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The Peter Principle

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*This book is dedicated to all those who,
working, playing, loving, living and
dying at their Level of Incompetence,
provided the data for the founding and
development of the salutary science of
Hierarchiology.*

They saved others: themselves they could not save.

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Introduction

by RAYMOND HULL

AS AN author and journalist, I have had exceptional opportunities to study the workings of civilized society. I have investigated and written about government, industry, business, education and the arts. I have talked to, and listened carefully to, members of many trades and professions, people of lofty, middling and lowly stations.

I have noticed that, with few exceptions, men bungle their affairs. Everywhere I see incompetence rampant, incompetence triumphant.

I have seen a three-quarter-mile-long highway bridge collapse and fall into the sea because, despite checks and double-checks, someone had botched the design of a supporting pier.

I have seen town planners supervising the development of a city on the flood plain of a great river, where it is certain to be periodically inundated.

Lately I read about the collapse of three giant cooling towers at a British power-station: they cost a million dollars each, but were not strong enough to withstand a good blow of wind.

I noted with interest that the indoor baseball stadium at Houston, Texas, was found on completion to be peculiarly ill-suited to baseball: on bright days, fielders could not see fly balls against the glare of the skylights.

I observe that appliance manufacturers, as regular policy,

establish regional service depots in the expectation—justified by experience—that many of their machines will break down during the warranty period.

Having listened to umpteen motorists' complaints about faults in their new cars, I was not surprised to learn that roughly one-fifth of the automobiles produced by major manufacturers in recent years have been found to contain potentially dangerous production defects.

Please do not assume that I am a jaundiced ultra-conservative, crying down contemporary men and things just because they are contemporary. Incompetence knows no barriers of time or place.

Macaulay gives a picture, drawn from a report by Samuel Pepys, of the British navy in 1684. 'The naval administration was a prodigy of wastefulness, corruption, ignorance, and indolence . . . no estimate could be trusted . . . no



In the expectation that many of their machines will break down during the warranty period.

contract was performed ... no check was enforced. . . . Some of the new men of war were so rotten that, unless speedily repaired, they would go down at their moorings. The sailors were paid with so little punctuality that they were glad to find some usurer who would purchase their tickets at forty percent discount. Most of the ships which were afloat were commanded by men who had not been bred to the sea.”

Wellington, examining the roster of officers assigned to him for the 1810 campaign in Portugal, said, “I only hope that when the enemy reads the list of their names, he trembles as I do.”

Civil War General Richard Taylor, speaking of the Battle of the Seven Days, remarked, “Confederate commanders knew no more about the topography . . . within a day’s march of the city of Richmond than they did about Central Africa.”

Robert E. Lee once complained bitterly, “I cannot have my orders carried out.”

For most of World War II the British armed forces fought with explosives much inferior, weight for weight, to those in German shells and bombs. Early in 1940, British scientists knew that the cheap, simple addition of a little powdered aluminum would double the power of existing explosives, yet the knowledge was not applied till late in 1943.

In the same war, the Australian commander of a hospital ship checked the vessel’s water tanks after a refit and found them painted inside with red lead. It would have poisoned every man aboard.

These things—and hundreds more like them—I have seen and read about and heard about. I have accepted the universality of incompetence.

I have stopped being surprised when a moon rocket fails to get off the ground because something is forgotten, something breaks, something doesn't work, or something explodes prematurely.

I am no longer amazed to observe that a government-employed marriage counselor is a homosexual.

I now expect that statesmen will prove incompetent to fulfill their campaign pledges. I assume that if they do anything, it will probably be to carry out the pledges of their opponents.

This incompetence would be annoying enough if it were confined to public works, politics, space travel and such vast, remote fields of human endeavor. But it is not. It is close at hand, too—an ever-present, pestiferous nuisance.

As I write this page, the woman in the next apartment is talking on the telephone. I can hear every word she says. It is 10 P.M. and the man in the apartment on the other side of me has gone to bed early with a cold. I hear his intermittent cough. When he turns on his bed I hear the springs squeak. I don't live in a cheap rooming house: this is an expensive, modern, concrete high-rise apartment block. What's the matter with the people who designed and built it?

The other day a friend of mine bought a hacksaw, took it home and began to cut an iron bolt. At his second stroke, the saw blade snapped, and the adjustable joint of the frame broke so that it could not be used again.

Last week I wanted to use a tape recorder on the stage of a new high-school auditorium. I could get no power for the machine. The building engineer told me that, in a year's occupancy, he had been unable to find a switch that would turn on current in the base plugs on stage. He was beginning to think they were not wired up at all.

This morning I set out to buy a desk lamp. In a large furniture and appliance store I found a lamp that I liked. The salesman was going to wrap it, but I asked him to test it first. (I'm getting cautious nowadays.) He was obviously unused to testing electrical equipment, because it took him a long time to find a socket. Eventually he plugged the lamp in, then could not switch it on! He tried another lamp of the same style: that would not switch on, either. The whole consignment had defective switches. I left.

I recently ordered six hundred square feet of fiber glass insulation for a cottage I am renovating. I stood over the clerk at the order desk to make sure she got the quantity right. In vain! The building supply firm billed me for seven hundred square feet, and delivered nine hundred square feet!

Education, often touted as a cure for all ills, is apparently no cure for incompetence. Incompetence runs riot in the halls of education. One high-school graduate in three cannot read at normal fifth-grade level. It is now commonplace for colleges to be giving reading lessons to freshmen. In some colleges, *twenty percent* of freshmen cannot read well enough to understand their textbooks!

I receive mail from a large university. Fifteen months ago I changed my address. I sent the usual notice to the university: my mail kept going to the old address. After two more change-of-address notices and a phone call, I made a personal visit. I pointed with my finger to the wrong address in their records, dictated the new address and watched a secretary take it down. The mail still went to the old address. Two days ago there was a new development. I received a phone call from the woman who had succeeded me in my old apartment and who, of course, had been receiving my