

Greetings from Idiot America

by Charles Pierce
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There is some undeniable art, you might even say design, in the way southern Ohio rolls itself into northern Kentucky. The hills build gently under you as you leave the interstate. The roads narrow beneath a cool and thickening canopy as they wind through the leafy outer precincts of Hebron, a small Kentucky town named, as it happens, for the place near Jerusalem where the Bible tells us that David was anointed the king of the Israelites. This resulted in great literature and no little bloodshed, which is the case with a great deal of Scripture.

At the top of the hill, just past the Idlewild Concrete plant, there is an unfinished wall with an unfinished gate in the middle of it. Happy, smiling people are trickling in through the gate this fine morning, one minivan at a time. They park in whatever shade they can find, which is not much. It's hot as hell this morning.

They are almost uniformly white and almost uniformly bubbly. Their cars come from Kentucky and Tennessee and Ohio and Illinois and as far away as New Brunswick, Canada. There are elderly couples in shorts, suburban families piling out of the minivans, the children all Wrinkle-Resistant and Stain-Released. There is a clutch of Mennonite women in traditional dress, small bonnets and long skirts. All of them wander off, chattering and waving and stopping every few steps for pictures, toward a low-slung building that seems from the outside to be the most finished part of the complex.

Outside, several of them stop to be interviewed by a video crew. They have come from Indiana, one woman says, two toddlers toddling at her feet, because they have been home-schooling their children and they have given them this adventure as a kind of field trip. The whole group then bustles into the lobby of the building, where they are greeted by the long neck of a huge, herbivorous dinosaur. The kids run past that and around a corner, where stands another, smaller dinosaur.

Which is wearing a saddle.

It is an English saddle, homless and battered. Apparently, this was a dinosaur used for dressage competitions and stakes races. Any working dinosaur accustomed to the rigors of ranch work and herding other dinosaurs along the dusty trail almost certainly would wear a sturdy western saddle.

This is very much a show dinosaur.

The dinosaurs are the first things you see when you enter the Creation Museum, which is very much a work in progress and the dream child of an Australian named Ken Ham. Ham is the founder of Answers in Genesis, an organization of which the museum one day will be the headquarters. The people here today are on a special tour. They have paid \$149 to become "charter members" of the museum.

"Dinosaurs," Ham laughs as he poses for pictures with his visitors, "always get the kids interested."

AIG is dedicated to the proposition that the biblical story of the creation of the world is inerrant in every word. Which means, in this interpretation and among other things, that

dinosaurs coexisted with man (hence the saddles), that there were dinosaurs in Eden, and that Noah, who certainly had enough on his hands, had to load two brachiosaurs onto the Ark along with his wife, his sons, and their wives, to say nothing of green ally-gators and long-necked geese and humpy-backed camels and all the rest.

(Faced with the obvious question of how to keep a three-hundred-by-thirty-by-fifty-cubit ark from sinking under the weight of dinosaur couples, Ham's literature argues that the dinosaurs on the Ark were young ones, and thus did not weigh as much as they might have.)

"We," Ham exclaims to the assembled, "are taking the dinosaurs back from the evolutionists!" And everybody cheers.

Ham then goes on to celebrate the great victory won in Oklahoma, where, in the first week of June, Tulsa park officials announced a decision (later reversed) to put up a display at the city zoo based on Genesis so as to eliminate the "discrimination" long inflicted upon sensitive Christians by a statue of the Hindu god Ganesh that decorated the elephant exhibit.

This is a serious crowd. They gather in the auditorium and they listen intently, and they take copious notes as Ham draws a straight line from Adam's fall to our godless public schools, from Darwin to gay marriage. He talks about the triumph over Ganesh, and everybody cheers again.

Ultimately, the heart of the museum will be a long walkway down which patrons will be able to journey through the entire creation story. This, too, is still in the earliest stages of construction. Today, for example, one young artist is working on a scale model of the moment when Adam names all the creatures. Adam is in the delicate process of naming the saber-toothed tiger while, behind him, already named, a woolly mammoth seems to be on the verge of taking a nap.

Elsewhere in the museum, another Adam figure is full-size, if unpainted, and waiting to be installed. This Adam is reclining peacefully; eventually, if the plans stay true, he will be placed in a pool under a waterfall. As the figure depicts a prelapsarian Adam, he is completely naked. He also has no penis.

