Old vs. New Review

The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable
by Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Berlin Diary: An Inside Account of Nazi Germany
by William L. Shirer

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As Yogi Berra once said, "the future ain't what it used to be." Indeed, those of us who have tried to predict the World Series champion on opening day each spring are often met with frustration (and possibly, even humiliation). So, why do we persist at making predictions, when so often we are wrong?

Humans love to make predictions regardless of qualifications. Not surprisingly, most predictions are rarely reasonable and often wildly wrong. Yet even when we are qualified or sufficiently knowledgeable of a given topic, we tend to predict with about the same degree of inaccuracy. At their core, predictions play on emotions, not reason. We do not enjoy ambiguity in our everyday lives, and making predictions may be one of the ways that we atone for the uncertainties that surround us, regardless of how inaccurate those predictions may ultimately prove to be. We examine what information is available, frame it against a historical context (if possible), and then attempt to predict how a particular situation in the future may unfold. Making predictions based on models that use data from the past is risky, as demonstrated in two books – one old, and one new. Each work demonstrates the human inability to make predictions in both life and warfare.

The Black Swan by Nassim Nicholas Taleb examines the dangers of predictions and the human infatuation with conforming our experiences to the famous Gaussian Bell Curve, despite nature's insistence otherwise. In this intriguing book, Taleb focuses on "unknown unknowns"—those events a recent Secretary of Defense was lampooned for describing as "the ones we don't know we don't know." For military professionals who contend everyday with uncertainty, Taleb's *The Black Swan* offers a framework for encountering extreme events and systems that act outside the realm of human expectation or experience.

Although Taleb inadvertently obscures his message at times with jabs at Federal Reserve presidents, investment bankers, economists, and career academics, he does reserve some praise for

military professionals. Taleb's jaunty harassment of these professions adds levity, but it does get repetitive and tends to draws attention away from his theme.

Black Swan events can be either positive or negative in consequence, but regardless they share three common traits: first, they are outliers in that they lie outside the realm of normal human expectations and defy normal explanation. Second, Black Swan events cause an extreme impact upon our world. Finally, despite their outlier status, we invent explanations for Black Swan events after they have happened, attempting to make them explainable and predictable.[1]

There are two vital lessons here. First, at the micro (or tactical) level of war: we should be prepared for many of our major weapons systems to perform *not* as we expect during combat. There are several major combat suites that form the basis for naval tactics, and most of them have never been fired in a hostile environment. Our confidence in them is often predicated upon statistical modeling, but Taleb would caution us to not be surprised when they do not work as advertised. Do we have alternative plans or systems available in case they fail? Do we know what they are? Second, at the macro (or operational/strategic) level of war, we must be prepared for our planning assumptions to be proven untrue. Large, unexplained, unpredictable, and potentially catastrophic events tend to occur during military operations. Ultimately, our chances of achieving success at any level of war may hinge upon our ability to quickly recognize Taleb's Black Swan events and adapt our assumptions and expectations in spite of them.

Given the context that Taleb's book presents, *Berlin Diary: An Inside Account of Nazi Germany* by William L. Shirer, is an historical account of the period leading up to World War II in Europe. Shirer's book is filled with numerous predictions regarding the impending war -- both by the author and by the people with whom he interacts. As you may suspect, based on *The Black Swan*, many of those predictions were wrong.

Perhaps better known for *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William L. Shirer spent fifteen years in Europe, from 1925 to 1940. During this fifteen year span, Shirer rose to become CBS's radio correspondent in Berlin. The book is based on a compilation of Shirer's personal diary entries from interactions with a spectrum of people, ranging from Hitler's most trusted lieutenants to average German citizens from January 1934 through December 1940, and it represents a unique historical perspective of the events that led to World War II. In the course of his reporting, Shirer recorded his own assessments of the situation in Europe and the assessments and predictions of the people he encountered. Nearly every prediction or boast that is made in the book turns out to be incorrect. Each predication, regardless of the source, was entirely wrong. Whether it was Hitler, a German officer, a competing foreign news correspondent, or an average German shopkeeper, no one was able to grasp entirely their situation and envision accurately the future. No one was able to predict the Black Swan of World War II.

Berlin Diary is also full of numerous other military lessons, such as the effectiveness of an ambitious propaganda and censorship campaign, the dangers of treaties and non-aggression pacts, the potential effectiveness of trade and blockade warfare, and the dangers of neutrality when potential belligerents surround a nation (all observed and uncovered through the eyes of a news correspondent). It is a well written narrative of those tumultuous years.

[1] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable (2nd Edition)*, xxii.

Ultimately, in an activity that is as uncertain as warfare, we must always be prepared for our predictions and our simulations to be wrong. We will make assumptions and develop plans, but we must never become emotionally wed to these assumptions. In order to adapt quickly to the battlefield's ever-changing environment, we must anticipate flaws in our assumptions and admit when they are proven incorrect. Both *Berlin Diary* and *The Black Swan* are books that deserve space on a wardroom shelf or in the personal library of the military professional.