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JRF.

## A Psychiatric Study of Professional Football

A former NFL "psychiatrist-in-residence" reports on player behavior and addresses the question: Can psychoanalysis provide the winning edge?

by Arnold J. Mandell, M.D.

Two years ago Harland Svare, then head coach of the San Diego Chargers, asked me to lunch to talk about football. I was then, as I am now, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego. I had never paid much attention to football. During my five years of basic medical training, when we lived in the shadow of New Orleans's Sugar Bowl, I didn't attend a single game. I had been in San Diego as many years, and I still wasn't paying attention to football. The Chargers were a losing team, and Coach Svare,

an imaginative man, wondered if my training might equip me to notice things about the attitudes and the behavior of his players that could help give the team what is often called "the winning edge."

Our lunch lasted three hours, and the result was that the Chargers retained me as a sort of psychiatrist-in-residence—the first, I believe, for a National Football League team. At Svare's invitation I began to hang around the team. I joined the members of the Charger squad in the locker room, at team lectures, at practice, on the plane to and from away games, and on the sidelines during the games. In all, I conducted over 200 hours

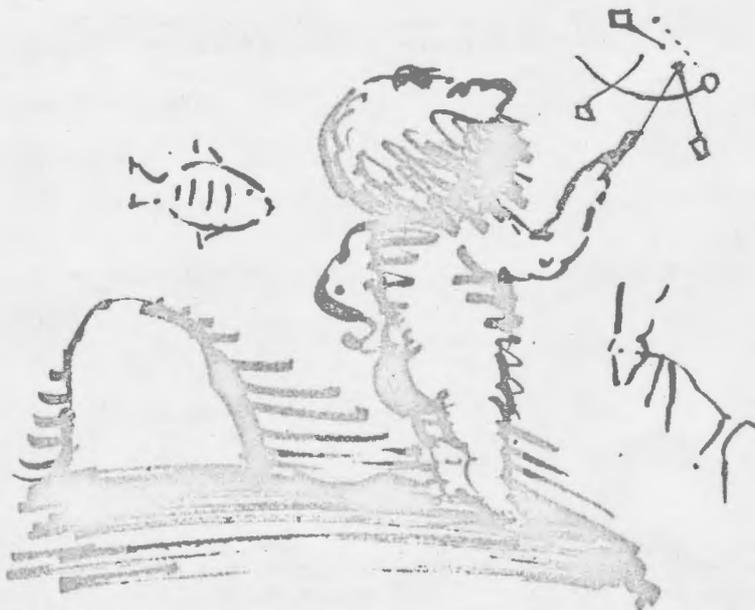
of individual interviews with them. My function was to provide the coaches with a clearer understanding of the players and their positions and, more practically, to make actual personnel comments and recommendations.

When I first sat on the bench, I realized I was hearing the sounds of a Stone Age battleground. You can't pick them up on television or from a seat in the stadium. But on the bench you hear grunts, groans, hits—mankind's most fundamental sounds. I quickly learned what many Sunday widows already realized—that football is not a game but a religion, a metaphysical island of fundamental truth in a highly verbal, disguised society, a throwback of 30,000 generations of anthropological time.

When I was first around the team, the players thought I was spooky because I just stood there and watched. It was to take me more than a year to break down barriers and build trust between the players and me. But after only a few weeks, I rushed to Coach Svare with my first systematic insight. "Harland," I said, "I think I can tell whether a player is on offense or defense just by looking at his locker. The offensive players keep their lockers clean and orderly, but the lockers of the defensive men are a mess. In fact, the better the defensive player, the bigger the mess."

AS I PORED OVER scouting reports and interviewed players and coaches from numerous NFL teams, it became clear that offensive football players like structure and discipline. They want to maintain the status quo. They tend to be conservative as people, and as football players they take comfort in repetitious practice of well-planned and well-executed plays. The defensive players, just as clearly, can't stand structure; their attitudes, their behavior, and their lifestyles bear this out. They operate as though they've been put out of the tribe and are trying to show people that tribal structure is worthless anyway. Ostracism does not bother them; it serves as a source of fuel for their destructive energies. Rules or regulations put forward by anybody, anyplace, are to be challenged. Coaches find defensive players notably more difficult to control than their offensive teammates.