This would seem to be a departure from Scripture inconsistent with the biblical literalism of the rest of the museum. If you're willing to stretch Job's description of a "behemoth" to include baby brachiosaurs on Noah's Ark, as Ham does in his lectures, then surely, since we are depicting him before the fall, Adam should be out there waving unashamedly in the paradisaical breezes. For that matter, what is Eve doing there, across the room, with her hair falling just so to cover her breasts and midsection, as though she's doing a nude scene from some 1950s Swedish art-house film?

After all, Genesis 2:25 clearly says that at this point in their lives, "And the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed." If Adam courageously sat there unencumbered while he was naming saber-toothed tigers, then why, six thousand years later, should he be depicted as a eunuch in some family-values Eden? And if these people can take away what Scripture says was rightfully his, then why can't Charles Darwin and the accumulated science of the past 150-odd years take away all the rest of it?

These are impolite questions. Nobody asks them here by the cool pond tucked into a gentle hillside. Increasingly, nobody asks them outside the gates, either. It is impolite to wonder why our parents sent us all to college, and why generations of immigrants sweated and bled so their children could be educated, if it wasn't so that we would all one day feel confident enough to look at a museum filled with dinosaurs rigged to run six furlongs at Belmont and make the not unreasonable point that it is all batshit crazy and that anyone who believes this righteous hooley should be kept away from sharp objects and his own money.

Dinosaurs with saddles?

Dinosaurs on Noah's Ark?

Welcome to your new Eden.

Welcome to Idiot America.

LET'S TAKE A TOUR, shall we? For the sake of time, we'll just cover the last year or so. A federally funded abstinence program suggests that HIV can be transmitted through tears. An Alabama legislator proposes a bill to ban all books by gay authors. The Texas House passes a bill banning suggestive cheerleading. And nobody laughs at any of it, or even points out that, in the latter case, having Texas ban suggestive cheerleading is like having Nebraska ban corn. James Dobson, a prominent conservative Christian spokesman, compares the Supreme Court to the Ku Klux Klan. Pat Robertson, another prominent conservative preacher, says that federal judges are a more serious threat to the country than is Al Qaeda and, apparently taking his text from the Book of Gambino, later sermonizes that the United States should get with it and snuff the democratically elected president of Venezuela.

The Congress of the United States intervenes to extend into a televised spectacle the prolonged death of a woman in Florida. The majority leader of the Senate, a physician, pronounces a diagnosis based on heavily edited videotape. The majority leader of the House of Representatives argues against cutting-edge research into the use of human stem cells by saying that "an embryo is a person. . . . We were all at one time embryos ourselves. So was Abraham. So was Muhammad. So was Jesus of Nazareth." Nobody laughs at him or points out that the same could be said of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, or whoever invented the baby-back rib.

And, finally, in August, the cover of Time, for almost a century the dyspeptic voice of the American establishment, clears its throat, hems and haws and hacks like a headmaster gagging on his sherry, and asks, quite seriously: "Does God have a place in science class?"

Fights over evolution, and its faddish new camouflage, intelligent design, a pseudoscience that posits without proof or method that science is inadequate to explain existence and that supernatural causes must be considered, roil up school districts across the country. The president of the United States announces that he believes ID ought to be taught in the public schools on an equal footing with the theory of evolution. And in Dover, Pennsylvania, during one of these many controversies, a pastor named Ray Mummert delivers the line that both ends our tour and, in every real sense, sums it up:

"We've been attacked," he says, "by the intelligent, educated segment of the culture."

And there it is.

Idiot America is not the place where people say silly things. It's not the place where people believe in silly things. It is not the place where people go to profit from the fact that people believe in silly things. Idiot America is not even those people who believe that Adam named the dinosaurs. Those people pay attention. They take notes. They take the time and the considerable mental effort to construct a worldview that is round and complete.

The rise of Idiot America is essentially a war on expertise. It's not so much antimodernism or the distrust of intellectual elites that Richard Hofstadter deftly teased out of the national DNA forty years ago. Both of those things are part of it. However, the rise of Idiot America today represents, for profit mainly, but also, and more cynically, for political advantage and in the pursuit of power, the breakdown of a consensus that the pursuit of knowledge is a good. It also represents the ascendancy of the notion that the people whom we should trust the least are the people who best know what they're talking about. In the new media age, everybody is a historian, or a preacher, or a scientist, or a sage. And if everyone is an expert, then nobody is, and the worst thing you can be in a society where everybody is an expert is, well, an actual expert.

