



A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam

Neil Sheehan

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Selected by the Modern Library as one of the 100 best nonfiction books of all time

In this magisterial book, a monument of history and biography that was awarded the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, renowned journalist Neil Sheehan tells the story of Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann—"the one irreplaceable American in Vietnam"—and of the tragedy that destroyed that country and the lives of so many Americans.

Outspoken and fearless, John Paul Vann arrived in Vietnam in 1962, full of confidence in America's might and right to prevail. *A Bright Shining Lie* reveals the truth about the war in Vietnam as it unfolded before Vann's eyes: the arrogance and professional corruption of the U.S. military system of the 1960s, the incompetence and venality of the South Vietnamese army, the nightmare of death and destruction that began with the arrival of the American forces. Witnessing the arrogance and self-deception firsthand, Vann put his life and career on the line in an attempt to convince his superiors that the war should be fought another way. But by the time he died in 1972, Vann had embraced the follies he once decried. He went to his grave believing that the war had been won.

A haunting and critically acclaimed masterpiece, *A Bright Shining Lie* is a timeless account of the American experience in Vietnam—a work that is epic in scope, piercing in detail, and told with the keen understanding of a journalist who was actually there. Neil Sheehan's classic serves as a stunning revelation for all who thought they understood the war.

From the Hardcover edition.

A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam Details

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From Reader Review A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam for online ebook

Rachel says

I read this book in 1988 while a member of the "Book of the Month Club," before it became a best-seller and Neil Sheehan won a Pulitzer for this remarkable book, 16-years in the making.

And I've been talking about it ever since.

"A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam" is THE primer on contemporary US foreign policy and should be read by every student of American history. School boards should buy this book and stock the high school libraries (excuse me, "media centers") with at least 10 copies.

If you liked "Born on the Fourth of July" by Ron Kovic, "Charlie Wilson's War" by George Crile or the "Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone" by Rajiv Chandrasekaran then read Neil Sheehan's work, one of America's best contemporary journalists and political history writers.

Daniel Ellsberg gave Neil Sheehan The Pentagon Papers for a reason. Find out why by reading this book and taking account of American "hard power", just as John Paul Vann did.

Larry Bassett says

This book is an extensive coverage of the war in Vietnam and includes many of the details of covert actions that were withheld from the American public at the time they were occurring. At the end of the book there are extensive notes by the author about how he researched the book until its completion in 1988. John Vann was a unique character in the war both as a soldier and an officer and ultimately as a civilian involved in depth with the decision making process at the highest levels. The Pentagon Papers are a significant source for the book. It seems ironic to me that John Vann and Daniel Ellsberg were friends and close associates.

This book is perhaps the one that covers the war from at the very beginning through its end although John Vann died in a helicopter crash in Vietnam shortly before the US withdrew from Saigon in the notable helicopter flights from the roof of the US Embassy.

The corruption of the Saigon government as well as the corruption and incompetence of the South Vietnamese military is clearly and convincingly portrayed throughout the book. This is not a book that takes you out into the jungles and battles as so many books do. It is a book that takes you into the homes and buildings of power where the decisions were made that led to the deaths of so many Americans and Vietnamese. John Vann was always convinced that the US could win.

For some reason I thought the strangest part of the Book was the occasions where it focused on John Vann's personal life. He was a womanizer and a bit of a scum of a man. He was married for 25 years to a woman who put up with his being moral scum.

John says

I don't know of many books that win both the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. Sheehan's book is one of them, and it shows.

An entirely engrossing narrative of the profound arrogance, paralyzing complaisance and careerism, and the incorrigible, altogether impenetrable ignorance of Americans in Vietnam. Generals Harkins and Westmoreland seem to have been the two most seriously impaired of the bunch. And as a result millions died. [Let's just say that in comparison 9/11 is only a vanishingly small down-payment on the full measure of retribution that peoples of color around the world are due.] These guys can't die off quickly enough.

But then again we have Obama and McCrystal now. So maybe this blinding hubris is part of the American character - at least until we spend ourselves into oblivion.

It appears that we now have the opportunity to consider Vietnam II - of particular interest, I hope, to those too young to have seen the "prequel." The 60's were great fun - the very best of times. The self-destruction of presidents is always amusing to watch, and the volumes of history that follow make great reading.