Offensive and defensive football players, I noticed, often had little or nothing to do with one another. There was one exception on the Chargers. Walt Sweney, an all pro offensive guard, had



Illustrations by Ken Rinciari

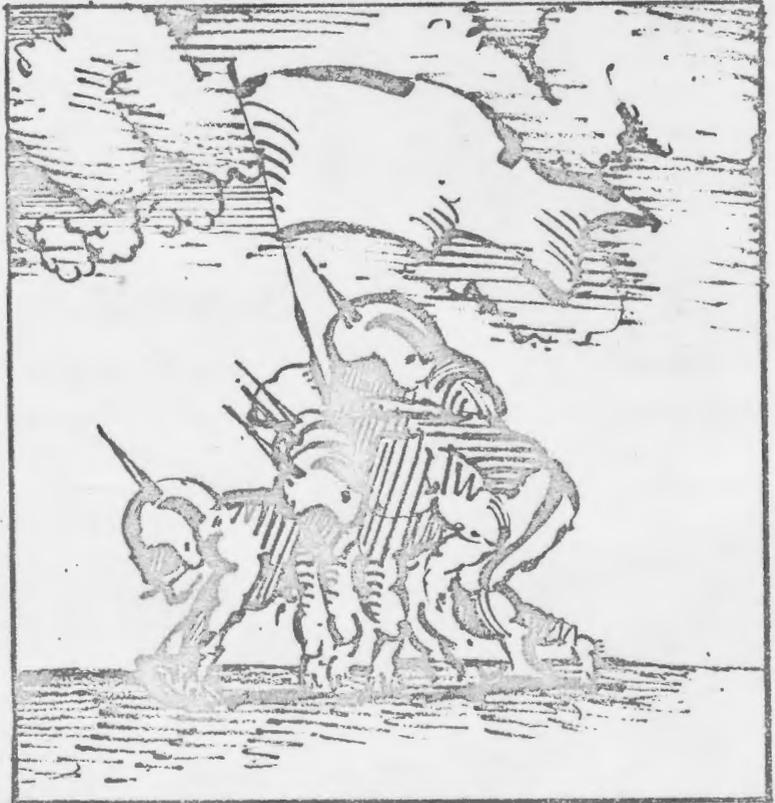
*"Not a game, but a throwback of 30,000 generations of anthropological time."*

the personality of a defensive player, and his friends were all on the defensive team. (In fact, Sweeney wasn't that much of an exception. The Chargers drafted him to be a linebacker, and that was the position he himself preferred.)

When I mentioned my new "rule," Svare, a former linebacker, responded, "Sure, I never put it in words, but I'm basically a defensive player, and I find myself liking defensive players more than offensive players as people. I have very little patience with the rituals and repetition involved in the offense. We just don't look at the world the same way."

So I found that, despite the nomenclature, the offensive squad is made up of defenders of structure and the defensive squad is garrisoned with attack troops. I began to differentiate the personality profiles of these men independently of any prior knowledge about the specific requirements of their individual positions. Before long a personality classification in relation to position began to emerge. The consistency of the patterns seems explainable on the basis of the selection that occurs before any professional football player gains a regular starting position in the NFL.

EVERY YEAR several thousand college football players are eligible; not more than 600 are seriously considered, and of those, 50 to 100 make it to the NFL. The selection goes on year after year. A player maintains his position by winning individual battles week after week on the field, where his performance is witnessed, filmed, and "graded." The crop of players is weeded systematically. The athletic difference between those who remain and those who are dropped is amazingly small. When it comes to making it in the NFL, practically every owner or coach with whom I've talked says, reverently and resignedly, "The game is in the mind." In addition to athletic ability, motivation, and commitment, the player needs a personality that meets the requirements of his position. This Darwinian process leaves each participant as an island of psychobiological organization in a circumstance that tests physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual strength—man-on-man—and in which psychological pressure from peers is even more potent a motivation than the challenge from the enemy. A suitable personality becomes the most significant and necessary component of survival. Making a proper match between player and



"Offensive linemen in general are ambitious, tenacious, precise, attentive to detail."

position, then, is necessary for personal happiness, because players working in the wrong position are uneasy and attempt to correct for their uneasiness. Or, as aggressive and territorial individuals are very prone to do, they become depressed, turning their aggression inward. Like the rest of us, they become demoralized and lose effectiveness when they aren't in the right place to function at their best.

