

An Unlikely Oracle

a review by Russell Baker

Here is an extraordinary thing. A book by a "military writer," and written in English.* This, I suppose, will insure its oblivion, at least among those who might profit by it—White House and Pentagon types, strategic thinkers. How they despise English! At least as much as those who love it must despise the prospect of reading a book written "by the most respected and controversial military writer of the 20th century," as the jacket blurb calls Liddell Hart. What an iron wreath for such a graceful, delicate, reasonable piece of writing to have to bear through the marketplace.

The term "military writer" suggests Teutonic murk, Clausewitz, drowsy afternoons in the stacks with Admiral Mahan, slow suffocation in a smother of Pentagonian polysyllabics, highbrow horror chatter about "mega-deaths," "protective reaction strikes," "hamlet pacification," you-name-it, and the-Pentagon-has-a-brain-bending-euphemism-for-it.

This little book—it is only 80 pages long—is not of the Pentagon, however,

**Why Don't We Learn From History?* B. H. Liddell Hart. Hawthorn, \$3.95.

Russell Baker writes the "Observer" column in *The New York Times*.

nor of Prussia. It was published first in 1944. The barbarity of war, on which we all seem besotted in the present age, has corrupted our language, which is the expression of our thinking, almost to the point of nonsense. But here, in these marvelously calm and lucid paragraphs, we find a civilized mind at grips with questions of war and statecraft and human failing and are shocked to be reminded that these, after all, are the great questions which have always absorbed good men, and that it is honorable to ponder them and, indeed, important.

Liddell Hart died in 1970 at the age of 75. He had served as a British officer in the great butchering that was World War I. He became interested in history and military doctrine; in World War II, both Germans and Russians applied doctrines which he had attempted without much success to propagate in the British army before 1939.

For all this, however, he seems to have remained a prime example of that singular British contribution to Western civilization, the "amateur." The term is difficult to translate into American. It comes from the Latin verb "amo," meaning "love." The British "amateur" was a man who

pursued his specialty out of love for it, a sense that a civilized gentleman should also be capable of mastering complex, difficult subjects and materials.

The British “amateur” was, of course, often a thorough professional, but he instinctively rejected the exclusivity which Americans and continentals cultivated to enhance their identity as experts in the recondite. The decay of the English language in the United States results, in some degree, from the pride we take in our professionalism.

Each profession develops its own jargon, which becomes a private language, comprehensive only to other members of the profession. Colleagues will understand us, we reason; it may be better if outsiders do not. Here, professionalism tends to be exclusive, snobbish, clubby. (“We systems analysts all speak the same language here, fellows.”) The ability to speak the language becomes a badge of professionalism.

Conversely, failure to use the club code may suggest a lack of expertise. At a guess—nothing more—I would bet that Liddell Hart’s essay will receive scant attention among persons to whom it might speak most trenchantly, because it is not written in the argot of the national-security expert, the strategic thinker, or the military analyst.

The title alone is apt to put off the professional. “Why Don’t We Learn from History?” may be explicit enough, but the book would probably have a much wider professional audience if the title were translated into one of the professional jargons, as for example, “Factors in Generalized Shortfall of Experiential Absorption Capability.”

Well, why don’t we learn from history? Liddell Hart’s answer is that we would rather not. History, in his view, is the search for truth, and despite a great deal of lip service paid to truth, we are really not very fond of it, he believes. “Opposition to the truth is inevitable,” he writes, “espe-

cially if it takes the form of a new idea.”

The “prophet”—the person who expresses the truth unreservedly as he sees it—is indispensable to human progress, but his fate is bleak. “The prophets must be stoned; that is their lot and the test of their self-fulfillment.”

The task of successfully propagating their vision, he holds, depends on another class of men—leaders. The leaders must be “philosophical strategists, striking a compromise between truth and men’s receptivity to it. The prophet’s stoning is evidence of his success; “a leader who is stoned, however, may merely prove that he has failed in his function through a deficiency of wisdom or through confusing his function with that of a prophet.”

One vaguely discerns the outline of Lyndon B. Johnson in there. Indeed, this all reads as though it were derived from the history of the presidency since World War II, although it was composed in the early 1940s. Liddell Hart’s reflections on the draft might have been composed yesterday. Those who love the Army may lament that they were not read and taken to heart before Lyndon Johnson reached hip depth in the Big Muddy.

History, he argues, shows that “the compulsory principle always breaks down in practice.” You can *prevent* men from doing something, but you cannot compel them to do something without risking more than can be gained:

Efficiency springs from enthusiasm—because this alone can develop a dynamic impulse. Enthusiasm is incompatible with compulsion—because it is essentially spontaneous. Compulsion is thus bound to deaden enthusiasm—because it dries up the source. The more an individual, or nation, has been accustomed to freedom, the more deadening will be the effect of a change to compulsion.

Liddell Hart’s observation changed his early belief in the value of military conscription. It was inefficient and out of date—“a method that clung,

like the ivy, to quantitative standards in an age when the trend of warfare was becoming increasingly qualitative. For it sustained the fetish of mere numbers at a time when skill and enthusiasm were becoming ever more necessary for the effective handling of the new weapons."

Moreover, "Every unwilling man is a germ carrier, spreading infection to an extent altogether disproportionate to the value of the service he is forced to contribute."

There was nobody to argue this case, apparently, when the Selective Service System, back in the days of draft-board demonstrations, thought it was having the last laugh by drafting demonstrators to show them who was in charge. Those who won't read *Why Don't We Learn from History?* may be doomed to learn from events.

