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THEY SAID IT

The author's [Sorel's] relentless prognostication of war and anarchy, his characterization of Europe as the war-breeding soil, his theory that the peoples of our continent can unite only in the one idea, that of making war – all justified its public calling it the book of the day. But even more trenchant and telling was its perception and statement of the fact that in his age of the masses parliamentary discussion must prove entirely inadequate for the shaping of political decisions; that in its stead the masses would have in the future to be provided with mythical fictions, devised like primitive battle-cries, to release and activate political energies. This was in fact the crass and inflaming prophecy of the book; that popular myths or rather those proper for the masses would become the vehicle for political actions; fables, insane visions, chimeras, which needed to having nothing to do with truth or reason or science in order to be creative, to determine the course of life and history, and thus to prove themselves dynamic realities. Not for nothing, of course, did the book bear its alarming title [*Reflections sur la Violence*]; for it dealt with violence as the triumphant antitheses of truth.

Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 1947.

STUPID IS AS STUPID DOES.

You may want to sit down for this, but last week, our nation's capital (and Capitol) was the scene of a grave indignity. One of this hearty people's elected servants, a man sworn in to yet another term of representation only four weeks ago, loosed his tongue and embarrassed an entire nation.

Less than three weeks after the attempted murder of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the subsequent near-universal declaration that political rhetoric should be "toned down," Memphis, Tennessee Congressman Democrat Steve Cohen took to the floor of the House to call (or to try to call) his partisan adversaries "Nazis." As ABC News put it:

"They say it's a government takeover of health care, a big lie just like Goebbels," Cohen said.
"You say it enough, you repeat the lie, you repeat the lie, and eventually, people believe it. Like blood libel. That's the same kind of thing. . . .

"The Germans said enough about the Jews and people believed it – believed it and you have the Holocaust. We heard on this floor, government takeover of health care. Politifact said the biggest lie of 2010 was a government takeover of health care because there is no government takeover," Cohen said.

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Stupid is as Stupid Does.

Of Informational Cascades.

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This is dreadful. Awful. Disgraceful. We are ashamed that a great nation such as ours has sunk to the point where it calls men like Steve Cohen “leaders.” We are truly humiliated.

Why is this, you ask? Is it because we, like the rest of the political and media establishment, think that Cohen overstepped some line? Or because we think that Cohen, a lawyer and a proud past winner of the “Tennessee Holocaust Commission Award,” should know enough to avoid the trivialization of the Holocaust? Or because we think that the country should, in fact, be speaking more gently and delicately to and about its politicians, for fear that someone, somewhere, with some mental instability may, in theory, be affected by the “climate of hate?”

Well . . . in a word, no.

We couldn't care less what Steve Cohen says or does. We think that politicians who scream “Nazi” at the slightest hint of disagreement with opponents do far more to discredit themselves than said opponents. And, more to the point, we think that all the blather about greater “civility” in public discourse and about reining in the current, “unprecedented” nasty rhetoric is both stupid and transparently political. In fact, as we put it just under eleven years ago, in a piece titled “A Good Word for Negative Talk”:

If ever there were a silly, moronic, idiotic, stupid, dumb, base idea in American politics, it is the assertion that negative campaigning is bad. Frankly, we believe mud slinging in politics is not just good, but great. It is, indeed, we think, indispensable to the process of choosing a leader.

Short of putting a politician into combat, we can't think of a better way of finding out “what a person is made of,” as the saying goes, than plopping him or her down into the middle of a highly personal and intense political mud fight

. . .

In fact, we think a case could be made that the absence of highly personal, nasty political fights would allow candidates far too much opportunity to create a fictitious character profile for themselves out of whole cloth; to create their own myths, so to speak.

Given that, does anyone wanna guess what we think is behind the President's push for “civility” and the Obamaphilic media's insistence on the same?

But if we're the only people in the world who like negative talk from politicians (or at least the only ones willing to admit it), why then do we think that Cohen embarrassed the nation and disgraced himself? Mostly because the guy proved himself to be a political “leader” who is completely ignorant of political history; an outspoken Jewish legislator who knows next to nothing about the Holocaust; in short, a case study in the type of fool who currently populates our federal government and who therefore believes that he should have the right and the ability to decide how each and every one of us should live our lives.

