

Asides

The Jack Sprat Fallacy

No one knows what to believe anymore, and no wonder. Jogging is either good for you or bad for you, depending on which book you read. Peanut butter will either make you healthy or pollute your system with carcinogenic aflatoxins. Martinis will either destroy your liver or ward off heart attacks. Now, it even turns out that being skinny isn't necessarily better than being fat.

The Journal of the American Medical Association has just published an article saying that underweight people, like overweight people, have a higher-than-average mortality rate. But if it is any consolation, the researchers aren't drawing any broad conclusions. It may be, they theorize, that the reason some of the folks in their survey were underweight was because they were sick.

Welcome Back, Warbler

The U.S. Forest Service, which provides jobs for lots of young ecology-minded men and women but hasn't been getting very high marks lately for forest management, won't find its reputation enhanced much by events this week in Michigan's Huron National Forest. Someone thought it would be a good idea to burn off some of the forest to free up pine cone seeds and the like. This food would be a nice welcome for the rare Kirtland's warbler, due back from winter quarters in the Bahamas any day now. But the fire got out of control, a Forest Service biologist was killed and another man injured, several homes and cabins were destroyed along with some 25,000 acres of forest land.

Accidents can happen, of course, and no one is perfect; but the Huron fire might provide a good occasion for looking at the broader question of Forest Service management, which can't

seem to reconcile some of the newer theories of "wilderness" groups about letting "natural" things happen with the task of preserving property, human life and the forests themselves.

Khadafy's Wall

Cryptic reports keep filtering in about a \$3 billion "great wall" Libyan President Muammar Khadafy is building along his country's border with Egypt. For example a report from a Nairobi newspaper that an Italian contractor was in Kenya trying to recruit 6,000 workers to help build the wall. There are a few little problems, like the fact that even \$3 billion won't buy a wall stretching the full 700-mile length of the border or one tall enough to stop things like airplanes and helicopters or maybe not even thick enough to stop tanks. Which causes some other Africans to wonder. Is Khadafy really building this wall or does he have something else in mind, like recruiting Kenyans, Sudanese, Chadians and the like to come to Libya for training in the manly art of terrorism and guerrilla warfare, so they can return home some day to conduct subversion on President Khadafy's behalf?

The China Syndrome

China, which already has a wall, seems to be developing another form of resistance, unbelievable to the American mind. This nation of one billion people, who have traditionally dined on such delicacies as sea slugs and 1,000-year-old eggs, isn't rushing to take advantage of the opportunity to buy and drink Coca-Cola, or "Kekoukele" as they call it. Some say it tastes like medicine, according to an AP dispatch. It's enough to give a marketing man nightmares. Maybe a little soy sauce would help kill that "mediciney" taste.

One of the more striking features of the operation was the small size of the assault force: 90 men assigned to overwhelm an enclosed compound defended by 150 well-armed and disciplined terrorists. At Entebbe in 1976, an Israeli unit of over 100 picked troops was employed against only seven Palestinian terrorists and a scattered number of predictably later-reacting and confused Ugandan soldiers. The German recapture of a hijacked Lufthansa airliner in Mogadishu in 1977 involved a strike force of about 90 commandos against only four or five terrorists. In terms of both men and machines the U.S. attempt to free its hostages in Tehran appears to have been severely "underfunded," allowing little margin for error or for the unexpected event.

Why? It is difficult to believe that those military planners charged with devising the Tehran raid opted for a force of the size finally used. Military planners are inherently conservative when it comes to estimating needed resources; if anything, they are prone to ask for substantially more force than they think is required. In the case of the Tehran operation, a natural proclivity for redundancy of force was undoubtedly strengthened by the knowledge that Tehran constituted a greater challenge than Entebbe (where the hostages were conveniently held at an airfield) or Mogadishu (where the Germans had the benefit of a collaborative Somali government).

* * *

In contrast to the military planners is the political leadership of the administration, which for over three years has displayed a profound mistrust of military power in general and, as the first six months of the Iranian hostage crisis has proved, a no less profound hesitancy in using U.S. power on behalf of interests violently threatened. Is it illogical to assume that an administration with a record of demonstrable nervousness in contemplating the use of force would, when force is needed, be niggardly in supplying it as well as vulnerable to losing its nerve when force is actually in the process of being used?

And it is here that one is compelled to return to Colonel Beckwith, sitting on the ground at "Desert 1" with his force sans one helicopter. Faintheartedness is rarely characteristic of men like commando Beckwith, an individual who freely chose a career fraught with risk and danger, who is trained to adapt rapidly to the unanticipated event on the battlefield, and who does so with a confidence (misplaced or not) bred by immersion in a subculture that exalts "can do" and disdains "quitters." No, it is highly unlikely that Beckwith was prepared to throw in the towel simply because he had five rather than six working helicopters.

In sum, while there was "equipment failure" inside Iran, the impression that it was attended by a failure of nerve inside the White House cannot be dismissed.

Jeffrey Record is a senior fellow at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis in Washington, D.C., and author of "Sizing Up the Soviet Army."

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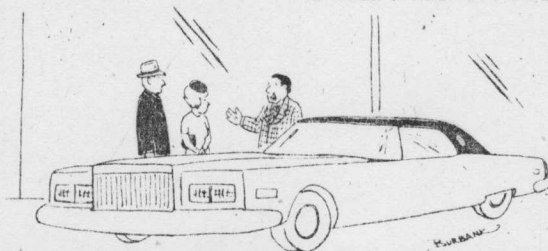
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PEPPER . . . and Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Just think—you can be the last in your neighborhood to own an anachronism!"

Smart Attention Span
I've tried to be attentive,
Have practiced, am well intentioned;
But nothing makes me a better listener
Than hearing my name mentioned.

—Gail Cooke.

Daffynition
Ventriloquist's dummy:
wood-be person.

—Frank Tyger.

