

BOOK REVIEWS

Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. New York: Random House, 1988.

Now that the Vietnam War is over, for America's literati it has become the war that won't quit. Out of cellars and other monastic hideaways, an army of gnomes is spreading an epidemic of new titles: Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam* (1986), George Mc. T. Kahin's *Intervention* (1986), James William Gibson's *The Perfect War* (1986), and D. Michael Shafer's *Deadly Paradigms* (1988) come most readily to mind. Now, after a genesis of sixteen years, comes Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*.

Sheehan's account centers on the career of John Paul Vann, whom he establishes as an archetypal figure of the Vietnam War. Vann's story is the saga of a poor white Southerner with a determination to rise above his circumstances, by whatever opportunities presented themselves: in his case the military and the media. He was both fearless and flawed. Vann began his career in Vietnam in 1962 as an advisor in the Mekong Delta. The culmination of his attempts to instill a fighting spirit in his charges was the Battle of Ap Bac in 1963, an epic nonvictory. Sheehan's vivid narration of this fray froths with the frustration of an advisor's heroism and daring vitiated by a resistant Vietnamese languidity.

There was a message of warning that needed telling, and Vann skillfully manipulated his jeremiads to U.S. officials and young journalists, like David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan, eager to puzzle out the fighting, and, like Vann, build *their* careers. Vann himself saw his own future in the army blocked because of an increasingly conspicuous lack of rectitude in his dealings with women. He retired in 1963, but returned to Vietnam in 1965 as a civilian to take up again what he did best: fighting and wenching. Despite his confiding that he, and others like him, were "bright shining lies," Vann believed passionately in the war itself, and saw in the wreckage of the Tet Offensive (1968) an opportunity for victory (a view that Sheehan judges to have been fatally erroneous). He went up to the Central Highlands afterwards as a civilian in the anomalous position as the head of the American military effort there. In the Easter Invasion of 1972, he personally planned and directed the successful defense of Kontum—his finest hour—dying two weeks later in an accidental helicopter crash.

John Paul Vann was no Lawrence of Arabia. There was no poetic romance of "guerrilla vapors" ethering "rooted Turkish army plants" in rhapsodic Arabian deserts. He was instead a natural warrior who knew his business, and how to package himself. More analogous to the Peloponnesian War of classical Greece, John Paul Vann was Virginia's reincarnation of Alcibiades for the Syracuse of Vietnam.

To this reviewer, there will be a permanent and special place for *Bright Shining Lie* in the huge corpus of literature on the Vietnam War. There are already good historical overviews on the war itself, such as George Herring's *America's Longest War* (1979), Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam* (1978), and Frances FitzGerald's widely read *Fire in the Lake* (1972). Indeed Ronald Spector's *Advice and Support* (1985) provides a good background for understanding Vann's "advisor war." Memoirs from many of the principal figures have been out for some time, from General Westmoreland, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, to Henry Kissinger. Terrifying snapshots have come from innumerable individual accounts, perhaps the most vivid and depressing is Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977).

What has been largely missing is a middle level-of-analysis—somewhere below the ethereal level of policy-making and above the fox-hole grit of the day-to-day—where one can see how the war actually "worked." One of the best books on the war yet is Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An* (1972) because it does precisely this; it traces the war from the revealing perspective of Long An, one of South Vietnam's 44 provinces. Sheehan offers a similar vantage point in his searching examination of Vann, one of those middle-ranking operatives who had to inventively translate policy into action and pragmatically make sense of things—as always, what Americans do best. Sheehan is certainly right to have focused on Vann, but he enriches our understanding immeasurably by also briefly illuminating other figures from the human mosaic of this "working level" cadre: men like Ed Lansdale, "Brute" Krulak, Daniel Ellsberg, and Robert "Blow Torch" Komer. It is clear now that David Halberstam, in his quest for *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) among national leaders, was concentrating on the wrong level.

A Bright Shining Lie will be most often compared to Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* (1983), which also provides an overall account of the war while fleshing out many of the war's key personalities, including many Vietnamese. Yet Sheehan's book is at once more focused while at the same time being broader. It is broader in that it provides a social setting for understanding Vann and a historical context for appreciating the war, the latter being "the forgotten war" of Korea. Such a context reminds us that America would have fared a lot worse in Vietnam were it not for Korea's battle-seasoned "lifers" who steered the U.S. military machine that went to Vietnam. A focus on Vann lets us see the passage through time and change of place in America's longest war. Ap Bac (1963) was different from Tet (1968) which was different from Kontum (1972). Sheehan, then has finally illuminated the reality that the single war in Vietnam was a changing war fought in very different places along a temporal continuum of highly shifting circumstance.

Certainly the book is not without its lapses. Sheehan has front-loaded his account; that is, it is most vivid at the beginning when Sheehan was there with Vann, and, by contrast, is somewhat wooden in the middle, though it picks up again with Kontum. Inevitably, there is a tendency to generalize from the single, though impressive, case of Vann.

Kontum, for example, was not the only significant action of the Easter Invasion of 1972; the defenses of Hue and An Loc were equally critical. Also, from Vann's perspective (and Sheehan's), Westmoreland receives harsh treatment. While the failings of "Westy's" strategy are easy to see at this level, at the theatre level this clarity gets confused by the ambiguities brought on by the war's larger crosscurrents: a national vs. an international war, a revolutionary vs. an inter-state war, and a guerrilla vs. a conventional war. Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports* (1976) is very tightly reasoned and, given the constraints under which he had to operate, at the very least, he did not disgrace himself—something that cannot be said for some of the commanders in the Korean War. Finally, there is something about the book's title that makes Sheehan, like Vann, manipulative. Sheehan quotes Vann as saying that he was "a bright shining lie." Vann clearly meant this only about how he was forced to play his role as an optimistic advisor, not about his feelings for the war itself, a cause in which he passionately believed. Sheehan, however, has taken this as a metaphor for *his* own beliefs about the war, implicitly criticizing Vann for failing to share the author's wisdom. Despite the brilliance of Sheehan's book, it is still by no means clear that Vann was wrong about the war, nor is it completely fair for Sheehan to use Vann to render a general indictment of it.

Nevertheless, Sheehan's book is a landmark contribution to an understanding of the Vietnam War. He has gathered its complexity and played it across the career of a truly remarkable American, John Paul Vann, part devil and part hero. In so doing, Sheehan has combined scholarly insight with vivid journalism to produce a true drama. Whether or not the Vietnam War was "a bright shining lie," as Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, (1978) would say, Sheehan's work has hit us with an "illumination round" that will light us into the next century.

Timothy J. Lomperis
Duke University

Shafer, D. Michael. *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of US Counter-Insurgency Policy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Professor Shafer, a political scientist at Rutgers University, travels familiar ground in his attempt to explicate fundamental failures of American policy definition and execution during the Vietnam War. The fact that the ground is quite familiar to students of that unhappy conflict in no way renders irrelevant this attempt to place history in the matrix of political science.

The author presents several different models which might serve to provide general explanation for the manner in which policy decisions were made as well as the inherent causes of failure. These include a