Let's remember here that Cohen is a U.S. Congressman. He is a trained lawyer. He is a lifelong politician, having served a quarter century in the Tennessee state general assembly and two years as Shelby County Commissioner before being elected to Congress. He is well respected member of his community, a former trustee of the Memphis College of Art, and, as we noted, a onetime recipient of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission Award.

And he doesn't have a flipping clue as to what “the Big Lie” was or how it was used by Joseph Goebbels, or Hitler before him.

If you look at Cohen's statement and look beyond the absurdity of his comparison, you see that he gets the concept of “the Big Lie” precisely backward, which is to say that he got the point of the lie and its historical relevance precisely backward as well.

For starters, Cohen attributes the idea to Goebbels, which is a common mistake, *but still a mistake*. As with most things Nazi, the concept of the Big Lie originated with Hitler himself and with the following passage from *Mein Kampf*, which begins with a defense of Erich Ludendorff, the German Generalquartiermeister who shared supreme command of the World War I German army with Paul von Hindenburg:

But it remained for the Jews, with their unqualified capacity for falsehood, and their fighting comrades, the Marxists, to impute responsibility for the downfall precisely to the man who alone had shown a superhuman will and energy in his effort to prevent the catastrophe which he had foreseen and to save the nation from that hour of complete overthrow and shame. By placing responsibility for the loss of the world war on the shoulders of Ludendorff they took away the weapon of moral right from the only adversary dangerous enough to be likely to succeed in bringing the betrayers of the Fatherland to Justice.

All this was inspired by the principle--which is quite true within itself--that in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. Even though the

facts which prove this to be so may be brought clearly to their minds, they will still doubt and waver and will continue to think that there may be some other explanation. For the grossly impudent lie always leaves traces behind it, even after it has been nailed down, a fact which is known to all expert liars in this world and to all who conspire together in the art of lying.

Now, as any schoolboy can see – but which Steve Cohen apparently doesn’t understand – the “big lie” in question *is not* a Nazi propaganda technique, but rather Hitler’s lament against what he sees as a Jewish technique or, more accurately, an innate Jewish characteristic. Hitler and Goebbels *did not*, contra Cohen, scheme to defame the Jews by repeating a lie over and over. Rather, they accused the Jews of defaming Germany by repeating lies over and over. *Which is to say that in mentioning the big lie and attempting to associate it with the Jews, Hitler was both libeling the Jews and demonstrating his own instinctive, vile, and eventually murderous prejudices against them.*

Far be it from us to compare Steve Cohen – an award winner, after all – to a prejudiced Nazi madman who hated “the other” so irrationally and passionately that it moved him to slaughter millions upon millions of them. But then, we don’t have to. Steve Cohen himself made the comparison, the moron.

What we suspect happened to the Gentleman from Tennessee is that he got confused and wanted so desperately to call the Republicans “Nazis” that he mixed up his historical concepts. Obviously, the idea he wanted to use to make his point was not the Nazi’s Big Lie.

The idea he *did* want to use, we’d guess, was that of the “social myth,” fashioned by the French “social philosopher” Georges Sorel and later described by Max Eastman as “an idea not valid, but necessary to set the masses in motion.” Robert Gildea, a professor of Modern History at Oxford, expanded upon Eastman’s summary thusly:

Sorel argued that “myths,” such as the Holy Grail, Reign of Saints, or Second Coming had immense and irrational powers to drive men to act. The myth of the general strike, as a complex of images of class war, had the power to provide feelings of anger in the working class and to inspire actions that would transform the world. Because the myth was grasped intuitively by the workers there was no need for a Leninist élite schooled in the scientific theory of Marxism.”

In short, then, what Cohen meant to accuse the Republicans of was attempting to manufacture a social myth relating specifically to a government takeover of health care. But, of course, that’s not what he said. Why not? We can’t say for sure, but we guess that it’s a lot more fun to compare your opponents to Nazis than to radical syndicalists and *Marxist* heroes like Sorel. After all, fascists and Nazis are bad, bad, bad. Marxists? Well . . . not so much, really.

