



## Stupid Is As Stupid Does

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The headline, of course, is an aphorism dating from 1862 that was popularized by the charming 1992 Tom Hanks film, “Forrest Gump.” Stupid may be an innate characteristic, but dumbness is certainly an opportunity available to all. It can be especially surprising and sometimes infuriating when a person not thought to be stupid does some really dumb things.

Back in college at our fraternity, we had an “award” for pledges who said or did dumb things, or could not respond to questions fired at them, like reciting the Greek alphabet or remembering some factoid from the university’s illustrious history. The prize was a beautifully finished and inscribed half toilet seat on a chain which the recipient got to wear around his neck until another pledge’s dumb stunt or clueless response occurred. It symbolized manure for brains. (Yes, it *was* very 1960s.)

If that award were available to us now, even against stiff competition, it would surely go to Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Democrat of Michigan. She has exhibited a stunning dumbness that, even among politicians, is extraordinary.

Whitmer’s decrees in the name of mitigating the spread of COVID-19 have been both bizarre and counterproductive, lacking common sense or any sort of scientific basis and eliciting widespread mistrust of her judgment.

In fact, some of her edicts are so illogical that one wonders where they possibly could have come from. Perhaps the weirdest is a prohibition on people traveling from one of their houses to another of their *own properties*. Traffic is certainly not an issue; the roads these days are reminiscent of early morning on a Sunday. Spreading the virus is implausible, since stay-at-home restrictions apply at both ends. And real estate is immune to this viral infection, unless termites are found to be carriers.

Then there is the restriction on motor-boating, although sailing and rowing are permitted. Another odd requirement is that large stores must close off areas that display carpeting, flooring, furniture, gardening supplies, and paint. With many states requiring simply that total customer occupancy be controlled, why not just use that approach?

We could go on with examples of Whitmer’s misguided micromanagement, but first, we must acknowledge that dumb micromanagement is different from bad judgment in setting a strategy.

Though only time will tell, the poor judgment of other governors in managing the pandemic may prove to be more consequential.

Governor Ron DeSantis (R-Fla.) may come to regret not clamping down early on spring breakers on his state's beaches. Governor Brian Kemp (R-Ga.) may have delayed too long in implementing mitigation. And Governor Andrew Cuomo (D-N.Y.) may have been wonderful in managing his image, but not so prescient in setting policy. Critiquing 2020 pandemic strategies will occupy scholars for years to come.

To fully appreciate the import of micromanagement, we would offer a history lesson going back to D-Day in World War II. We'll spoil the story by divulging the moral in advance: Leaders should set the objectives and leave it to trusted, knowledgeable subordinates to figure out how to meet them. That, by the way, is one of the key principles of leadership espoused by legendary Marine General and former Secretary of Defense James Mattis in his superb memoir, *Call Sign Chaos*.

The Allies' invasion plan called for "softening up" the Germans' Fortress Europe defenses by bombing the gun emplacements that would try to repel the amphibious invasion by allied soldiers and marines. The air forces deployed mostly light bombers because they could come in low over the water and then turn parallel to the beach, allowing them to hit the relatively narrow band of bunkers on the ridge overlooking the beaches. The strategy worked decently on most of the assault beaches and, as a result, casualties were lighter than had been feared.

The American infantry general assigned to Omaha Beach favored more bombing, however, and against the advice of the Army Air Corps, demanded that heavier B-17s be used. They had five times the ordnance capacity of the B-25s and B-26s used elsewhere. But the problem was that the heavier planes were less maneuverable. Thus, they came in higher and perpendicular, instead of parallel, to the beach. Almost all of the bombs overshot their targets by thousands of feet, leaving the pillboxes and heavy guns of the Germans untouched. That is partially the reason for the exceptionally high casualty rate at Omaha.

By analogy, the casualty of Whitmer's micromanagement and lack of understanding is lost public confidence that the state's leaders are competent and are really looking out for its citizens' interests. That lost trust at a time of fear and anxiety has spurred a willingness to rebel against and disobey pandemic-related strictures.

What Michigan's citizens seem to find especially galling is that many governors in other "hot spot" states crafted policies using common sense and the guidance of the senior scientists on the White House coronavirus task force, Drs. Deborah Birx and Anthony Fauci.

We can't explain Whitmer's cluelessness. Either she blindly accepted the advice of incompetent advisers, or she concocted stupid policies on her own. Neither is acceptable, and, as Cato Institute legal scholar Ilya Shapiro observed, "regulations that don't make common sense, that aren't seen as reasonable by most people, are simply not going to be taken as legitimate, and they won't be followed."

So, to you, Governor Whitmer, we award the 21st-century version of our beloved half toilet seat to wear around your neck. It is a fitting symbol for the citizens of your state to see.