It is important to realize that professional football players are, to mint a term, "homoclitics." That is, they are extremely normal people—stable and anxiety-free, accustomed to handling pressures and performing extraordinarily and quickly. Many of them are also paranoid, but my use of that term—and of others from psychology—does not imply pathology; it implies a personality trait within normal limits.

The men who fill particular positions on the offensive team can be described by clusters of personality traits. The offensive linemen in general (centers, guards, tackles, and, to an extent, tight ends) are ambitious, tenacious, precise,

attentive to detail. They manifest a kind of toughness that I would call stubborn rather than explosive. They work hard. Their traits clearly suit them for their work. As blocking assignments become ever more intricate, the linemen must practice like a ballet corps to coordinate perfectly the necessary spatial and temporal movements of blocking patterns. They also have to stand firm and cool when an opposing defensive line rushes their passer, no matter what verbal or physical abuse is thrown at them; they must care only about protecting their quarterback, not about proving their masculinity in an explosive way. A sacrificial attitude toward the welfare of the team is integral to the offensive linemen.

WITHIN THE offensive line itself, the typical personalities of centers, guards, tackles, and tight ends are readily distinguishable. The center, who often has to call signals, is usually the brightest. His loquaciousness in relation to other members of the line reflects his leadership. The guard may be bright, and he is

quicker than the center. He may also be more aggressive—in the violent, rather than the stubborn, sense—because on sweeps he may be called upon to block downfield. His assertiveness is more persistent; the center's is more volatile. The tackle is slower, more patient, and even more persistent than the guard. He is not called on to be as mobile as the guard, and he doesn't have to get the middle linebacker with an explosive block, as the center does. He maintains and sustains. Stubborn tenacity is prototypical of the offensive tackle; his loyalty and commitment to the welfare of the team know no match.

The wide receiver is a very special human being. He shares many features with actors and movie stars. He is narcissistic and vain, and basically a loner.

Whereas the offensive linemen may hang around together (the center is particularly gregarious), the wide receiver often lives alone, dates alone, and remains a bit of a mystery. He is tactful in interpersonal encounters but elusive and hard to locate as a person. Like the track star, the good wide receiver is disciplined because the precision required to run intricate pass patterns and hold onto passes while he is getting clobbered requires discipline. Yet the courage of the wide receiver is more brittle than that of the other offensive linemen. His elusiveness may move beyond unpredictability to treachery. Typically, the wide receiver doesn't mind getting hurt on the body, but he doesn't like his face to be touched—he's afraid of disfigurement. Essential, brilliant, vain, and not too friendly, he's rarely a popular member of the team. Disaffinity may be particularly acute between wide receivers and linebackers.

I have found two kinds of running backs. One is like the wide receiver: tough, treacherous, quick, lonely, and perhaps even paranoid, like the much-traveled Duane Thomas, perhaps the most gifted runner of all time. That paranoia is adaptive for a man whom everybody on defense is out to get. His particular unpredictability makes him even more difficult than a wide receiver to locate as a person. He's never where you expect him to be. In his days with the Chargers, Thomas was as difficult to locate off the field as on; if you made a date with him, he was likely not to be there. He is a good example of how a really great football player's personality is welded to his job.

The other kind of offensive back—the Larry Csonka kind—runs straight ahead.

He's honest, tough, strong, disciplined, and if his toughness is a touch brutal, he may be great. He's not as quick, and he might not be as treacherous or paranoid, as the flanking back. He will work long and hard; he has some offensive tackle in him.

Back to the line, to the tight end. It's difficult to find an ideal tight end because the chores he is required to do are virtually incompatible and therefore demand incompatible personality traits. The tight end must block like an offensive lineman or a fullback yet catch passes like a wide receiver. Blocking well requires bodily sacrifice for the welfare of others and does not gratify vanity; so the tight end can't have too much wide receiver in him. He does well to replace that with a bit of the distrust found in the Duane Thomas-type running back.

THE MOST DIFFICULT of the offensive players to categorize are the quarterbacks. I have studied the scouting reports of a number of quarterbacks and talked about them with scouts, teammates, reporters, owners, and coaches. Given the physical ability, passing talent, and intelligence, the major determinant of success as a quarterback appears to be self-confidence—a self-confidence that is more akin to super-arrogance. The physical threat to a quarterback passing from the "pocket" is intolerable. To stand there to the last millisecond, waiting for your receiver to reach the place the ball is supposed to go while you are being rushed by mammoth defensive linemen—that takes sheer courage. A single mistake might negate all the efforts and sacrifices of your teammates—as well as lay you open to a fearful pounding.