More accurately, we suppose, Cohen made the mistake simply because he didn’t know any better, and since he repeated the charge later, didn’t bother to learn any better. All of which is to say that he really is educationally challenged.

We’ll note here that our concern with Cohen’s ignorance is not merely pedantic – although we do find his inability to get the players straight in the Big Lie plot a little entertaining. No, our concern is that he is not alone and is, rather, more representative of his profession as a whole.

Obviously, Cohen’s comments came during the debate over the House Republican efforts to repeal the Democrats’ health-reform law passed last March. And despite his manifest foolishness and idiocy, he was hardly the dumbest or the creepiest of the Democratic “reform” supporters.

Also during the repeal debate, Sheila Jackson Lee, Congresswoman from Texas, declared repeal of the

health care law “unconstitutional.” And no, we are not kidding. As the *American Spectator* reported:

Arguing that the Commerce Clause provides the constitutional basis for ObamaCare, Jackson Lee said repealing the law by passing Republicans’ H.R. 2 violates both the Fifth Amendment’s right to due process and the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause.

“The Fifth Amendment speaks specifically to denying someone their life and liberty without due process,” she said in a speech on the House floor moments ago. “That is what H.R. 2 does and I rise in opposition to it. And I rise in opposition because it is important that we preserve lives and we recognize that 40 million-plus are uninsured.

She continued, “Can you tell me what’s more unconstitutional than taking away from the people of America their Fifth Amendment rights, their Fourteenth Amendment rights, and the right to equal protection under the law?”

Oh dear. As the lawyer and writer Clarice Feldman noted in response, “Jackson Lee, B.A. Yale., J.D. University of Virginia, may not be the dumbest member of Congress, but it would be hard to defend her from such a characterization.”

Also during the debate, Georgia Democrat John Lewis declared that repeal of the health reform law would violate the preamble to the Constitution, where “you talk about the pursuit of happiness.” Now even if one can get past the patent stupidity of the claim that somehow “the pursuit of happiness” necessitates a government mandate to purchase health care, there’s the disturbing little bit about “the pursuit of happiness” appearing nowhere in the Constitution, but rather in the less legally binding Declaration of Independence. Sigh. Our “leaders” in action.

The sad and disconcerting fact of the matter is that Jackson Lee, Lewis, and Cohen are not the exceptions, but rather the rule. Those who represent the American public in Congress are among some of the best connected and best credentialed men and women in the nation. But they are also among the least creative, least informed, and least intelligent professionals in the nation as well.

Don't believe us? Well, you don't have to take our word for it. Fortunately – or unfortunately, depending on your perspective – our friends at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) conduct an annual survey on the general knowledge of governmental and constitutional matters. And the results speak rather poorly of our esteemed elected officials. Richard Brake, the co-chairman of ISI's National Civic Literacy Board, provides the gruesome details:

When the Republican House leadership decided to start the 112th Congress with a reading of the U.S. Constitution, the decision raised complaints in some quarters that it was little more than a political stunt. The *New York Times* even called it a “presumptuous and self-righteous act.”

That might be true, if you could be sure that elected officials actually know something about the Constitution. But it turns out that many don't.

In fact, elected officials tend to know even less about key provisions of the Constitution than the general public....

Oh dear. Wait. Did we say that already?

Elected officials at many levels of government, not just the federal government, swear an oath to “uphold and protect” the U.S. Constitution.

But those elected officials who took the test scored an average 5 percentage

points lower than the national average (49 percent vs. 54 percent), with ordinary citizens outscoring these elected officials on each constitutional question . . .

Overall, our sample of elected officials averaged a failing 44 percent on the entire 33-question test, 5 percentage points lower than the national average of 49 percent.

The politicians, talking heads, columnists, and other assorted hangers-on who populate the political left insist that Republicans are stupid and that that party's elected officials in particular lack the requisite intelligence to lead the country. George W. Bush and Sarah Palin, among others, are constantly mocked and disparaged as stupid.

So, for argument's sake, let's assume that the left is right and that Bush and Palin and Republicans in general, are a little dumb. How does that distinguish them from their Democratic counterparts? How does that make them any different from Steve Cohen, Sheila Jackson Lee, John Lewis, or even Barack – 57 states and do they speak Austrian? – Obama?

