The Importance of Being Ignorant

by Aaron Ross Powell

When you're constructing a political philosophy, never forget how much you don't know — and even more, how much the government doesn't know.

Humans come into the world ignorant. We make a good effort at digging ourselves out of our pit of ignorance by accumulating knowledge through experience and education, but we never quite reach the surface. We learn things, of course. We can recall our home address and the names of our children. Most of us can say who the president is (though fewer the vice president, and fewer again our state governor). The truths of science are also accessible. Many know that force equals mass times acceleration and that fish breathe through their gills. But the world contains an awful lot to know, and none of us can approach grasping it all.

In fact, the mere existence of human ignorance creates the wonder of our world and the drive to explore. Ignorance is our intellectual blank canvas and, so long as we strive to fill it in, we should not lament its presence. Yet ignorance has its dark side too. It can be blamed for racism and homophobia, for religious violence and quack medicine. What is important is to limit its harmful effects while encouraging its motivational benefits.

How much damage a bad idea can do is a function not only of how bad it is but also of the power held by those who believe it. A plumber who has bad ideas about pipes can cause a lot of leaks in my house. He's unlikely, however, to destroy my children's future. But if a bad idea is held by someone in government, its reach can expand dramatically, along with its potential harm. This is not because the ideas of those in government are worse or their ignorance more pronounced, but because these people's power is greater. I can tell a plumber to leave me alone and never touch my sink again, but Congress is inescapable.

Thus we should be particularly concerned by the actions that those wielding state power may take, and limit their power to enact bad ideas. In other words, we should structure our state along libertarian lines. What follows is an argument for that idea. Much of it may seem intuitively true; certainly it may seem that way to libertarians. Yet one of the corollaries of

this idea is a truth that is often forgotten in the complexities of political life: the truth that we should be wary of the strength of our own convictions. Forcing the world to behave in accordance with our knowledge is one thing, when that knowledge turns out to be real, but quite another when it turns out to be false. Given how little we know for sure, it's best to err on the side of hesitancy and humility when implementing what we think we know. The precautionary principle is hard to accept, but here it is: while I may believe that X is true, X may very well be false. Therefore, I should be cautious when requiring others to act as if X were true.

Ignorance? Which Ignorance?

When discussing ignorance from a policy perspective, we often misunderstand the kind of ignorance at issue. Ignorance in comparison to others is given primacy and ignorance in comparison to the world is often ignored. We assume that, while any one of us may not be an expert, there are experts out there with knowledge great enough to tackle any problem. It is almost as if recognition of our personal ignorance blinds us to the existence of general ignorance. In other words, if I know less about climate change than Al Gore, then Al Gore knows everything there is to know on the topic. In effect, the fact that he knows more than I do makes it seem as if he were virtually without ignorance of the topic in his "field."

The result is the emergence of a cult of experts, people just as burdened by ignorance of a complex world as the rest of us but insulated from recognizing it by their comparative lack of ignorance on specific topics. Experts thus become a privileged problem-solving class. Yet given that all of us are ignorant, and given that this ignorance extends even to experts, what power should we give them to enact changes in the world?

Of course imperfect knowledge need not induce paralysis. If we had always been delivered to inaction by our lack of complete information, we would still be hunter-gatherers on the earth's savannahs. No, we are free to act while ignorant, but we must be careful — and the degree of caution demanded is directly proportional to the likelihood of ignorance, by experts or anyone else.

To demonstrate what I mean, imagine making a prediction about driving your car — a subject on which you are an expert. If you know it's been working well, you can confidently predict that you'll be able to back it out of your driveway tomorrow morning. Though you are making a prediction about future events, a prediction hampered by a certain degree of ignorance (you don't know that a meteorite won't fall through the car's engine block while you're asleep), the knowledge you do have easily trumps the knowledge you don't.

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But what if I were to ask you if you'll be able to drive that same automobile three years from now? Suddenly the ignorance you bring to the question is a little greater. A lot more can happen in three years than in 24 hours: accidents, excessive wear and tear, a loss of the job that lets you make auto payments. That said, however, you'll probably still feel pretty good about betting that you'll drive the car three years from now.

But what about ten? Twenty? As the point predicted moves farther out, the number of possible occurrences about which you are ignorant increases. It quickly eclipses whatever real knowledge you have.