The reader keeps stumbling over passages in this book that seem to have been written with the benefit of hindsight on American involvement in Southeast Asia. Here, for example, is what Liddell Hart was saying in 1944 about honoring our commitments.

Civilization is built on the practice of keeping promises. It may not sound a high attainment, but if trust in its observance be shaken the whole structure cracks and sinks. Any constructive effort and all human relations—personal, political, and commercial—depend on being able to depend on promises.

It could be Dean Rusk explaining why we are in Vietnam, until, in the next paragraph, Liddell Hart discusses "the importance of care about making promises."

"It is immoral to make promises that one cannot in practice fulfill," he writes. With approval, he cites Gladstone's definition to Queen Victoria of the guiding principles for British foreign policy in 1869:

Though Europe never saw England faint away, we know at what cost of internal danger to all the institutions of the country she fought her way to the perilous eminence of which she undoubtedly stood in 1815. . . . Is England so uplifted in strength above every other nation that she can with

prudence advertise herself as ready to undertake the general redress of wrongs? Would not the consequences of such professions and promises be either the premature exhaustion of her means, or a collapse in the day of performance?

John Foster Dulles' answer to the first question, in the American context, was yes. President Nixon is now struggling to prevent the answer to the second question from also being yes.

In his discussion of guerrilla warfare, Liddell Hart raises a question which our enemy in Vietnam may come to find awkward. While guerrilla war peculiarly fits the conditions of the modern age, being especially well suited to exploit social discomfort, racial ferment, and nationalistic fervor, he writes, it produces danger of a moral kind.

The habit of violence takes much deeper root in irregular warfare than it does in regular warfare. In the latter it is counteracted by the habit of obedience to constituted authority, whereas the former makes a virtue of defying authority and violating rules. It becomes very difficult to rebuild a country, and a stable state, on such an undermined foundation.

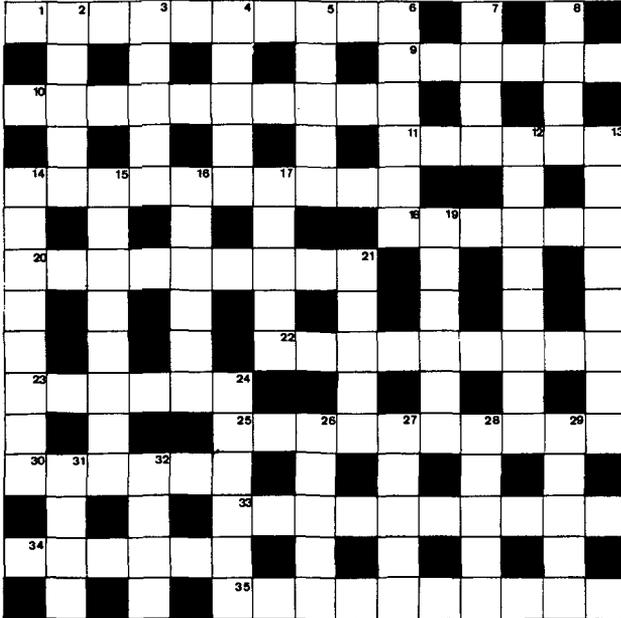
It would probably be overstating the case to grant Liddell Hart the mantle of "prophet." He did not receive the ultimate accolade of stoning, but in fact ended up receiving honorary degrees in history. In spite of this, he remained a writer of English, and a provocative thinker about subjects that still torment us, and on which we can all use some fresh 1944 provocative thought.

His model of the great soldier was the Duke of Wellington. Let him explain:

It was because he really understood war that he became so good at securing peace. He was the least militaristic of soldiers and free from the lust of glory. It was because he saw the value of peace that he became so unbeatable in war. For he kept the end in view, instead of falling in love with the means. Unlike Napoleon, he was not infected with the romance of war, which generates illusions and self-deceptions. That was how Napoleon had failed and Wellington prevailed. ■

The Political Puzzle

by John Barclay



ACROSS

1. We need a taller crab in the chair. (4, 6)
9. Strangers in the throes of a dilemma. (6)
10. One politician made of forged lard. (6, 4)
11. No hurry to see this lad wed. (6)
14. Uses brain when tea skill is needed. (6, 4)
18. Mistakes are art form in Washington. (6)
20. Bread lines for Congress? (4, 5)
22. Senator wants to see thug shot. (4, 5)
23. Not live, but big in broadcasting industry.

25. New AP press outlets. (10)
30. Hard first name to get down pat? (6)
33. Senate leader in fight v. women's lib? (1, 9)
34. Effect entrance, not tooting horn. (2, 4)
35. Way to gerrymander, or to fight it. (10)

DOWN

2. Help a Hebrew first. (5)
3. Chance for Arlen to get better. (5)
4. These make the well-soled miner. (5)
5. To overact bring Uncle Tom back with ease. (5)
6. Let D.O.D. move its own way. (6)

7. What the cold war needs. (4)
8. Name Russian river after Nat. (4)
12. Latin ode hard to come by in NYC. (4, 4)
13. Starts out to set a name up. (8)
14. Ball chore for Nixon. (5, 3)
15. Latin hoe sometimes heard on stage. (8)
16. What you do with heels or a fuss. (4, 2)
17. These Englishmen won't live up to deal? (5)
19. Not USA, sir. (6)
21. Respirations of dimension? (5)
24. Charm to bring Roman "E" up. (6)
26. For us, a wide ocean is no bar to help. (2, 3)
27. Spots for big contributors. (5)
28. Put Spanish river in publicity beforehand. (5)
29. With this behind, how can you not see circle upset. (5)
31. Fits twice between mother and wink. (4)
32. The measure of a Senator. (4)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 13.