

Naval War College Review

Volume 25
Number 2 February

Article 11

1972

From the Jaws of Victory

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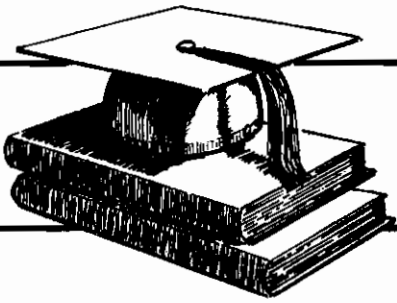
Charles Fair

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Recommended Citation

Simpson, B. M. III and Fair, Charles (1972) "From the Jaws of Victory," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 25 : No. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol25/iss2/11>

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PROFESSIONAL READING

Brown, J.C. and Stuebner, R.L., Jr. *American National Security Policies: a Selective, Working Bibliography*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971. 111p.

The bibliography, the fifth and last of a series published by the Pennsylvania State University Libraries, is designed to serve as a useful research tool for the student of national security affairs. Despite the limitations inherent in this type of project and the small staff with which they had to work, the authors have admirably filled what heretofore had been a void in reference materials available in the field.

No bibliography can be more comprehensive than the body of scholarship it is designed to survey. Thus, while Brown and Stuebner's work generally emphasizes books and periodical literature as source material, certain sections such as Arms Control and Disarmament include many government documents and hearings where private research is not available. In a similar fashion the number of entries included under topics like Ideologies, Nationalism, Foreign Aid, and Insurgency and Counterinsurgency reflect the boom in literature relating to U.S. policy problems in the Third World in recent years. This quantity of material, however, has only been developed at the sacrifice of continued research in the fields of U.S. defense policy in Europe, the Americas, and Japan, a situation which Brown and Stuebner's compilation amply documents.

In conclusion, this bibliography is a

useful and constructive first step toward cataloging the best literature of the past decade in the various fields of national security, and as such both highlights worthy scholarship and draws attention to areas requiring further study.

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Fair, Charles. *From the Jaws of Victory*. Simon and Schuster, New York: 1971. 416p.

Successful military commanders have always been held in fascination by students of warfare, if only because they succeeded. At times commanders who may have lost battles or wars are studied and admired because of the competence they displayed. Charles Fair has produced a study of the real losers: the stupid and the incompetent military commanders.

The first loser is Crassus, who apparently equated skill at making and keeping money with military competence. His ultimate defeat was richly deserved in terms of the extraordinary blunders he committed. Other commanders singled out are Phillip VI of France, "an ill-educated idiot with some skill at intrigue and none at all in battle," and Phillip II of Spain, of the Armada fame, "a well educated idiot who somehow became convinced he had a gift for great strategic combinations and . . . remained so in the face of most alarming evidence to the contrary."

Following in chronological order, the reader is treated to fascinating descriptions of, among others, the campaigns

of Charles XII of Sweden against Peter the Great of Russia. Despite Peter's unstable personality and the medieval condition of Russia and her armies, Charles was unable to succeed in the end, even though he frequently beat the Russians. The author describes him with a great deal of sympathy as the "fatal flaw" type. Charles was competent enough to have known he could not ultimately win in Russia, but he followed his own will o' the wisp instead.

Napoleon is described as a man who simply had to succeed or at least find some outlet for his tremendous psychic energy, otherwise he might have gone mad. Despite his boundless energy and bravado, Napoleon is depicted as a man who depended on the inspiration of the moment to extricate him from military difficulties.

These losers and their campaigns are treated with wit in a lively style and with appropriate erudition. The result is a charming book, which makes good reading. However, it is a great deal more. The mordant style masks a more serious purpose: a history of warfare from the days when the clash of armies may or may not have had a great effect on the populace to the ghastly all-inclusiveness of modern war. The conclusion is that bad generals are the penance society must pay for its ills.

This explains why the most scathing comments and greatest scorn are reserved for the Civil War generals. McClellan is depicted as the first of the "image" generals. He was far more concerned with public relations and with what people thought of him than he was with pursuing Lee. Hence his procrastination, his failures, and his ultimate removal by Lincoln from command of the Army of the Potomac.

The acme of the incompetent general is none other than Ambrose E. Burnside. Few historians would disagree. Burnside's blunders at Antietam and later at Fredericksburg are blamed for prolonging the Civil War at least another

2 years. The source of Burnside's difficulties is seen as his inability to comprehend a developing tactical situation and to alter his previously conceived plans in the face of the impossibility of their execution. The book is appropriately dedicated to him.

World War I produced several notable failures as generals. The author singles out the literary Sir Ian Hamilton, who dithered while the ill-fated Gallipoli expedition proceeded from difficulty to calamity. Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British forces in Flanders, is listed as a loser for his dogged insistence on frontal assaults on the German lines, with little success and no reason to expect it. Naturally, the casualties were exceptionally high.

The shortcomings and the blunders committed by the reasonably competent commanders, as well as the stupidities and disasters perpetrated by utterly incompetent generals are explained in terms of the personal characters of the men themselves. These are interesting insights, but they are somewhat limited. The book is good because of its charm and erudition. But it is also a bad book, because it raises issues which the author fails to develop. The student of military history can learn from the mistakes of other generals when the mistakes are not seen solely in terms of limited personalities or even intelligence.

A real chance has been missed by the failure to analyze what precisely the mistakes were. Burnside lacked tactical flexibility. Phillip II lacked strategic realism. Crassus got himself into an untenable position. McClellan misplaced his emphasis by an over concern with his image rather than defeating Lee. The reason these men committed these mistakes certainly can be attributed to their own individual personalities. The mistakes and blunders of these losers can be and should be generalized.

Finally, Charles Fair adds President Johnson and General Westmoreland to

his pantheon of military losers. Unfortunately, this particular chapter is marred by an excess of emotion and bias. It includes all sorts of extraneous matter which has nothing to do with the criticism of the conduct of the war in Vietnam. Certainly the strategy, and indeed the tactics, President Johnson approved and the way General Westmoreland executed them are not above criticism. However, this point is not made as well as it could be. Historians are usually not at their best when

writing about contemporary events.

The publisher's intent is obviously to take advantage of current antimilitary sentiment. Nevertheless, the value of studying other people's mistakes—particularly in a book as lively and as interesting as this one—can be enjoyable and even useful, providing the reader remains conscious of the author's abiding prejudices.

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Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.

Sir Richard Steele, The Tatler