The concept is by no means limited to such simple questions as the longevity of an automobile. In the summer of 2008, as gas prices rose above four dollars, it was widely assumed that a crisis had come to America. Politicians fretted about how to solve the issue. Gas tax holidays were proposed, as were tax rebates. Many believed that prices would continue to rise, forcing people to drive less or buy more fuel efficient vehicles. But by early November 2008, the average cost for regular unleaded in the United States was $2.40 a gallon and falling rapidly. The predictions made by experts just four months before proved entirely wrong.

Prices are not alone in their long-term unpredictability. Even consensus science frequently goes wrong. In the 1970s, American scientists warned of the impending crisis of global cooling. Climatology researchers pointed to global trends demonstrating a significant and continuing drop in temperatures. In 1980, Carl Sagan, in an episode of his popular television show "Cosmos: A Personal Voyage," warned viewers that we were on the verge of a new ice age and the catastrophic danger resulting from the burning and clear cutting of forests. Of course, 30 years later, scientists know the global cooling theory was incorrect. They now warn of global warming. Politicians and environmentalists call for drastic changes in America's industry and economy to prevent rising seas and planet-wide extinctions.

It is crucial to understand that, just because scientists were wrong about global cooling, it does not follow that they are wrong about global warming. And just because the gas prices predicted in July 2008 didn't materialize in November, it doesn't follow that future predictions about the cost of gasoline are bound to fail. Incorrectly guessing nine coin tosses has no effect on the accuracy of a tenth guess.

No, the lesson to be learned from five-dollar-a-gallon gas and global cooling is that present certainty is often exaggerated. We don't like to admit our own ignorance, even as we are happy to point to ignorance in others. What we can do is deal with ignorance realistically, by operating within a governing structure that maximizes its benefits (the drive for discovery) while minimizing its detriments (the harm from bad ideas). This is where the question of state action and coercion becomes important.

Ignorance and Coercion

The forgotten fact of state action is this: legislation is a mandate for men employed by the state to point guns at our faces. This applies to all legislation, from statutes prohibiting rape to regulations keeping restaurants from allowing their patrons to smoke. The truth of this assertion is easy to demonstrate.

Imagine you have just committed murder. This is against the law, and now the police are after you. If you submit to their authority — if you act in accordance with the laws that

take effect after you've broken the statute prohibiting homicide — then guns don't have to be drawn. But if you don't submit, then men wearing uniforms will most assuredly draw their service revolvers. If you continue to resist, those guns will eventually be aimed and fired at you.

If this weren't the case, state legislation — which is not the self-enforcing laws of society, such as the rules against being rude to your neighbor or lying to your spouse — would have no effect. It would be merely a set of suggestions about how we ought to behave, not rules we are forced to conform to. This holds true even in cases a great deal less serious than murder.

Imagine that, instead of killing someone, you've just received a parking ticket. It's ridiculous, you think. Your car was nowhere near the fire hydrant. So you take the ticket, wad it up, and toss it on the curb. After months of not paying, your car is booted. Not willing to submit to the state's authority, you get a mechanic friend to remove the boot and continue driving. At some point, if you evade enforcement long enough, the state will seek to have you arrested — and resisting arrest will immediately bring those guns to bear.

What the two examples above have in common, however, is that they're both prohibitive laws. Don't murder. Don't park in front of the fire hydrant. It's easy to see how prohibiting citizens from taking certain actions necessitates the threat of force. But what about more positive state actions? What about grants for people to do cancer research?

If the federal government creates a grant for cancer research, providing a huge block of funds for public and private universities working to cure the disease, it certainly doesn't seem to be preventing anyone from taking any action. Indeed, it is facilitating the act of solving one of humanity's most pressing medical problems. Is even this act coercive?

If the money comes from taxing others, then yes, it is coercive. Not paying taxes for long enough will bring out the state's violence in pursuit of the delinquent taxpayer. Thus all of us are coerced into funding cancer research instead of using that money to pay for autism studies or big screen TVs, or cancer research funded in some other way.

