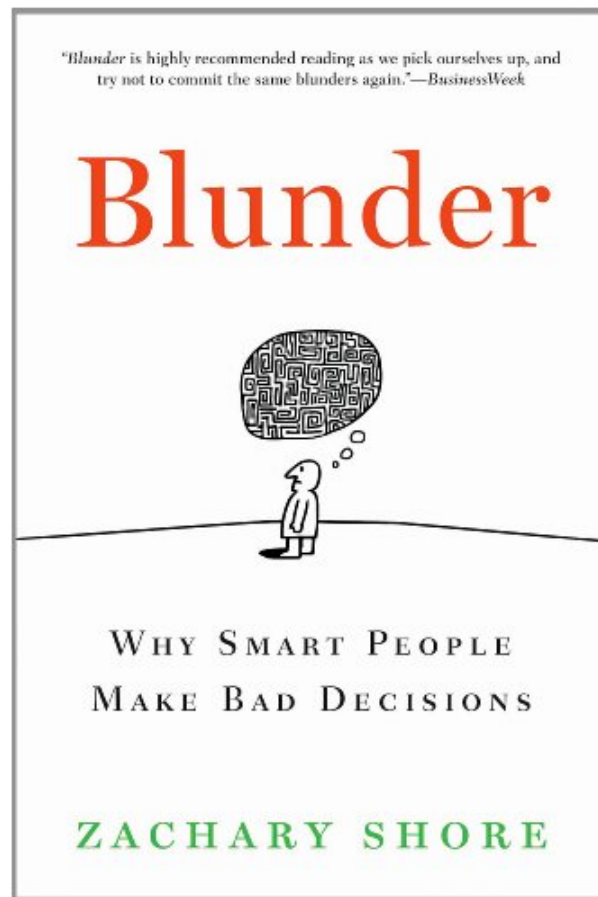


BLUNDER: WHY SMART PEOPLE MAKE BAD DECISIONS BY ZACHARY SHORE



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"Blunder is highly recommended reading as we pick ourselves up, and try not to commit the same blunders again."—*BusinessWeek*

Blunder



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“Blunder is a shrewd, smart book, full of entertaining stories and wise insights. Drawing his examples from history, literature, and current events, Zachary Shore shows how smart, well-meaning people are often trapped into making the wrong decisions. Every policy-maker should have a copy of *Blunder* near at hand.”
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About the Author

Zachary Shore is a professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School and a senior fellow at Berkeley's Institute of European Studies. He has served on the policy planning staff at the U.S. Department of State through support from the Council on Foreign Relations. He has also worked as a national security fellow at Harvard's Olin Institute for Strategic Studies. Shore earned his doctorate in history from Oxford and has won numerous academic honors. The author of *What Hitler Knew* and *Breeding Bin Ladens* he lives in Berkeley, California.

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For anyone whose best-laid plans have been foiled by faulty thinking, *Blunder* reveals how understanding seven simple traps—Exposure Anxiety, Causefusion, Flat View, Cure-Allism, Infomania, Mirror Imaging, Static Cling—can make us all less apt to err in our daily lives.

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Most helpful customer reviews

39 of 41 people found the following review helpful.

Great read as a history book, but not a good guide to making decisions

By Edward Durney

In *Blunder*, Zachary Shore takes a look at some big blunders in history. He finds a lot of them, including a few related to the recent invasion of Iraq. Those Iraq blunders have gotten a lot of press in recent years. The other stories Shore tells, though, have not. With all that new material, Shore's talent for telling stories makes the book a fascinating read.

Just a couple of comments. First, I like Shore's style. His academic credentials as a historian seem top notch. And his research seems good. Still, to me his best qualification is that he can tell a story. He must be a great teacher.

But Shore did not convince me that the lessons we can learn from his stories will help us avoid blunders. His subtitle says that *Blunder* will tell us "Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions." I'm not sure that the book does that.

Shore does present some theories on that score. He talks about "causefusion," his coined word for confusion about causation. He talks about "infomisering" and "infoavoiding," two more coined words for keeping too much secret and for ignoring inconvenient truths. He talks about exposure anxiety, cure-allism, flatview, mirror imaging and static cling. All these labels do tie his stories together and give the book some structure.

But for me at least, the conclusions Shore draws from his stories are a little too pat, and the categories and labels a little too gimmicky. Like parables, Shore's stories teach. But I'm not sure that, for me at least, the stories taught me the lessons that Shore meant to teach. In fact, in many cases, I'm sure they did not.

Second, when I read a book like this, I'm always curious about the author. I look at the author's picture, if there is one, and read the biography and acknowledgements. I suspect many people do, since almost all books do include some author information.

But I do not like books (other than autobiographies of course) that talk too much about the author, their family, or their own personal experiences. Even a little of that seems too much. Too narcissistic. It bothers me.

Shore did a great job of telling just enough about himself in the book to make me happy, without telling too much. He mentions toward the end of the book that he is blind. That was something that I was interested to know. I'm glad he mentioned it. But he mentioned it artfully, with a light touch, and did not mention it again. That may not matter to other readers. But it did to me.

