

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 19
Number 1 *Parameters* 1989

Article 23

7-4-1989

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Recommended Citation

Bruce Palmer Jr., "HOW BRIGHT, HOW SHINING? SHEEHAN'S PORTRAIT OF VANN AND VIETNAM," *Parameters* 19, no. 1 (1989), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1536.

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How Bright, How Shining? Sheehan's Portrait of Vann and Vietnam

BRUCE PALMER, JR.

A Review Essay on: **A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam.**
By Neil Sheehan. Random House, 1988. 861 pages.

When asked to review Neil Sheehan's new work on John Paul Vann and Vietnam, I did not fully realize what I was getting into—now I do! The book captures one's attention, certainly, but it poses an imposing challenge to review. Powerful and extraordinary in many respects, it can also be infuriating and confusing. A correspondent for *The New York Times* and UPI during the Vietnam War, Sheehan makes no attempt to conceal the anti-war, anti-military, and anti-establishment biases that stream through the book, often taking on a mean-spirited tone. On balance, however, despite the fact that there is much to condemn in the book, there is much to commend as well.

Unfortunately, Sheehan tries to combine a biography of Vann and a history of our Vietnam involvement, producing in effect two books, with less than optimum results. The reader can be simultaneously fascinated and distracted keeping up with the private and official life of Vann while trying to maintain at least some continuity with respect to the twists and turns of the war. Sheehan, moreover, often launches into long digressions, on MacArthur and the Korean War, for example, that have little if anything to do with his main subject.

He even takes a gratuitous swipe at the US intervention in the Dominican Republic (1965) where Ambassador Ellsworth and I served together before we went to Vietnam. And so the book follows an uneven pattern, disjointed both chronologically and organizationally. Some judicious editing would have greatly improved it.

Before getting into Sheehan's version of Vietnam, I would like to address the biographical part of his work, where his fair and considerate treatment is in sharp contrast to his less-than-objective approach to history. Sheehan does a superb job of portraying John Paul Vann, who is about as complex a man as one would care to meet. Here, the research is thorough, covering not only Vann's family antecedents, but his whole life in detail from his birth in Norfolk, Virginia, on 2 July 1924 to his spectacular death near Kontum, Vietnam, on 9 June 1972. Sheehan's journalistic technique, approaching the novelistic at times, creates an unforgettable portrait of Vann—bold and fearless in battle, but a master of deceit, accomplished liar, unequaled manipulator of people, callously unfaithful husband, improbable father, and eternal womanizer. Indeed, Vann's sex life was incredible in his insatiable appetite and phenomenal stamina, enabling him to devote equal time, day or night, to business and love-making.¹ As Sheehan observes, Vann's passions in life were fighting wars and making love. Vietnam provided a perfect setting for both.

Sheehan's revelations about Vann's personal life came not so much as a surprise to me, but as a deep and bitter disappointment. Looking back, my contacts with him were limited to essentially military matters, while my knowledge of his family and personal life was practically nil. I knew that he could be crude and boorish, and that he was not well-liked by his contemporaries, although they respected his ability as a leader. My executive officer in the 16th Infantry Regiment of the Big Red One in Germany, where Vann and I first served together in 1954-1955, found him hard to handle when he disagreed with or didn't like the orders he received, but we both regarded him as an unexcelled troop leader.² Toward the end of Vann's career, after he had left the Army and was working in Vietnam as a civilian for the Agency for International Development, I had heard about his Vietnamese "wife and family" who received more of his attention than his bona fide American wife and children, but I had no inkling of his dark side, which included the statutory rape of a teenaged baby-sitter for his American family. Sheehan is quite right—Vann could never have risen to general officer's rank, much less a full colonel's, in the Army. In fact, he should have been cashiered back in the late 1950s with a dishonorable discharge. The foregoing notwithstanding, however, I still admire his raw courage, indomitable spirit, and battlefield leadership. Moreover, I continue to believe that he knew and understood Vietnam

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and its people better than any other American. Indeed, our countrymen owe John Paul Vann deep gratitude for his gallantry both in uniform and in mufti during our efforts to keep Vietnam out of the clutches of its communist foe.

