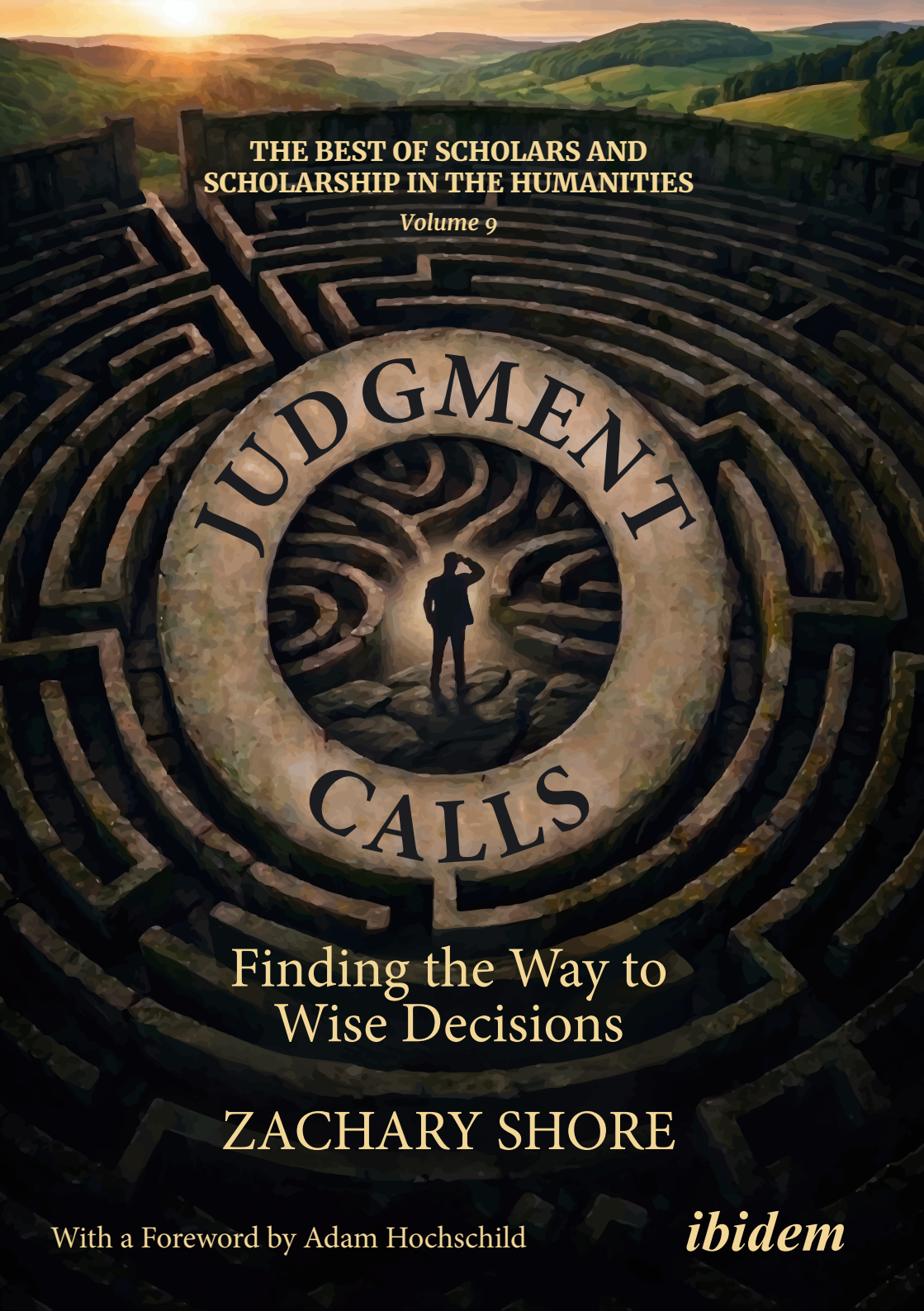




THE BEST OF SCHOLARS AND  
SCHOLARSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES

Volume 9

JUDGMENT  
CALLS

Finding the Way to  
Wise Decisions

ZACHARY SHORE

With a Foreword by Adam Hochschild

*ibidem*

Zachary Shore

# **Judgment Calls**

Finding the Way to Wise Decisions

With a foreword by Adam Hochschild

# **The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities**

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Edited by:

Elliot Y. Neaman, Matthew Feldman, and Karim Mamdani

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Zachary Shore

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As always, any errors in the text are my responsibility alone.

Zachary Shore,  
Berkeley, May 2026.

## Foreword

*Adam Hochschild*

Zachary Shore has in the past been consulted by America's National Security Council, and any sensible president would do well to pick his brains again.

What would he or she find there? That president, and the reader of this book, will find a wide-ranging mind animated by certain core questions. These are the themes that come up repeatedly as Shore ranges across the landscape of international affairs in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Why do well-intentioned leaders (as well as not so well-intentioned ones) make disastrous decisions? Why, when looking at adversaries, do we focus on what those adversaries think rather than the more important question of *how* they think? What are the unexpected actions—generosity, mockery, and more—that may accomplish more than a confrontation?

