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Clowns in the Cockpit

By [Herbert E. Meyer](#)

As you've probably noticed by now, the twenty-first century has gotten off to a rocky start. In 2001, on September 11, we were attacked. And now our country's financial system is collapsing. This makes for two "unimaginable" events within a decade.

How could 19 hijackers succeed against the world's greatest military power? And how could history's strongest and most productive economy seize up virtually overnight? Of course, there are complicated and highly technical explanations for each of these disasters. Some books have already been written about the causes of 9-11, and others are sure to come along in the years and decades ahead. No doubt publishers are already signing contracts for books about how today's financial meltdown happened.

But if you put both "unimaginable" events together, you'll see something that the experts won't ever see -- or won't say out loud because it sounds too simplistic and unsophisticated. Let me use an analogy to illuminate the common thread - what liberals would call the "root cause" -- that runs through both these "unimaginable" events:

Most of us fly from time to time, and the airplanes that carry us around the country, and the world, are marvelous pieces of equipment. Today's jetliners are the products of centuries of science, technology, business acumen and financial prowess. They are big, powerful -- and remarkably safe; the back-up systems have back-up systems.

The Pilots Pay Attention

These jetliners are also complicated pieces of equipment, which is why the pilots who fly them are not only technically competent but intellectually capable of concentrating on doing their jobs well. These pilots aren't sitting in the cockpit working on *The New York Times* crossword puzzle, or playing music on their *iPods*, or fooling around with the flight attendants. They are paying absolute, total attention to bringing their plane and its passengers safely to their destinations. If they see the plane drifting just one degree off course, or if they see the oil pressure in an engine dropping even slightly, they deal swiftly and effectively with this very minor problem before it becomes a major problem -- or perhaps a problem too big to resolve without catastrophe. It's hard work, and this is why pilots are exhausted even after an uneventful flight.

A modern country is like a jetliner. It's the product of centuries of human development, and it's a marvelous piece of equipment. In a sense, even the back-up systems have back-up systems. But a modern country is also a very complicated piece of equipment. Managing it successfully -- in other words, bringing its citizens safely into the future -- takes both technical competence and, perhaps even more important, intense concentration. You've got to spot little problems quickly, then deal with them effectively before they become too big to deal with.

Read the U.S. constitution, and you'll see that our country's "cockpit" isn't the White House; it's Congress. It's the Congress, not the President, which controls the money by raising taxes and enacting the federal budget. It's the Congress that makes our laws and oversees the executive departments and agencies that implement these laws and write the regulations that support them.

My fellow Americans: We've been putting clowns in the cockpit.

I don't mean this to be rude -- and I certainly don't mean this to be partisan -- but isn't it obvious that most of the people

we've elected to the House and Senate haven't got the technical knowledge and the intellectual firepower to guide our country safely through the turbulent skies? And isn't it obvious that most of these preening buffoons spend nearly all their time lining their own pockets, showboating, raising money for their re-elections or running for higher offices -- in short, concentrating their energies and attention on everything *except* doing the jobs for which we've elected them?

Of course there are exceptions in both political parties. Every so often, you're watching some television news talk show and suddenly there's a member of Congress on camera you've never heard of before who actually knows what he or she is talking about. But the blond news anchoress with teeth like Chiclets keeps interrupting -- and by the time your spouse comes running into the room to see what you're shouting about the interview is over even before you've gotten the House or Senate member's name. And chances are you'll never see this splendid lawmaker on television again. There just aren't enough of these talented and dedicated lawmakers in Congress to get the job done.

We've let this go on for too long, and now we're in a real jam: Our economy is teetering on the edge of a cliff, we're in the midst of a war -- and we're relying on the people who got us into these unimaginable disasters to get us out of them. Fat chance.

A New *Kind* of Congress

We need to re-think the role of Congress, and fast. Given the inherent complexity of our country, and the world's political turbulence, we've got to start electing a different *kind* of person to the House and Senate. Whether we prefer candidates who are Republicans, Democrats, liberals, conservatives, independents, libertarians, or who subscribe to any other party or philosophy, we've got to be sure that these individuals have the competence to cope with the issues that confront us, and the willingness to concentrate their total attention on doing the job. And if this leaves them with insufficient time for enriching themselves, or for raising a re-election war chest, or planning campaigns for higher office -- so be it. Candidates who don't want the job under these conditions shouldn't be running for them. And those who already have these jobs and don't like the new criteria should get out of the way -- or he shoved out of the way by us -- to make room for better men and women. Our lives and our fortunes -- literally, in both cases -- depend on getting this right.

I used to be in the intelligence business, and when we sent our projections to the President we always told him whether we were "uncertain" or "reasonably certain" or "highly confident" that whatever we were projecting actually would happen. For the first time in my life, I'm going to make a political projection in which I have total, 100-percent confidence:

If we keep putting clowns in the cockpit, at some time down the road -- two years from now, or five years, or in a decade -- there's going to be a third "unimaginable" event.

Herbert E. Meyer served during the Reagan Administration as Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council. He is host and producer of [The Siege of Western Civilization](#) and author of [How to Analyze Information](#).

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