In the place of expertise, we have elevated the Gut, and the Gut is a moron, as anyone who has ever tossed a golf club, punched a wall, or kicked an errant lawn mower knows. We occasionally dress up the Gut by calling it "common sense." The president's former advisor on medical ethics regularly refers to the "yuck factor." The Gut is common. It is democratic. It is the roiling repository of dark and ancient fears. Worst of all, the Gut is faith-based.

It's a dishonest phrase for a dishonest time, "faith-based," a cheap huckster's phony term of art. It sounds like an additive, an artificial flavoring to make crude biases taste of bread and wine. It's a word for people without the courage to say they are religious, and it is beloved not only by politicians too cowardly to debate something as substantial as faith but also by Idiot America, which is too lazy to do it.

After all, faith is about the heart and soul and about transcendence. Anything calling itself faith-based is admitting that it is secular and profane. In the way that it relies on the Gut to determine its science, its politics, and even the way it sends its people to war, Idiot America is not a country of faith; it's a faith-based country, fashioning itself in the world, which is not the place where faith is best fashioned.

Hofstadter saw this one coming. "Intellect is pitted against feeling," he wrote, "on the ground that it is somehow inconsistent with warm emotion. It is pitted against character, because it is widely believed that intellect stands for mere cleverness, which transmutes easily into the sly or the diabolical."

The Gut is the basis for the Great Premises of Idiot America. We hold these truths to be self-evident:

- 1) Any theory is valid if it sells books, soaks up ratings, or otherwise moves units.
- 2) Anything can be true if somebody says it on television.
- 3) Fact is that which enough people believe. Truth is determined by how fervently they believe it.

How does it work? This is how it works. On August 21, a newspaper account of the "intelligent design" movement contained this remarkable sentence: "They have mounted a politically savvy challenge to evolution as the bedrock of modern biology, propelling a fringe academic movement onto the front pages and putting Darwin's defenders firmly on the defensive."

A "politically savvy challenge to evolution" is as self-evidently ridiculous as an agriculturally savvy challenge to euclidean geometry would be. It makes as much sense as conducting a Gallup poll on gravity or running someone for president on the Alchemy Party ticket. It doesn't matter what percentage of people believe they ought to be able to flap their arms and fly, none of them can. It doesn't matter how many votes your candidate got, he's not going to turn lead into gold. The sentence is so arrantly foolish that the only real news in it is where it appeared.

On the front page.

Of The New York Times .

Within three days, there was a panel on the subject on Larry King Live , in which Larry asked the following question:

"All right, hold on. Dr. Forrest, your concept of how can you out-and-out turn down creationism, since if evolution is true, why are there still monkeys?"

And why do so many of them host television programs, Larry?

This is how Idiot America engages the great issues of the day. It decides, en masse, with a thousand keystrokes and clicks of the remote control, that because there are two sides to every question, they both must be right, or at least not wrong. And the poor biologist's words carry no more weight than the thunderations of some turkey-neck preacher out of the Church of Christ's Own Parking Facility in DeLand, Florida. Less weight, in fact, because our scientist is an "expert" and, therefore, an "elitist." Nobody buys his books. Nobody puts him on cable. He's brilliant, surely, but his Gut's the same as ours. He just ignores it, poor fool.

This is a great country, in no small part because it is the best country ever devised in which to be a public crank. Never has a nation so dedicated itself to the proposition that not only should its people hold nutty ideas but they should cultivate them, treasure them, shine them up, and put them right there on the mantelpiece. This is still the best country ever in which to peddle complete public lunacy. The right to do so is there in our founding documents.

After all, the Founders were men of the Enlightenment, fashioning a country out of new ideas, or out of old ones that they excavated from centuries of religious internment. Historian Charles Freeman points out that in Europe, "Christian thought . . . often gave irrationality the status of a universal 'truth' to the exclusion of those truths to be found through reason. So the uneducated was preferred to the educated, and the miracle to the operation of natural laws."

In America, the Founders were trying to get away from all that, to raise a nation of educated people. In pledging their faith to intellectual experimentation, however, the Founders set freedom free. They devised the best country ever in which to be completely around the bend. It's just that making a respectable living out of it used to be harder work.