What if, instead of taking money directly from taxpayers and transferring it to research institutions, the government granted tax incentives for private parties to donate to cancer research? No one would be forced to fund the universities. People would merely be encouraged to do so. But the trouble here is that the state places a burden on anyone choosing to engage in a non-incentivized activity. It is as if the state were telling us, "Oh, I'm not coercing you. But if you don't act in the way I'd like you to, you're going to pay for someone else to do it." If a company gives away money to cancer research, the government will demand only, say, 20% of each dollar that company earns. If it doesn't make the donation, the government will coerce away 30%.

But why should we be concerned about a coercive state? For many people, the answer is obvious and intuitive. Others have grown used to government coercion and don't realize that state sanction doesn't make an action moral, or prudent in the face of ignorance.

Indeed, we need only recast the state's actions as performed not by a duly elected governing body, but by an individual no different from ourselves, to see just how cautious we ought to be. Take the innocuous example discussed above. Most of us are happy with the state redirecting tax dollars to cancer research. It is a noble thing for society to do, using its resources to help those most in need. But what if the entity doing the redirecting wasn't Congress but the guy who lives across the street? What if he showed up at his neighbor's door one morning, brandishing a firearm, and demanded that the neighbor hand over her money so it might be used to find a cure for cancer?

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Chances are that these demands would not be greeted with as much good will as if they came from elected officials. At a fundamental level, we recognize that forcibly taking someone's property against his will is a moral wrong; we're just willing to look the other way when the aggressor is our own government. This is a type of willful ignorance.

Any action that makes us uncomfortable when performed by an individual, however, should also make us uncomfortable — though sometimes, perhaps, to a lesser degree — when performed by the state. And let us not forget that the state is, quite literally, just a collection of individuals to whom we've granted privileges. It does not exist as a thing in and of itself, exempt from the bounds of ignorance. An individual may donate all his money to inefficient medical research or a group of quacks; so may the state, and it may do so with a degree of impunity that private individuals usually do not possess.

This is not to argue that no coercive act by government is ever justified. Instead, we must recognize the moral troubles inherent in coercion, rather than neglecting to examine them just because the organization exercising coercive force is the product of a democratic system. All of us should see coercion as prima facie wrong and only change our view on a case-by-case basis — and only when we are presented with considerable evidence against our initial hunch, not simply relying on an ignorant assumption that the government, or the voters, must be right. Any system that assumes otherwise, any system that acts as if coercive force by a particular actor were prima facie right — should be viewed with deep suspicion.

Ignorance and Imperatives

As I have said, the existence of ignorance does not mean that we should refrain from action. It does, however, introduce the question of imperative action versus other kinds of action. Imperatives must be distinguished from preferences — and I would argue that only imperatives justify the use of force.

Not every want carries the same weight with the people around us. Not every want creates obligations or even demands respect. That I may want a candy bar does not, in any way, require you to give me one, nor should you particularly care about my preference for Snickers. But if I want medicine for my dying child or want not to get my head beaten in

by a soccer hooligan, then it may be more reasonable for me to expect you to take notice.

Much of what we take to be imperative ("We must do something about all these cars on the roads") is actually just preference ("I don't like all these cars on the roads."). And while it may be permissible, in some circumstances, to use the force of law to fulfill imperatives, the consequences are often undesirably grave when that same force is used in the service of preferences. The preference for expansive homeownership among low income Americans led to laws and programs that inflated the housing bubble and precipitated the financial crisis.

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The simple fact is that very few people agree on the imperatives for human behavior. We might all agree it's imperative that people not murder one another, that they not engage in rape, that they not burn down each other's homes. But all of these fall within a very specific category, the protection of rights in property. If I own my body, it is wrong for you to invade that property by rape or to deprive me of it by murder. The same logic applies to my home. Imperatives can exist in other categories, too, but they diminish quickly outside the generally recognized and understood private property context. Confining people to their homes during a plague outbreak is a likely imperative — supposing that we know, or think we know, that the quarantine will protect other people's lives. But a preference for a smoke-free environment, which often presents itself as an imperative to take action against deadly secondhand smoke — this is a matter on which serious debate exists about the extent of our understanding. The ban on smoking may be strictly a preference.

