

SEVEN FATEFUL MOMENTS
**WHEN GREAT MEN
MET TO CHANGE
THE WORLD**



CHARLES L. MEE JR.



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PROLOGUE

THE ART OF
MAKING HISTORY

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What stands in the way of a person who wants to change the course of history, not by the force of arms, but by the peaceful means of charm, wit, persuasion, flirting, backstabbing, patience, skillful negotiation, foresight, deceitfulness, and all the other arts of peaceful human exchange?

The question comes up every day in thousands of contexts of daily life and high diplomacy, at PTA meetings, and in corporate boardrooms.

But the question shows itself with perhaps greater clarity in one context than in all the others: at summit meetings, where two leaders meet, with the presumed power, by uttering a word, altering a position, relinquishing a claim, offering trust, telling a lie, taking a gamble, remaining firm, to transform the course of events.

In such circumstances, they naturally consider the substantial obstacles that stand in the way of their desires: the sizes of each other's armies, the resources of their economies, their geographical positions, and other material facts of the world. Both contemporary people and historians make much of such things, constructing entire theories around the importance of the means of production, the raw materials, and the skills of workforces available in various nations. But, in truth, these are the simple elements to weigh, and, by themselves, they are rarely the factors that cause people to make great miscalculations.

The sources of the big, repeated mistakes in history are the conceptual pitfalls that undo the best-made plans of the most able practitioners. There are many such pitfalls, large and small. This book deals with seven of the most common and upsetting of them all.

The first involves the difficulty of knowing the facts, the foundation of the historical field in which any of us ever operates, and not only when powerful leaders come together to bargain or confront one another. Most sources of information - in our daily lives as in the archives we leave behind for historians to sort through - are dreadfully inadequate, incomplete, filled with error, biases, giving weight to certain facts because they happen to be the only ones that have survived, and ignoring others be-

cause they have been lost or discarded or shredded, or never deemed worth gathering in the first place. Is there a missing piece of evidence that would transform our understanding of John Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, or the Iran-Contra scandal, or of what Manuel Noriega of Panama did in the name of assisting American policy in Latin America? Do we have such a certain grasp of the effects of American policy that we know what will maintain good relationships with Arab countries and what will ruin them? "History," as the historiographer Michael Stanford has written, like an understanding of the present, and "unlike mathematics, is not a science of certainties, and only rarely are a historian's reasonings empirically confirmed. . . ." Meanwhile, we act, presumably, on the basis of what we know; and what we know is invariably incomplete, or wrong.

Second, as if ignorance of facts were not disabling enough, we are further incapacitated by the appearances we mistake for reality, and by those appearances that we create in order to bewilder others. We add to that the belief that by changing the appearance of things, we have changed the nature of things, or that, in time, thinking will make it so. Thus, when the Chinese massacred their citizens in a public square, President George Bush carried on with business as usual, on the premise that if the massacre went unnoticed it would not disturb the progress of China toward an open society. Of course we know that appearances do matter: that the Soviet Union seemed to be a powerful colossus fueled an immense American military budget right up to the very last moment of the Cold War. But there is a limit to the efficacy of appearances. Not all the parades of Russian tanks and missiles and soldiers could keep the Soviet Union, at the end of its economic resources, from collapse.

Third, we must face up to the fact that the ancients were right about the role of chance in human affairs. Aristotle and Plato spoke of the operations of Nature, Chance, and Art, or the exercise of practical skills in human history. St. Thomas, in his *Summa contra gentiles*, spoke similarly of nature, luck, and will. In our modern hubris, believing that with sufficient research and rational analysis we can comprehend all pertinent factors, we forget that, inevitably, absolutely unpredictable events occur to rout even the finest, most sophisticated, computer-modeled calculations about the ever-changing histor-

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ical situation. If that were not the case, the stock markets of the world would not be so liable to crash, intelligence evaluations of the possibility of deposing foreign rulers would not so often be wrong, and a sandstorm would not have made such a humiliating mess of President Jimmy Carter's attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran.

Fourth, there is the disagreeable fact that events depend on the principle of contingency, which states that everything depends on everything else. As the historian Paul Veyne has written, there are no laws of history, or if there are they are couched along the lines of "a rise in the price of bread will cause a revolution except when it doesn't." And so, not only are there no rules to follow in the making of history, but there is, as a consequence, no telling, before the fact, even which factors in a given situation will turn out to be the crucial ones.

Fifth, there is the puzzle that the only thing worse than not learning from the mistakes of the past is to learn from them - and apply the wrong lessons to the wrong events at the wrong time. From World War II, we learned the lesson of Munich: that aggressors must be firmly opposed, or they will proceed to greater and greater conquests. We applied the lesson of Munich to Vietnam - certain that the United States could not afford to show behavior that would be interpreted as weakness or timidity - and created a tragedy. Generals are famous for applying the lessons of the previous wars to future ones: thus the Maginot Line was built across France after World War I to keep tanks from rolling across French fields; and in World War II, armor outflanked the Maginot Line. The hardest lesson of all for us to learn is the lesson that every moment in history is a separate constellation of events, never to be repeated; no lesson of the past can ever be applied exactly to the present or future.