It doesn't.

The only thing that distinguishes the Republicans from the Democrats on this matter is that the Republicans tend, as a general rule, not to overestimate their intelligence as it compares to that of the public at large and therefore tend not to be quite as disdainful of the public and its wishes as do the Democrats.

You see, the problem with the Cohens, Jackson Lees, Lewises, Bidens, and Obamas of the world isn't that they aren't brilliant. It's that they think they are and therefore think that they should have the authority to substitute their will and their predilections for those of the people. The people, after all, are dumb. They don't know what they want, what they need, or how to go about getting it. And they need the geniuses in Congress and the White House to explain to them what they need.

Or so we're told.

Now, it would be easy to look at what we have written here and the results of ISI's survey or the actual words that our distinguished gentlemen and gentlewomen speak and to conclude that we need a better class of elected official; that we need men and women who actually are smarter than the public at large rather than those who merely think they're smarter. Like Steve Cohen, this is precisely backward.

What we need are not smarter elected officials, but humbler ones. We need men and women who understand their limitations and believe that the people of this country are, as the Constitution actually instructs, capable of governing themselves. As Burke put it, prudence is "in all things a virtue, in politics the first of virtues."

Would that Steve Cohen would remember that. He could call us Nazis and propagandists all he wants to, if only he would, at the same time, remember his job, his position, and his duty to the people of this nation.

OF INFORMATIONAL CASCADES.

Can a diet book be "the most important book you read this year?" Well, if blogger Tom Maguire is to be believed, then yes, a diet book can be the most important book you read, if that book is *Why We Get Fat and What To Do About It*, by Gary Taubes. As Maguire puts it:

Read as a diet book it is interesting. However, it is fascinating as a story of how science can run off the rails. Mr. Taubes does not attempt to politicize his views, but our national obesity epidemic can certainly be told as a story of an Epic Big Government Fail.

You see, Taubes's book is another in a long line of books that insist that the health "experts" who have been telling us for four decades how and what to eat are just flat wrong. Contrary to the quasi-official view of diet and health, promulgated by the government among others, Taubes and countless others (most

notably Robert Atkins) insist that there is little evidence that dietary fat has any correlation to body fat and that the real enemy in modern man's battle of bulge is processed carbohydrates, which raise insulin levels and lead to the retention and storage of fat.

We don't really have a dog in this fight over diet. We have our preferences, but don't believe you care what they are, since we don't care what yours are. And that's sort of the point here. Maguire continues, citing several passages from a *Los Angeles Times* story from last month, a story we read at the time and agreed was interesting and compelling. To wit:

Most people can count calories. Many have a clue about where fat lurks in their diets. However, fewer give carbohydrates much thought, or know why they should.

But a growing number of top nutritional scientists blame excessive carbohydrates — not fat — for America's ills. They say cutting carbohydrates is the key to reversing obesity, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and hypertension.

"Fat is not the problem," says Dr. Walter Willett, chairman of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. "If Americans could eliminate sugary beverages, potatoes, white bread, pasta, white rice and sugary snacks, we would wipe out almost all the problems we have with weight and diabetes and other metabolic diseases."

It's a confusing message. For years we've been fed the line that eating fat would make us fat and lead to chronic illnesses. "Dietary fat used to be public enemy No. 1," says Dr. Edward Saltzman, associate professor of nutrition and medicine at Tufts University. "Now a growing and convincing body of science is pointing the finger at carbs, especially those containing refined flour and sugar."

Americans, on average, eat 250 to 300 grams of carbs a day, accounting for about 55% of their caloric intake. The most conservative recommendations say they should eat half that amount. Consumption of carbohydrates has increased over the years with the help of a 30-year-old, government-mandated message to cut fat.

And the nation's levels of obesity, Type 2 diabetes and heart disease have risen. "The country's big low-fat message backfired," says Dr. Frank Hu, professor of nutrition and epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health. "The overemphasis on reducing fat caused the consumption of carbohydrates and sugar in our diets to soar. That shift may be linked to the biggest health problems in America today."