So far as Sheehan's treatment of the Vietnam War itself is concerned, there are many things that I take exception to, or would like to comment upon, but that effort would amount to another book, far beyond the scope of a review essay. I will therefore limit my comments to some general observations and a few specific subjects that I feel are particularly important. In overall terms, the author's coverage of the Vietnam conflict begins in 1945 near the end of World War II and ends with the communist Easter Offensive of 1972, during which Vann was killed in a helicopter accident. Sheehan's treatment of the earlier years, starting with the return of the French to Indochina in 1945 and ending with the outbreak of open hostilities in the early 1960s between North Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem, is evenhanded. But beginning with the period after Vann arrives in Vietnam in March 1962 to become the senior US adviser to the 7th ARVN Division in the Mekong Delta, Neil Sheehan becomes personally involved in the war and seems to lose the ability to view events in a dispassionate manner. Sheehan and Vann knew each other during these years, and it seems clear that Vann's frustrations in trying to improve ARVN performance in the field and Sheehan's impatience with South Vietnamese performance at higher levels had mutually reinforcing effects on the two men.

Overall, there are significant omissions in Sheehan's coverage of the war that bear on the outcome of the struggle. For example, the incursion into Cambodia in April 1970 and the invasion of Laos in February 1972 are hardly mentioned, but the most glaring omission is the last three years of the war, 1972-1975, when the final fate of South Vietnam was sealed. During those years, as US forces withdrew from the war, some tangible progress was made in the performance of the South Vietnamese armed forces; in the development of South Vietnam's professional leaders serving not only in military units, but also in the countryside at various administrative levels; and in a pacification program that was beginning to win the genuine support of the people. Moreover, many ARVN units, including some that had not performed well in the past, fought well up to the end. One could argue with some conviction that we simply ran out of time. Sheehan regrettably makes no mention of this final period. Lacking an examination of these three fateful years, Sheehan's opus can be considered neither complete nor adequate.

Like Vann himself, Sheehan is lavish in handing out biting criticism of anything he dislikes or disagrees with, but is stingy when it comes to praise. There is nothing particularly wrong about this, but Sheehan does not always apply the same standard of moral judgment to the North as he does to the South. This is especially apparent when he discusses the admittedly brutal methods used by both Vietnamese sides in "pacifying" people in unfriendly areas.

There are other troublesome aspects of Sheehan's outlook. His account of events is frequently one-sided, failing to acknowledge that there is usually room for more than one interpretation of events. For example, he applauds the US-sponsored coup—engineered in a cold-blooded fashion by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge—that led to the assassination of Diem in November 1963, but conveniently overlooks the disastrous consequences. The consequent leadership vacuum and turbulence contributed importantly to the ensuing degraded South Vietnamese war effort, thus seeming to vindicate Sheehan's (and Vann's) own pessimistic portrayals of the war. But Sheehan cannot fairly crow about Diem's elimination and then complain of the results. The violent death of Diem led to a period of instability that took years to overcome. Nor did it help our relations with the South Vietnamese, who now realized that the United States would not hesitate to remove any head of state who did not accede to our wishes.

My greatest problem with this book, however, is Sheehan's pronounced habit of couching wildly controversial assertions as untroubled statements of fact—unburdened by proof or evidence—and then dressing them up in exaggerated terms, calculated perhaps to raise the blood pressure of readers like myself. This makes interesting reading, but it is dishonest. For this reason alone, the book should not be considered a history, but rather a polemic of doubtful validity. Indeed, it is larded with outrageous statements that make any fair-minded reader wince.

One sample of Sheehan's methods should suffice to demonstrate the hollowness of many of his arguments. Sheehan paints a devastating caricature



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Vietnam, 1963: LTC John Paul Vann, left, senior US advisor to the 7th Infantry Division, discussing the tactical situation.

of General Paul Harkins, our first MACV commander, that is unfortunately valid in many respects. Harkins was not on top of the situation in Vietnam and clearly was the wrong man for the job. But from this narrow point of departure, Sheehan leaps to a sweeping condemnation of all American leadership, to wit:

By the second decade after World War II, the dominant characteristics of the senior leadership of the American armed forces had become professional arrogance, lack of imagination, and moral and intellectual insensitivity. . . . The attributes were the symptoms of an institutional illness that might most appropriately be called the disease of victory The condition was not limited to the armed services. It had also touched the civilian bureaucracies . . . that joined the armed services in managing American overseas interests for the president. The attitude had spread as well to the greater part of the political, academic, and business leadership of the United States.³

In sum, while *A Bright Shining Lie* is often brilliantly written and always provocative, it ultimately is ensnared in a web of irresponsible statements and tinged with an underlying malice that, taken together, reveal the author as a man with a deeply troubled conscience. It also reveals Sheehan's enormous arrogance and belief in his own infallibility. Whatever his motives, good or bad, his book leaves a strong, sour aftertaste.