These are some of the concerns that drive Shore as he considers many of the biggest crises, successes, and blunders of recent decades. And as he picks them apart, certain patterns recur. Winning a war is far easier than winning a peace. The ability to bomb a country to smithereens is not the same as the ability to control events there subsequently. And, what it takes to win that war may very well not be what it appears (in one fascinating example he gives, it's not the number of tanks you can send into battle, but the ability to quickly repair them when they break down).

Montaigne defined good prose as “not pedantical, nor friar-like, nor lawyer-like, but rather, downright, soldier-like.” Shore's prose is like that: language that is clear, firm, everyday. And with it he surveys so many events that people

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thinking more like pedants, friars, and lawyers—instead of thoughtful human beings—have made a mess of. His concerns range from the hubris of the American wars on Afghanistan and Iraq to the ill-conceived Morgenthau Plan to turn Germany into an impoverished, agrarian state after World War II, to the cruel internment of Japanese Americans during that war.

I particularly admire his judiciousness. He jumps on no bandwagons. Yes, the Cold War era involved vast and useless military spending, but the fighting in Korea prevented that country's south from falling under a regime like that of its north, and the Berlin airlift won millions of friends for the United States. The decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan caused a shocking number of deaths, and an invasion might have as well. Shore reminds us that there were other options open to decision makers at that time, far less costly actions that we have since forgotten or ignored.

Shore's way of thinking is not an ideology, but a set of questions. What, at this moment, would a Council of Historical Advisors suggest to the president? What do your adversaries know, or think they know, and how is that driving their actions? And, when Shore doesn't know the answer to something, he doesn't just read history, he talks to people. I found particularly interesting here his many conversations with young Muslims in Europe, in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. He was not asking, like most policy-makers, how can we stop this from happening again? But rather, how can we address the discontents and humiliations that drive such attackers? And answering that first involves much listening.

We live in a world where too many political leaders seem blind to the consequences that an impulsive action can produce, whether that action is starting a war, vilifying an ethnic group, or something else entirely. Ironically, Shore explains

in these pages that his way of thinking, so alert to the unexpected possible consequences of such decisions, comes in part from being blind for almost his entire adulthood. Unable to read body language and facial expressions, he has had to become acutely aware of other ways of perceiving and understanding the world around him. In these pages, we can all benefit from the unusual insight that experience has given him.

Discerning readers will also find something quietly hopeful embedded in these pages. Shore is urging historians—and citizens—to treat judgment itself as a subject worthy of study. To analyze error is not to assume that error is inevitable. On the contrary, Shore's work rests on the belief that better judgment can be cultivated—when we understand where wisdom comes from. Gently, steadily, tenaciously, he is guiding us toward that goal.

Berkeley, April 25, 2026

Adam Hochschild



## Introduction

I'm a strange historian. While some seek the judgment of history, I probe the history of judgment. On my website, it says that I'm a historian of international conflict. And while that's true, if you look more deeply, you'll see that I'm actually a historian of decision making. My ultimate quest is to figure out why we make such bad decisions. Basically, I'm asking why governments so often screw things up. And not just governments, but organizations and individuals as well. Of course, I also explore the reverse—why we occasionally get it right. My hope is that the insights we glean from history can help us make better decisions not only in government, but in our daily lives as well.

Most scholars who ask these kinds of questions study them from a scientific perspective. They are cognitive neuroscientists, psychologists, and other types of social scientists. They design experiments in labs, adjust for variables, and create control groups. In sharp contrast, I tackle the problem of decision making with the historian's craft. I examine what people actually did in real-world conditions. Both approaches have their benefits and drawbacks, but one big advantage for the historian is that our subjects faced all the real-world pressures of daily life. No one controlled for any variables. The people I study had to make their high-stakes decisions, sometimes about war and peace, at the same time that they were dealing with everything else in their lives. Maybe they were coping with insomnia, the kids were ill, their colleagues were undermining them at work, their bosses were threatening to sack them—and in some cases to have them killed. Lab experiments can't really capture those effects. The fact that we sometimes manage to make sound decisions under such circumstances is pretty amazing, a testament to the human character. And when we mess up, it

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helps to figure out exactly why, so we can avoid or ameliorate those conditions the next time, if possible.

In this first part of the collection, I want to introduce you to some central questions and key concepts I've developed in my previous books, all dealing with judgment. We'll start with an excerpt from four of those works. The first one contains the question in the title—*Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions*. It will expose you to the idea of cognition traps. After that, we'll look at the concepts of strategic empathy and pattern-break analysis, which I developed in *A Sense of the Enemy*. We'll go straight to its conclusion, so you can get the bottom line up front. Next, we'll take a ride on the Friendship Train, where we'll ask why Americans have made such polar opposite decisions about how to treat their enemies, at times with abject cruelty, at other times with heroic compassion. Lastly, we'll look back at the beginning of my journey with the Introduction to *What Hitler Knew*, my first book on decision making. That book asked how Hitler and his government made decisions about war and peace. The answer surprised me so much that I never stopped wanting to learn more—not just about Hitler, but about dictatorships, democracies, and the people who run them. What makes them act the way they do, and how might we change them?

