up towards the sea and saw water coming at great speed. I knew I had to run. I ran out of the hotel and kept on running and never looked back.*

—Uditha Hettige, Sri Lankan naturalist

"It won't happen to me." It is the cry of the unprepared everywhere. But in the case of earthquakes and volcanoes, it will. It's the way the earth is made. There will be another San Francisco earthquake. Mount St. Helen's will erupt again. It's simply a matter of when. The Ring of Fire is the name given to an extensive underwater fault stretching from Japan as far as Indonesia, responsible for many earthquakes and volcanoes (see *Pulau Run*) including Krakatoa. Straddling the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the fault has frequently caused eruptions across the region. Not a matter of if, but when.

When the fault occurs at a spot where the water is shallow enough, and the seabed shifts, the resulting disruption causes a tsunami, a wall of water that tends to flow undetected over wide ocean, but builds to a terrifying height as it approaches land. Not if, but when. The majority of these take place in the Pacific Ocean, but the Indian Ocean also has seen many tsunamis, especially during the nineteenth century. In the exact same area as 2004, tsunamis were reported in 1797, 1833, 1843, and 1861, while the Krakatoa tsunami in 1883 killed 40,000. They aren't that common in the Pacific Ocean, maybe one a century in the Indian Ocean. After the Chile earthquake and tsunami in 1960, a comprehensive Pacific Ocean sensor array was established, but only in the Pacific. Given that a complete deep-water early sensor system would cost only about \$30 million and the December 2004 tsunami caused billions of dollars of damage and probably in excess of 200,000 lives, perhaps those governments that decided against the system out of sheer sloth might rethink before the next time. Because there will be a next time. Excluding Indonesia, where victims would have had horrifyingly little time to escape because of their proximity, 31,000 died in Sri Lanka; 10,700 in India, 5,400 in Thailand. That's nearly 50,000 who could have been warned.

Seven years ago a senior Thai meteorologist warned that the massive resort complex building at Phuket could be exceptionally dangerous if—when—another tsunami struck. He demanded sirens and alarms at



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all hotels and that they be built some way back from the beach. For his trouble he was moved to another department and none of his suggestions were followed—the very suggestion of a tsunami might put tourists off, according to the government. So, small wonder that the Thai weatherman who saw the early reports and realized what was happening on December 26, 2004, decided to keep quiet.

**A LESSON  
LEARNED**

Fortunately, the same reservations did not occur to Tilly Smith, on Maikaho beach in northern Phuket that morning. While the great seismic detectors of the world's powers—and the nonexistent deep ocean sensors of the South Asian countries—literally slumbered, Tilly, a 10-year-old English girl, was on a beach on Christmas vacation with her family when she saw the tide doing very strange things. A few months before, at her private school (geography is discouraged in the state school curricula and considered one of the worst-taught subjects around the world in a UNESCO report), her geography teacher had played videos of a 1980s tsunami disaster and explained what happened. Tilly will clearly never be someone to question the use of what she learns at school. Her mother tells what happened next: "Tilly said she'd studied this at school. She talked about tectonic plates and an earthquake under the sea. She got more and more hysterical. In the end she was screaming at us to get off the beach."

There were other means of finding out what was happening and getting out of the way, absolutely none of them to do with modern technology. The inhabitants of Simulue, an island in Indonesia, had strong folk memories of a similar event in 1906 and several thousand fled to safety in the islands. Moreover, any islanders or beach dwellers who happened to observe carefully the behavior of birds and other wildlife in the minutes leading up to the event also were able to escape. Interestingly, those coastal areas not remade by man survived rather well, ecologically, all of these pointing to the fact that the earth is well aware of this regular cataclysm and knows how to deal with it with minimum damage. It is modern mankind with all its modern technology that appears to have as little touch with what is really happening on the earth as Adam and Eve had all those centuries ago.

For there are of course other ways of detecting activity around the world. Especially after 9/11, the world's security is on full alert for any-

thing untoward that might be a threat. Well, perhaps. The offices in Vienna of the World Nuclear Test Ban treaty had machines that picked up the activity, but they were unmanned for the Christmas vacation. Messages were relayed to the United States base at Diego Garcia, which is slap bang in the middle of the Indian Ocean, but apparently they had no idea who they should call and didn't have any appropriate phone numbers in their system. Australian embassies were informed and they appear to have passed this information on to—nobody. A lot of excuses were made, particularly about time frames. But it took almost two hours from the time of the earthquake for the waves to reach Phuket, longer still to reach Sri Lanka. It takes 10 minutes to clear a beach. The Japanese, who have been hit by more tsunamis than any other nation in the Pacific, have a three-minute alert system in place and figure to be able to evacuate appropriate coastal areas within 10 minutes of an earthquake taking place, enough time to have saved the people of Aceh, let alone those two and a half hours away. Only 239 people died when a huge wave hit Hokkaido in 1993.

So, a 10-year-old girl saved more than 100 people, and birds and animals, an unknown few thousand, while the pride of our modern technology, early warning systems, satellites, sonar, and nuclear threat detection, saved none. Somehow it makes you think this final entry won't be the last manifestation of the idiocy of humans.

AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE  
STRUCK, IT TOOK ALMOST  
TWO HOURS FOR THE WAVES  
TO REACH PHUKET. IT TAKES  
10 MINUTES TO CLEAR A  
BEACH.





## FURTHER READINGS

**In General:** The most useful single book for any earnest student of history is a good historical atlas, of which *The Times Atlas of World History* is the best. For general reference and fact-checking without expense or inconvenience the Wikipedia web site ([en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)) is a remarkable resource. You will also find some excellent links and information on [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

**Specific Chapters:** Please note that the listings below are works to enhance further reading rather than sources as such.

This resource includes web site addresses that may change due to the constantly evolving environment of the Internet. If you find a web site address that does not work, please try a key word search because the information may still be available on the Internet but moved to a different page.

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**"Those Who Cannot Remember the Past  
Are Condemned to Repeat It."**

—George Santayana, philosopher

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