THEY CALL IT THE INFINITE CORRIDOR, which is the kind of joke you tell when your day job is to throw science as far ahead as you can and hope that the rest of us can move fast enough to catch up. It is a series of connecting hallways that run north through the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The hallways are lined with cramped offices, their doors mottled thickly with old tape and yellowing handbills. The Infinite Corridor is not a straight line. It has branches and tributaries. It has backwaters and eddies. You can get lost there.

One of the offices belongs to Professor Kip Hodges, a young and energetic North Carolinian who studies how mountain ranges develop and grow. Suffice it to say that Hodges's data do not correspond to the six-thousand-year-old earth of the creationists, whereupon dinosaurs and naked folks doth gambol together.

Hodges is recently returned from Nepal, where he rescued his research from encroaching Maoist rebels, who were not interested in the least in how the Himalayas became the Himalayas. They were interested in land, in guns, in power, and in other things of the Gut. Moreover, part of Hodges's duties at MIT has been to mentor incoming freshmen about making careers in science for themselves.

"Scientists are always portrayed in the literature as being above the fray intellectually," Hodges says. "I guess to a certain extent that's our fault, because scientists don't do a good enough job communicating with people who are nonscientists, that it's not a matter of brainiacs doing one thing and nonbrainiacs doing another."

Americans of a certain age grew up with science the way an earlier generation grew up with baseball and even earlier ones grew up with politics and religion. America cured diseases. It put men on the moon. It thought its way ahead in the cold war and stayed there.

"My earliest memory," Hodges recalls, "is watching John Glenn go up. It was a time that, if you were involved in science or engineering, particularly science, at that time, people greatly respected you if you said you were going into those fields. And nowadays, it's like there's no value placed by society on a lot of the observations that are made by people in science.

"It's more than a general dumbing down of America, the lack of self-motivated thinking: clear, creative thinking. It's like you're happy for other people to think for you. If you should be worried about, say, global warming, well, somebody in Washington will tell me whether or not I should be worried about global warming. So it's like this abdication of intellectual responsibility, that America now is getting to the point that more and more people would just love to let somebody else think for them."

The country was founded by people who were fundamentally curious; Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, to name only the most obvious examples, were inveterate tinkerers. (Before dispatching Lewis and Clark into the Louisiana Territory, Jefferson insisted that the pair categorize as many new plant and animal species as they found. Considering they were also mapping everything from Missouri to Oregon, this must have been a considerable pain in the canoe.) Further, they assumed that their posterity would feel much the same as they did; in 1815, appealing to Congress to fund the

building of a national university, James Madison called for the development of "a nursery of enlightened preceptors."

It is a long way from that to the moment on February 18, 2004, when sixty-two scientists, including a clutch of Nobel laureates, released a report accusing the incumbent administration of manipulating science for political ends. It is a long way from Jefferson's observatory and Franklin's kite to George W. Bush, in an interview in 2005, suggesting that intelligent design be taught alongside the theory of evolution in the nation's science classes. "Both sides ought to be properly taught," said the president, "so people can understand what the debate is about."

The "debate," of course, is nothing of the sort, because two sides are required for a debate. Nevertheless, the very notion of it is a measure of how scientific discourse, and the way the country educates itself, has slipped through lassitude and inattention across the border into Idiot America, where fact is merely that which enough people believe, and truth is measured only by how fervently they believe it.

If we have abdicated our birthright to scientific progress, we have done so by moving the debate into the realm of political and cultural argument, where we all feel more confident, because it is there that the Gut rules. Held to this standard, any scientific theory is rendered mere opinion. Scientific fact is no more immutable than a polling sample. This is how there's a "debate" over the very existence of global warming, even though the preponderance of fact among those who actually have studied the phenomenon renders the "debate" quite silly. The debate is about making people feel better about driving SUVs. The debate is less about climatology than it is about guiltlessly topping off your tank and voting in tax incentives for oil companies.

The rest of the world looks on in cockeyed wonder. The America of Franklin and Edison, of Fulton and Ford, of the Manhattan project and the Apollo program, the America of which Einstein wanted to be a part, seems to be enveloping itself in a curious fog behind which it's tying itself in knots over evolution, for pity's sake, and over the relative humanity of blastocysts versus the victims of Parkinson's disease.