I've chosen the title to this volume of collected writings with care. *Judgment Calls* conveys the main theme of my work, and it also suggests that I've felt a calling to study judgment. I'm passionate about it because so many of our problems in the world could be ameliorated, avoided, or resolved, if we could just learn to think and act wisely.

It's been a long journey, and I hope you'll let me guide you through what I've learned so far. I'll be back in Part II to explain what that second section is all about. For now, here's a story to open Part I. It's about one horrendous decision Thomas Edison made that wound up costing him a fortune as well as his name.

**Part I:**  
**The Quest**



## Keeping Current<sup>1</sup>

By age thirty-five, Thomas Alva Edison stood at the peak of his career. Presidents asked to meet him. Financiers hoped to fund him. Journalists vied to quote him, desperate to report his latest breakthroughs. Tourists crowded daily in his lab, just to watch him capture human voices on a disc and hear them back again. In a time before television, his image was so recognizable that a letter sent from North Carolina bearing only a sketch of his face easily reached him in New Jersey. The mere invoking of his name suggested genius, hard work, and the American “can-do” spirit. Then, in 1882, he illuminated part of New York City with his first central power station. So many other cities requested stations of their own that his company simply lost count. Edison had become a national icon, and the future looked full of fortune. There was a problem, however, one so obvious that Edison should easily have grasped it. The world was already outgrowing the very electric system which he had helped devise. Edison’s light bulbs used direct current, but only alternating current could power both tiny light bulbs and gigantic machines over vast distances. When one of Edison’s star employees, a young man named Nikola Tesla, explained how they could harness alternating current and transform the way people live, Edison would have none of it. Edison had built his fame on direct current, and he could not imagine that anything more was needed. It was an exceptionally bad decision. By rejecting a new and far superior technology, Edison set the stage for Tesla to eclipse him.

If mad scientists had a prototype, Nikola Tesla would be it. Nearly everything he did had to be divisible by three. He

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1 From *Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

would swim twenty-seven laps each morning. He would only eat breakfast with eighteen napkins set at his place. He would count the number of steps from his lodging to his office, and if that number were not divisible by three, he would circle around the block to make the calculation fit. Certain furry things repulsed him. The thought of touching someone's hair made him queasy. The presence of a peach produced a fever. In his later years, he developed an excessive, almost romantic attachment to pigeons. Despite these traits, or perhaps because of them, his close friends like Mark Twain and Robert Underwood Johnson found him utterly endearing.<sup>2</sup> For their friendship, Tesla now and then delighted them with his laboratory magic. The tall and boyishly exuberant Serb mesmerized his visitors by sending bolts of spectral light dancing across the room. He commanded electric fireballs to engulf his body, and always emerged unscathed. Occasionally he literally shocked the onlookers by directing waves of colored currents through his guests. Mark Twain and friends were privy to a futuristic light show at a time when electricity was barely understood. But to bring his magic to the world, Tesla would have to confront the wrath of the man synonymous with electric light.

Tesla had an endless stream of ideas that led him toward inventions far before his time. He saw that the future was wireless and constructed the first rudimentary radio, even before Marconi.<sup>3</sup> Tesla built the first remote control device,

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2 For more on Nikola Tesla see Margaret Cheney, *Tesla: Man Out of Time* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1981), and Jill Jonnes, *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* (New York: Random House, 2003). For more on Edison see Randall Stross, *The Wizard of Menlo Park: How Thomas Alva Edison Invented the Modern World* (New York: Crown, 2007).

3 Although the Italian inventor Marchese Marconi initially received credit for inventing the radio, the US Supreme Court ultimately settled the matter in Tesla's favor.

and demonstrated to amazed New Yorkers how he could use it to command a model submarine from a distance. He created the field of telegeodynamics, once even simulating an earthquake in New York City that shattered windows across town. His work inspired the cyclotron, a device used for smashing atoms and central to sub-particle physics. He made substantial, some believe decisive, contributions to the development of robotics, ballistics, and theoretical physics. When he died in 1943 at age 86, the US government confiscated part of his plans and equipment, believing that the military applications of his ideas could be immense. Thomas Edison clearly underestimated the talent he had in his employ.

After being rebuffed by Edison over AC power, Tesla was snapped up by an aggressive, far-sighted entrepreneur. George Westinghouse purchased the rights to Tesla's patents and hired the young inventor as a consultant. Westinghouse now began promoting the use of AC generators, placing Tesla's system in direct competition with Edison's. Edison fought back with a protracted campaign to discredit AC by highlighting its many dangers.

One of his most egregious ploys involved a new form of execution. Edison convinced the New York State correctional authorities that death by electrocution in a specially wired apparatus would be fast and efficient. This so-called electric chair would of course require alternating current. Before Edison could release his device, it had to be tested. Neighbors began to notice that their pets were disappearing. Dogs, birds, cows and horses were all made subjects in a gruesome experiment. When the day came at last for the first prisoner to be electrocuted, the procedure went horribly wrong. William Kemmler was essentially roasted in a spectacle too grisly to describe. Westinghouse, Tesla, and the many proponents of AC's tremendous benefits were outraged at this perverted

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use of their technology and vowed to strike back. The battle of the currents was on.