You get that? The obesity epidemic that Big Government-types are always prattling on about and that the First lady has taken upon *herownself* to fix is, quite possibly and according to "a growing number of top nutritional scientists," in part the government's fault in the first place. Now ain't that a bitch.

Do we think that the government is responsible for making people fat? No. Not really. And we don't think government can be responsible for making people skinny either. We just wish that the government would show similar discretion in touting its abilities and embracing its coercive powers.

Last week, you may recall, we noted that one of the most troublesome aspects of big government is its effect on the people, the fact that it enervates the people, making them less capable of taking care of themselves and more reliant on the government to take of their every need and complaint. All of that is true, of course, but that's not the only problem with big government.

An additional problem with big government is that it is distracted. A government that tries to be everything to everyone and tries to manage every possible issue, is generally incapable of doing anything well. Certainly, those of you who live in New York know all too well what we mean. If your Mayor, the eminent Michael Bloomberg, had spent a little more of his time and energy on fixing the city's budget or keeping tabs on the sanitation workers' union heads or even just making sure that snow emergency plans were up to date and spent a little less preaching the horrors of margarine and the destructive powers of full-sodium ketchup, then perhaps he and his government would have been ready when the blizzard of December, 2010 hit. One only hopes that the families that lost loved ones because emergency vehicles were unable to traverse snow-buried streets will understand that their relatives gave their lives to the greater good, namely the war on trans-fats.

Another problem – which is exacerbated when governments try to do everything – is that they tend to take short cuts in their haste to please everyone and appear "responsive." We noted a recent and rarely discussed example of this problem last February in a piece we wrote, entitled "Beware of Aliens":

For decades now, we've been told that sunshine is just awful for you, a leading cause of cancer, not to mention nasty wrinkles (GASP!). And our government – through its Surgeon General and Centers for Disease Control – has become one of the leading voices in the campaign against sunshine, insisting that melanoma is the inevitable result of unscreened exposure, despite the fact that the actual mechanism producing melanoma is poorly understood.

The "consensus" view about sunshine has, predictably, been bolstered by environmentalists who insist that sunshine and increased exposure to it is "deadly." . . .

And where has this “consensus” left us? With massive and massively disruptive Vitamin D deficiencies – deficiencies linked to everything from rickets to osteoporosis; from breast cancer to hypertension. The scientific “consensus” on Vitamin D and sunshine has begun to collapse and continues apace.

The problem, quite often, is that government officials have no expertise of their own and thus must rely on “consensus” to determine the best course of action on any number of matters that should, by all rights, be beyond their purview. As such, they are susceptible to “informational cascades,” described as follows in a 2007 article by *The New York Times* science columnist John Tierney:

We like to think that people improve their judgment by putting their minds together, and sometimes they do. The studio audience at “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” usually votes for the right answer. But suppose, instead of the audience members voting silently in unison, they voted out loud one after another. And suppose the first person gets it wrong.

If the second person isn’t sure of the answer, he’s liable to go along with the first person’s guess. By then, even if the third person suspects another answer is right, she’s more liable to go along just because she assumes the first two together know more than she does. Thus begins an “informational cascade” as one person after another assumes that the rest can’t all be wrong.

Because of this effect, groups are surprisingly prone to reach mistaken conclusions even when most of the people started out knowing better, according to the economists Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer and Ivo

Welch. If, say, 60 percent of a group’s members have been given information pointing them to the right answer (while the rest have information pointing to the wrong answer), there is still about a one-in-three chance that the group will cascade to a mistaken consensus.

Cascades are especially common in medicine as doctors take their cues from others, leading them to overdiagnose some faddish ailments (called bandwagon diseases) and overprescribe certain treatments (like the tonsillectomies once popular for children). Unable to keep up with the volume of research, doctors look for guidance from an expert — or at least someone who sounds confident.

