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What Went Wrong . . . and Why

reviewed by Maj E. Gray Payne, USMCR

MILITARY MISFORTUNES: The Anatomy of Failure in War. By Elliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. The Free Press, New York, 1990, 289 pp., \$22.95. (Member \$20.65)

The study of military history is all too often the study of battles won, and while this is certainly a valid and important perspective, we should also analyze the reasons for military failure, particularly in those instances when there was no obvious reason. The authors of this book, two noted military historians, began their collaboration in 1985 while lecturing at the Naval War College on the question, "Why do competent military organizations fail?" From their study of numerous military failures, they developed the premise that some were truly misfortunes, "failures attributable neither to gross disproportions in odds nor to egregious incompetence on the part of the victim nor yet to extraordinary skill on the part of the victor."

The authors begin by examining the five most common explanations offered by military historians for failure on the battlefield:

- "The Man in the Dock," where failure is attributed to the actions (or inaction) of an individual, usually the commander;
- "The Man on the Couch," common psychological characteristics shown by commanders who failed;
- "Collective Incompetence and the Military Mind," the idea that "simply living in and serving a hierarchical institution such as an army encourages and intensifies potentially disastrous habits of mind";
- "Institutional Failure," collective rather than individual incompetence;
- and "Cultural Failure," wherein "certain qualities of intellect and character occur more frequently and are more

frequently valued in one nation than in another."

While a case might be made for these explanations for some failures, the authors regard them as overly simplistic and woefully inadequate in explaining others. Moreover, the authors examine civil and business disasters, drawing interesting parallels between those and military failure.

Military misfortune, according to the authors, is the result of organizational rather than individual failure, and such organizational failures can be categorized in one of three ways: as a failure to learn, failure to anticipate, or failure to adapt. When two of these failures occur in combination, aggregate failure results; and when all three failures exist, the result is catastrophic. In their analysis, the authors used a "failure matrix" wherein failure could be identified insofar as the level of command, the functional type of failure, and the interrelationship of the failures to other factors.

By way of example, the authors examined military misfortunes that have taken place during this century. Failure to learn was illustrated by the antisubmarine warfare campaign of 1942 by the U.S. Navy. Why, when the Royal Navy had, since 1939, been dealing with the U-boat threat in the North Atlantic and had developed successful techniques, organization, communication, and systems for dealing with that threat, did the United States suffer such tremendous losses in shipping in 1942—an average of 650,000 tons between January and September, much of it in eastern and Caribbean Sea frontiers—at the hands of a U-boat fleet that numbered as little as a half-dozen?

Failure to anticipate was illustrated by the Yom Kippur War in 1973, when Syria and Egypt simultaneously attacked and surprised the Israeli Defense

Forces (IDF), inflicting substantial losses. Though the IDF rebounded admirably, the impact of the strategic surprise on the Israelis was remarkable both because of the intelligence failure—there were numerous indications that an attack would indeed take place—and because of the lack of preparedness on the part of the Israelis.

Failure to adapt, illustrated by the British at Gallipoli in 1915, was particularly noteworthy due to the lost opportunities for victory. Given the British strength in naval and ground forces, the results were astounding. The Suvla Bay landing in August 1915 provides one of the most striking examples in modern military history of the failure of an organization to seize and secure a success that, to both contemporaries and subsequent historians, looked to be there for the taking.

Closer to home, aggregate failure was illustrated by the rout of the American 8th Army in Korea during November and December 1950. Marked by both a failure to anticipate and a failure to learn, the defeat of the 8th Army—which remains the largest defeat of American arms since the Battle of the Bulge—provides a valuable study due to the comparative results of the 1st Marine Division at the Chosin Reservoir as well as the vast improvement in the 8th Army following the assumption of command by Gen Matthew Ridgway.

The last, study, that of the French army and air force in May and June 1940 is, an example of catastrophic failure. We have heard many times of the collapse of France at the hands of the Wehrmacht, but here the authors delve deeply into the root causes of the six-week defeat of the larger, better-equipped French army.

It is tempting to hold that these and similar military failures are primarily due to a single cause. They are not. And if we are to complete our study of history, we desperately need to study the reasons for failure just as ardently as we study the reasons for success. Granted, some military failures can be attributed, perhaps, to superior numbers, technology, or generalship; but there are other "misfortunes" caused by organizational inadequacies that warrant close examination.

This book is extremely well-researched and is written in a most enjoyable style. In addition to the five primary examples noted, the authors mention numerous other battles and campaigns to illustrate their points, and while

their analysis deals primarily with the operational level of war, it also includes strategic and tactical considerations. Interestingly, the authors purposefully excluded the study of Vietnam, concluding that it warranted its own book-length treatise. The partnership

of Cohen and Gooch has produced a fascinating and instructive study, and it is hoped that they will continue their collaboration for future volumes.