Despite Edison's best efforts to discredit it, AC was on its way to becoming the standard current for industrial production. Tesla's designs were simply too practical to be resisted, and Westinghouse grasped that the tide would eventually turn in their favor. The public just needed a clearer demonstration of the good that AC could do. That chance came with the arrival of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Edison and other electric companies hoped to profit financially by lighting that event. Westinghouse recognized it as a public relations bonanza. Thousands of spectators oohed and aahed as AC power illuminated the night sky in a light show that truly none had ever seen before. Electricity was still unknown to most people who used only gaslight and tallow candles. Thousands from Europe joined the crowds of Americans at that event. They came to see not just the dazzling colored lights but the star above it all. Dressed in coat and tails, the enigmatic Tesla put on a show of wizardry to everyone's delight. Few in the crowd could grasp the scientific explanations, but all could marvel at the magical whirl of sparkling currents. Not long after their brilliant display at the World's Fair, Westinghouse telephoned Tesla in his laboratory with news. He had just landed the Niagara Falls contract. The power of those falls would spin gigantic turbines generating alternating current to power industrial machines. This was the company's most significant contract yet. Soon AC's tremendous potential would be undisputed. Tesla's dreams were coming true. So, too, were Edison's worst fears.

Edison was not a bad man. Although he could be stubborn and ruled by self interest, he could also rise above pettiness when necessary. Once, when a fire destroyed Tesla's laboratory completely, Edison provided his rival with a temporary workspace in his own lab. Edison was a man who

clearly saw the power of electricity, and who championed a bona fide revolution in how the world would light its surroundings. In spite of that vision he could not accept that a modern world demanded more from electric power than what his system of direct current could produce. For all his brilliance, the man who invented the light bulb was caught in a cognition trap—a rigid mindset that undermined his own success. He failed to grasp a fundamental change occurring in the world around him.

Edison never recaptured the greatness of his early breakthroughs. Having lost the battle over AC, he poured nearly everything he had into a scheme to extract iron from ore by the use of magnets. After five years of tireless labor in the remote countryside, he had to abandon the effort. It was a total failure. Despite his gifted, inventive mind, Edison refused to adapt to changing times. Unable to accept that his phonograph had tremendous commercial value as an entertainment source, Edison insisted on its use as a Dictaphone and watched as another opportunity passed him by. In his eighties he enlisted Harvey Firestone and Henry Ford to back his search for a domestic rubber source. Again he failed. One employee even claimed that the inventor had secretly enriched his products with rubber extracted from condoms.

In a major corporate restructuring, the mighty J. P. Morgan, the banker who underwrote the Gilded Age, merged Thomas Edison's electric company with one of its rivals and renamed the new company General Electric. Despite the fact that Edison had personally electrified Morgan's mansion years before, the banker erased Edison's name from the company that would become one of the most profitable in American history. Decades after AC had become the standard current, the father of the phonograph kept repeating he was

right. Edison's resistance to AC proved the biggest blunder of his life.<sup>4</sup>

### Blunder On

*Blunder* is a book about judgment calls. It is the story of how smart people like Edison get caught in cognition traps and wind up defeating themselves. Most complex problems have complex causes, and no single factor can explain it all. This book offers one possible explanation for why people blunder. I suggest that we all sometimes fall into "cognition traps"—rigid ways of approaching and solving problems.<sup>5</sup> Cognition traps are inflexible mindsets formed from faulty reasoning. They are the stolid ways in which people approach and solve problems based on preconceived notions and preset patterns of thought. Although cognition traps are forms of faulty thinking, each rigid mindset I describe does contain a powerful emotional component. They affirm that our reason and emotions are so often intertwined. Yet as badly as our passions can muddle sober judgment, the stories of how people become caught in cognition traps do not, in fact, prove that blunders are inevitable. On the contrary, they strongly sug-

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4 In *Tesla: Man Out of Time*, Margaret Cheney asserts that Edison admitted his mistake before he died. I find no persuasive evidence of this. As late as 1907, Edison still maintained that AC presented dangers to the public. See "Edison condemns High Voltages," *Newark Advertiser*, December 30, 1907.

Paul Israel, Director of the collected Edison papers held at Rutgers University, told me in a telephone interview in March 2007, that he believes that Edison never fully accepted that AC was the better current.

5 Psychologists often speak of "cognitive traps" or "cognitive biases," referring to a wide range of common human responses to uncertainty. In this book I use the term "cognition trap" as a short-hand for rigid mental frameworks. I am focusing on those mindsets which I as a historian see as most frequently undermining good judgment.

gest that we can all make wiser decisions by cultivating empathy and imagination. As we travel through past and present examples, you'll see how true this is.