The confusion of the two — the ignorant assumption that our personal interests are, in fact, universal — is a common mistake. I prefer urban living. I love having the city close around me, with the option to do nearly anything at a moment's notice. The crush of humanity is comforting, both for its broad anonymity and for the availability of diverse and interesting personalities. So I might easily assume that all people should live in urban settings so as to enjoy the features I find so enticing. But I would be wrong to think so. Strange as it may appear to me, a great many of my fellow humans cherish the quaint tedium of suburbia. I may think they're crazy, but it's their right to be that way. Should I make the judgmental error of turning my preference for urban living into an imperative that all follow my example — and should I use the coercive power of the state to enact my worldview — I would be perpetrating a moral wrong, turning my own sense of "oughts" into the world's "is." Instead of learning more about the world that exists, I will be trying to impose my own world, with no moral sanction behind my actions.

The inability to recognize this distinction — between my preferences and the world's imperatives — is the root cause of many frustrations about freedom. Take so called "market failure." When the free market allows a situation that goes against a given preference, those who hold it are quick to claim that the market has failed them. But it is equally true that, while "failing" them, the market has benefited others — namely the people who don't hold the preference in question.

How to Change the World

How can we go about changing the world? All of us want to do that in some way or other, from making our upcoming dinner tastier than it might otherwise have been to ending the scourge of AIDS. Possible actions to change the world can be divided into three categories: design, experimentation, and evolution.

As is normal in human life, each of the three brings its own unique set of tradeoffs. Recognizing these tradeoffs is a crucial step toward understanding both the benefits and the harms of state action. If one method brings with it considerable costs, we ought to be more concerned if the state dictates its use.

In discussing design, experimentation, and evolution, I draw upon the four concepts that I emphasized before: ignorance, coercion, imperatives, and preferences. How these interact within the three methods exposes the risks and tradeoffs of government action.

Most state actors begin by believing that they are engaged in design work. This is a reasonable attitude, given the type of behavior typically called for by government — and, indeed, for most of the tasks each of us engages in every day.

Let's say that I want to drive my car to the store. If I'm at home, then I seek to change the state of the world from one less desirable (me at home) to one more desirable (me at the store). All that's left is for me to design my way between one worldly state and the other.

Why design? Because, presuming I've done this sort of thing many times before, I know every step that is necessary. I know I have to go to the garage, get in my car, start it, pull out (after opening the garage door, of course), and then follow a sequence of streets already memorized. The process is easy and, barring random and unlikely circumstances, foolproof. That is the crucial characteristic of design: the process and needs for success are known (almost) totally in advance. Design, then, is predicated on something close to perfect knowledge.

But any project of significance — any great change to the world — will almost never approach even the degree of "perfect" knowledge I have when making my crosstown drive. Design is ordinarily useful in implementing immediate individual preferences — not great moral or national imperatives.

Of course, this doesn't stop us from trying to design solutions to problems about which we have far from perfect knowledge, although this often turns puzzles into crises. We see a problem — too few people owning homes, say, or the thinning of bird eggs caused by DDT — and assume that, if we don't solve it now, with the tools we have, we'll never solve it. There is absolutely no way any one of us — or any group of us — can have perfect knowledge of the housing market or the global ecosystem, but compelled by our ability to ignore our own ignorance, we pretend that we do.

This leads to the policy equivalent of exorcisms and blood

lettings. Action takes place, but the patient is not made well. Instead, the housing market collapses and millions throughout Africa die from the malaria that returns with the banning of DDT. The risks of design failure grow in proportion to our ignorance. Without perfect knowledge, design will rarely work. For large-scale problems (the kind the state most often seeks to "solve"), we will never have anything close to perfect knowledge.

That's a large claim, but it has been borne out again and again in experience. We need only look to the failure of centrally planned economies to see an especially tragic example. For a more thorough look at the problems of imperfect knowledge, one can do no better than the work of Friedrich Hayek, whose economic arguments against socialism are hard to surpass. "Human reason can neither predict nor deliberately shape its own future," Hayek wrote in "The Constitution of Liberty." "Its advances consist in finding out where it has been wrong." While such advances are crucial to human progress, the effort of trial and error must be approached cautiously, with a recognition of its limits and a wariness of those who would use coercive power to direct it.

If design, which assumes near-perfect knowledge, is made impossible for most situations by the fact of our ignorance — and thus coercing us into participating in the process is wrong — then experimentation is the next method open to us. If we can't be sure how to get from point A to point B, then we can try something, see if it works, then try again, with variations if it doesn't.

