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## The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did

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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.

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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.

During Vietnam, our technomancers, the name Gibson gives to those military and civilian war leaders, felt that victory could be achieved by economic rationalization. Thus, warfare should be approached as a problem of organizing quantities. This fit into the mechanistic world view of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his "whiz-kids," people who could transform social revolution into quantifiable dimensions. Numbers became critical, and number-crunchers filled out reports with such data as number of VC killed, number of structures destroyed, and number of vehicles damaged. To improve one's apparent worth, one could alter the numbers upwards slightly.

Vietnam was to be a laboratory of social systems of engineering and economic modernization. This included the "strategic hamlet" concept, which concentrated Vietnamese peasants in protected but unfamiliar areas. The South Vietnamese government had separated them from their ancestral homelands, but no one understood how important this was to the peasants. To protect them, "free fire zones" were established around the hamlets and anyone caught in them was fair game. If Vietnamese peasants innocently wanted to get away from the hamlets, even briefly, they became VC statistics.

The American commanders wanted to demonstrate to the North Vietnamese the superior firepower which inevitably would both defeat the "foreign Other" and reduce

friendly casualties. Thus, American ground forces were deployed in lightly populated areas. The author considered this to be exactly the wrong program because it left the populated areas to the Vietcong. The Vietcong actively proselytized the peasants, using the noncombatant casualties as their own ammunition. The unthinking and unknowing American commanders who refused to learn the Vietnamese language and customs could not identify with their hosts. When a pregnant woman was killed, it was counted as two VC: one soldier and one cadet. Many Vietnamese saw no alternative other than to join the Vietcong to drive out their concept of the foreign Others: the impotent Americans and their corrupt Vietnamese government officials.

Why did the United States lose a war to a technologically inferior enemy? Gibson describes many factors: Americans never understood the Vietnamese and their culture and thus could never "pacify" them; only an average of 6 percent of assigned troops were in combat; U.S. troops were given defective equipment; corruption at all levels crippled the war effort; American technology kept the war impersonal; war objectives were never clear, even in the minds of the generals (so how were their subordinates to determine their goals other than to produce statistics?).

Gibson states that small unit antiguerrilla tactics are effective, but the Army just does not function in small units. The failure to use counterinsurgency tactics allowed

the Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars to call the time and place of battle.

According to Gibson, neither the Americans nor the South Vietnamese government made any serious effort at land reform, so essential for pacification and winning "the hearts and minds." Americans could not communicate with most Vietnamese, so a wide gulf grew between the few Vietnamese who could speak English and the majority, who were not consulted. Profits could be made by corrupt suppliers and Vietnamese officials at the expense of both the American taxpayer and the soldier who was being shot at in the field.

The air war in the North never was as effective as the war managers hoped it would be because large, viable targets were not readily available and could not be justified. Expensive aircraft and million-dollar trained pilots were not cost effective when sent to destroy 55-gallon drums of fuel oil. The damage they caused was easily repaired, using peasant laborers, who, like their counterparts in the South, saw American technology as something to be hated.

So where can we place the blame for a war we could not lose and yet we did? If the military had had a freer hand, could it have "won" the war? If something does not work, is it proper to use a bigger hammer? Where did the system break down? Is it possible to learn from the failure in Vietnam to understand guerrilla war and how to counteract it? How could we have kept the population

from supporting and supplying the revolutionaries?

The call for "No More Vietnams" should be echoed at every military strategy session, at every seminar on future wars, at every gathering of veterans who compare notes on each unit's activities in Vietnam; but not for the same reason that the radicals attempted to shut the United States down. Rather we should learn from our mistakes and develop tactics to work with the local population in any future engagement. This would require courses in our war colleges in the culture, language and history of potential trouble spots.

Who is the enemy? Is it those among us who refuse to look at criticisms, even those as unbalanced as Gibson's attempt at self-flagellation? Read the book not for the reason he wrote it, but rather to better understand the nonmilitary elements of society.

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Dorr, Robert F. *Air War Hanoi*. New York: Sterling, 1988. 190pp. \$24.95

The author makes it clear from the start that his book is about the air war in *North* Vietnam. He is not concerned with the efforts in South Vietnam and Laos to support ground forces and interdict supply routes from the north. For those aviators with an opportunity to do both, flying down south was fun. The odds were in your favor. Someone else