I believe that one key reason why we blunder involves the way we approach and solve problems. Without realizing it, we often fall into rigid mental frameworks. To understand how these mindsets trap us, we need to know more about cognition—the conscious process of thinking. When most of us want to understand cognition, we typically turn to science. We expect the best insights to emerge from inside the well-ordered laboratory. While science can tell us much about reason and decision making, the scientist's methods of experimentation are only one way of understanding how we think. Another way is by examining our decisions as they actually occurred in real life, rather than as they unfolded within the confines of carefully controlled experiments. Fortunately, history has given us a wealth of cases for learning about how we think. This book is one historian's take on cognition.

Scholars from all manner of fields have been studying our thoughts to help explain how we think. Neurologists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, even some social scientists—all are weighing in. But one profession has been needlessly silent. Historians have a unique role to play in these questions because they are ultimately concerned with how people think. Historians are not mere recorders of facts and dates. Although we care about what happened and when, our greater goal is to discover the causes of events. To do that, we need to know what thoughts led people to make history as they did.

When scientists study decision making, they create experiments in the present and watch as the future unfolds. Their subjects exist within a maze at least partly of the scientist's design, and they follow those subjects forward

through time. Historians, in contrast, begin at the end. We start in the present and work our way to the past. After figuring out what people did, we then have to determine why they did it. We retrace their steps, exploring the labyrinth of options. Historians must also grapple with the challenge of getting inside our subjects' minds. Usually our subjects belonged to a vastly different culture from our own. The people that we study typically spoke a different language, practiced different customs, and lived under completely different circumstances. Their actions are often mysterious, and the motives for their choices are opaque. Historians must act like detectives on a crime scene where the heroes, villains, and victims are all long gone. But unlike detectives, we are not just on the hunt for who done it; we must discover why they did it in the first place. To succeed as a historian, you must become acutely sensitive to how other people think. You must unearth the roots of other people's decisions, the good judgments as well as the bad.

Douglas Feith, assistant to the US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, was one of the principal architects of America's war in Iraq. Feith believes passionately in learning from history; the rise and fall of the British Empire is one of his personal fascinations. His home in the Maryland suburbs contains an extensive library, holding some 5,000 books, most of them works of history. Yet Feith accepts that history is no substitute for sound judgment. "There's a paradox I've never been able to work out," Feith admitted to Jeffrey Goldberg of *The New Yorker*. "It helps to be deeply knowledgeable about an area, to know the people, to know the language, to know the history, the culture, the literature, but it is not a guarantee that you will have the right strategy or policy as a matter of statecraft for dealing with that area. You see, the great experts in certain areas sometimes get it fundamentally

wrong.... Expertise is a very good thing, but it is not the same thing as sound judgment regarding strategy and policy.”<sup>6</sup>

Politicians, policy analysts, intelligence experts, and scholars will be studying for years how America, possessed of the world’s most powerful and expensive spy agency and scores of intelligent advisors, could have misread Iraq so badly. But the Iraq debacle raises a much larger question: Why do individuals, businesses, and nations, employing their best and brightest minds, and focusing their finest resources on a particular problem, sometimes go horribly wrong? With ample access to historical precedents, why don’t people learn the lessons of history? I believe we often blunder not because our thinking is wrong, but because it is rigid.

To be clear, let me make a distinction between three important terms. A mistake is simply an error arising from incorrect data, like believing that an electric wire is running direct current when it’s actually on AC. A blunder, in contrast, is a solution to a problem that makes matters worse than before you began, like attempting to discredit a potentially liberating technology rather than adapting to it. Finally, a cognition trap is the mental framework that led you to a blunder, like the one I call Static Cling, the refusal to accept that a fundamental change is underway. This book is not simply a catalog of blunders. Instead, it’s a typology of judgment calls combined with the stories of how they unfolded and how they were resolved. Each chapter defines a different cognition trap and offers historical and contemporary examples of how those traps were sprung. Cognition traps have nothing to do with a lack of intelligence. As you’ll see throughout these stories, they can flummox even the brightest decision makers.

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6 Jeffrey Goldberg, “A Little Learning,” *The New Yorker*, May 9, 2005.

*Blunder* does not predict America's rise or fall. Instead, it explains the ways in which all nations, along with businesses and individuals, weaken themselves. America's errors in Iraq, for example, will not destroy the nation, but they surely weaken it. Most of the time, when countries blunder, they neither collapse nor revolt; they just squander precious resources and set back their progress toward prosperity, security, and strength. Eventually they regroup, right themselves, and blunder on.

Because I teach military officers at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, part of *Blunder's* focus involves international conflicts. My students come not just from the Navy, but the Army, Air Force, and Marines as well. And there are many from other countries' militaries. One of the core courses I teach explores the roots of war in the modern era. Through historical study, we look deeply into the causes of war and the conditions for a stable peace. One of the many lessons I hope my students take away is that thoughtful decision making can be cultivated and improved. The poor judgments made in war and peace often result from the same kind of rigid mindsets, or cognition traps, that affect people every day.

*Blunder* is not a book solely about nations and wars. It shows how the same cognition traps that ensnare policymakers catch us in other realms as well. Just as cognition traps sap a nation's strength, they can sabotage personal relationships and shatter corporate competitiveness. They foil our best laid plans in nearly every arena, from international relations to romantic relations, from environmental management to health care to weight loss, and much, much more. Cognition traps are insidious, and once you finish this book, you will likely start spotting them all around you.

