

Another Look at Vann and Vietnam

reviewed by Maj Edward F. Palm

A BRIGHT SHINING LIE: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam. By Neil Sheehan. Random House, New York, 1988, 861 pp., \$24.95. (Member \$22.45)

Regrettably, the June 1989 issue of the *Gazette* containing the review of *A Bright Shining Lie* snuck by me when it first came out. I didn't discover it until recently, so what follows is at least a day late and a dollar short, but I decided to write as it is an important book on Vietnam.

The principal complaint in the *Gazette* review, and perhaps its central theme, is that Sheehan's book doesn't quite fit into any of the standard categories of history, biography, or memoir—or that in trying to be all three, it fails in each area. *A Bright Shining Lie* indeed has elements of all three genres, but it is finally something different. It is essentially a species of the New Journalism, that hybrid genre, for lack of a better term, Truman Capote christened the nonfiction novel.

Hence, the "digressions" and scene changing objected to in the review. Sheehan is merely employing the major conventions associated with good fiction: beginning at the end and flashing back to pique the reader's interest, creating and arranging scenes not necessarily in chronological order but for dramatic effect, making extensive use of descriptive detail and dialog to show as well as tell, using biographical and background information to establish character, and weaving plots and subplots harmoniously together into a unified thematic statement. The difference, of course, is that the elements he is weaving together in the hope of expressing some greater underlying Truth (and his theme) are all ostensibly true.

I recognize that historians tend to view this approach as suspect. It lacks the decorum and gravity traditionally associated with serious history. On the other hand, by virtue of being a skillfully crafted and well-written nonfiction novel, Sheehan's book, in the manner of good fiction, communicates on the level of feeling as well as intellect. In short, it makes us feel the

truth of Sheehan's ideas. Again, I realize that some prefer their history unadulterated, presented only in the cold light of reason. But as history is something that happens to people across the whole gamut of their being—passions, prejudices, and all—some literary critics might argue that there is certainly a place for "history as the novel and the novel as history" (Norman Mailer's phrase).

If we can grant that premise, I think we'll discover the thread that ties it all together. As several other reviewers have pointed out, Sheehan is intent on showing how the pattern of Vann's life parallels the course and tone of the American experience in Vietnam. Even his personal faults serve in Sheehan's narrative as apt metaphors for the larger cultural shortcomings that inspired and finally doomed our commitment.

Vann's ironic progression was our progression in Vietnam. He begins as the truth-telling adviser and apostle of counterinsurgency and restraint and ends a frustrated firepower freak calling in B-52 strikes with the best of them. What changed, of course, were the stakes—for both Vann and America in Vietnam. As an adviser, with a terminal career, he could afford to challenge the system. Later, when he got his stars, as Sheehan puts it, his motivations were no longer so clear-cut. He had his newfound position and reputation to protect—just as Westmoreland and Harkins had theirs to protect and much as the United States had its national prestige to preserve. Moreover, just as Vann's motivations were tainted with an element of fraud (accepting credit for having had the moral courage to put his career on the line when he in fact had no career), America too was less than honest and aboveboard in acknowledging the roots of her involvement. This is the relevance of and the thematic link to Ellsberg and the *Pentagon Papers*.

Vann's friendship with Ellsberg is almost archetypal, symbolizing at least two other problems with our Vietnam involvement. First, Vann was one of the few proponents of that war who managed to retain influential friends in the antiwar camp. I can't imagine a

more poignant illustration of the polarization of those years, particularly since Ellsberg started out an advocate of the war but evolved (or devolved, depending upon one's point of view) into a leading figure in the antiwar movement. And as Sheehan obviously understands, if one doesn't understand the dynamic relationship between the war at home and the war in country, one doesn't understand the war. Secondly, I think Sheehan dwells on Vann's duplicity with Ellsberg as a fitting mirror of the duplicity endemic to the war at large, the famed "credibility gap." Their relationship serves all the more effectively to link seemingly disparate themes of the story when one stops to realize that this in effect is the symbolism that occurs in real life. Sheehan didn't invent it; he had the wit to recognize it and the talent to make inspired use of it.

Vann's other failings, it seems to me, have the same resonance. His failure to learn Vietnamese and his incorrigible promiscuity are likewise integral parts of the whole. The point is that he never cared about nor really knew the Vietnamese. He only exploited them for selfish ends. In a larger sense, some would argue, we as a Nation never took the time to get to know the Vietnamese. We only exploited them as pawns in our crusade against inter-



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national communism. Far from an unwarranted or gratuitous digression, Vann's simultaneous affairs with two Vietnamese women speak to me about the spoiled arrogance and self-indulgence of American power in those years. In our egocentrism, we thought we could do anything and get away with anything, and because we were sacrificing in the name of a noble cause, we thought (or at least some of us did) that we were entitled to take whatever we wanted.

