

Saturday Review

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The Lexicon of Force

THREE YEARS AGO, when we visited the crisis centers of Indochina, we had an opportunity to speak to American officials in the area. Most of them agreed that the situation was infinitely complex, not susceptible to crisp solutions, and required almost unlimited patience. But there were a few officials—not confined to the military—who argued all that was needed was the direct application of a little force.

"There's only one way to deal with problems of this sort," they would say. "You've got to set off some explosions. It won't take very much. The other side is ready to topple right now. But you've got to have the nerve to start dropping some bombs. Once you do, they'll crumble like stale cookies."

When you asked how we could be so sure, the other side would collapse after only a few bombs, the answer, given with an air of utmost confidence and expertise, would be in effect; "Please don't ask us how we know. We know."

The only thing greater than the certainty that a few bombs would do the job was the conviction that we had to be prepared to go all the way, if we had to, meaning readiness to use anything we had in our arsenals, all the way from artillery to atomic bombs.

When you asked about the morality of this approach you were almost made to feel like a country bumpkin looking at a nuclear reactor for the first time. "Brother," they would say, "when you deal with these characters, you leave your morality at home."

Questions about the implications of

this position for our official commitment to the United Nations were treated as a species of naïveté—almost as though this were an irrelevancy that didn't need answering. "No one pays any attention to the United Nations," was the response you would receive, uttered in a way to indicate that the matter was not even worth discussing.

Queries about other elements of our foreign policy that would be adversely affected by the unilateral decision to use force, or about the effect on America's standing in world public opinion, would produce a similar rejoinder: The United States couldn't allow itself to be led by the nose by world public opinion; it didn't make any difference what anyone thought—we had a job to do.

Most startling of all in this lexicon of force was the lack of knowledge about human history; in particular, knowledge about the way men react when attacked. There was the assumption that the other fellow was somehow different, that he would put up little or no resistance when raw force was applied, that any other approach was a waste of time.

Equally striking was the inability to accept evidence to the contrary. In 1961 the President was assured that the Cuban government would drop like over-ripe fruit the moment military action was launched. He was told that numberless thousands of people were ready to spring to arms at the first sign of armed opposition. Just the opposite happened. Nothing did more to strengthen the hold of the Cuban government on its people than the ill-fated invasion.

Another instance: the government of Souvanna Phouma was the only duly elected government in the history of Laos. It was not Communist or pro-Communist. Like most of the other governments of Southeast Asia, it had a historic fear of China. It did not recognize the Chinese Communist regime. It was a coalition government. Most American officials believed that such a government was the best that was possible or obtainable under the circumstances. But a few American officials felt we could do much better with General Phoumi Nosavan. They assured the President that only token force would be required to overthrow Souvanna. Though the United States was publicly pledged to the Souvanna government, we underwrote the rebellion. Both sides wore American uniforms, used American equipment, shot American guns. For a time, the United States was in the position of paying the salaries of opposing armies. The Souvanna government did not fall overnight, as predicted. Instead, the attempted coup led to a long and costly war, the ultimate outcome of which was that we reverted to support of the coalition government. But the net effect was to strengthen the forces of the Communists in the north, who could pose as defenders of their country against outside intervention.

AND now, Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. In the case of Vietnam, nothing was more emphatic than the certainty of some of our officials, in their own words, that the only way to stop the Vietcong in the south was by "scaring the hell out of the government in the north." As the political and military situation deteriorated in the south, the urgings of these officials for military action against the north increased in direct proportion. Again, most American officials, both in the area and in Washington, opposed the extension of the war because of its effect on the other elements in our total foreign policy. But when the deterioration became advanced enough, these other considerations were put to one side. The bombing was authorized. Yet the result has not been as advertised. We have not succeeded in scaring the hell out of North Vietnam. We have succeeded only in building an iron wall of resistance against us. The Vietcong now presents itself as an army of liberation. Available evidence would seem to indicate that Communism in Vietnam is stronger, not weaker, as the result of the bombing.

If Communism has been gaining in the world in recent years, it has not been because we have not been militantly anti-Communist but because we have not been knowledgeably anti-Communist. For victory or defeat is reckoned

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Time and the Moving Finger

A BIG HURRAH for your fine editorial "How to Write Without Thinking"! [SR, May 1].

Assigned topics, with time and space limitations, are frustrations to all students. Such impositions stifle creativity; and, after all, the creative fulfillment of persons is the ultimate end of education.