To stand that kind of responsibility requires poise beyond that possessed by most men. How is the poise of the successful type of quarterback achieved? From my observations, there appear to be at least two routes. One is that of the naturally arrogant man who does not feel bound by the rules governing other men. He makes his own. He exploits the environment in a tough, tricky way and with very little compunction. Such men have run their talents and capacities to incredible self-advantage with no apparent anxiety or guilt. And they win football games—yea, even championships. The Joe Namaths and the Sonny Jurgens fit well into this category.

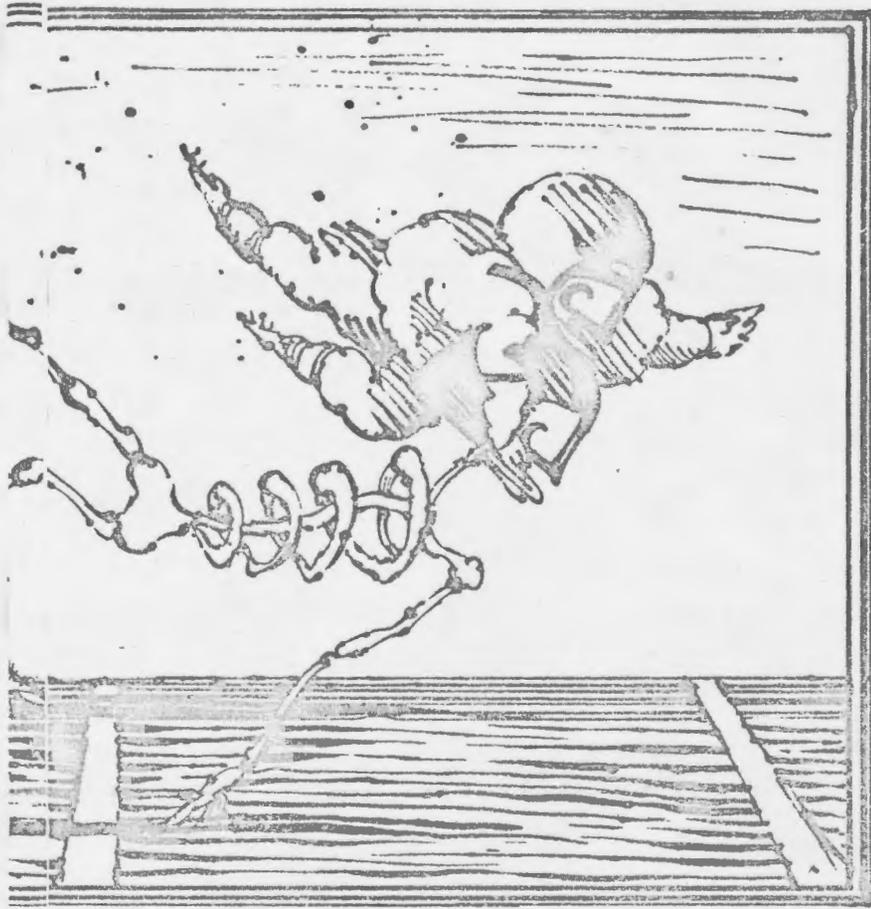
The other way to turn in that kind of performance under those battle conditions is with assurance from On High.



*Superstars disemboweled in ft*

The Cowboys' Roger Staubach and the peerless John Unitas, who has finished his outstanding career, are in this group. So is Fran Tarkenton, the Vikings' renowned scrambler. We might call them and their comrades the religious quarterbacks. They attend church regularly, are active in such organizations as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and have a truly evangelical mission that they carry forward with the calm certitude of the believer, the chosen one. (In my two seasons with the Chargers, I got a chance to see Unitas up close and was struck by his religious commitment, as well as by his humility. These qualities helped insulate him from what was obviously a particularly stressful situation: the struggle of a player of his stature and past achievements to remain a first-stringer.)

The believer-quarterbacks win championships, too. But any quarterback who leads with kindness and concern for



view of 50 million people. Even the Roman Colosseum would have trembled.

others, who feels anxious about his responsibility to the 47 other men on the team and guilty over the outcome of his own actions, may collapse at critical moments—at the climax of a game or as his team moves closer to the playoffs. Students of the game point to John Hadl, the Rams' all-pro quarterback, whose pass-completion percentages dropped off drastically in the critical final games of last season.