"Even in the developing world, where I spend lots of time doing my work," Hodges says, "if you tell them that you're from MIT and you tell them that you do science, it's a big deal. If I go to India and tell them I'm from MIT, it's a big deal. In Thailand, it's a big deal. If I go to Iowa, they could give a rat's ass. And that's a weird thing, that we're moving in that direction as a nation."

Hence, Bush was not talking about science, not in any real sense, anyway. Intelligent design is a theological construct, a faith-based attempt to gussy up creationism in a lab coat. Its fundamental tenets cannot be experimentally verified, or, most important, falsified. That it enjoys a certain public cachet is irrelevant; a higher percentage of Americans believes that a government conspiracy killed John F. Kennedy than believes in intelligent design, but there is no great effort abroad in the land to include that conspiracy theory in sixth-grade history texts. Bush wasn't talking about science. He was talking about the political utility of putting saddles on the dinosaurs and breaking Ganesh's theological monopoly over the elephant paddock.

"The reason the creationists have been so effective is that they have put a premium on communication skills," explains Hodges. "It matters to them that they can talk to the guy in the bar, and it's important to them, and they are hugely

effective at it."

It is the ultimate standard of Idiot America. How does it play to Joe Six-Pack in the bar? At the end of August 2004, the Zogby people discovered that 57 percent of undecided voters would rather have a beer with George Bush than with John Kerry. Now, how many people with whom you've spent time drinking beer would you trust with the nuclear launch codes? Not only is this not a question for a nation of serious citizens, it's not even a question for a nation of serious drunkards.

If even scientific discussion is going to be dragged into politics, then the discussion there at least ought to exist on a fairly sophisticated level. Again, the Founders thought it should. They considered self-government a science that required an informed and educated and enlightened populace to make all the delicate mechanisms run. Instead, today we have the Kabuki politics and marionette debates best exemplified by cable television. Instead, the discussion of everything ends up in the bar.

(It wasn't always this way. Theodore Roosevelt is reckoned to be the manliest of our manly-man presidents. He also was a lifelong science dweeb, cataloging songbirds, of all things. Of course, he shot them first, so maybe that makes all the difference.)

It is, of course, television that has allowed Idiot America to run riot within the modern politics and all forms of public discourse. It is not that there is less information on television than there once was. (That there is less news is another question entirely.) In fact, there is so much information that fact is now defined as something that so many people believe that television notices it, and truth is measured by how fervently they believe it.

"You don't need to be credible on television," explains Keith Olbermann, the erudite host of his own show on MSNBC.

"You don't need to be authoritative. You don't need to be informed. You don't need to be honest. All these things that we used to associate with what we do are no longer factors.

"There is an entire network [the Fox News Channel] that bills itself as news that is devoted to reinforcing people's fears and saying to them, 'This is what you should be scared of, and here's whose fault it is,' " Olbermann says. "And that's what they get, two or three million frustrated paranoids who sit in front of the TV and go, 'Damn right, it's those liberals' fault.' Or, 'It's those, what's the word for it?, college graduates' fault.' "

The reply, of course, is that Fox regularly buries Olbermann and the rest of the MSNBC lineup in breaking off a segment of a smidgen of a piece of the television audience. Truth is what moves the needle. Fact is what sells.

Idiot America is a bad place for crazy notions. Its indolent tolerance of them causes the classic American crank to drift slowly and dangerously into the mainstream, wherein the crank loses all of his charm and the country loses another piece of its mind. The best thing about American crackpots used to be that they would stand proudly aloof from a country that, by their peculiar lights, had gone mad. Not today. Today, they all have book deals, TV shows, and cases pending in federal court.

Once, it was very hard to get into the public square and very easy to fall out of it. One ill-timed word, even a whiff of public scandal, and all the hard work you did in the grange

hall on all those winter nights was for nothing. No longer. You can be Bill Bennett, gambling with both fists, but if your books still sell, you can continue to scold the nation about its sins. You can be Bill O'Reilly, calling up subordinates to proposition them both luridly and comically, loofahs? falafels?, and if more people tune in to watch you than tune in to watch some other blowhard, you can keep your job lecturing America about the dangers of its secular culture. Just don't be boring. And keep the ratings up. Idiot America wants to be entertained.

