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Complexity Is the Friend of Good Decision-Making, and It's the Enemy of Easy Decision-Making

People + Strategy: What is your advice for drawing the right lessons from history?

Ty Seidule: I'm a historian and a military officer. I've often said that history is more often abused than it is used correctly. The goal should be to gain wisdom through history. As one famous historian, Jacob Burkhardt, said, "It is the historian's function not to make us clever for the next time, but to make us wise forever."

History is a way of solving problems just like any other discipline, whether it's systems engineering or operational research. So one way we solve problems is we ask a question, we gather evidence, and then we answer a question. Telling stories is often a way to get a broader understanding of what's going on rather than just focusing on a singular problem or question.

Historians and people in the military can often get bogged down in their use of analogies. We all tend to do that based on our own experience, who we are, and where we came from. And analogies are almost always going to get us into trouble because we cherry-pick the analogy rather than using a wider set of analogies. We take one analogy and we use it to justify going in one direction. So people will invoke Vietnam to say, "We should not go to war because it's going to be a quagmire." Or they might mention

the rise of Hitler and appeasement to justify going to war. Rather, what we should do is use more analogies.

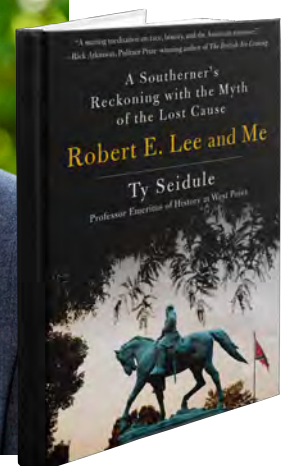
If CEOs want to solve a problem, they should choose five, six, seven, eight analogies and for each one they should do an analysis of the differences and likenesses compared to the current situation. The goal is to capture the complexity of the problem. History brings complexity.

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P+S: What are some other frameworks on how to extract wisdom from history?

Seidule: Historians have 100 percent agreement on only one thing, which is that we can't predict the future. After all, there are 8 billion independent

variables, and they're called humans. And that doesn't even include weather, the pandemic, competition and every other unpredictable disruption or crisis. So the way



that we try to address that challenge in studying history is to use breadth. You want to read, whether it's about your industry or about war or any other topic, across a long period of time so that you have lots of examples. You will understand how to find the complexities by looking at it in depth.

You also need to understand context, because nothing happens on its own. If it's a business, you've got to understand the rest of your industry, and you've got to understand what's going on in politics and culture and everything else that's happening around your industry so that you don't take it out of its natural habitat. So breadth, depth, and context—in the words of the late historian Sir Michael Howard—are the ways that we try to look at the complexity.

You still have to create order out of the complexity because the number of facts available are infinite. You still have to choose facts because you have to turn it into something that other people will understand, as well. The way historians do that is to create a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end.

P+S: What is the right level of healthy versus unhealthy respect for the past? After all, a lot of ideas and problems feel like they are starting with a clean sheet of paper.

Seidule: Understanding the past is a way to look at the way humans operate. So if you're looking at a company that you think has never done this before, there likely are a lot of examples of companies that at least did something similar, and studying them will help to ask the right questions on what may feel like this brand-new challenge.

If you think about war, some things are always the same—fear, for instance. Yet, there is always change, too. You can study history carefully and still absolutely get it wrong. So the French looked at the lessons of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, where they got hammered, and they decided to go on the offensive in 1914 for World War I, and they got slaughtered. So then they took a more

methodical approach for World War II, and they lost there. The lesson is that just because you're studying the past doesn't mean that you're going to get it right next time. They looked at the problem too narrowly. They didn't look at it in breadth.

So if you end up looking at a bunch of companies that were brand new—

had 10 bases named for Confederates. Strange. I asked, but no one knew why.

In a way, this was my new business—to answer a question that no one had looked at before. So I went into the archives and I found that in the 19th century, West Point and the army banished Confederates from their memory because they

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and that could be Rockefeller on the railroad, it could be the first telegraph company—the way they went about becoming brand new can still provide some insights for new companies today. You're not the first company to do something brand new. What you're trying to do is be wise.

It's about experience. How does one gain experience? Well, there's only a couple of ways of doing that. If you're a CEO, you can be a CEO. But the other way of doing it is to read in breadth, depth and context about those who have done this successfully or unsuccessfully in the past. That is what we do in the military. In fact, we spend years reading about war because you may only practice it once or twice in your entire career. History provides vicarious experience.

