

THE WOODENHEADED AFFLICTION IN ACTION

Were you able to read our recent information on The Woodenheaded Affliction in leadership? If not, take a minute to read it here, and then read below to learn about the Woodenheaded Affliction in action.

A TRAGIC EXAMPLE.

General Douglas Haig is a tragic example of what can happen when a top leader afflicted by woodenheadedness doubles down on a failed strategy and insulates himself from the consequences of his decisions. Haig was given command of the British First Army Corp in France at the outbreak of World War I. He soon became the Commander in Chief and was later promoted to Field Marshal for the remainder of the War. Haig is remembered as a “good man” but second rate general. He is best known for his mishandling of the Battle of Somme, where he earned the title, “Butcher of the Somme” after unnecessarily sending thousands of British troops to their deaths.

Haig was a meticulous military planner. He made ample use of military intelligence and began his attacks on the German line with heavy artillery bombardments to weaken enemy positions. Haig was utterly convinced that success in battle was primarily a matter of morale and determination.

So, the best way to win, he reasoned, was not by strategic advantage, but by sheer force of will.

A firm believer in the superiority of the cavalry charge, Haig believed that mere bullets had little stopping power over horses. Consequently, the best way to break through the German front lines was a massive cavalry charge. Supremely confident in his military judgment, Haig wrote in his journal on the first day of the Battle of Somme,

“Very successful attack this morning. All went like clockwork...The battle is going very well for us and already the Germans are surrendering freely. The enemy is so short of men that he is collecting them from all parts of the line. Our troops are in wonderful spirits and full of confidence.”

Haig knew there would be heavy casualties. As he warned,

“The Nation must be taught to bear losses. The nation must be prepared to see heavy casualty lists.”

He was right. On the first day of the Somme, as Haig was recording his upbeat version of the battle, the British took an astonishing 61,816 casualties—the greatest single day loss in British military history. In the first five days of the Somme offensive, over 100,000 thousand British troops would be killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Four thousand German prisoners would be taken and a little more than a mile of disputed ground gained.

Perhaps just as astonishing as the casualty figures was the fact that Haig remained unaware of the tragic consequences of his orders. Historian John Terraine notes,

“What is difficult to grasp from the vantage of today, is how a disaster of such proportions could fail to be instantly apparent. Yet such was the case. It is perfectly clear from Haig’s Diary that he had no sense whatever on July 1st of the catastrophe that had befallen his army.”

How could Haig remain oblivious to the disastrous impact of his decisions not only on the first day of the battle, but over the next five months?

THE SHORT ANSWER TO HOW HAIG REMAINED OBLIVIOUS IS THAT HE WAS AFFLICTED BY A SEVERE CASE OF WOODENHEADEDNESS.

Three factors contributed to his leadership failure.

1ST

First, Haig didn't grasp the fact that in battle some things don't go as planned—common knowledge to any general.

Sometimes artillery shells didn't explode and weaken enemy positions. Sometimes the Germans moved soldiers and artillery out of the range of his artillery. Consequently, British troops faced murderous return fire from machine guns and artillery as they charged the German line.

2ND

Second, Haig lived in self-imposed blindness to the consequences of his decisions.

He resolutely determined never to visit the front line or familiarize himself with the actual day-to-day of warfare. During the entire course of the war, he never visited the front lines once. His reason? He worried that scenes of the carnage might influence his strategic judgment. Winston Churchill later wrote that Haig reminded him of

"A great surgeon before the days of anesthetic, versed in every detail of such sciences as was known to him: sure of himself, steady of poise, knife in hand, intent upon the operation; entirely removed in his professional capacity from the agony of the patient, the anguish of relations, or the doctrine of rival schools, the devices of quacks or the first fruits of new learning. He would operate without excitement, or he would depart without being affronted; and if the patient died, he would not reproach himself."

3RD

Third, Haig's subordinates refused to tell him the truth—remember the filter principle.

Without excusing his terrible judgment, Churchill laid some of the blame at the doorstep of Haig's advisors. "Sir Douglas Haig was not at this time well served by his advisors in the Intelligence Department of General Headquarters. The temptation to tell a Chief in a great position the things he most likes to hear is one of the commonest explanations of mistaken policy. Thus the outlook of a leader on whose decision fateful events depend is usually far more sanguine than the brutal facts admit."

These three factors were enough to fuel and sustain Haig's woodenheadedness, allowing him to remain convinced that his decisions were sound and that doubling down, in his case tripling and quadrupling down, and sending more troops into the line of fire made perfect sense.

Haig was frequently in error but never in doubt. Over the four months of the Somme campaign, he stubbornly refused to abandon his failed strategy of throwing men at machine gun nests after an ineffectual initial bombardment. After five months of fierce battle, Haig finally called a halt to the slaughter. The official British history of World War I would tactfully conclude that Haig was “not swift of thought.”

SUMMARY AND IMPACT.

Douglas Haig is a spectacular example of the incapacity of the woodenheaded leader to “read reality” and metabolize its feedback. Cognitive psychologist Dietrich Dorner connects this brand of poor leadership performance to what he calls

“bad habits of thought.”

In Haig’s case this included an overreliance on outdated military theory, laziness in seeking out and properly interpreting feedback, mixed with a blatant moral disregard for the personal and collective consequences of his decisions.

HAIG IS TESTIMONY TO THE PRINCIPLE THAT THE DENIAL OF ONE’S MISTAKES IS THE GREATEST OF ALL MISTAKES.

As the saying goes,

“The greatest of sins is to be conscious of none.”

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