(The story in *Blunder* about the man blind since three years old who had sight restored in one eye at 50 is very interesting. He could see, but at the same time he could not see. Sight needs the brain as well as the eye.)

To sum up, if you like to read history, you will probably like *Blunder*. I do, and I did. Shore ranges over the centuries and the continents to pick his stories. He does a good job at picking them and telling them. *Blunder* is well worth reading as a history.

But is the book a good guide to making decisions? For me, not really. For others, I of course cannot say. I'd be interested to see what other readers think on that question.

11 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

" 'Blunder' is a book about judgment calls."

By E. Bukowsky

"*Blunder*," by Zachary Shore, is one of many books that have been written in the last few years (among them "*The Tipping Point*," "*Blink*," "*Predictably Irrational*," "*Freakonomics*") that attempt to explain why human beings behave the way they do. In Shore's case, the focus is on "why smart people make bad decisions." Shore, who is a professor of national security affairs with impressive academic credentials, uses a host of anecdotes, many of which relate to military conflicts and economic matters, to illustrate his points. The book's basic premise is that even intelligent people get caught in "cognition traps" that blind them to the complexity of certain situations, leading them to act in ways that are ultimately self-defeating.

By revealing "the destructive mental patterns that we all employ," Shore hopes to help the average person to identify rigid thinking and irrational thought-patterns. If we better understand the mental traps that can ensnare the unwary, perhaps we will try to be more flexible, imaginative, and open-minded when confronting the predicaments that we all face. Instead of relying on often incorrect assumptions, we will make the necessary mental leaps that enable us to perceive an issue from another perspective, to share and use information wisely instead of hoarding it, to embrace or at least understand the changing world that we live in, and to have the self-confidence to do the right thing as we see it.

Shore entertains us with a host of anecdotes: He discusses the rivalry between Thomas Alva Edison and Nikola Tesla to bring electricity to the world; George Orwell's "*Shooting an Elephant*," in which he killed a beast unnecessarily in order to prove his strength and decisiveness; and the king of Siam made famous in the musical, "*The King and I*" who studied Western ways in order to bring his country into the modern era without surrendering Thailand's independence. In addition, the author examines a wide range of international confrontations, including the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Iraq War, all of which, he

believes, can teach individuals and governments important life lessons.

At times, Shore is a bit repetitious and he relies too much on irritating catch-phrases, such as "causefusion," "infomania," and "cure-allism." In addition, some of his arguments are murky and unhelpful. He writes a chapter on mental illness in which he questions the use of medication for depression and states that schizophrenia may stem from root causes other than a genetic predisposition and/or chemical imbalance. First of all, it is common knowledge that the causes of mental illnesses are far from being definitively established. In addition, arguing that medication may not be the way to go is irresponsible, especially when discussing such a debilitating and potentially treatable condition as depression. Shore is on firmer ground when discussing geopolitical themes and few would argue with his conclusions about the Vietnam War, a debacle that cost many lives and weakened the United States both at home and abroad. In spite of its flaws, "Blunder" does alert us to some of the mistaken assumptions that can often lead us astray.

2 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

FINALLY answers as to WHY such terrible decisions

By Susan Goewey

Having listened to frustrating "justification" for torture, etc for YEARS from Cheney, etc....the author has successfully and FINALLY explained WHY and HOW decision process goes wrong by "smart" people with convincing examples from history. He explains why even "necessary" wars at certain points move from what they really are "wars of choices" and the need to appear "strong" and save face by well intentioned, but blundering leaders who are afraid of "appeasement" and other loaded terms. The author offers great insight and alternatives to the specious "arguments" such as "the only thing 'these evil terrorists' understand is OVERWHELMING FORCE." No. It just makes us "less safe" with every innocent 'civilian' killed. There are always other alternatives to war...not every 'terrorist' is fighting b/c he is 'evil' some are fighting b/c they/their families are threatened to be killed if they don't, others just need a paycheck to feed their families, "detainees" may have been ID'ed and "rounded up" to collect U.S. paid bounties. Peaceful alternatives to marginalize the extremists were seen as "weak" by Cheney, et al.

He confirms, as Sally Fields noted, "If the world were ruled by mothers, there would be no more *&@!+!! wars." Even the language "war on terror" was a blunder. This is a fabulous book. Hope it sells as well as Malcolm Gladwell and sparks new way of thinking among the masses.

Interesting that the author is blind, but does not tell us until late in the book and then mentions it only in passing. Of course I want to learn more about his own story. What a talent! Can't wait to see this book reach it's own tipping point on best seller's list and hopefully change the way Americans see the best way to truly "keep us safe" is with sound descions based on more than fear, but with arguments that appeal to the "just nuke them to oblivion" bullies as well as to the bleeding hearts of mothers. We all have the same goal: peace on earth. I'd like to thank the talented, wise, witty and truly smart author for an insightful, interesting, fascinating book and the history lessons--contemporary and ancient-- he provides.

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