

by Humpty Dumpty

By Their Clichés, You Shall Know Them

At least since September 11, the buzzphrase for every investigation has been “connect the dots.” Republicans were highly imaginative in connecting the dots between Afghanistan and Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, while Democrats preferred connecting the dots between Enron executives and the Bush administration. Donald Rumsfeld, who has raised this kind of political gibberish to high art, told Bob Schieffer on *Face the Nation*:

I was musing over the fact that there are so many books that have been written — “Why England Slept,” Pearl Harbor, what happened, why didn’t we know? Right now on Capitol Hill, the members of the House and the Senate are trying to — are looking, having investigations on September 11th of last year, and trying to connect the dots, as they say, trying to piece together what might have been known, and why didn’t we know it, and why weren’t we able to connect the dots? What the president is saying very simply to the world is let’s look at the dots today. Our task is not to connect — connect the dots as to why England slept, or what happened with Pearl Harbor, or what happened on September 11th only. Our task is to connect the dots before the fact, and — and see if we can’t behave in a way that there won’t be books written about why we slept, or what happened.

To “connect the dots before the fact,” in case you have not been able to figure it out, means passing *a priori* judgments on the Iraq-Al Qaeda connection without supplying any facts whatsoever.

“Connect the dots” seems to have replaced “pieces of the puzzle” as the paranoid metaphor of choice and bids fair to supplant even “smoking gun.” What makes it so attractive is the tacit assumption that there must be a preset pattern, that the investigator’s only task is to go from point to point in the right sequence to come up with the predetermined picture.

After all, the search for “the smoking gun” may prove to be fruitless, if no crime has been committed. Putting together a puzzle of hundreds of pieces may require hours, and the picture, often quite complicated, will be incomplete if some of the pieces (as the cliché often suggests) are missing, but in the children’s game of Connect the Dots, there is no room for doubt. One person (in my day, it was usually another child) imagines an iconic image and outlines it in dots, and it is the child’s duty to connect them up to discover the outline of an elephant or the face of Abraham Lincoln.

This simplicity appeals to children. Adults are supposed to realize that reality is never so simple, that the divine Puzzle Master has created a richly textured universe that can rarely be explained in one-dimensional terms. Ike was probably not a commie; the Frankfurt School did not single-handedly destroy Western civilization; Bill Clinton was not planning a *coup d’état*; poverty cannot usually be explained by either the greed of plutocrats or the laziness of social inferiors.

To think that America’s problems in the Middle East can be explained by any simple connecting of dots is as infantile as the phrase itself, and the popularity of this expression is one more indication — as if we needed it — of the growing infantilism of the American people and their leaders.

The evidence is all around us, especially in the elite classes. Read or listen to speeches of American statesmen from before World War II, and you will hear forceful, articulate men, not afraid to speak plainly, who studded their speeches with references to the Scriptures and to American history. Listen to any senator, cabinet member, or president of the past ten years, and you will think you have entered into a school for learning-disabled children. The two Bushes may be excused on the grounds of hereditary dyslexia, but how do we explain away the rest of them?

The infantilism comes out very strongly in the choice of slang expressions and the use of allusions to pop culture. Where politicians once quoted Shakespeare, the Bible, Thomas Jefferson, and Mark Twain,

they now refer to Disney cartoons, game shows, movies, and sitcoms. Journalists are even worse. The only frame of reference for journalists under 40 seems to be pop music, sports, and TV shows. And if we descend the cultural scale, the situation gets even more desperate: If comic writers had to give up all references to Michael Jackson and Jennifer Lopez, they would go on unemployment.

Just in case you might be tempted to take the American pundit-class seriously, consider: This is the country where actresses who play farm wives in films are invited to testify in Congress on the farm crisis, where a p.r. hack like Lucianne Goldberg (to say nothing of her son) or a fashion-plate like Arianna Huffington can gain a respectful hearing, where political activists and speechwriters (James Carville, Paul Begala, Tony Snow, Cal Thomas) pretend to be “journalists” on talk shows. (“I’m not a journalist, but I play one on TV.”)

Uneducated people have always been, well, uneducated, but, in the old days, they did have a rich storehouse of proverbs, folktales, and traditional lore. A proletariat has nothing but consumer culture and Madison Avenue to fall back on. Unfortunately, that proletariat now includes the American ruling class, which can only express its thoughts in simple sentences, because all of its thoughts are simple, and which reveals, in its reliance upon infantile clichés, an entirely infantile view of the world. c

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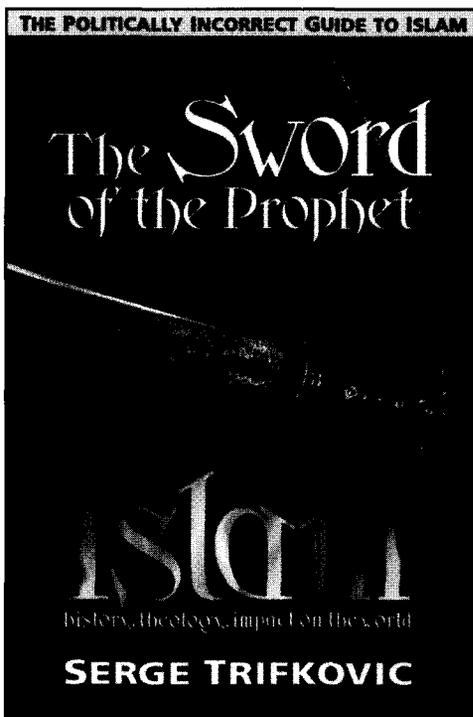
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