Sheehan himself plays an important supporting role in his narrative. This is a point the review recognizes and objects to, but it is another of the conventions of the New Journalism and the nonfiction novel. The new journalist makes no pretense toward objectivity and becomes a participant and even a character in his own story.

In this case, Sheehan did play an integral role in supporting Vann. He believed in him, and his subsequent disillusionment with Vann and the cause are hardly irrelevant from the standpoint of narrative or theme. Sheehan's own pilgrim's progress again serves as a fitting symbol of our national experience.

In sum, I would argue that Sheehan's themes do indeed "make a whole cloth." But this is not to say that the book is perfect. Sheehan's somewhat heavy-handed treatment of Vann's childhood bothers me. He, of course, had to be honest about it, and it even works, up to a point, as a statement about American upward mobility, but the tone smacks of upper-middle-class elitism and snobbery. On the other hand, I do think Sheehan gives a sympathetic and fair hearing to the view

that the war could have and should have been won—remarkable in itself from a journalist.

The conclusion of the *Gazette* review is right on target. I think we would agree that, whatever else Sheehan does or fails to do, the pilgrim's progress he traces in *A Bright Shining Lie* reinforces the point of view, as reported by Michael Herr, that "America got involved in the Vietnam War, commitments and interests aside, simply because we thought it would be easy." If we still have the capacity for such hubris, then we really have learned nothing from Vietnam.

I realize I've done my judging from different angles than your reviewer. From the literary standpoint at least, I think *A Bright Shining Lie* is one of the best books to come out of the American experience in Vietnam. USMC

BOOKS

Reviews of books relating to the military profession and of particular interest to Marines are welcomed. Prospective authors are encouraged to contact editor prior to submission. Preferred length 300-750 words. Any book published in the United States and still in print may be purchased through the MCA Bookservice, but listed prices are subject to change.

Staffriding Battlefields

reviewed by LtCol Donald F. Bittner, USMCR(Ret)

BATTLEFIELDS OF THE CIVIL WAR. By Roger W. Hicks and Frances E. Schultz. Salem House Publishers, Topsfield, MA, 1989, 240 pp., \$27.50 hardback, \$19.50 paperback. (Member \$24.75/17.55)

THE U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE GUIDE TO THE BATTLES OF CHANCELLORSVILLE & FREDERICKSBURG. Edited by Jay Luvaas and Harold W. Nelson. Harper & Row, New York, 1989, 361 pp., \$8.95 paperback. (Member \$8.00)

In recent years, the "staff ride" has returned as a key element in the professional military education of officers, noncommissioned officers, and troops. A staff ride to a battlefield of

the past is an endeavor designed to enhance the individual's understanding of and insight into war. With the diminishing number of combat veterans in the Marine Corps, such exercises will become an even more important part of our training as Marines try to learn from the experiences of history, including past battles, what occurred on those battlefields, and the thought processes that led to command decisions which affected victory and defeat.

Upon commencing this educational and training exercise, one cardinal rule must be remembered: prior preparation is necessary before beginning the staff ride. This includes study of the war, campaign, and battle that the exercise will cover. Because modern battlefields are large in scope and are

immediately rebuilt after a war, sites of wars in the more distant past—smaller in scale and often preserved as national, state, or local parks—will generally have to be used. Thus, books can be quite valuable in assisting the professional Marine in his or her preparation before and during the staff ride.

Battlefields of the Civil War is a valuable volume for young Marines interested in staff riding. It is a general orientation volume to the Civil War and 18 battlefields of that conflict. It is more oriented toward the eastern theater than the western, with 11 eastern battlefields described as opposed to only 7 western. The 18 chosen, of course, are the better known sites. There are sections on armies, uniforms, weapons, and logistics, plus the social history aspects of slavery and women. The volume concludes with a glossary and a brief list of recommendations for further reading. Each section on the 18 battles provides a brief orientation to what occurred; photographs of the sites at the time and today; maps; profiles of various individuals; an informational block on each site with location and map references, park visiting hours, and other data; information on nearby towns; and, for 7 of the battles, an identified book for further reading. Thus, *Battlefields of the Civil War* is a good general orientation volume to the Civil War. For Marines