P+S: Was there a time when you looked at your own narrative history and realized you need to go broader and deeper?

Seidule: I taught at West Point for two decades. One day, I walked past the barracks, named for our greatest military heroes—Washington, MacArthur, Eisenhower and Grant. Then, I stopped by the sign for Lee Barracks. Why, I wondered, did West Point have a barracks named after someone who fought against their country? There must be a dozen things named after Robert E. Lee. Heck, I lived on Lee Road. Moreover, the army

were traitors. That really resonated with me. So when and why did West Point memorialize Lee? The answer floored me. It was a reaction to racial integration in the 1930s, the 1950s and the 1970s. The Lee memorials were a form of protest against equal rights and that just made me so angry. I started to tell people, but nobody seemed to care.

Then in 2010, I oversaw the creation of a Memorial Room at West Point with the names of more than 1,500 graduates who died in our nation's wars, including 100 who died in the Wars on Terror. I wanted to exclude the names of those West Point graduates who died wearing Confederate gray because they fought to destroy our country and they killed U.S. Army soldiers to create a slave republic. Confederate values are the exact opposite of West Point's values of Duty Honor Country. Yet, I couldn't convince our leaders despite my "brilliant" argument.

I went home, defeated, and told my wife. She asked me if I told my own story. After all, I grew up in Virginia revering Robert E. Lee and thinking Confederates fought for an honorable but doomed cause. "No way!" I told her. Historians tell other people's stories, not their own. Well, she said, if you want to convince anyone, you must tell your own story. She was right.

In my book, *Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause*, I tell my story

In First Person: Ty Seidule

of growing up on Lee idolatry and then I tell the real story, the real history. The horror of slavery and segregation. The violent terror and Jim Crow laws that white leaders used to maintain political power at the expense of Black people. The facts changed me. The history changed me. So, now, I tell my uncomfortable story to try to convince others about the importance of our past.

History is dangerous because it challenges our myths and identity. History makes us uncomfortable, but uncomfortable causes no lasting damage. In fact, uncomfortable means education. Dealing with my own uncomfortable history made me a more empathetic person. History changed my life because I finally understood myself. And once I understood myself, I became a better leader and a better person.

P+S: Given how time-starved so many people feel today, are there some efficiency hacks for studying up on history in breadth, depth and context?

Seidule: There are some amazing short videos on American history that are entertaining and really good, like the CrashCourse YouTube channel. Or you can watch Ted Talks or other lectures online. They give you context for understanding why we are the way we are. The solutions aren't easy, and it's OK that they're not easy. The point is that you are gaining wisdom and experience through your research. They will give you insights into your problems—to come at it sideways instead of directly. And that's what history can do, because every time you read something or do something, you think of your problem in a different way.

It's also about finding time. It was true for me in all the leadership positions I was in. Can you carve out time to just think—to sit at your desk or take a walk away from your computer to think about the problem? Or bring somebody else in to talk



about your problem or issue, even if they don't know anything about the problem. Just their questions will help you sharpen your thinking.

P+S: Can you talk more about the role of certainty about the past versus the ambiguity? You need contingency plans because things can go sideways.

Seidule: Things always go sideways. Always, always, always. All the military operations I've been involved in have been a complete mess, including the most successful ones. But when you look back on them, somehow you get this rose-colored view that everything worked fine. Anybody who has done any sort of complex operation in the military will tell you that people get lost, they run out of gas, they die in accidents. The number of people who died in accidents in World War II is astonishing and absolutely heartbreaking. None of this is clean. They are always incredibly complex.

I always share this story about how complex new situations can be in military operations: How do you deal with artillery falling on you in a forest?

Usually, you get on the ground as fast as you can. Not in a forest. You have to hug a tree, because when the artillery hits trees, it will send up shards of wood. If you're hugging a tree, you're less likely to be hit by artillery or wood shards. How could you possibly prepare for that? This is the complexity of history. You are not going to get everything right, and it's OK. No one ever has. Not Dwight Eisenhower, as he smoked four packs a day and was stressed out of his mind, and not George Patton, who once even slapped his own soldiers in Sicily.

When I look at the past—particularly when I'm looking at a primary source—you learn that whether it's life, business or war, these things are hard, and studying them is difficult. People matter, and if you have different people in different situations, things might have turned out differently. Weather, chance and a lot of other things play a role. Experience does help in dealing with new challenges. How can you get more experience? One way is reading about the past in breadth, depth and context. ■