Throughout the stories in these pages you will meet a remarkable range of historical figures from antiquity to the

present. All of them, in one way or another, have either fallen prey to crippling cognition traps, or else skillfully avoided them. And some of them have done both. What they share is not any unique vulnerability to being unconsciously hoodwinked, nor any extraordinary intellectual gifts which helped them break the destructive mental habits that afflict us all. Nonetheless, they do share certain common features. My hope is that by the end of this book, you will have a deeper grasp of the characteristics which contributed to blunders and the traits which helped to avoid them.

*Blunder* aims to help us recognize the destructive mental patterns we all employ. But identifying the most prevalent cognition traps is not enough to overcome them. The second aim of *Blunder* is to suggest concrete ways for all of us to escape cognition traps once we find them. If we can spot those self-destructive thought patterns in time, then we have a genuine opportunity to break them. Naturally, it's always easy to look back at other people's errors and say how foolish they were. It's a much harder thing to be in the situation yourself and avoid the same mistakes. For that reason, in each chapter I contrast examples of people who blundered with people in comparable circumstances who managed to succeed. Even though no two situations can ever be exactly alike, we can still learn a lot from those who made sound decisions.

*Blunder* is a book about cognition, but it approaches the subject from a historian's point of view. Since historians love to tell stories, I illustrate cognition traps not solely with historical examples, but also by drawing on literature, poetry, and even a bit of clever folklore to ease us through the complex and crucial world of judgment calls.



## Moon Over Miami<sup>1</sup>

Kadeesha had a tip. It arrived by anonymous email. “Watch the 9:20 race at Wolverhampton. The winner will be a horse called Boz.”

Kadeesha was instructed not to place a bet; she was merely to watch. She had never put money on the races before. In fact, she had no history of gambling. Why would she, of all people, be receiving this tip? A single mom in Kew, England, working two jobs to support her son, Kadeesha barely had enough income to cover the monthly bills. “I never had a large sum of money,” she explained, “‘cause it always goes out ‘cause of all the responsibilities I’ve got in life.” But the sender insisted that he possessed a foolproof system for consistently predicting the winners at the race track. “I was gutted that I couldn’t put a bet on, but I checked it out and it won.”

Kadeesha was intrigued. The next email came a few days later. Again it predicted the result of a race just twenty-four hours in advance, this one at Suffolk Downs in Boston. How could this “system” know anything about a race in America? Kadeesha figured, “I’m up for a laugh,” and this time, as instructed, she put a small amount of money on Laced Up. Though not the favorite, her horse won again.

Now Kadeesha was hooked. When the third email came, she zoomed out from her desk at work to the nearest betting shop. She put down 20 quid, which for her was not a small sum, on a horse named Naughton Brook, an eighteen to one outsider. Nervous and excited, she repeated to herself, “This

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1 From *A Sense of the Enemy: The High Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

had betta' win. Oh, God, this had betta' win." As the announcer declared the winner, Kadeesha shrieked, "Thank you, The System!" She had just won 360 pounds.

Race four took place back at Wolverhampton. The 2:45, a horse called Formation. The odds of correctly predicting four of these races in a row stood at nearly a thousand to one. But Formation did win, and Kadeesha had now made over 500 pounds. The System, it seemed, could not lose.

After race five, Kadeesha's confidence in The System had solidified. She was now ready to put down serious dough. She went to her father to ask for 1,000 pounds. "The most I ever put on a horse was 20 quid," her father told her, "and when I lost it, I said that's it. Never again." Nonetheless, the predictions had been right so far. Kadeesha then borrowed more money from a loan company. For race six she had assembled 4,000 pounds. She bet it all on Moon Over Miami, the horse in the green and white checks. "I'm really, really scared now," she admitted to the TV cameras filming her story. The worst part, she confessed, was gambling her father's money as well as her own.

What Kadeesha did not know but was about to discover was that The System was simply an exercise in probability. Derren Brown, a British entertainer, wanted to demonstrate how difficult it is for most of us to think rationally about prediction. No such system could exist for accurately predicting horse races, yet Kadeesha and thousands more like her are willing to believe in a bogus ploy. Soon after his first anonymous email, Brown informed Kadeesha that he was the actual sender. She then agreed to let him film her as she bet her money. But what Brown did not reveal (not yet) was that the same email Kadeesha initially received Brown had also sent to 7,775 other randomly selected people.

The only difference in all those email messages was that the recipients were divided into six groups and each group

was given the name of one of the six horses in the race. Kadeesha just happened to be in the group that was told to watch for Boz. The five groups whose horses did not win were sent a follow-up email, blaming the loss on a glitch in the system. They were never contacted again. Kadeesha's group, however, was then subdivided into another six groups, each given the name of one of the six horses in a new race, and instructed to bet. And thus the process was repeated, until by the fifth race, only six participants remained, each one betting on a different one of the six horses. Kadeesha just happened to be the lucky winner. By race six, however, she was the only one left. Moon Over Miami had as good a chance of winning as any other.