This isn't a bad way of solving problems. It's responsible for the invention of airplanes, automobiles, and antibiotics. It's the cornerstone of the scientific method. The problem of ignorance remains, but experimentation offers us a way around it, by chipping away at what we don't know through a slow but steady increase in what we *do* know. The microchip took a long time to get from Geoffrey W.A. Dummer's proposal in 1952 to Steve Jobs' introduction of the iPhone 55 years later, but it works quite well. Couldn't the state do the same kind of thing?

One difficulty is that experimentation isn't cheap. Imagine that I want to bake a cake, but I don't have a recipe. I'm not entirely ignorant of the process: I know that eggs are involved, as are flour, sugar, oil, baking powder, chocolate, and heat. I concoct a combination of these and see what happens. Strangely, the result is not a cake, so I throw it out and try again. The second try is a little better — at least the object rises a bit — but it's not quite there. Obviously, a lot of ingredients will wind up in the trash before a cake results, if it ever does.

This may be acceptable when all that's wasted is flour and sugar, but when the experimenter is not a home chef but the state exercising its coercive power, then the experimental costs take the form of people's lives. To fix healthcare, for instance, we might propose the experiment of a single-payer approach. Clearly, the health of a nation is such a large system that a great deal of ignorance will be present. This rules out the design process, meaning that the state must turn to experiment, with all its wastes — in this case, not the waste of flour but the diminished health of millions, and, very likely, substantial loss of life.

It might be argued that if the eventual benefits of experimenting outweigh the accumulated costs, we are better off trying and failing than not trying at all. In the aggregate, such a claim sounds plausible. But it risks a perverse form of future-oriented utilitarianism: the wellbeing of potential future people is more important than the wellbeing of the real people who exist today. And we certainly cannot know what the eventual benefits may be; we cannot know whether, for every person whose life is made worse in 2010, some person's life will be made better in 2100. Our ignorance grows with the size and length of the experiment.

When a private party experiments, the basic costs are internalized to him and anyone who chooses to take part with him. If scientists want to live in Biosphere 2, experimenting with their own lives and the money of their sponsors, they are free to do so. But if the state enacted a policy requiring cities to be 100% ecologically neutral and self-sufficient, the people living there would have no choice about bearing the costs and accepting the benefits.

It is this lack of freedom that makes the distinction between preferences and imperatives so profound. Given the waste inherent in experimentation, it is morally repugnant to force people to give up their livelihoods — or their lives — for a simple preference that the victims may not even hold. Large political imperatives make coerced experimentation more palatable, but only barely. The potential for waste, and even ultimate failure, is so great when the state acts on the macro scale that only the most pressing of imperatives can justify the risks. Again, this is especially true the farther out the goal lies and the less information the state has when conducting its experiment. Thus we should be particularly concerned when the government exercises its coercive power to force us to participate in non-acute and far-from-settled "imperatives" such as alternative energy and aesthetic community restructuring.

Design and experimentation are teleological processes: the designer or experimenter begins with a result in mind and uses the tools available to make that result happen. While they differ in their efficiency and their ability to deal with systemic ignorance, each progresses toward some imagined conclusion.

Evolution, on the other hand, is an algorithm without a goal. In effect, it is experimentation without an experimenter and design without a designer.

Even in the social sphere, we see the dazzling success of evolution. It is difficult to imagine how a goal-oriented experimenter could have created something so lush as human culture. Yet evolution lacks something important. Because it cannot predict its own results, it cannot be used as a method for producing any specific change, whether preference or imperative. It is logically impossible to "evolve" the implementation of an imperative, for the state or anything else. The only options the state has are design and experimentation, both of which suffer from the problems associated with coercion and ignorance.

The confusion — the ignorant assumption that our personal interests are, in fact, universal — is a common mistake.

If what I have said so far is at all convincing, then the reader should come away not with an equation he can use to decide whether Government X should take action Y, but a general skepticism toward all actions, A through Z and beyond, that Government X might propose. How much skepticism is warranted depends on what kind of action the government is seeking to take, how much knowledge it can bring to bear, and what method it is adopting to execute its plans. These considerations should make us more or less willing to grant the government freedom of action.

The first step in critically examining a proposed state action is to ask whether it is in furtherance of a preference or an imperative. Because coercion is involved in any state action, we should allow the state to act only when it is advancing a true imperative. To do otherwise is to grant the state the ability to decide among competing preferences, effectively giving some citizens (those in control of the state) undue influence over others.