This book is highly recommended, and should be included on the professional reading list. If we are to truly

learn the lessons of history, we need to understand what went wrong . . . and why.

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Exposing the Un-Coverup

reviewed by Maj Charles W. Gittins

KISS THE BOYS GOODBYE. By Monika Jensen-Stevenson and William Stevenson. Dutton, New York, 1990, 493 pp., \$21.95. (Member \$19.75)

The official position of the U.S. Government is that the United States cannot discount the possibility that American military personnel may continue to be held against their will in Southeast Asia. To illustrate the point and as a symbolic gesture, the Air Force continues to maintain a single Air Force officer, Col Charles E. Shelton, in the status of prisoner of war (POW). Few, however, seriously believe that any Americans remain involuntarily and alive in Southeast Asia.

Most Americans are familiar with the treatment of those who were taken prisoner by the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. For years, American prisoners were accorded the status of criminals by the Vietnamese; they were denied their rights under the Geneva Conventions and were systematically tortured, beaten, starved, and placed in isolation in an effort to break them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The longest held among the returnees repatriated in 1973 during Operation HOMECOMING when Everett Alvarez, who was held for 8 1/2 years, returned home.

A number of individuals and groups outside the Government adamantly maintain that Americans remain held against their will in Southeast Asia 17 years after the release of Alvarez and his fellow prisoners. Additionally, a number of these individuals and groups assert that U.S. intelligence agencies are aware of this fact and have tracked such prisoners without taking action either to publicize their existence or to obtain their release.

Certainly, if such allegations were

true, they would constitute a callous disregard for the lives of American servicemen and their families bordering on a national disgrace; a gross breach of faith against honorable men who did their duty for their country. Monika Jensen-Stevenson, a former producer with the television news magazine *60 Minutes*, and her husband, William Stevenson, make precisely such allegations in their book, *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*. Indeed, their thesis is even more grave—that not only does the American Government have knowledge of Americans who remain held against their will in Southeast Asia, but that a coverup within the highest echelons of the intelligence community has been undertaken to prevent the information from uncovering intelligence operations financed in part through drug profits emanating from the same jungles in which Americans are allegedly held.

While their book might make an interesting piece of fiction, it fails miserably as a factual expose. To accept the authors' basic proposition that Americans are currently being held against their will in Southeast Asia and that American intelligence agencies are aware of this, the reader must accept that a large number of intelligence analysts and military officers are devoid of conscience and would fail to make public any intelligence information confirming that fellow Americans have been abandoned in Southeast Asia.

Even assuming that a giant conspiracy of silence could exist within the U.S. Government and the intelligence community, it does not overcome the many inaccuracies in the authors' information and facts. Where objectively verifiable facts are incorrect, it requires a leap of faith by the reader to accept that the authors' code-named and anonymous sources are speaking the truth or, indeed, are credible in the first instance.

For example, the authors cite the case of Air Force Col Norman Gaddis as an individual POW who "surprisingly" turned up on the list of POWs returned in Operation HOMECOMING:

Most astounding, some prisoners were actually hidden in the main prison compounds in Hanoi. One such man, Air Force Colonel Norman Gaddis, who was shot down on May 12, 1967, did appear on the 1973 list of returnees—unexpectedly. He had never been accounted for by the Vietnamese.

In fact, Col Gaddis was one of the most publicized of American POWs. For two days when he was shot down, he was the subject of radio broadcasts in English by the Vietnam News Agency. Additionally, his identification card was pictured in the official North Vietnamese Army newspaper, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, on 14 May 1967, just two days after his capture. Finally, the *Vietnam Courier*, an English language magazine published in Hanoi, also reported his capture shortly after the fact.

Similarly inaccurate is the authors' portrayal of Robert Garwood, an American prisoner who remained voluntarily in Vietnam after his early release by the Vietnamese in 1967. The authors assert that Garwood was, in reality, a prisoner throughout his stay in Vietnam achieving release only after approaching a Scandinavian businessman in Hanoi in 1979. They further intimate that Garwood's return long after Operation HOMECOMING is evidence that others have been similarly held beyond 1973.

Again, objectively verifiable and previously published facts and evidence refute their claims of innocence on behalf of Garwood. In his recently published official history, *Marines and Military Law in Vietnam: Trial By Fire*, LtCol Gary D. Solis published a copy of Garwood's early release form issued by the Vietnamese. The document came into the Government's hands after Garwood's defense counsel inadvertently turned it over to prosecutors during a routine document exchange after his court-martial conviction on