Because scientific expertise was dragged into political discussion, and because political discussion is hopelessly corrupt, the distrust of scientific expertise is now as general as the distrust of politicians is. Everyone is an expert, so nobody is. For example, Sean Hannity's knowledge of, say, stem-cell research is measured precisely by his ratings book. His views on the subject are more well known than those of the people doing the actual research.

The credibility of Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania on the subject of the cultural anthropology of the American family ought to be, well, minimal. He spent the summer promoting a book in which he propounded theories on the subject that were progressively loopier. "For some parents," he writes, "the purported need to provide things for their children simply provides a convenient rationalization for pursuing a gratifying career outside the home." He goes on later to compare a woman's right to choose an abortion unfavorably with the institution of slavery. Nevertheless, he's welcome in the mainstream, at least until either he's defeated for reelection or his book doesn't sell.

"Somewhere along the line, we stopped rewarding intelligence with success and stopped equating intelligence with success," Obermann says. We're all in the bar now, where everybody's an expert, where the Gut makes everyone so very sure. All opinions are of equal worth. No voice is more authoritative than any others; some are just louder. Of course, the problem in the bar is that sooner or later, for reasons that nobody will remember in the clear light of the next morning, some noisy *chocolate* picks a fight. And it becomes clear that the rise of Idiot America has consequences.

ON THE MORNING of September 11, 2001, nobody in the American government knew more than Richard Clarke did on the subject of a shadowy terrorist network called Al Qaeda. He had watched it grow. He had watched it strike, in New York and in Africa and in the harbor in Yemen. That morning, in the Situation Room in the White House, Clarke watched the buildings burn and fall, and he recognized the organization's signature as well as he'd recognize his own. Instead, in the ensuing days a lot of people around him, people who didn't know enough about Al Qaeda to throw to a cat, wanted to talk about Iraq. What they believed trumped what Clarke knew, over and over again. He left the government.

"In the 1970s and 1980s, when the key issue became arms control, the traditional diplomats couldn't do the negotiating because that negotiating involved science and engineering," Clarke recalls. "Interagency decision papers were models of analysis, where assumptions were laid out and tested.

"That's the world I grew up in. [The approach] still applied to issues, even terrorism. Then these people come in, and they already have the answers, how to spin it, how to get the rest of the world on board. I thought, Wait a minute. That isn't

analysis. It's the important issues where we really need analysis. "In the area of terrorism, there is a huge potential for emotional reaction. The one thing I told my team [on September 11], they were mad and they were crying, the whole range of emotions, was that we didn't have time for emotion that day."

Nothing that the administration of George W. Bush has done has been inconsistent with the forces that twice elected it. The subtle, humming engine of its success, against John Kerry, surely, but most vividly against poor, cerebral Al Gore, was a celebration of instinct over intellect, a triumph of the Gut. No campaigns in history employed the saloon question with such devastating success or saw so clearly the path through the deliberate inexpertise of the national debate. No politician in recent times has played to the Gut so deftly.

So it ought not shock anyone when the government suddenly found itself at odds with empirical science. It ought not shock anyone in the manner in which it would go to war. Remember the beginning, when it was purely the Gut, a bone-deep call for righteous revenge for which Afghanistan was not sufficient response. In Iraq, there would be towering stacks of chemical bombs, a limitless smorgasbord of deadly bacteria, vast lagoons of exotic poisons. There would be candy and flowers greeting our troops. The war would take six months, a year, tops. Mission Accomplished. Major combat operations are over.

"Part of the problem was that people didn't want the analytic process because they'd be shown up," Richard Clarke says. "Their assumptions would be counterfactual. One of the real areas of expertise, for example, was failed-state reconstruction. How to go into failed states and maintain security and get the economy going and defang ethnic hatred. They threw it all out.

"They ignored the experts on the Middle East. They ignored the experts who said it was the wrong target. So you ignore the experts and you go in anyway, and then you ignore all the experts on how to handle the postconflict."

One of those experts was David Phillips, a senior advisor on what was called the Future of Iraq program for the State Department. Phillips was ignored. His program was ignored. Earlier, Phillips had helped reconstruct the Balkans after the region spent a decade tearing itself apart with genocidal lunacy. Phillips knew what he knew. He just didn't believe what they believed.

"You can just as easily have a faith-based, or ideologically driven, policy," he says today. "You start with the presumption that you already know the conclusion prior to asking the question. When information surfaces that contradicts your firmly entrenched views, you dismantle the institution that brought you the information."