"Fuckin' hell!" was all Kadeesha could muster after Brown explained what he had done. "I'm gonna' be sick," she declared. And yet, even after the explanation, Kadeesha seemed in disbelief. "I was lucky all this time and now it's all gone wrong."

Moon Over Miami did not win. The lucky horse was Marodima. Only moments after Kadeesha's horse had lost and her agony was plain, Derren Brown assured her that he had not actually bet her money on the unlucky steed. With dramatic flare, Brown handed her a ticket showing 4,000 on Marodima to win. (Most likely, he had put 4,000 down on each of the horses, just to be certain.) Kadeesha was about to receive 13,000 pounds in cash. She shrieked for joy. "I'm debt free for the first time in eight years!"

Brown's experiment tried to show how poorly most of us grasp basic concepts of probability. What he actually revealed was something he himself might not have realized. Kadeesha always had the upper hand, and she very likely sensed it. She had no way of knowing whether Brown's so-called system was legitimate or not. She probably lacked a firm grounding in the science of probability. What she really

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needed to know, however, was not whether Brown's system could find her the winning horse. Instead, she needed to know whether Derren Brown would permit her to lose her and her father's savings on national TV.

Kadeesha had two ways of thinking about what Brown would likely do. She could have tried to ascertain Brown's character, observing subtle cues to gauge his kindness and compassion—the underlying drivers that make him tick. The second method was for Kadeesha to contemplate the limits on what Brown could actually do, regardless of his inclinations. With this approach Kadeesha had to focus on Brown's constraints. The key question then would be not whether Brown, of his own volition, would let her lose, but whether his television network or the British TV-viewing public would permit a working-class single mom to be ruined by a clever TV host.

Kadeesha may not have had the skills to think deeply about the probability of predicting races, but rather than being a sucker for “The System,” Kadeesha may have worked the system—the larger social system in which both Brown and Kadeesha have to function. Moon Over Miami had little chance of winning, but placing her money as Brown instructed her to do proved the shrewdest guess she could have made.

We will never know what Kadeesha really thought, but we can use her predicament to illuminate the kinds of questions leaders face when thinking like the enemy. Exactly like Kadeesha, leaders must seek out their adversaries' underlying drivers and constraints. They must gather information, filter out the ocean of irrelevant data, and devise shortcuts for locating the points that matter most. I have called this exceedingly difficult endeavor strategic empathy.

Kadeesha's story also highlights a related problem in prediction. Quantitative methods often miss the mark because they calculate the wrong data, as I described in the previous chapter. Even if Kadeesha had possessed training in statistics, math, or the science of probability, seeing through Brown's system would have done her little good. Kadeesha walked away a winner: 13,000 pounds richer than before. Moon Over Miami's fate never mattered. The only odds that counted were the ones on what Brown would do to her in the public eye. And those odds were probably always in her favor. Knowing which data matter most is what strategic empathys do best.

I began this book by asking what produces strategic empathy—the crucial yet all-too-rare capacity for divining an enemy's underlying drivers and constraints. I have argued that when leaders focused on the right data—their enemy's behavior at pattern-break moments—they improved their chances of reading their enemies correctly. When they ignored the pattern breaks entirely, or else grossly misinterpreted them as in Stalin's case regarding Hitler, they thwarted their capacity for accurate assessments. I further argued that when leaders assumed that their opponents' future behavior would resemble their past behavior, they hindered their own ability to identify and correctly interpret surprising new information, which could have afforded them useful insight.

## **Does He Sting, or Only Roar?**

Entering another's mind is hard enough when we know that person well. It is vastly harder when that person comes from a foreign culture, speaks a foreign tongue, and thinks in ways distinctly different from ourselves. I have tried to show that the pattern-break heuristic enhanced leaders' ability to

think like their enemies and that this ability affected key conflicts in the past century. Yet the pattern-break heuristic is not simply a tool of the past. It can be just as useful to present-day policy analysts seeking to predict their adversaries' likely actions. Although analysts should not overweigh the expected payoffs of this approach, they should weigh heavily the value of surprising information. When routine trends are broken and individuals behave in unexpected ways, that information can reveal more about an opponent's root ambitions than his actions under normal conditions. This is primarily true when an opponent's actions impose costs upon himself.

Just as the pattern-break heuristic can aid analysts contemplating the future, it can also assist historians examining the past. As I noted in the section on Gustav Stresemann, historians still debate the Foreign Minister's true objectives. Similar debates are common among most other historians struggling to comprehend why their particular subjects acted as they did. For the scholar and the policymaker alike, such disagreements are common because leaders frequently behave in complex, sometimes seemingly contradictory ways. Experts can then point to evidence to support competing interpretations of that leader's intentions. If we instead concentrate on behaviors at meaningful pattern breaks, we may come closer to exposing a historical figure's deeper aims.

All of this raises the question of whether individuals possess fixed or fluid motivations. This turns out to be a non-trivial problem, one that dates back at least to ancient Greece.

