Military Misfortunes: Pitfalls in Understanding

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A Review Essay on *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. By Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. 296 pages. New York: The Free Press, 1990.

This book by Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch is an intriguing analysis of military misfortunes that have occurred during 20th-century wars. The book also represents an unusual approach to the study of military affairs because one of the authors—Eliot Cohen—is a political scientist who is interested in history while the other is a historian who evidently accepts some of the methodology of political scientists. The authors offer some provocative theories about military misfortune while also providing brief analyses of five cases of well-known military failures: the British expedition to Gallipoli in 1915; the fall of France in 1940; the American anti-submarine campaign of 1942; the defeat of the US Eighth Army in Korea by the Chinese in 1950; and the Israeli defense of the Suez and Golan fronts in 1973. Despite the best efforts of the authors, both of whom are known widely for their intellectual gifts, the model for analyzing military misfortunes leads to an oversimplification of some very complex developments, and the analyses of the five cases offer little that is new.

To analyze military misfortune, the authors offer a method involving five steps: (1) identifying the failure; (2) identifying the "critical tasks" that went incomplete or unfulfilled and thus are at the root of the overall failure; (3) analyzing the contributions of different layers of organization to the failure; (4) constructing an "analytical matrix" that graphically presents the key failures leading to military misfortune; and (5) marking a "pathway" of misfortune through the "analytical matrix."

The most important step within this method is the first step, the identification of the precise failure which led to the misfortune. For example, in their examination of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in 1941, which is not one of their five primary cases, the authors assert that the key nature of

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the failure was "the absence of a stout defense." Having identified the nature of the failure, they then search for the subordinate lapses or mistakes that contributed to the broader failure. According to the authors, the critical tasks that went unfulfilled in this case were "communication of warning," "appropriate level of alert," and "coordination." The next step is the construction of the analytical matrix, in which the actions or failures of each command level are shown for each of the critical tasks. The authors then trace a "pathway to misfortune" through this matrix and conclude that of the possible pathways through the matrix, the pathway through the "failure of coordination" offers the "most important explanation" for the Pearl Harbor disaster.

The limitations of Cohen and Gooch's methodology is best illustrated by the difficulty of their first step. One who is conversant with the controversy over Pearl Harbor knows that numerous explanations have been offered for that disaster. Yet, if one has different ideas about the most important failure leading to a misfortune, one will have fundamental disagreements with the "pathway" of misfortune. The same can be said about the subordinate failures along which the pathway follows. The debate about these failures has been at least as controversial as the identification of the larger failures. The authors implicitly acknowledge this limitation in their preface where they justify their omission of a case about Vietnam on the ground that a discussion of that misfortune "would require not a chapter but a separate book." Anyone who is at all familiar with the five cases upon which the authors focus will recognize that numerous fine books exist on most of the subjects they have chosen for study and that one's perception of their complexity depends on the depth of one's understanding of the subject.

Having identified their methodology, the authors state that there are three basic kinds of failure: failure to learn, failure to anticipate, and failure to adapt. They add that when two types of failure occur together, an "aggregate" failure will result, and then when three types of failure occur together, a "catastrophic" failure will result. Having identified the broad categories, the authors then devote individual chapters to the five different types of failures. For example, they offer analyses of the Israeli defense on the Suez and the Golan Heights in 1973 as an example of the "failure to

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anticipate" and the French defense against the German attack in 1940 as an example of "catastrophic" failure.