Creative teaching respects the uniqueness of each mind by presenting stimulation from which each student may choose his own point of departure and determine his own end-point. In so doing, he learns to deal with space and time in a manner commensurate to his particular capabilities—thus establishing his own sense of self-discipline.

CAROLE HODGSON.

Santa Fe, N.M.

YOUR EDITORIAL, "How to Write Without Thinking," is a moving appeal for a return to educational methods that may have been feasible when Mark Hopkins sat on his log and instructed individuals at Williams College. Unfortunately, you seem blissfully unaware of the number of students who must be taught English during the present era, and you do not appear to have estimated the time that might be at the disposal of the human beings who are charged with their instruction. Many college English teachers face four classes of thirty students or more, three times a week, while those in high school regularly encounter even larger numbers. Is it really practical to give tests to all these individuals by having them "spend several days thinking about an idea before presuming to commit it to paper"? Will you take charge of reading these examination papers, when they are adorned with an indefinite amount of "reworking," "transposing," and "inserting of second thoughts"? Will you also administer for us an educational system in which the students are encouraged to bring passive resistance into the classroom, so that they may refuse to take any examination of which they do not approve? Give us a chance, Mr. Cousins.

BRAINERD P. STRANAHAN,
Teaching Fellow in English,
Harvard University.

Cambridge, Mass.

I FOUND your editorial on the CEEB writing sample a rare, enlightened ray of hope for a presently almost hopeless situation.

Having taken this test myself just three years ago, I can still recall the trauma of "controlled creativity." Being a lover of, and indulger in, creative writing, I felt that the exam was truly a nerve-wracking, unsatisfying "challenge."

BARBARA ANN BECKWITH.
Newton, Mass.

YOUR CRITICISM of the College Entrance Examination Board Writing Sample is fair: it is not a test of writing ability.

I have found, however, that almost all of my college work has been under immense pressure of time. The CEEB Writ-



"First of all, Mr. Denning, how big a piece of the cultural boom do you want?"

ing Sample is therefore a valid measure of a collegian's writing ability, however stifled the quality of writing.

When getting a lot of education in a hurry, one does not have time to contemplate his artistry as he might wish.

EDDIE ELLIS,
Journalism Student,
University of
North Carolina.

Chapel Hill, N.C.

WE MALIGNED and battered fighters against linguistic *laissez faire* welcome you to our diminishing ranks. We hope you will become angry and frightened enough to supply us with more ammunition.

That ammunition could be in the form of an attack on the vociferous critics of correct English, both spoken and written. These critics, who abhor any kind of standard English (because, as they say, there should be no authority in a democracy) have indeed become authorities.

This new authority, which is trying to turn an art into a science, has for its motto: "Write as You Speak." The result of this speak-write system is permissiveness. And permissiveness leads to anarchy.

The CEEB essay-question is a monument to linguistic lawlessness. It seems to me that the Board has surrendered to anarchy in the name of pseudo-democratic togetherness.

H. H. HART,
Assistant Headmaster,
The Oxford Academy.

Pleasantville, N.J.

OH YOU LITERARY PEOPLE with your pretense that writing must be "creative" to be important. What blah! However little you may like it, the fact is that most written matter, and the most important written matter, is strictly factual and written in a hurry. I refer to news reports, business let-

ters, directions for use, recipes, technical and scientific accounts—everything that we work with, and much of what we play with. And how badly written so much of it is. This is the skill to teach our children, and to test validly by an essay on a given topic in a limited time. As for the creative writing that lifts both men and language—that can't be taught in any way, anyway. (Time: 17 minutes.)

BARBARA SHERIDAN LIPPMAN.
New York, N.Y.

WITH HIGH REGARD for Norman Cousins's characteristically clear thinking as expressed in "How To Write Without Thinking," I must quarrel with him about one point: assigning papers of "an approximate length." If we should not harness students with considerations of time (and I agree that we should not), why harness them with considerations of length—something even more arbitrary? The fear of the overworked teacher that students will submit dissertation-length papers is wholly unwarranted. Students simply do not have that much to say. And the problem is not the reverse either, for, freed from quantity, the focus shifts to quality: the student tends to become aware that he must not only say something, but that he must say something worthwhile.

PAUL J. MCRAY.
Hempstead, N.Y.

EDITOR'S NOTE: We find Mr. McRay's ideas most persuasive. The only argument in favor of approximate length is that it at least relieves the student of the feeling of being at sea about what he is expected to do.

AS A HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR who has run the gauntlet of college board tests, I feel somewhat qualified (and magnanimous) in coming to their defense.

Colleges that require writing samples