Nevertheless, the book embodies a powerful message that should give us all pause. Many Americans who served in Vietnam were aware of the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese, as so aptly described by Sheehan, and many of us had serious doubts as to whether we would or could be successful in the conduct of the war. But we were loathe to voice our misgivings because we were well aware that leaders must outwardly reflect optimism since defeatism by leaders can be dangerously contagious in a combat unit. We all had the "Can Do" spirit, perhaps a product of our World War II victory, as Sheehan implies. Military men are also imbued with the concept of loyalty to the chain of responsible command. To go outside that chain, as Vann did, and enlist the support of the press, is an extremely difficult thing to do. Under some circumstances, it could be called mutiny. Thus, it is understandable that it is a rare occurrence in well disciplined and proud armed forces.

The short command tour policy in Vietnam, ironically a decision taken to maintain morale and not—as Sheehan alleges—to provide command jobs for "ticket punchers," compounded the problem for several reasons. It hurt our continuity of effort, because unit leaders were too briefly on the job to gain a thorough knowledge of either the enemy or our South Vietnamese allies. Under such a policy, it became too easy and tempting to pass on responsibility for an unfinished job to one's successor. But Vietnam was not World War II in any way, shape, or form. Today we should ask ourselves the question, When the answer should be "can't do" instead of the automatic "can do," what is the ultimate result? Will the "system" (a favorite expression of

Sheehan's) tolerate a prolonged adherence to such a philosophy? In the US Army today, have we silenced our thinkers, our unbelievers, our mavericks—like Vann? Is it possible for them to speak up—to say that the situation is less than perfect? Can we hear them? Can an urgent “can't do” message get through the system and be listened to—all the way to the top? And if it does, what are the consequences for those who originate and pass along the message? Perhaps our present military leaders should ponder these questions.

But coming back to the book at hand, I found that one of the most heartening and positive aspects was telling the story of our advisers, the unsung heroes of Vietnam. Virtually all of the movies, TV programs, and flashy novels about Vietnam concern the trials of regular US combat units. Rarely if ever do we hear about the advisers, often alone, or in very small groups, serving in a foreign, war-torn land, doing their job on their own with no US backup support nearby, and knowing that their very survival is not in their hands, but dependent on their South Vietnamese friends. For telling this story in a compelling way, Sheehan deserves our thanks and high praise.

Throughout his book, Sheehan reiterates that General Westmoreland and other American leaders in Vietnam mentioned by name simply “did not understand” and implies that they never would understand the enigma of Vietnam. I submit that these men “understood” far more than perhaps even Sheehan “understands” today, with 16 years of reflection and 20/20 hindsight. The war is still too close to us, and much of the received wisdom about the war is constantly shifting and changing. Several generations must come along before any final judgments can be ventured. After all, we are still examining our own Civil War with great gusto, 125 years later, and modern historians are now challenging some of the common myths and beliefs about that long-ago war.⁴ It could well be that Vietnam will continue to hold the same fascination for the American people. My unsolicited advice is to read this book carefully and try to keep an open mind. It surely is well worth anyone's time.

NOTES

1. US advisers serving under Vann in various parts of Vietnam were well aware of Vann's overwhelming need for sex. It was commonly understood that not just one, but several Vietnamese women of pleasure were to be made available for Vann when he was in their area.

2. Brigadier General David S. Henderson, USA Ret., my Executive Officer as a lieutenant colonel in the 16th Infantry Regiment in the Schweinfurt area of Germany in 1954-1955, recalls how preoccupied we were in training, field exercises, and the like, and how little time we had for our families who were fortunate enough to join us and find housing on the German economy. Vann's family did not come to Germany until early 1955. We saw very little of Mrs. Vann, who had her hands full coping with small children.

3. *A Bright Shining Lie*, p. 285.

4. James M. McPherson, the Edwards Professor of American History at Princeton University, discusses common interpretations of the question, demolishes some of the myths that still abound, and comes up with some extremely interesting observations. McPherson's discussion of turning points in our Civil War that critically affected the *will* of both the North and the South have considerable relevance to our experience in the Vietnam War (“Why Did the South Lose the Civil War?” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 7 December 1988).