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The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War

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needed. Sustained activity of any military nature in Australia will eventually require the logistical link that only rail can provide, given that country's seaborne limitations.

While this book can be viewed as part of a local debate over a defense-related and practical political issue, it has utility for Americans, for Darwin provides a position from which to reach Southeast Asia. At one time, Manus in the Admiralties attracted U.S. attention. We would do well to examine our alternate systems of supply delivery to the Western Pacific and Indian oceans. Do we have flexibility? Do we have the capacity to support large-scale operations? One can ask other questions of the type raised by these Australians viewing their strategic and geographical position. If nothing else, the authors' arguments will inform the reader of one issue that not only confronted the Australians yesterday, but still does today.

PETER CHARLES UNSINGER
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Hannah, Norman B. *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War*. Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1987. 335pp. \$19.95

This book is yet another in a long series of efforts that attempts to discover the underlying causes of our defeat in Vietnam. The author is a retired foreign service officer with extensive experience in Asia (but not in Vietnam), whose appointments included that of political adviser to

the Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet during a crucial early stage in the escalation of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Hannah's book portrays the origin and evolution of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam in a series of chapters variously evoking images of the bullring, the theater, and knitting. The author asserts that the failure of the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos and the subsequent U.S. failure to isolate the battlefield in South Vietnam led to our defeat in the Vietnam War. He states that, throughout the war, the principal American decision makers failed to appreciate this fact. As a consequence, although there was "a real [North Vietnamese] aggression through Laos," the United States "won the wrong war by expending its effort against . . . a largely simulated insurgency in South Vietnam." The result was a misguided "strategy of mirrors" compounded by a "dismally repetitive," incremental decision-making approach that continually missed coming to terms with the main chance in Laos.

Hannah argues that we could have done better and produces excerpts from his own memoranda of the time to show how the establishment of a flexible, mobile barrier south of the so-called Demilitarized Zone and across the Laotian panhandle would have isolated the battlefield in South Vietnam, "using our ground positions as the anvil and our aerial attacks as the hammer." Success was possible later in the war, despite the misguided beginning, in his opinion: 1969 was still a good time to

intervene in Laos, but even that opportunity was missed; Cambodia in 1970 was the wrong place; and by 1971 the Laotian operation was simply too late to be effective. At the end, frustrated though unbeaten in the field, "Like a dispirited bull, the United States left the ring."

There are some interesting particulars in this book that deserve favorable attention. Hannah's account of the negotiations over Laos are instructive. His commentaries on the self-deception that prevailed in the U.S. government during this war, the flaws inherent in an incrementalist approach to war, and the inability of the United States to define an appropriate strategy linking means and ends, ring true. And at the end of the last chapter he offers, almost as an afterthought, some "lessons" that merit careful reflection.

What makes *The Key to Failure* so disappointing is that these and other useful particulars are largely lost in a book whose basic organizational concept is simply off the mark, and whose prose is replete with rhetorical questions and metaphors that are just a bit too cute. Anyone who spent any time on the ground in South Vietnam, or who knew anything about the conduct of revolutionary war, would realize that the "insurgency" in South Vietnam was by no means "simulated," despite the overall direction received from Hanoi and the subsequent introduction of regular North Vietnamese formations. Even if one accepts Hannah's assertion that the problem

was North Vietnamese aggression, his focus on Laos overlooks the fact that Laos was only a conduit (albeit an important one) for North Vietnam; the crux of the strategic problem was the source—North Vietnam itself—not the battlefield (South Vietnam) or the line of communication (Laos) to it. Without the neutralization of that source, the flow of men and materiel southwards would continue, especially given what is now known about the single-minded determination of the communist leadership in Hanoi.

That same determination makes it even less likely that Hannah's preferred "containment by negotiation (based on the neutralization of Laos)" would have succeeded. His belief that "We could have established a line and stood pat until negotiations produced a definitive cease fire" reflects a misunderstanding of the tactical permeability of any barrier defense; a disregard for the feasibility of establishing an effective barrier—mobile or not—in that particular terrain, to which those of us who walked over it can attest; and the fact that when one has an American government, with the characteristics Hannah describes, engaged in a war of attrition against an opponent like that in Hanoi, time assuredly *does* favor the other side.

Working one's way through *The Key to Failure* is akin to prospecting for gold in a long-abandoned mine. Some real nuggets, or at least flakes of gold, can be found if one makes the effort, but pyrite abounds and one has to work through a good deal

of filler to strike paydirt. Hannah obviously sees himself as a classic "prophet without honor" in his own time and place. His book has the tone of barely subdued sarcasm—that of a person who believes his earlier contributions were unappreciated and who feels compelled to reproduce large portions of his own memoranda to support his case—something which he has the grace to acknowledge may appear "self-serving." (It does.) There are some good points in the book to be sure, especially with regard to the Laotian negotiations. But the conceptual misapprehension permeating it simply lends credence to the belief that the State Department is the last place to look for sound guidance in matters of strategy.

Somewhere there may be good answers to the debate over "Who lost Vietnam?" but *The Key to Failure* is not the place to find them.

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Middlebrook, Martin. *The Fight for the Malvinas: The Argentine Forces in the Falklands War*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1989. 321pp. \$24.95

Martin Middlebrook, Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, has gained international recognition for his nine books on the two world wars.

The absence of the Argentine perspective in his previous book on

the Malvinas, *Operation Corporate*, led Middlebrook to negotiate with the Argentine authorities for interviews with participants in the Malvinas/Falklands war. He was particularly successful with the navy.

The Fight for the Malvinas, which contains sixty-two interviews with members of varying ranks in the Argentine army and navy, is a history of the operations during the war as seen through Argentine eyes.

Middlebrook makes it clear that the Argentine political decision to reoccupy the island was based on the premise that the British would not retaliate militarily. The unreadiness of Argentina's forces illustrates this misperception: Bombs failed to explode, thus betraying the brave pilots of the *Fuerza Aerea*; torpedo failures did the same to submariners; support to the land forces failed to materialize. All these shortcomings stemmed from that one political error.

Quoting from the interviews, the author describes specific operations in detail: The South Georgia crisis (which Middlebrook believes the British mishandled), the seizure of the islands without shedding British blood, the naval battle that never was, the sinking of the cruiser *General Belgrano*, the sinking of the destroyer H.M.S. *Sheffield*, the air battle, the effects of the British task force on Argentine actions, the unopposed British landing on San Carlos, the battle of Goose Green, the "Invincible attack," the bombing of the *Sir Galahad*, the battle of Stanley, and