

Permanent Five, emboldened by the success of the Gulf War, were determined to push through their peace plan by putting the economic squeeze on Hanoi and Phnom Penh; fourthly, the United States refused to be pressurized into lifting the trade embargo on Vietnam; and fifthly, Hanoi's calculation that good relations with China was necessary for its own economic survival as well as the survival of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Indeed, both the Chinese and Vietnamese leaderships share the belief that their brand of communism, which is indigenously based compared to that of the East European states, which was imposed by the Soviet Red Army, could stand the test of time.

Clearly, international developments more than the military situation inside Cambodia were the decisive factors in helping to end the thirteen-year-old war in Cambodia. It would, therefore, be useful to compare the circumstances that led to the convening of the failed 1989 Paris Peace Conference and the events that contributed to the Cambodian peace accord in 1991. Such a study may produce useful lessons for resolving other regional conflicts.

Having initiated the publication of the book on the 1989 Paris Peace Conference, it is perhaps incumbent on York University's Centre for International and Strategic Studies to carry through the study of the Cambodian peace process by commissioning a second volume on the 1991 Paris Peace Conference.

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***Unholy Grail: The U.S. and the Wars in Vietnam 1965-68.* By Larry Cable.** Routledge, 25 July 1991. 292 pp.

Historical analyses of the conflicts in Vietnam, and particularly the U.S. calamitous role in that country's struggle for liberation and unification, are all too numerous. Researchers continue to wade through colossal volumes of material which the Washington administrations of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon — as well as those before and after — indirectly generated in their failed bid to prevent communist control over the Indochina peninsula. Unlike Hanoi's limited release of information on its thirty years of bitter war against enemies within and without, the United States produced (and continues to produce) a plethora of documentation from

its eight years of direct conflict and eventual defeat in a distant country. In this specific case, much of the evidence for *Unholy Grail* was drawn from the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Archive, which the author has moulded into a damning historical analysis of poor decision-making at the highest level.

Cable's basic thesis is that the U.S. failure in Vietnam during three years of increasing political commitment and military escalation (between 1965 and 1968) was largely a product of poor decision-making in Washington. "Intellectual insolvency" and lack of "moral courage", as well as a host of ill-informed assumptions within the Johnson Administration effectively negated any hope of success for the United States in Vietnam. "Material strength and technological sophistication or human courage and suffering cannot redeem a faulty idea". "A fundamental intellectual failure in conceptualizing the war cannot be redeemed by the courage or blood of men. It cannot be rectified by mere weight of munitions or prowess in the technologies of war." All the military "clout" that the United States possessed had to be unleashed in the right direction to be of any use; Washington was fighting the wrong war, and to some extent, with the wrong opponent.

The author depicts this period of the Vietnam War as it was fought in the minds of Washington's top policy-makers and senior strategists. Not only were the principles behind Washington's policies askew, but also the intelligence data on which it based its military strategies were often ambiguous or contradictory. Cable claims that this "allowed the consumer to choose what best fitted his predilections rather than being forced to accept the interpretation which accurately described the reality on the ground no matter how unpleasant".

In July 1965, when the decision was taken to commit significant numbers of ground troops to Vietnam, the declared aim was "stabilizing South Vietnam to the point that there was no imminent danger of collapse to external invasion or internal subversion". Victory for the United States would be the cessation of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese activity against the Saigon regime, using the trusted American method of "fire-power kills". Non-military means of achieving this end, such as those proposed by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) were largely ignored. Indeed, in 1965 the CIA reported that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese could withstand greater numbers of U.S. troops into South Vietnam, and there "was little reason to believe that the escalation would prove any more efficacious" in supporting the Saigon regime.

As Cable illustrates, Washington made several major errors of judgement, in typical cold war fashion. Having misread the lessons from earlier popular uprisings and conflicts (most notably Korea), the Johnson

Administration failed to make a distinction between partisans and insurgents, which “represented a major intellectual error”. Washington could not perceive of the Viet Cong as a self-motivated insurgent force. Instead, the Viet Cong was judged to be a subservient partisan force directed by Hanoi, which in turn was following orders from Beijing and Moscow. “By not viewing the Viet Cong as an insurgent force, by not granting the possibility that the guerrillas constituted the armed expression of organic political disaffection, the Administration looked beyond the venue of conflict in search of an enemy.” Meanwhile, the prime enemy (at least before 1968) was alive and well in South Vietnam and feeding off the brutally corrupt socio-political structure that the United States was sustaining with arms and aid.

Military strategy was incompatible with the situation in Vietnam, both in terms of application and equipment. Cable cuttingly states, “In common with most armed forces at most times, US ground and air doctrine was oriented toward capitalizing upon perceived strengths rather than upon attempting to identify and exploit weaknesses within the enemy” — an error that certainly could not have been levelled at Hanoi. “The genius of the North Vietnamese theory of victory, seeking enervation of the political will of the United States and South Vietnam through protracted conflict, was that it identified and exploited weaknesses inherent in the target nation”. Indeed, Hanoi went one step further, by also turning the U.S. strengths against itself: the heavy bombing of the North helped harden its own populace’s will to win; whilst the bloody activities of U.S. troops in the South helped disrupt the political structure, society and outward image of the Saigon regime, and crucially, turned American domestic opinion against the war.