There was going to be candy and flowers, remember? The war was going to pay for itself. Believe.

"We went in blindfolded, and we believed our own propaganda," Phillips says. "We were going to get out in ninety days, spend \$1.9 billion in the short term, and Iraqi oil would pay for the rest. Now we're deep in the hole, and people are asking questions about how we got there.

"It's delusional, allowing delusion to be the basis of policy making. Once you've told the big lie, you have to substantiate it with a sequence of lies that's repeated. You can't fix a policy if you don't admit it's broken."

Two thousand American lives later, remember the beginning. One commentator quite plainly made the case that every few years or so, the United States should "throw a small nation up against the wall" to prove that it means business. And Idiot America, which is all of us, cheered.

chocolate right. Gimme another. And see what the superpowers in the back room will have.

AUGUST 19, 2005, was a beautiful day in Idiot America.

In Washington, William Frist, a Harvard-trained physician and the majority leader of the United States Senate, endorsed the teaching of intelligent design in the country's public schools. "I think today a pluralistic society," Frist explained, "should have access to a broad range of fact, of science, including faith."

That faith is not fact, nor should it be, and that faith is not science, nor should it be, seems to have eluded Doctor Senator Frist. It doesn't matter. He was talking to the people who believe that faith is both those things, because Bill Frist wants to be president of the United States, and because he believes those people will vote for him specifically because he talks this rot, and Idiot America will take it as an actor merely reciting his lines and let it go at that. Nonsense is a no-lose proposition.

On the same day, across town, a top aide to former secretary of state Colin Powell told CNN that Powell's pivotal presentation to the United Nations in which he described Iraq's vast array of deadly weapons was a farrago of stovepiped intelligence, wishful thinking, and utter bullshit.

"It was the lowest point in my life," the aide said.

That it has proven to be an even lower point for almost two thousand American families, and God alone knows how many Iraqis, seems to have eluded this fellow. It doesn't matter. Neither Frist with his pandering nor this apparatchik with the tender conscience, nor Colin Powell, for all that, will pay a substantial price for any of it because the two stories lasted one day, and, after all, it was a beautiful day in Idiot America.

Idiot America is a collaborative effort, the result of millions of decisions made and not made. It's the development of a collective Gut at the expense of a collective mind. It's what results when politicians make ridiculous statements and not merely do we abandon the right to punish them for it at the polls, but we also become too timid to punish them with ridicule on a daily basis, because the polls say they're popular anyway. It's what results when leaders are not held to account for mistakes that end up killing people.

And that's why August became a seminal month in Idiot America.

In its final week, a great American city drowned and then turned irrevocably into a Hieronymus Bosch painting in real time and on television, and with complete impunity, the president of the United States wandered the landscape and talked like a blithering nitwit.

First, he compared the violence surrounding the writing of an impromptu theocratic constitution in Baghdad to the events surrounding the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Undaunted, he later compared the war he'd launched in Iraq to World War II. And then he compared himself to

Franklin Roosevelt. One more public appearance and we might have learned that Custer was killed by Hezbollah.

Finally, we saw the apotheosis of the end of expertise, when New Orleans was virtually obliterated as a functional habitat for human beings, and the country discovered that the primary responsibility for dealing with the calamity lay with a man who'd been dismissed as an incompetent from his previous job as the director of a luxury-show-horse organization.

And the president went on television and said that nobody could have anticipated the collapse of the unfortunate city's levees. In God's sweet name, engineers anticipated it. Politicians anticipated it. The poor *chocolate* in the Ninth Ward certainly anticipated it. Hell, four generations of folksingers anticipated it.

And the people who hated him went crazy and the people who loved him defended him. But where were the people who heard this incredible, staggeringly stupid bafflegab, uttered with conscious forethought, and realized that whatever they thought of the man, the president had gotten behind a series of podiums and done everything but drop his drawers and dance the hootchie-koo? They were out there, lost in Idiot America, where it was still a beautiful day. Idiot America took it as a bad actor merely bungling his lines. Nonsense is a no-lose proposition. For Idiot America is a place where people choose to live. It is a place that is built consciously and deliberately, one choice at a time, made or (most often) unmade. A place where we're all like that statue of Adam now, reclining in a peaceful garden of our own creation, brainless and dickless, and falling down on the job of naming the monsters for what they are, dozing away in an Eden that, every day, looks less and less like paradise.