HISTORY AS A LEARNING AID

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it
Santayana, Life of Reason, vol i, ch xii (1905)

Both Elbart Hubbard and Frank Ward O’Malley are credited with the pithy “life is just one damned thing after another.” However, it fell to the acerbic Edna St Vincent Millay to top them: “It is not true that life is one damned thing after another, it’s the same damned thing over and over.”

Recently the US President George Bush has invoked comparisons between Viet Nam and Iraq in support of his policy of “staying the course” in Iraq. The suggestion is here proffered that such a comparison may well result in a different conclusion from that intended by the President.

Consider for example this excerpt from Neal Sheehan’s Pulitzer prize winning A Bright Shining Lie (1988) [the same incident was described in David Halberstam’s The Best and the Brightest (1972)]:

Walt Rostow [Special Assistant for National Security] was an optimistic as John Paul Vann [civilian advisor to General Frederick Weyand] was pessimistic regarding US prospects of winning the war in Viet Nam.

In 1967, after a somewhat pessimistic briefing by Vann, Rostow, slightly shaken, said, “But you do admit that it’ll all be over in six months.” “Oh,” said Vann somewhat airily, “I think we can hold out longer than that.”

Now consider a more recent incident described in Cobra II: the inside story of the invasion and occupation of Iraq by Michael R Gordon & Bernard E Trainor (2006):

Colin Powell left the administration soon after Bush’s re-election. At the State Department, Rich Armitage, Powell’s top deputy, stayed on for a month and made several fact-finding trips to Iraq before he also left government. Armitage had no love for Saddam and was happy to see him overthrown. He had questioned the timing of the invasion but not its purpose. Still, he was troubled by the way the transition was going. Reconstruction projects had slowed as a result of the violence. The insurgents seemed to know where the US forces were and where they were headed. Time was not necessarily on the US side. Meeting with Bush and his National Security Council in November 2004, Armitage provided his unvarnished assessment. “We are not winning,” Armitage stated. The president seemed taken aback. “Are we losing?” Bush asked. Armitage’s reply was not reassuring: “Not yet.”

Concluding, here is an anecdote involving the utilization of simple arithmetic skills by the one-time US Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg who served on the Court between 1962 (appointed by President Kennedy) and 1965. It is this writer’s regret that in his previous article linking mathematics and law (see 84 Victorian Bar News 68-71 (Autumn 1993)) he neglected to include this episode.
For background, the reader should be aware that Justice Goldberg’s short tenure on the US Supreme Court is explained by the then President Lyndon Johnson, desiring to appoint his friend Abe Fortas to the Supreme Court, created a vacancy on the Court by persuading Goldberg to step down and accept the position of Ambassador to the United Nations which became vacant upon the death of Adlai Stevenson. That President Johnson could persuade Goldberg to resign despite the protection of lifetime tenure is testimony to Johnson’s political skills. Johnson was also able to persuade a reluctant Fortas to accept the nomination to the Supreme Court and Judge Thurgood Marshall to resign from the Federal Court of Appeals (appointed by JFK in 1961) in order to serve as his Solicitor General (1965).

At one of the [Viet Nam] briefings of the Wise Men it was Arthur Goldberg, much mocked by some of the others, who almost single-handedly destroyed the military demand for 205,000 more troops. The briefing began with the military officer saying that the other side had suffered 45,000 deaths during the Tet offensive [in early 1968].

Goldberg then asked what our own [wounded-to-] killed ratios were. “Seven-to-one,” the officer answered, “because we save a lot of men with [medical evacuation by] helicopters.”

“What was the enemy strength as of February 1, when Tet started?” asked Goldberg. “Between 160,000 and 175,000,” the officer answered.

“What is their [wounded-to-] killed ratio?” Goldberg asked. “We use a figure of three and a half-to-one,” the officer said.

“Well, if that's true, then they have no effective forces left in the field,” Goldberg said. What followed was a long and devastating silence.

David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (1972)

This article began with the well-known aphorism of George Santayana. It concludes with three lesser known aphorisms of which the first is also attributed to Santayana:

fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim

insanity (or stupidity) is continuing to do the same thing and yet expecting a different result

the real test of a general is to know when to retreat and dare to do it

attrib. Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington

M M Park