If, however, it is determined that an imperative is in play, we cannot simply give the state free rein. We must next look to the question of ignorance. The greater the government's ignorance in any situation, the greater our skepticism should be. It is always worse to be coerced along a path guided by deep ignorance than one illumined by some degree of knowledge. If you're going to be forced to make a cross-country trip, it's at least nice to know how to get there. Given that ignorance grows as plans are projected into the future, big changes, taking a long time — weaning America from fossil fuels, or fixing public education, for example — tend to be burdened with much more ignorance than short-term projects, and so should be approached with greater skepticism.

If the state were not ignorant to any significant degree, design would the best way to implement its imperatives. But state imperatives are almost always so large as to preclude design; the surrounding ignorance is too great. The only method remaining for accomplishing the goal is experimentation — which is, however, both uncertain and costly. The fact that most costs are paid not by the experimenters, but by people coerced into participating in the experiment, should again raise our skepticism about the permissibility of the state's action. The last thing any of us should want is for the state to coerce us into participating in an enormous experiment.

The skeptical attitude should lead us to err on the side of seeing proposed imperatives as actually preferences, and claims to design as masked experiments. The evidence against state ignorance and for a genuine imperative must be vast to overcome this attitude of doubt.

But suppose that doubt never is overcome. Suppose we act on our doubts and keep the state from acting. That doesn't prohibit further action. In the absence of state direction, the powerful force of evolution can work its magic, as successes spread and failures are abandoned by individual people seeking to get the best out of life. And private citizens, spending their own resources, free from coercion and not coercing others, will use the tools of design and experimentation to find individual paths to a better world. We need only look at the fabulous wealth the free market has created to see the value of a healthy skepticism about the ignorant and coercive state.❑

Obama the Ordinary, *from page 24*

prosperous. So what's an acceptable number? Seventy percent? One hundred percent? Still, no answer. And no answer is conceivable, given the next contention, that the success of an economy depends on its "ability to extend opportunity to every willing heart."

Every willing heart? I know a person who was a decent football player in a rural high school. He's five feet, eleven inches tall, and he weighs 180 pounds. This young man conceived the idea of starring in the NFL. To get there, he accepted sports scholarships from a series of small, obscure colleges — nonprofit institutions that gave him "opportunity." After many years of this he gave up and joined the Navy. His is the story of a willing heart that had every chance to participate in the great marketplace of American sports. According to President Obama, it is the kind of story that should inspire our nation's economic policy. According to me, it's a story of illusion and failure. It has precisely nothing to do with "our common good." Only the most mediocre, cliche-driven politico could mistake it for an account of the American economy as it ought to be.

Should I blame Obama for failing to test his cliches against such common examples as this? Indeed I should. You, and every other reader of Obama's speeches, can think of a hundred other proofs that his words are nothing but syllables. There are no ideas here — no historic truth, no inspiring wisdom, no insights gained from the experience of life — only the sort of abstractions that a bad writer (likely, more than one bad writer) can generate from the chance impressions of an ordinary politician.

Distinctive concepts, the fruits of long reflection and careful analysis? Obama has none. Among his political notions, we find the bailout, the stimulus, and government healthcare. These notions became giant initiatives, in terms of their economic expenditures and effects; but each of them entailed only a paltry expenditure of intellect, a mere endorsement of discredited notions. Weren't skill and intellect required to get them enacted? By no means. The first two happened quickly, because people were scared; the third happened with excruciating slowness, despite the fact that Obama's party held an immense majority in both House and Senate.

The important thing to remember is that this majority resulted from the people's disgust with the ordinariness of the preceding administration, which in its waning days maintained a popularity rating at the irreducible low of both American parties, 40%. And that's more or less where Obama is now.

Some of the 40% who like Obama are dumb enough to think that he is in fact a genius, simply because he is a member of their party. Some of them are smart enough to see him for what he is, while continuing to vote for him, as the exponent of policies they advocate. This also is ordinary and predictable.

But to another 40%, the people who wouldn't vote for a Democrat if he parted the Red Sea, belongs the choice of politicians who will oppose Obama. The question for them is: what extraordinary men and women do you have among you? And I don't mean extraordinarily stupid. ❑