Examples of informational cascades embraced by government in lieu of actual verifiable, documented, and replicable *science* include the aforementioned war on sunshine, the embrace of the *theory* of global climate change (formerly known as global warming), and, unsurprisingly the embrace of the idea that dietary fat causes body fat and, along with it, serious health risks. Indeed, the 2007 article cited above, in which John Tierney first discussed informational cascades, is actually, in part, a history of the war on dietary fat and a review of Gary Taubes’s last book, *Good Calories, Bad Calories*. Tierney continued:

In the case of fatty foods, that confident voice belonged to Ancel Keys, a prominent diet researcher a half-century ago (the K-rations in World War II were said to be named after him). He became convinced in the 1950s that Americans were suffering from a new epidemic of heart disease because they were eating more fat than their ancestors.

There were two glaring problems with this theory, as Mr. Taubes, a correspondent for *Science* magazine, explains in his book. First, it wasn’t clear

that traditional diets were especially lean. Nineteenth-century Americans consumed huge amounts of meat; the percentage of fat in the diet of ancient hunter-gatherers, according to the best estimate today, was as high or higher than the ratio in the modern Western diet.

Second, there wasn't really a new epidemic of heart disease. Yes, more cases were being reported, but not because people were in worse health. It was mainly because they were living longer and were more likely to see a doctor who diagnosed the symptoms.

To bolster his theory, Dr. Keys in 1953 compared diets and heart disease rates in the United States, Japan and four other countries. Sure enough, more fat correlated with more disease (America topped the list). But critics at the time noted that if Dr. Keys had analyzed all 22 countries for which data were available, he would not have found a correlation. (And, as Mr. Taubes notes, no one would have puzzled over the so-called French Paradox of foie-gras connoisseurs with healthy hearts.)

The evidence that dietary fat correlates with heart disease “does not stand up to critical examination,” the American Heart Association concluded in 1957. But three years later the association changed position — not because of new data, Mr. Taubes writes, but because Dr. Keys and an ally were on the committee issuing the new report. It asserted that “the best scientific evidence of the time” warranted a lower-fat diet for people at high risk of heart disease.

The association's report was big news and put Dr. Keys, who died in 2004, on the cover of *Time* magazine. The magazine

devoted four pages to the topic — and just one paragraph noting that Dr. Keys's diet advice was “still questioned by some researchers.” That set the tone for decades of news media coverage. Journalists and their audiences were looking for clear guidance, not scientific ambiguity.

After the fat-is-bad theory became popular wisdom, the cascade accelerated in the 1970s when a committee led by Senator George McGovern issued a report advising Americans to lower their risk of heart disease by eating less fat. “McGovern's staff were virtually unaware of the existence of any scientific controversy,” Mr. Taubes writes, and the committee's report was written by a nonscientist “relying almost exclusively on a single Harvard nutritionist, Mark Hegsted.”

That report impressed another nonscientist, Carol Tucker Foreman, an assistant agriculture secretary, who hired Dr. Hegsted to draw up a set of national dietary guidelines. The Department of Agriculture's advice against eating too much fat was issued in 1980 and would later be incorporated in its “food pyramid.”

And so it goes.

Again, none of this is to say that government is to blame for your spare tire, thunder thighs, or love handles. Government didn't *make* you eat anything, at least not yet it didn't.

But this should serve as something of a reminder that government has a role and that overstepping that role is foolish, is potentially dangerous, distracts government from its actual job, and all but certainly creates far more confusion than it resolves.

As the federal government continues over the next several years – through its roles in health care and in managing the environment, to name just two – to insert itself into discussions in which it has no business, you can expect for “informational cascades” to play more and more prominent parts as well, though said cascades will go unacknowledged, if not entirely unnoticed. That’s the problem with these things; they are extremely difficult to spot until it’s too late. And those who do spot them are branded freaks, quacks, hacks, and “deniers.”

In the above piece, we argue that government officials should exercise a little prudence in their conduct of their offices, if for no other reason than because many of them are actually quite stupid. But even if they weren’t stupid; even if they were ALL smart and trustworthy wonderful men and women, that wouldn’t change the need for prudence. As Tom Maguire, Gary Taubes, John Tierney and others have ably argued, even those men and women who are exceptionally brilliant are prone to mistakes of serious magnitude.

And a little prudence would go a long way in the direction of mitigating the negative effect of those mistakes.

So buy a diet book for your Congresscritter. Maybe it’ll help.

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