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Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War

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consequence of faulty planning, or as is often the case, faulty *execution* resulting from delayed orders, misunderstood intentions, and such like. He deplores "the complete lack of attention to a proper combination of arms," especially artillery support for armored thrusts, without supplying the reader with evidence to show whether the failure was one of planning or execution.

Despite dust-jacket claims of "new ideas, new insights, even new facts," this volume is largely a reworking of familiar sources. The "brute force" thesis dates back to the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey and has been exploited by numerous historians ever since. Ellis relies almost entirely on secondary sources from which he frequently weaves quotations into his text. Unfortunately, in many instances he gives no indication whether these passages are an interpretation by the historians quoted or of the primary source used by them.

Navy readers will welcome the author's praise for the naval gunfire support provided during the initial landings on the south coast of Sicily, but may question his condemnation of the Allied failure to use naval power along the east coast of Sicily for amphibious landings behind the retreating Germans or to interdict their escape to the Italian mainland across the Strait of Messina. To be successful such naval operations would have required assured air cover, which was lacking. Characteristically, Ellis reports the numerical superiority of Allied aircraft available for operations over Sicily; he neglects, however, to

address the realities of logistics, notably fuel supply, as well as delays in opening adequate bases close behind the advancing ground forces. The presence of Luftwaffe units, with far fewer aircraft but operating from well established bases (especially those covering the Straits from the mainland), helps to explain why so many enemy forces escaped from Sicily. Throughout, the author relies upon gross statics of forces available without giving full consideration to the ever-present qualitative factors affecting performance.

Flawed as this study is, readers would do well not to dismiss the author's significant second thesis: there were indeed many instances of unimaginative tactics and dubious strategy. Surely, navy readers could profitably ponder Ellis's notion that naval strategy in the Pacific might better have concentrated on Japan's economic lifeline, the shipping which carried essential resources to the home islands, rather than the bloody island-hopping campaign. This thesis itself is not so much at fault as is the dogmatic way in which the author *asserts* rather than *suggests* it, and the caustic tone he adopts, particularly when bashing individual commanders.

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Cohen, Elliot A. and Gooch, John.
Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War. New York: Vintage, 1991. 246pp. \$11
Military failure, and the ineptitude or bad luck presumed to cause it, have

been sifted and ridiculed by historians, novelists, and screenwriters since Thucydides—if not Homer. Many object lessons have been drawn from the haplessness of people or the inadequacies of things by which campaigns, combat opportunities, and lives have been lost or thrown away. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*, a new contribution to this extensive inquiry, takes the matter to a new level of sophistication, modelling, and methodology.

A portion of the research for this book was done at the Naval War College. It was here that, as visiting professors in the Strategy faculty, the authors first asked themselves the defining question: Why do competent military organizations fail? The authors narrowed the issue by setting aside cases of lopsided odds and patent incompetence (though their analysis might apply to why forces go into battle hopelessly outnumbered or with unfit commanders), and focused on “misfortunes”: where prospects were “evenly balanced . . . at the outset” and in which the loser might have been expected to succeed.

The answer is found not in individuals or in poor intelligence, not in the “military mind,” or even in surprise, but in how a given armed force “does business”: how it is organized and how the levels of its hierarchy interact with each other while coping with their respective parts of the task at hand. The authors address the varying relevance of experience, study, and practice in an extended theoretical argument that

embraces civil disasters, business failure, politics, organizational theory, social science, wargaming, and military scholarship (especially Dupuy’s *A Genius for War*, Keegan’s *The Face of Battle*, and the work of S.L.A. Marshall). An analytical “razor” is slowly created, which the authors strop to remarkable fineness upon the example of Pearl Harbor. Here the authors assert (plausibly if baldly) that military organizations can fail in precisely three ways—inability to learn, to anticipate, or to adapt—or through a combination of two of these, or (castastrophically) in all three ways at once.

The bulk of the text comprises case studies that exemplify these types of organizational failures. The “failure to learn” is that of American antisubmarine forces attempting in 1942 to blunt the nearly disastrous U-boat campaign in Atlantic coastal, Gulf, and Caribbean waters. The authors argue that the fruit of two years’ worth of British experience, especially the value of “fused” operational intelligence, was not learned; the reason it appears, is not simply “Ernest J. King.” That the Israelis were caught off guard in 1973 by the Egyptian and Syrian attack (and by the antitank weapons employed) constitutes the “failure to anticipate.” The “failure to adapt” is found in the little-remembered 1915 landing at Suvla Bay—a Gallipoli sideshow that might have broken loose the whole stalemated campaign could the British commanders have seen and seized the possibilities their unexpected early

success momentarily offered. "Aggregate" failure (here, both to learn and to anticipate) is found in the near-dissolution in 1950 of the U.S. Eighth Army in the face of the Chinese onslaught across the Yalu. Finally, the hapless rout of the French army and air force by the German invasion of 1940 exemplifies "catastrophic," total, systemic failure.

This is a careful and thoughtful work that takes up an important subject in a challenging and productive way. Its evidence is intriguing, its narratives are informative, its analyses incisive; it commands engagement on its own terms, whether one agrees or not. The extended treatment of intelligence is especially apt. It is possible, however, to have reservations about some points. The "matrices" concluding each case study (command levels on one axis against "critical tasks" on the other) are perhaps more convenient as tabular summaries than they are convincing as analytical tools; the "pathways of failure" they generate are inordinately sensitive to the induced "critical tasks" and other subjective inputs. Also, the 1940 French example muddies the waters somewhat: it is such an extreme case that it seems to violate the prior assumption of basic competence. Thirdly, the maps, though clearly drawn, themselves reflect a "failure to learn" (from many years of readers' complaints) in not locating many important place-names mentioned in the text.

Finally, though the authors do address the issue (and dismiss it), one

feels inescapably, if instinctively, that such analyses as this must leave room for contingency, for the critical thing that could have gone either way: the PBY that appears over a hole in the clouds just as the *Bismarck* arrives under it, the campaign orders found wrapped around a cigar. It is part of the value of this demanding and thorough study that it places most such "chances" in a larger fabric. But perhaps we may acknowledge, without analytical abdication, that in the very nature of conflict sometimes one side has lost simply because the other side won—that two belligerents went into battle, and only one came out.

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Edmonds, Robin. *The Big Three: Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin in Peace and War*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991. 608pp. \$27.95

Fifty years after World War II the relationship between Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin still captivates historians. Robin Edmonds has reassessed the war in terms of the international political structure dominated by the triumvirate of the Grand Alliance. The author has not offered any dramatic revelations but rather has suggested a shift of perspective. The result is a major contribution to the historiography of this century's bloodiest conflict.

Edmonds has traced the wartime leaders' relationship from the early