An assumption was also made by the U.S. military that “forces and equipment developed for use in Europe against an armoured, mechanized and nuclear-capable opponent would work equally well against guerrillas in the bush of Asia”. Such wishful thinking was partly the product of a deep-seated fear among Washington’s policy-makers of the threat posed to the Western world by international communism. The ripple effects created by an American defeat in — or even just a U.S. disengagement from — South Vietnam, were thought to be potentially apocalyptic. “To the President’s men . . . the failure to secure a stable and non-communist South Vietnam would open a veritable flood of guerrilla wars of national liberation with endless opportunities for Soviet and Chinese mischief.” The stakes being played over a minor, illegitimate Third World state were inflated to immense proportions, at least in the minds of presidential advisors. The United States elevated what had originally been a small-scale anti-colonial conflict for national liberation into the apex of cold war

hostility. That error, if only of exaggeration, was then compounded by strategic errors into a military and political defeat.

The author stresses that "it is essential that the administration establish a goal toward which all efforts are directed, define success or victory and provide or approve an overall theory of victory. These three elements must be coherent with one another, consistent over time, understood by all subordinate commanders and planners and, most importantly, relevant to the realities which have developed". Put another way, "vague and overly elastic definitions or a 'can do' theory of victory have usually resulted in failure".

In his conclusion, Cable suggests that the U.S. troops stationed in Vietnam were let down by their desk-bound leaders, and that these servicemen's physical courage . . . in the bush of the South and the sky of the North" was betrayed by "failed concepts and theories". Although there were undoubtedly numerous cases of heroism displayed by U.S. troops in Indochina, the poor decision-making of the administration also percolated down to the combat troops "in-country". The war was morally bankrupt at all levels — trickling down from the very top through the command structure — as evidenced by the My Lai atrocity and the excesses of the Phoenix Programme. The U.S. combatants were not defeated in Vietnam despite their own best endeavours; they became part of the same erroneous war machine that measured its success in terms of day-to-day kill ratios.

As if reflecting the vast scale of Washington's military endeavours to defeat Hanoi, the sheer bulk of post-war analyses has created an unwieldy dinosaur of "Vietnam literature" — perceived wisdoms from those who were there and wish to put the record straight, those who were not there and would have done things differently, or those who have a new angle of luxurious hindsight. As with the American war machine in Vietnam, the vast body of this post-war comment and analysis has become a self-sustaining monster divorced from a sense of logic and proportion, delving ever deeper into the minutiae of the conflict.

Unholy Grail initially appears to be a further addition to this massive introspective body of work, focusing almost exclusively on the U.S. side of the war, and with a typically avid regard for the smallest detail. However, an attention to minutiae is essential in a book such as this, and it is economically used to good effect. In addition, Cable's broad conclusions on decision-making in times of crisis are of far wider relevance than just the Vietnam conflict.

The assumptions and herd instincts of a country's leaders at war are potentially dangerous, particularly if the assumptions are ill-judged and the country's firepower is as immense as that of the United States.

Vietnam suffered the fate of having such awesome firepower unleashed on it by leaders of a superpower who got things wrong from the start.

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***Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam.* By Greg Lockhart.** Sydney: Allen and Unwin, in association with the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1989. 314 pp.

Perhaps no army of any underdeveloped country enjoys the same prestigious status as that of Vietnam's military. This unique position has been assured by its patriotic struggle against the French and by the now legendary battle at Dien Bien Phu. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) has had its prestige enhanced by its victory over the most powerful army in the West, and by its success in its war with the Chinese-supported Pol Pot regime on its south-western flank and the "bloody nose" it inflicted upon the invading Chinese armies during the Sino-Vietnamese border war in early 1979.

Yet surprisingly, until the appearance of Douglas Pike's PAVN in 1986, there has been no book-length study on this subject. There has, nevertheless, been a deluge of books on the Vietnam war. With a few notable exceptions, most of these are examinations of the anguish and frustrations of the American inability to defeat a deadly, omnipresent and invisible foe. While Pike does to a certain extent attempt to focus on the Vietnamese side, his book is essentially within this tradition.

Greg Lockhart's greatest contribution in writing this book is to give us a plausible conceptual foundation for what really is the main-force of the Vietnamese revolution. He shows how the PAVN developed in 1940, not merely as a tool of the communists, but as the military arm of a popular nationalist revolt. Its organization showed the extent to which it became embedded in rural society. This was reflected in its ability to build its main-force units from village self-defence forces. The Viet Minh's victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu was not only a triumph of innovative military strategy but also one of logistical effort and popular mobilization.

Lockhart emphasizes through his use of Vietnamese language sources that Vietnamese nationalism was essentially a product of the early twentieth century and that the emergence of the PAVN was a distinct manifestation