THE INCREASING USE of computers to analyze the plays called by individual quarterbacks in various situations may change the personality requirements of successful quarterbacking. Except for audible signals (which can be employed in a significant percentage of the plays), computer-versus-computer may eventually lead to all plays being called from the bench. The defensive team may be able to guess what the opposing quarter-

back is going to do before he himself knows it—by a computer calculation of what he has done 77 percent of the time on “third and long” early in the fourth quarter when his team is behind by seven points.

Will this usurpation change the need for super-arrogance in quarterbacks? Maybe the super-arrogant will not obey readily. Many disciplined college quarterbacks who obeyed readily have not been able to make it in pro football; their opportunities may increase when plays are called from the bench.

The defensive team members are the renegades. They attack structure, and they feel that little is to be gained by identification with the establishment. They are basically angry and rebellious, primed to explode. The degree of inhibition controlling the trigger varies with the distance from the line of scrimmage. The defensive linemen, in contrast to

offensive linemen, are restless, peevish, irritable, impatient, intolerant of detail, and barely under control. Usually, it is the defensive players (especially the linemen) who have committed the impulsive, flamboyant acts that make newspaper headlines. The defensive linemen have the least-well-organized inhibitory systems. They are wild and free of conflict on the attack. The tackles may be reserved in some ways, but they, too, relish the hostilities. I remember one defensive tackle, a wonderful human being with his wife and family and friends, telling me gleefully in the heat of a game, “Look at that [a rookie quarterback entering the game for the opposing team]. It’s like letting me into a candy store!”

Defensive ends have even more spleen, and they are quicker. They display swagger and showmanship. Defensive end Deacon Jones, the former Ram superstar now with the Chargers, demonstrated at least the spleen at last year’s training camp. He parked his car in the same no-parking zone for 40 consecutive days, even though he got a ticket—and paid the fine—each day. The defensive lineman takes great joy in his unbridled assault on organization. Guilt or depression are not normally in his repertoire, although sometimes, as during the Monday blues, one can see vague hints. His temper, brutality, bluntness, and sarcastic sense of humor predict his success.

Linebackers experience more conflict about the aggression they manifest and by the same token achieve more precision of time and place in their attack. The linebacker in particular struggles with this balance of aggression and inhibition. Often he achieves a public image as a solid citizen; yet simultaneously he’s a killer. When I asked a number of NFL scouts whom they would send behind the lines in wartime to assassinate an important enemy, they said a linebacker: his cleverness and air of legitimacy would get him into the country and let him pass as a good citizen, and his brutality would let him kill when the time came. The linebacker pays heavily for his control. Keeping so much hostility on short rein occasionally forces the aggression inward, and the linebacker typically has periods of depression. He needs a seventh sense and special visual capacities to diagnose plays and to go where he is needed. The defensive linemen either stay or charge, but the linebackers may need to stay, charge, or go back.

In linebackers I found two kinds of intelligence. Some have the capacity to

## The American Scene

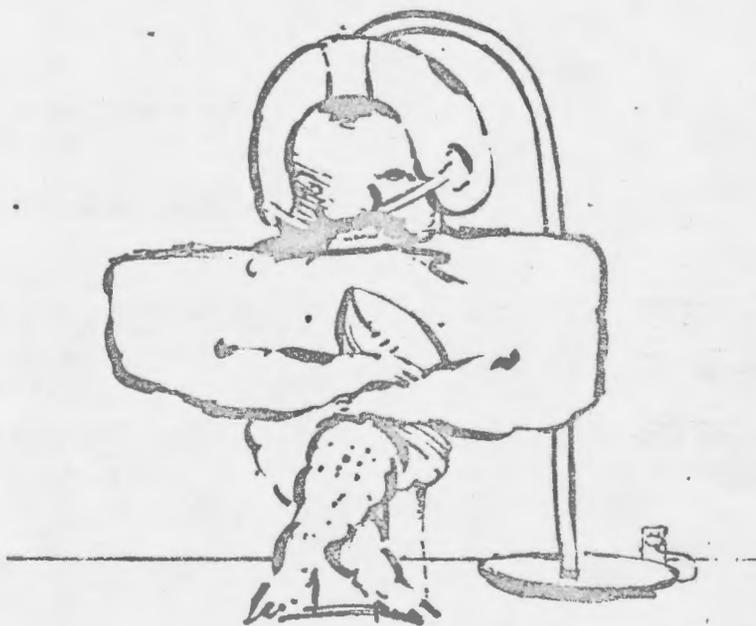
memorize a sequence of rules of behavior for themselves. Following certain keys—movements by opposing centers, guards, or fullbacks—they behave according to that set of rules. Other linebackers achieve the same effectiveness without knowing the rules very well. They actually visualize the action of the entire field and have the capacity to follow the developing patterns of movement. These men often make brilliant plays; but, as in the case of all positions, if the opposing team knows their habits well, they can be badly fooled. The linebacker is a fascinating combination of control, brutality, and internal conflict. He does not lack vanity, but unlike the

