

1989

Conflict of Myths

Alan Ned Sabrosky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Sabrosky, Alan Ned (1989) "Conflict of Myths," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 42 : No. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol42/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

by W. W. Rostow on the larger diplomatic consequences of the war. Both books are well-written and edited, provocative and revealing.

There is one point which cannot stand unchallenged. The role of the U.S. Navy is simply ignored. It is as if we were not there. These books, like too many others, focus on ground and air matters. The Navy is mentioned—only in passing—by Alan Gropman as having participated with the Air Force in the air war. Nothing is said of what the Navy did to stop infiltration by sea or to wrest control of South Vietnam's water transportation system. Sailors accomplished every mission assigned and won significant battles. They are largely, still, unsung heroes.

Cable, Larry E. *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counter-insurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*. New York and London: New York Univ. Press, 1986. 307pp. \$30

This is an intriguing and iconoclastic attempt to address the root of America's failure in the Vietnam war. Cable opens with a damning indictment of American military doctrine for such wars, which he defines as "the officially sanctioned theory of victory outlining the conduct of war on all levels." He asserts that "A powerful but unspoken assumption [before Vietnam] . . . consisted simply of the belief that the United States was a successful, experienced, warlike power whose vast military competence comprised a capability in guerrilla warfare," whereas in fact "the United States was a rank amateur in the arena of unconventional low-intensity conflict. . . ."

According to Cable, the U.S. military in general committed two major errors: it assumed incorrectly that all guerrillas were in fact

partisan adjuncts to a hostile regular army, and it misunderstood the lessons of history that could have been drawn from those conflicts in which the United States should have acquired some experience.

In the development of this thesis, Cable divides *Conflict of Myths* into three parts. The first part outlines the author's basic argument and provides critical case studies of five conflicts: the Greek Civil War, South Korea (1948-1954), the Philippines (1946-1954), the Malayan Emergency, and the Marine involvement in the so-called Banana Wars in Central America (1915-1934). Each could have been instructive, in his opinion. For example, the Greek experience demonstrated the near-impossibility of building a local army in the American image while it was engaged against "an able and motivated adversary." Korea's "Pohang Guerrilla Hunt" in 1951 provided a grim foretaste of later "search and destroy" operations in its cost and inconclusiveness. And Malaya showed that

“Overall [force] ratios are meaningless exercises in statistical thaumaturgy,” and that “The only [force] ratios that matter are those that are achieved locally,” thereby invalidating before the fact the quasi-mystical “ten-to-one ratio of victory” that so captivated American planners and critics in Vietnam.

The second and third parts of this book deal with the doctrine that evolved from what Cable describes as a “highly selective [and inaccurate] historical interpretation” of those conflicts that ignored virtually all lessons from the Philippines and the Banana Wars that were not “narrowly tactical in focus,” and the application of that doctrine to the Vietnam war. Errors abounded, he believes, but perhaps the most pervasive flaw in the U.S. approach to counterinsurgency doctrine was an institutional preoccupation with a “Clausewitzian priority upon destruction [of the enemy’s armed forces]” that failed to appreciate the fact that “The formulations of Clausewitz are often quite irrelevant to the realities of . . . insurgent conflict,” however useful they may be in the conventional arena.

Doctrine based on inappropriate principles and a misleading interpretation of previous wars “combined to assure that the very nature of the war in Vietnam would not be recognized.” The Marines, in Cable’s view, did somewhat better than the Army, at least at the margins. As he put it, “The marines had a more viable counter-

insurgency doctrine . . . [and] contemplated protracted low-intensity conflict with equanimity, but the Johnson aides, advisors and Secretaries could not do likewise.” All of this made the outcome in Vietnam unexceptional. As Cable put it, “ignorance, not malice, as was later charged by opponents of the war, was at the root of both the American escalation and the ultimate American failure.” What is needed in the future, he believes, is an approach that appreciates better the character of insurgencies in general, the specific attributes and requirements of a given situation, and the crucial importance therein of centralized command and control, as well as effective local leadership.

In general, although Cable does overstate his case, and therefore his indictment, his argument is largely on the mark. There are errors in some places, to be sure. Contrary to his allegations, for example, the writers of the late 1950s and early 1960s understood very well the distinction among guerrillas, partisans, and insurgents, and drew extensively on both the Marines’ *Small Wars Manual* and the British *Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya* manual. Overall, however, this book is a much needed antidote to much contemporary nonsense in the literature on low-intensity conflict, and particularly on counterinsurgency operations. It should be required reading for all who have acquired a blind affinity for Clausewitz, if only to help them think anew about this type of warfare. It

is a useful addition to any professional library.

ALAN NED SABROSKY
U.S. Army War College

Chen, King C. *China's War with Vietnam, 1979—Issues, Decisions, and Implications*. Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1987. 234pp. \$18.95

This fascinating and well-written study of China's 16-day "punitive" war against Vietnam in February 1979 has special relevance today as recent Chinese and Vietnamese naval interactions in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands have threatened once again to draw both countries into open conflict. These contemporary clashes have their roots in the same issues as the 1979 war: historic Sino-Vietnamese territorial disputes; deteriorating Sino-Vietnamese relations caused by Vietnamese treatment of its large Chinese ethnic population; the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Kampuchea (Cambodia); and expanding political and military ties between Vietnam and the Soviet Union, China's principal ideological adversary and military threat. Improving relations between China and the West, particularly the United States, also had an impact on the increasing confidence shown by the government of the People's Republic of China in aggressively pursuing their foreign policy goals with Vietnam. This assessment seems equally valid today.

In examining the causes of the 1979 conflict, Chen concisely outlines the historic claims and counterclaims of China and Vietnam concerning the various island groupings in the South China Sea, including the Spratly complex. This background relates directly to current events in the region.

Of equal relevance is Chen's discussion of the deterioration of the Sino-Vietnamese relations in the period between the "liberation" of Vietnam by the North Vietnamese in 1975 and the military clashes of early 1979. His account of the monetary and economic policies of the Vietnamese Communist Government and the impact of these policies on the relatively affluent Chinese and Vietnamese merchant and professional communities is particularly chilling. Through the seizure of personal property and a series of currency reforms and tax regulations, the predominantly Chinese business class was virtually destroyed by 1978. Soon "There were no more wealthy Chinese or Vietnamese businessmen in southern Vietnam."

Such conditions led to the flight of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam that began in the late 1970s and continues through the present. These refugees from Vietnam seek to emigrate to any country that will accept them. The plight of these "boat people" has been likened to that of the Jews during the 1930s and 1940s. While the refugee problem is still a major issue for ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) members, the