The authors treatment of "aggregate" and "catastrophic" failure are no different from their treatment of the three basic kinds of failure. For example, in their analysis of the Eighth Army in Korea, they find two types of failure—failure to learn and failure to anticipate. Nevertheless, their analytical matrix identifies no less than five "critical" failures ranging from excessive faith in air power to tactical units being poorly sited and roadbound. Meanwhile, their analysis excuses American political leaders for allowing the Army to be dismantled and downplays the effects of the US Army units' having been drained by several months of heavy fighting. In contrast, they offer a very positive assessment of the 1st Marine Division and its withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir and attribute the better performance of the Marines to their emphasis on basic skills. Only as an afterthought do the authors acknowledge the importance of geography, the advantages for the Marines of being fresh and nearly full-strength, and the "easy access" of the Marines to naval supply ships and a nearby port. In short, one could easily disagree with the causes of the "critical" failures in the Eighth Army, and the authors have definitely not offered the last word on the subject. The same comment could be made about several of the cases discussed in other chapters.

After wading through the theoretical and historical chapters and trying to comprehend the analytical matrices, the reader must ask whether he or she knows anything more or anything new about military misfortune. For most readers the answer will depend on whether they accept the authors' methodology and theories. In addition to the reservations mentioned above, an obvious shortcoming in the authors' approach is that the three types of failure they have identified are extremely broad, being somewhat akin to a pathologist's having only three choices in the identification of the causes of death: poor health, accident, or suicide. Beneath such broad categories, one could list innumerable other types of failure, particularly if one had different ideas about the causes of the misfortune.

Cohen and Gooch also cast doubt on their own theories. They admit that they have not identified a "universal" cause of failure and that the understanding of military misfortunes must be based on an understanding of a "particular organization" and the critical tasks confronting it. They also state that the "embryo of misfortune" resides in the shortcomings of individual organizations confronted with specific tasks. In the last few pages of their book, the authors generate further doubts about their theories by concluding that misfortune is like a "ghost in a machine" that lurks within the "bowels" of every military organization. In other words, their construction of a five-step method and their offering of three types of failure cannot provide a "remedy" for the deficiencies of particular organizations.

Despite the authors' reluctance to provide a remedy, they do offer suggestions about avoiding the three specific types of failure (learning, anticipation, and adaptation) on which their book focuses. Their suggestions emphasize the importance of inculcating an open-minded approach in officers, fostering a willingness in leaders to adapt and apply judgment to doctrine, and recognizing that command must be equated with positive leadership. One wonders what the authors' methodology and matrices have to do with their suggestions. Returning to the analogy of the pathologist, their remedies—even though one agrees with them—are little more than to maintain your health, avoid accidents, and seek therapy.

Though there are portions of the book that are well-researched and well-written, a perceptive reader will disagree with some of its points. For example, in their analysis of the US Army's use of doctrine, the authors cite Lieutenant Colonel Paul H. Herbert's excellent work on the writing of the 1976 edition of FM 100-5.[1] They quote him on General William E. DePuy's conception of doctrine in an attempt to illustrate the US Army's use of doctrine to stifle initiative.[2] The fact that this conception of doctrine is an aberration and bears little resemblance to the Army's recent view of doctrine apparently escaped the authors. Similarly, the authors talk about the reluctance of official historians to reflect on contemporary problems. The authors evidently have no knowledge of the existence of the Combat Studies Institute at the US Army Command and General Staff College and of its several important contributions to the development of doctrine, even though they cite several of its published works, including that of Lieutenant Colonel Herbert.

The response of a reader to this book will depend on whether he or she is more historian or political scientist. For those of us who are historians, the chapters on methodology and theory will appear involved and at times convoluted, while the five case studies of failure will be appealing despite their brevity. A well-informed reader, nevertheless, will recognize that more cogent explanations for several of the misfortunes studied by Cohen and Gooch are to be found in specific studies on those subjects. Despite these reservations, the book is interesting and stimulating reading if for no other reason than two very bright individuals have attempted to grapple with an extraordinarily complex topic. That they may have failed is perhaps due more to the difficulty of the task than the quality of their efforts.

NOTES

1. Paul H. Herbert, *Deciding What Has to Be Done: General William E. DePuy and the 1976 Edition of FM 100-5, Operations*, Leavenworth Papers, No. 16 (Ft. Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, 1988). See pp. 54-55.
2. Ibid., pp. 238-39.