Sixth, there is the near certainty, no matter what decision is taken, that it will produce unintended as well as intended consequences. The peace treaty that wrote an end to World War I led to the rise of Hitler and so to World War II. Britain's victories in World War I and World War II helped to drain the British Empire of its wealth and to reduce it to a second-rate power. The long-desired end of the Cold War let loose the long-repressed nationalist passions of Eastern Europe and removed the economic support the Soviet Union and the United States

gave to the Philippines, South Vietnam, Zaire, Somalia, Cuba, Ethiopia, and other nations that now teeter on the brink of economic and political anarchy.

And finally, once all these factors are combined, they create the seventh and most confounding obstacle of all: Because we cannot have a certain knowledge of what the world is or is becoming, and because the precondition of realism is an ability to suit one's actions to the world as it is and as it is becoming, it is not possible to be a confident realist. We need to embrace, in the place of mere realism, a more robust and complex view of the world, what we might call meta-realism, which recognizes a context more intricate and subtle than we had hoped would be necessary, that also takes into account some values, beliefs, wishes, and hopes that are completely unrealistic. This meta-realism might finally be indistinguishable from the elusive and contradictory tenets of ethics, which are, finally, no more nor less than the accumulated practical folk wisdom of millennia of human experience.

Each of these puzzles is considered in one of the seven chapters of this book.

The problem of the knowability of the historical field is seen in the first chapter as a particular puzzle faced by Pope Leo I and Attila the Hun when they met in the north of Italy in A.D. 452. Leo's task was to say something to Attila to persuade the barbarians not to attack Rome. Leo had no certain knowledge that what he might say would be effective; Attila had no way of knowing whether he could count on what Leo told him. Yet, on the basis of their conversation, the future of the center of western civilization - for that moment - depended.

The illusion of power - the spectacle of politics - as it is used to dazzle one's own followers, to fool an opponent, and to bemuse oneself, has never been displayed more grandly than in the meeting in 1520 of England's King Henry VIII and the French King Francis I on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, where the two kings made peace, but only for a relative moment.

And the operations of chance have not been more strikingly and catastrophically revealed than in the encounter of Hernando Cortés and his followers with the Emperor Moctezuma and the

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Aztecs in 1519, when the fate of an entire civilization depended on a surprise that neither of the men considered, or could have imagined.

The principle of contingency, embodied in the extraordinarily complex interrelationships of the people and the nations they represented at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, was understood by all the participants at the Congress - and, to their efforts' ultimate undoing, ignored.

The fifth chapter, addressed to the false lessons of history, recounts the story of the Paris conference of President Woodrow Wilson, Prime Minister Lloyd George, and Premier Georges Clemenceau, and the writing of the peace treaty at the end of World War I. Each of the participants had learned well and thoroughly from history lessons that were tragically wrong.

The sixth chapter, about the rule of unintended consequences, speaks of the Yalta Conference in 1945 - which marked the end of World War II, and the beginning of the Cold War and all its consequences.

The seventh and final chapter - dealing with the difficulty of basing one's actions on an accurate reading of the "real world" - tells of a recent meeting of the so-called G7, the heads of the seven great industrial powers of the world, and Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who asked for financial help to prevent the final disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The examples chosen for each of these puzzles are of course not the only ones - and perhaps not the most involved and intricate - that could have been chosen. History contains a vast store of such examples. Indeed, the Vietnam War by itself is an illustration of every single one of the seven pitfalls. But the events shown in the following chapters, from a broad span of time, are among the most exemplary, and, taken together, are bracing, and humbling, reminders of the complexity and mystery of human affairs.

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THE PROBLEM OF KNOWING

POPE LEO THE GREAT AND
ATTILA THE HUN NEAR SIRMIONE

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Historians are painfully aware of how difficult it is to come by reliable facts in any period of study. And it is not only a historian's problem. Those who are in the midst of the events themselves are often as much at a loss for reliable information as those who attempt to reconstruct and interpret events after the fact.

Would the American State Department have instructed April Glaspie, the ambassador to Iraq in 1990, to appear as friendly to Saddam Hussein, to have refrained in their last meeting from warning him against attacking Kuwait, if the State Department had known of his plans? Or if the Americans did know Hussein's plans and wished to lure him to attack so that his nuclear weapons development could be halted, what did President Bush's advisors know about their ability to destroy Hussein's nuclear capability in the war or its aftermath?

Two professors who teach would-be Washington insiders at the Kennedy School at Harvard, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, like to recall that President John Kennedy used to tell of hearing in college about a former German chancellor who, when asked the reasons for World War I, replied, "Ah, if we only knew."

When the "facts" are known the trouble does not so much end as begin, for we bring our own interpretive point of view to whatever incomplete facts we may possess, and that point of view may include conscious or unconscious biases. Centuries ago, some believed that earthly events were caused by God, and data was interpreted accordingly. This was regarded as the only correct understanding of the world. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were those who understood that events and even ideas and feelings arose from the material relationships described by Karl Marx, and histories were written to correspond to that view. Others assumed the truth of Thomas Carlyle's view that historical events were shaped by the acts of "great men." In the twentieth century, most of us have been more comfortable with multifactorial, pluralist explanations that recognize the complexities of a multitude of interacting factors that initiate and give distinctive shape to events. We are especially content if we are able to integrate those factors into a statistically based computer model. We accept that the older views are simply wrong, and our current view is the best possible.