linemen, wide receivers, and linebackers. They are tenacious. They must learn zone and man-on-man pass-defense patterns that require incredible self-discipline in the furor of battle. They must not be led by their natural inclination, which is to follow receivers out of their zone before the quarterback releases the ball on a pass play. They must execute patterns precisely. To counter running plays, however, they must move up fast and, though lighter and weaker than the running backs they are trying to stop, hit very hard. So they need controlled and timed brutality and anger.

In my research team's recent study of more than 600 potential NFL draft

sonality orientations of the latter better fit the tasks. No amount of coaching seems to alter these basic traits. Pragmatically, the NFL system quickly separates the misfits—even the athletically competent ones—from the team. My experiences with the men who play NFL football renewed my conviction that the psychobiological organization of personality, when it coincides with the appropriate role, is perhaps the most significant single determinant of personal success and happiness in life. De Gaulle was obviously a quarterback. Woody Allen is a defensive back. According to a recent profile in *The New Yorker*, Allen lives to "endlessly fend off guilt" with his continuous commitment to effort and performance. There is little or none of the vanity of the wide receiver in Woody Allen. Former President Nixon's stubbornly persistent and tenacious (not brilliant or explosive) management of his crises reminds me of the instincts of an offensive lineman. His attempts to be blunt, quick, and clever would have suited him to be an offensive guard.

My mother is an offensive lineman, a center-guard; my father, a classical wide receiver. My wife is a gifted center-guard. My medical school dean, John Moxely III, is a linebacker; my university chancellor, William McElroy, is a defensive personality, too, perhaps a linebacker. President Ford is a natural offensive lineman, which is in fact what he was at the University of Michigan. Truman Capote is a wide receiver. Kate Smith is a fullback, in more than size. Leonard Bernstein is a cross between a quarterback and a wide receiver.



*"The wide receiver is narcissistic and vain and shares many features with actors."*

wide receiver, whose witnesses are his parents or the fans, the linebacker evaluates his own performance. He wants to look good to himself. When he fails, he can almost destroy himself in depression.

IN THE DEFENSIVE BACKFIELD the aggression gets buried under more and more inhibition and discipline. These men are like long-distance runners: they are loners, but they are nowhere near as hungry for glory as are the wide receivers. In place of the vanity and fantasies of the wide receivers, the defensive backs experience depression and rage. They have traits that can be found in offensive

choices, six men were found to be almost suicidally depressed; all of them were defensive backs. The depression of a corner back who has been "beaten" on a pass play may last for days, though the great ones shake it somehow. The depression resulting from the inhibition of so much aggression can put such men in constant danger of self-destruction.

Professional football, because there are objective criteria for performance, provides a model situation in which to observe an ultimate test of function. Given the same amount of athletic ability, why do some men fail and others succeed? Inevitably it is because the per-

I AM OFTEN ASKED what I accomplished for the Chargers. The answer has to be: very little. The team's dismal record over the past two years—6 victories in 28 games—indicates that. So does my own professional observation. When attack troops hit the beach of the enemy's territory, some may benefit from benedictory reassurance, others from biochemical madness, few if any from a reminder that their current fear is reminiscent of the "castration anxiety" of their early childhood. Psychiatry and pro football, I conclude, probably don't mix. Or if they do, the blend is best left to the brewmaster, the head coach. The shrinks should stay with the rest of the armchair experts—in front of their television sets. □

*Dr. Mandell's research was supported by Friends of Psychiatric Research of San Diego, Inc.*

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

October 15, 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR: DR. LUKASH

FROM:

JERRY JONES

The attached copy of the October 5 issue of Saturday Review/World has been returned in the President's outbox with the personal note to you.

cc: Don Rumsfeld