

Studies We'd Like To Commission – 1: On Idiotarianism

What Do Idiotarians Think That Non-Idiotarians Think?

In an interesting and much commented-on [essay](#), left-wing blogger Michael J Totten recently mused on the fact that left wingers typically know less, factually, about history than right wingers:

I am astonished and dismayed to discover this. I'm a life-long liberal and I devour history like food. Not until after September 11 did I learn I'm a minority on the left.

Read it. He makes some excellent observations, and suggests a good reason for the phenomenon. Inevitably though, he does not mention a more straightforward and perhaps more significant reason, namely that left-wing explanations of historical events are simply less true than right-wing ones. So left wingers studying history more often have to create laboured reinterpretations of the causes of events and then find ways to believe them – an overhead whose very existence they must hide from themselves. Conspiracy theorists (of the right as well as the left) thrive on all that, but for sane left-wingers, factual history is harder work than for sane right-wingers.

Anyway, we agree with what Perry de Havilland suggests (but does not explicitly say) in his comments [here](#), namely that the cultural divide in question is not really between left and right, but between **idiotarian** and **non-idiotarian**. And it puts us in mind of a long-standing conjecture of our own about the nature of idiotarianism. Our conjecture is easily testable experimentally and we should very much like to see it tested, for the **study of idiotarianism** [permalinks broken: search for 'idiotarian'] is, in our opinion, a dangerously neglected subject, and such an experiment might help to get it off the ground.

So, those of our gentle readers who wish to make a significant contribution to human knowledge and to the war effort, and who have influence in a suitable university department or opinion-polling organization (or have the wherewithal to hire one), please pay close attention.

In short, we conjecture that *idiotarians are unaware of what their opponents' position is*. We don't mean the bottom line: of course people who were against the invasion of Iraq know that their opponents were in favour of it. And they think they know why:

because the warmongers are greedy, bloodthirsty, stupid bastards who **do not mourn dead soldiers or dead children**. Now, never mind for the moment whether that is true; what the idiotarians don't know is what the warmongers *claim* their reasons are.

Specifically: select at random 500 people who approve of the recent invasion of Iraq (call those the "pro-war" people for short; few of them are idiotarians), and 500 who disapprove (call these the "anti-war" people, who are mostly idiotarians). Ask each pro-war person to write, in a paragraph, what they consider to be a valid and sufficient argument for the invasion. Then – and here is the crux of the study – ask them to write a second paragraph which, they believe, a typical anti-war person would endorse as a valid and sufficient argument against the invasion. Ask each anti-war person to do the same thing. Then randomly hand out copies of several of these 2,000 paragraphs to each of the 1,000 people, and ask them to guess which were written by someone on their own side and which by the opposition.

Here's what we expect the outcome to be: most of the pro-war people will be able to write an anti-war paragraph that anti-war people would endorse. But few of the anti-war people will be able to write a pro-war paragraph that the pro-war people would endorse.

Additionally, we guess that the stronger a person's pro-war views are, the more easily they will be able to write the anti-war paragraph, because, just as Totten points out in the case of historical knowledge, politically-engaged non-idiotarians are interested in, and aware of, what idiotarians are saying and where they are coming from (i.e. in their arguments and values). With politically-engaged idiotarians, we expect exactly the opposite: they are as uninterested in the other side's arguments as they are in factual history. So we expect that the stronger a person's anti-war views are, the less likely it will be that they can write a recognisable pro-war paragraph. In fact we should not be surprised if a significant proportion of the anti-war people are unable to comply with the conditions of the study at all: their "pro-war" paragraph will contain irony, or comical stereotypes of the warmongers, or even overt anti-war arguments.

If we're right, isn't this quite important? And if we're wrong, or the truth is the opposite of what we expect, wouldn't it at least provide some interesting additional context for Totten's phenomenon (which could be measured at the same time)? So – somebody out there: please do it.

UPDATE: Why We Use The Word 'Idiotarian'

Fri, 05/16/2003 - 20:34 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

An idiotarian reply

I see no evidence that "non-idiotarians" are aware of what their *own* position is. e.g. how you start at Popperian epistemology and end up advocating military action vs. Iraq. (Unless it was a scientific

experiment?1.Conjecture: Iraq has WMD. 2.Military action to get empirical data. 3.Apparent refutation: No WMD found so far)

by a reader on Sat, 05/17/2003 - 13:07 | [reply](#)

Re: An idiotarian reply

Thanks for the data, "a reader", but your reply only constitutes anecdotal evidence in favour of our conjecture. What we'd like to see is a scientific study.

by [Editor](#) on Sat, 05/17/2003 - 13:26 | [reply](#)

This is an interesting idea, ...

This is an interesting idea, and one that should be applied. I myself doubt your conclusion but it would be useful to be proved right.

by a reader on Wed, 06/04/2003 - 10:26 | [reply](#)

An example

This onion article at http://www.theonion.com/onion3911/pt_the_war_on_iraq.html is a good example of idiotarians being completely ignorant of the pro-war argument:

Point-Counterpoint: The War On Iraq This War Will Destabilize The Entire Mideast Region And Set Off A Global Shockwave Of Anti-Americanism

If you thought Osama bin Laden was bad, just wait until the countless children who become orphaned by U.S. bombs in the coming weeks are all grown up. Do you think they will forget what country dropped the bombs that killed their parents? In 10 or 15 years, we will look back fondly on the days when there were only a few thousand Middle Easterners dedicated to destroying the U.S. and willing to die for the fundamentalist cause. From this war, a million bin Ladens will bloom.

vs. No It Won't...

You are completely wrong.

Trust me, it's all going to work out perfect. Nothing bad is going to happen. It's all under control.

Why do you keep saying these things? I can tell when there's trouble looming, and I really don't sense that right now. We're in control of this situation, and we know what we're doing. So stop being so pessimistic.

Any reasonably informed pro-war person could write the first

paragraph, but the idiotarians can't come up with any pro-war position that even sounds like an argument.

~Woty

<http://woty.blogspot.com>

by **Woty** on Thu, 06/05/2003 - 01:37 | [reply](#)

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