

The mind is a terrible thing to waste

Politics is a head game, said Bill Clinton, the 42nd president of the United States. In other words, if you're to win in politics, you must have a head and, colloquially speaking, "game".

In 1995, we lived in Makindye, on Salaama Road. It was a different place back then. An urban area possessed of an unquiet rustic charm. At the time, only the American Club seemed to beckon anything close to a chill-out joint.

Yet it was not exactly the kind of establishment you could walk into and freely exclaim, "This is the bomb" with no Jihadist-related consequences.

was "an American". They immediately screeched to a halt.

Then gave me the once-over as they tried to figure out whether my accent was from London or Half-London.

However, I stood firm and warned them of a diplomatic incident of Pearl Harbor proportions if they even looked at me wrongly. As they stood slack-jawed, I walked into the sunset like a cowboy at the end of a spaghetti western. I heard later that my brother Derek had done the same thing, weeks before. It had worked for him, too.

Perceptions

It was clear to me that how you shaped the perceptions of those around you is how they treated you. If they perceived you as a joke, they provided you with the first syllable of the word "punchline", right on the nose.

Thus, it was important to get inside their heads in order to steer their battlecruiser of a temperament to less choppy seas of interaction.

On a global level, this cognitive warfare played out during the Vietnam War.

In a post-war conversation in April 1995 between former US Army Colonel Harry G Summers Jr and North Vietnamese Colonel Bui Tin, this psychological warfare was revealed as the Vietnamese's trump card.

According to Col Tin, who accepted the surrender of South Vietnam in 1975, the conversation was based on a fundamental difference in how the two sides viewed the conflict.

"You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," Col Summers told Tin.

"That may be so, but it is also irrelevant," Tin replied.

This anecdote highlights the difference between military victory (which the US largely achieved in major battles) and strategic/political victory. The latter employed by North Vietnamese leadership was based on the premise that they did not need a conventional military victory to defeat the US.

Instead, they focused on a prolonged, high-cost struggle intended to break the American will to fight, exploiting the vulnerability of a democratic system to political dissent and public protests.

Clinton was right. Politics is a head game, one which is anybody's for the taking.

Before the soldiers could say anything, I declared that I was "an American". They immediately screeched to a halt.



Philip Matogo
Politics

It seemed exclusive, and it was known to be exclusive. Hence, appearance shaped perception into fact, hence not everybody could go there. I saw how this perceived exclusivity made the people who went there seem like titans.

Indeed, this mistaken outlook coloured even how the soldiers who stayed in the upper barracks saw the people who went there, especially the Americans.

So, I decided that I would borrow some of this aura. Accordingly, one day I was walking home and decided to take my usual shortcut through the barracks.

Back then, there was no fence, and so I walked through the barracks daily without accident. Then one day, the road turned. I was walking through the barracks and suddenly I heard a shout. Turning around, I saw a battalion-sized section of soldiers running towards me like I had just declared I was running for president.

Before they could say anything, I declared that I