

Current Events

By Paul Johnson



The Rhino Principle

THERE'S A CERTAIN RULE IN LIFE THAT I'VE FOUND WORTH CONSIDERING. It particularly applies if you're confronted by a crisis. I call it the Rhino Principle.

Now, the rhino is not a particularly subtle or clever animal. It's the last of the antediluvian quadrupeds to carry a great weight of body armor. And by all the rules of progressive design and the process of natural selection the rhino ought to have been eliminated. But it hasn't been. Why not? Because the rhino is single-minded. When it perceives an object, it makes a decision—to charge. And it puts everything it's got into that charge. When the charge is over, the object is either flattened or has gone a long way into cover, whereupon the rhino instantly resumes browsing.

Few people think of learning from a rhino. But I have. And when I hear of an author who cannot finish or get started on a book, I send him (or her) a rhino card. I paint a watercolor of a rhinoceros on the front of a postcard—something I do well, as I've practiced it a great many times. And in the space next to the address I write: "Stop fussing about that book. Just charge it.

Keep on charging it until it is finished. That's what the rhino does. Put this card over your desk and remember the Rhino Principle."

Sending a rhino card usually works. Now, the Rhino Principle may not produce the perfect book, but it does produce a book. And once a book is drafted, it can be improved, polished and made satisfactory. But if the Rhino Principle is ignored, there is no book at all.

This principle can be applied to many other things, particularly business. When an entrepreneur has an object in his line of vision, he should dismiss all other considerations from his mind, abandon all other activities and charge directly at that object, continuing to charge until the object has been secured. All kinds of qualities are needed to make a great businessman. But aggressive single-mindedness is by far the most important. Indeed, it is indispensable.

To what extent does the Rhino Principle apply to politics and statesmanship? In my view it applies with even more force. The story of Moses in the book of Exodus is an exposition on this approach. So is the monumental story of Alexander the Great of Macedonia and the destruction of the Persian Empire. Caesar's conquest of Gaul, as described by himself, is another epic in the need to charge and keep on charging until the object is taken.

In the history of the United States one sees time and time again how success was achieved through the concentrated pursuit of a clear and definite aim.

The original settlers who arrived on the *Mayflower* observed this principle. They wanted the freedom to practice the religion of their choice, and to secure this they disregarded wealth, comfort and safety and worked toward their goal until it was achieved.

The American leaders who objected to George III's government argued around (and beside) the point until they produced the Declaration of Independence. This was the moment at which America adopted the Rhino Principle: A salient object was perceived, and everything was sacrificed for its attainment.

Abraham Lincoln concentrated all his energies into one two-pronged aim: the preservation of the Union and the defeat of those trying to sunder it. He pursued this aim wherever it took him and never deviated from it, despite enormous difficulties and reverses, until the Union was triumphant.

Winston Churchill embodied the Rhino Principle. His objects were not always consistent—and they were sometimes the wrong objects. But there was always the same single-mindedness in his pursuit of them. In 1940 Churchill and the defense of

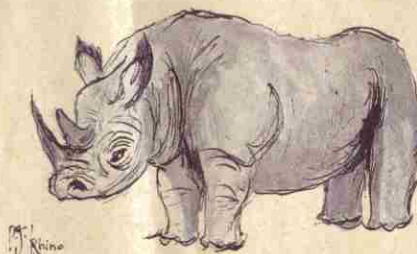
freedom in Europe came together in a common destiny. I remember, as a boy of 11, listening to his broadcasts during that fateful summer and hearing my father say, "That man Winston Churchill has a clear aim and is very determined. That is what we need today."

I've often noted that the statesmen who succeed on the big issues have a distinct vision of their goals combined with undeviating energy in pursuing them. Konrad Adenauer was one such example, Charles de Gaulle another. And in the 1980s two others who shared that trait, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, joined forces to win the Cold War. Neither was very sophisticated nor subtle, but both understood the importance of having a clear aim and concentrating unreservedly on that aim until it was accomplished.

Is President George W. Bush cast from the same mold? I rather think so. I certainly hope so.

We can choose to lead quiet lives and get through them without achieving much. But if we want to do the big thing, if we hope to leave a record that will be admired and remembered, we must learn to distinguish between the peripheral and the essential. Then, having clearly established our central objective, we must charge at it again and again until the goal is achieved.

That is what the rhinoceros does. It may not be a model animal in most ways. But it does one thing very well. And that one thing we can learn: Charge!



Paul Johnson, eminent British historian and author; Lee Kuan Yew, minister mentor of Singapore; and Ernesto Zedillo, director, Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, former president of Mexico; in addition to Forbes Chairman Caspar W. Weinberger, rotate in writing this column. To see past Current Events columns, visit our Web site at www.forbes.com/currentevents.