Most people know the fable of the scorpion and the frog. A scorpion asks a frog for a ride across the lake, but halfway across the water the scorpion strikes. As both are drowning, the frog asks the scorpion why he stung him, knowing it

meant that both of them would die. The scorpion responds that he couldn't help himself. It was just his nature. The original tale probably traces back to Aesop, who related the same parable through a farmer and a viper, but the moral was the same. Some people just can't change their wicked ways.

The scorpion story would be a tremendously depressing commentary on human nature if it were not offset by another of Aesop's fables, one with a strikingly alternative lesson. In the story of Androcles and the lion, a slave in ancient Greece escapes his captors and flees into the woods. There he comes upon a roaring beast. Whereas others might have fled in terror, Androcles overcomes his initial fear and approaches the animal. He discovers that the lion has a painful thorn caught in its bleeding paw. Once he removes the thorn and binds the wound, the lion is not only grateful, he develops a genuine warmth for the human. Later, both the lion and the slave are captured. As punishment, Androcles is thrown into the arena, where the hungry lion is sent to devour him while the emperor and crowds look on in savage expectation. But when the lion rushes toward his prey, he recognizes Androcles. Rather than tearing him apart, the lion licks Androcles's hand in friendship. The moral Aesop had in mind had to do with gratitude. But the story conveys another equally important lesson. Sometimes our enemies are not enemies by nature but because of conditions external to themselves. They can be transformed into allies simply by a change in circumstance.

These two tales can easily serve as metaphors for a recurring debate within foreign policy circles. Leaders are frequently confronted by aggressive states. They must then devise strategies for dealing with them. It would be just as foolish to assume that all opponents are potential allies as it would be to think that all are implacable foes. One of the

most crucial tasks of statecraft is to distinguish the scorpions who cannot change from the lions who can. It is here that pattern breaks can help.

Strategic empathy might seem useful only for getting the better of your opponent. Certainly that was its value to the leaders I described throughout this book. But strategic empathy can be used just as effectively to avoid or ameliorate conflicts. It can be a means not for outmaneuvering the enemy but instead for making amends. Obviously, some enemies cannot be accommodated. Some differences can never be bridged, but many can. Understanding what truly drives others to act as they do is a necessary ingredient for resolving most conflicts where force is not desired. It is, in truth, an essential first step toward constructing a lasting peace.

## The Friendship Train<sup>1</sup>

Everyone wanted to be there. It was the kind of spectacle that only Hollywood could produce. Scores of searchlights crisscrossed the night sky, illuminating fancy floats below. Ten live bands filled the grounds with music fit for the extravaganza. And the stars came out in force. John Wayne was there, and so was Mickey Rooney. The “Brazilian Bombshell” Carmen Miranda enchanted the crowd, while others swooned at the French-born actor Charles Boyer, still glowing from his performance in the hit film *Gaslight*. More than one hundred of the most renowned celebrities performed, mingled, and jockeyed to be seen. Half a million spectators braved the cold November chills since most did not yet own a television. In 1947, TV was just beginning to penetrate American homes as the long postwar economic boom began, and TV crews were there to capture the event. The comedian Danny Thomas got a raucous laugh by shivering on stage, reflecting what the crowds were feeling. He bowed in mock reverence at California’s Governor Earl Warren, who was seated with his wife on stage. The mood that night was ebullient, a striking contrast to the abject suffering that had brought them all there.

Across the Atlantic, Europeans were starving. The war had crippled food production. The massive bombing of roads, bridges, canals, and railway lines had shattered transportation routes, making the transit of food to cities that much harder. Drought had withered crops, further depleting what little food remained. More than two years had passed since Germany’s surrender, but the lives of average people had only worsened. Tens of millions of children were enduring

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1 From *This Is Not Who We Are: America’s Struggle Between Vengeance and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

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malnutrition, stunted growth, and disease. Mothers jostled and shoved their way into the scrums surrounding canned food distribution sites. Others picked through garbage dumps, searching for any edible scraps. With winter rapidly approaching, Europeans desperately needed sustenance or millions would soon die. The continent was facing a grim postwar apocalypse, and America had been asked to help. The half a million people who gathered that night in Hollywood had come to launch a distinctly American solution: the newly minted Friendship Train.

It began as a publicity stunt, the brainchild of Drew Pearson, America's best-known syndicated columnist. Pearson had witnessed Russian Army forces in France being lauded for supplying food aid while American shipments went unnoticed. Pearson wanted America to get credit for the humanitarian efforts it was making. Since 1946, Americans across the country had voluntarily gone hungry several days a week, eating less to make more food available for shipment to Europe. At President Harry Truman's urging, Americans observed "meatless Tuesdays," cut down on bread consumption and tried to reduce food waste. Exports rose but that was not enough to rectify the problem. By the fall of 1947, the situation had grown dire. The government intensified its efforts, but the public had to pitch in more. In one of Pearson's columns, he proposed a Friendship Train that would race across America collecting food for Europe's hungry masses. He thought that if celebrities could accompany the train, the crowds would gather and donations would rise. Europeans would then see the true heart of the American people. But neither Pearson nor any others could have imagined just how ardently Americans would get on board with the simple idea of giving.

As the train prepared to leave Los Angeles, the nation's most celebrated songwriter, Irving Berlin, led the crowd in a