

Cable, Larry. *Unholy Grail: The US and the wars in Vietnam 1965-8*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

This is Larry Cable's second book on the Vietnam war and the failure of US tactics and strategy in Indochina. The first, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (1986), examined the myths and realities of counterinsurgency theory in a number of post-World War II contexts. *Unholy Grail* pursues the logic of Cable's earlier work in this intensely focused account of the consequences of the Johnson administration's tragic misperception of the nature of the conflict in Vietnam. Written almost entirely on the basis of materials drawn from the Johnson Presidential Library, the book has a curiously hermetic quality. In part, this may be the result of the fact that, with the exception of Douglas Blaufarb's *The Counterinsurgency Era* (1977), Cable makes no reference to any of the literature reassessing military tactics and strategy. Andrew Krepinevich, Jr.'s, *The Army and Vietnam* (1986) is the most surprising absence. But I suspect it is mainly the result of the fact that Cable locates himself inside the world of the policy makers themselves.

He begins with an "inbrief" rather than a preface and ends with an "outbrief," rather than an epilogue, the neologisms, one must guess, of government reports. According to the book jacket, he was "engaged in intelligence acquisition and analysis in Vietnam." It may be that he was the US military advisor in Quang Tri Province in 1965 referred to in the inbrief who promised his companion he would "pass the word" if he ever learned "why the hell we are here." Or perhaps he was the one who asked the question. In any case, Cable has spent long hours in the Johnson archives, recording the wrongheaded arguments, the self-serving analyses, the bad decisions, the persistent, enervating lack of "intellectual and moral courage."

The major culprit was US military doctrine which seemed impervious to even very simple ideas. The only sort of unconventional warfare standard doctrine allowed was partisan warfare in which guerrillas act as supplements to a larger conventional force. Insurgents, on the other hand, are "the armed expression of political discontent and disaffiliation." The insurgent reverses the partisan formula: external aid is strictly supplemental. To the military as well as most of the civilian staff of the Johnson administration, North Vietnam was the only real enemy. Therefore, the only way to proceed would be to transform a difficult and draining unconventional war into the sort of war the US was certain it could fight and win.

Cable outlines the insane logic of this position effectively in his discussion of the conclusions reached by a Pentagon Ad Hoc Study Group in mid-1965. The group understood that the Viet Cong were South Vietnamese whose external requirements were too slight to be easily blocked. Moreover, the number of North Vietnamese troops in the South remained low. Therefore, it recommended a radical increase in the intensity of combat which would force Hanoi to increase both the number of troops it sent south and the amount of supplies necessary to respond to

the escalation. As Cable puts it succinctly, the air war against North Vietnam “had changed the character of the conflict from an insurgency to a partisan war.”

Unholy Grail suggests that the North Vietnamese effort to reunify Vietnam by force was thus a byproduct of American military tactics. Moreover, in this new situation Hanoi’s relationship to the National Liberation Front fundamentally changed. Now they were “potential rivals for power and . . . expendable tools;” in the Tet attacks of 1968 they were indeed expended. Cable argues that although the Viet Cong were “polluted” by North Vietnamese-trained cadre, they were mainly “Southerners in pursuit of a Southern agenda.”

Then, why was the US in Vietnam? Why did it not find the Southern agenda acceptable? On the whole Cable answers in a familiar fashion: the cliches of the Cold War led the US to Vietnam and obscured the fact that there was a Southern agenda. He is more interested in demonstrating the ways in which a refusal to reconsider received military doctrine kept the US in Vietnam and blinded its leaders to the reality of a Southern insurgency. But *should* the US have accepted the Southern agenda (a neutralist government in South Vietnam)? Cable notes that Robert Komer’s “theory of victory” which stressed “pacification, revolutionary development, Viet Cong infrastructure neutralization and a diminishment of large-scale combat operations” might have worked if it had been tried in 1965. *Should* it have been tried in 1965? On this the book is largely silent. I worry that Larry Cable imagines there to have been a holy grail as well as the unholy one he so penetratingly exorciates.

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Wolpin, Miles D. *America Insecure. Arms Transfers, Global Interventionism and the Erosion of National Security*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1991.

US military policy is currently under intense scrutiny and the US armed forces are in a period of reorganization. That should be so given the fundamental changes in international relations. Wolpin contributes a sharp and distinct view to this debate. He argues that the military apparatus should shrink considerably and that it should be used solely for the defense of the territory of the United States. He specifically emphasizes that the US government should not intervene militarily in what is conventionally called the Third World.

While suggestions for future policy are the most relevant part of the book, the bulk of it is a review of US military policy in the last few decades, with a focus on the 1980s. Wolpin delves into arms transfer policy, military interventions in Third World countries, the provision of hardware to the US military, the economic cost of US military spending and the ideological foundations of US military policy.