

1989

A Bright Shining Lie

William F. Long Jr.
U.S. Army (Ret.)

Neil Sheehan

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

Recommended Citation

Long, William F. Jr. and Sheehan, Neil (1989) "A Bright Shining Lie," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 42 : No. 2 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol42/iss2/20>

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.

suspects that the Navy would love to take credit for knocking down the famed "Dragon's Jaw" bridge at Thanh Hoa, North Vietnam. The author implies it did, but that honor must go to the Air Force.

These drawbacks aside, *Vietnam at War* will be basic reading for any serious scholar seeking to understand the complex evolution of the decades-spanning conflict in Southeast Asia.

EDWARD J. MAROLDA
U.S. Naval Historical Center

Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie*.
New York: Random House, 1988.
861pp. \$24.95

The subtitle of this superb work is *John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. It is a masterful interweaving of biography and history that combines the personal experience and insights of a combat correspondent in the Vietnam war with 16 years of research, 385 interviews (170 of which were tape-recorded on 640 cassettes) and two three-month trips to Vietnam in the early 1970s.

The book's title is an excerpt from John Vann's letter to a U.S. Army historian in 1963 and is apt for this account of the flawed hero of a flawed war. The experiences and influence of John Vann are a metaphor for the American hubris and South Vietnamese corruption that doomed any honest hope of establishing a political reality capable of winning the support of the people

south of the 17th parallel in what was called South Vietnam.

This is a painstaking recounting of the delusions of the American military and political leadership and the deceits of the Saigon cliques. It is a montage of the professional honesty of John Vann the warrior and the personal mendacity of John Vann the man. Yet, the leaders who John Vann depicted as deluded came to his funeral at Arlington in 1972; some, including General Westmoreland, as pallbearers. One was a pariah and turncoat to the others. Dan Ellsberg of the "Pentagon Papers" and Vann's one-time alter ego was there as a friend of Vann's divorced wife, who still considered herself John's widow and who now shared Ellsberg's antiwar views.

The Vietnam decade encompassed by Vann's contrapuntal domination of the scene started with Vann as a renegade lieutenant colonel military adviser (to a cowardly Vietnamese division commander who was losing the war in the Delta), watching helplessly as Vietcong guerrillas butchered a mismanaged and miserably led ARVN force at Ap Bac in 1962. He spent the rest of his career trying to manipulate the U.S. military to force the South Vietnamese to fight. It ended with Vann, as a civilian generalissimo, winning the battle of Kontum against NVA regulars in 1972 with American firepower and South Vietnamese troops, then losing his life in a helicopter accident.

Vann wanted an American proconsul to force the South Vietnamese

to start fighting and stop abusing the peasantry. He decried as stupid and cruel the indiscriminate use of firepower that blasted the people and the country, and opposed as a delusion the official American strategy of attrition. It was. But Vann was also deluded. He thought the war could be won.

The delusions and deceptions on all sides and at all levels and the resulting corruptions cost countless lives and ruined the country and American dreams and reputations. *A Bright Shining Lie* is the Vietnam obsession complement to David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*. Once, when Halberstam told Vann that he ought to look at the social divisions and other costs the war was exacting at home, Vann replied, "I'm not interested in that."

For all his weaknesses, Vann had one saving grace—he died fighting. At his funeral, Robert Komer, the chief of the pacification effort in Vietnam, eulogized him as "one of the authentic heroes of a grim and unpopular war."

The book, too, is heroic. It is the product of 16 years of a brave reporter and driven man's life. It is saturated with insights for the professional soldier and governmental leader. Not the least of the implicit lessons is that reporters are not traitors because they disagree with policy, but can be forced to be antagonists by the deceptions of the policymakers. And they can be teachers and statesmen. Neil Sheehan joins the company of writers such as William L. Shirer,

who raise war reporting to the level of political history.

As for its value to the national security community: Neil Sheehan's book should be required reading for every serious military leader—including the Commander in Chief.

WILLIAM F. LONG, JR.
Colonel, U.S. Army (Ret.)
Newport, Rhode Island

Gibson, James William. *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did*. New York: Random House, 1988. 544pp. paper \$12.95

Know your enemy! How many times have we heard that? In his book, James William Gibson attempts to identify the enemy, whom he describes variously as the "foreign Other," the military-industrial complex, or ourselves. He attacks what he considers to be the thesis of the American military mind: "by virtue of its technological production system, the United States can achieve its foreign policy objectives by limited wars fought as wars of attrition." In his eyes, since our victory in World War II, American war managers have felt that our technology and production could support us in all future wars waged by "foreign Others" against capitalism and our way of life. Because what we do is natural, that which is done by the "foreign Other" is antinatural. Because nature is on the inside, that which is foreign must come from the outside.