Lawyer says

Full Review to follow.

Kathleen says

Nominally a biography of John Paul Vann--a soldier and civilian who was one of the first American Advisers in Vietnam at the beginning of American intervention and remained involved in the conflict until his death in 1972--this is actually the most complete history of the Vietnam War that I have ever read. I feel that, for the first time, I really understand this conflict, what lead to it, and why America could never have really *won*.

Among the things I never knew was that the Viet Cong was essentially the Viet Minh, the armed nationalists who overthrew the French colonialists. That the Vietnamese people saw no difference between the French and the Americans. That Ho Chi Minh was drawn to communism only because it was the only governmental theory at the time to preach against colonialism and mean it. That Minh was originally hopeful that America would support *him* against the French because American Presidents were saying that it was time for Colonialism to end. That Presidents as early as Eisenhower admitted that Minh would win any election in Vietnam with 80 percent of the vote. That every South Vietnam government was ridiculously corrupt because they could never be comprised of nationalists, only people who didn't mind colluding with foreign powers for their own gain. So there's that.

And then there's John Paul Vann, who was a womanizer, a jerk, prone to bouts of irrational anger, and a man who always believed that America could win the war. Beyond that, though, he left the Army for complicated reasons near the beginning of the conflict in Vietnam with one of the reasons being protest of how the war was being handled. He didn't believe in bombing the village to save the village. He worked closely with--became good friends with--many of the Vietnamese. After leaving the army, he returned to Vietnam as a civilian working with the pacification program. Perhaps his ideas were based on false premises, and some--

like me--might argue he wasn't even a very good man, but he wanted to be a hero. Better than that, at least for those reading a biography, he was an interesting man who led an interesting life.

David says

The Vietnam War is one of the most important events in modern history. This is one of the many books written about it.

The amount of detail is staggering. The research that went into this one book must fill a small library with notes, clippings, photographs, references, biographies, maps and more.

Take for example the first day in the Army of the central character in the book - John Paul Vann. This occurs on page 423 in my copy.

" During his first day at Camp Lee and for four days afterward the Army hit him with the psychological shock of disorientation and beginning anew that facilitates the transformation of boys into fighting men. He was made to shed his civilian clothing, including his underwear, and handed Army khaki and olive green; his head was shaved; he was given another medical examination to verify that he had been telling the truth when he signed his arrival statement; and he was revaccinated for smallpox and vaccinated typhoid and tetanus. "

The enormous amount of detail and the size of this book is somewhat daunting. My edition is 790 pages, not including Maps, Source Notes, Interviewees section, bibliography and Index.

Among the facts is the information that the war was partially caused by nepotism, corruption and cronyism based on the Catholic religion. The French colonialism established a Government where you had to be a Catholic or give acceptance to the religion to get promoted or achieve a position. This aspect of the conflict was totally downplayed by the Western news media, which adds another side to the story.

The so called "Domino theory" of Communist take over that was meant to justify the USA involvement has proved to be a sham. Vietnam held suspicions about it's allies in Russia and China and is now a thriving economy based largely on free market ideas. Tourism to Vietnam is a multi-million dollar a year business. Nobody in the USA has been held to account for involving millions of US troops and at a cost of hundreds of thousands dead. The toxic poisoning of vast areas of Vietnam has caused birth defects, and the contamination will take generations to clear up.

Lyn says

A Bright, Shining Lie by Neil Sheehan is an erudite, well-informed and exhaustive narrative of the Vietnam War.

Sheehan provides a complete modern history of Vietnam, from the French Colonial period beginning in the 1850s to the end of French rule, particularly the period of Ho Chih Minh's rise to power after World War II. As a reporter on the ground in the 1960s, he also provides a detailed analysis of American foreign policy in the region and the complicated cultural make-up of Vietnam, with its odd assortment of aristocratic mandarins, both communist and non-communist, dynastic vestiges, French and catholic influences and the seemingly ever present shadows of Russo-Sino and American intrigue.

This is also a fine portrait of America in the 20s to 40s. Most poignant was the observation that children of this era were taught to understand at an early age that the spread of communism must be stopped in Asia, because if it was not stopped here, then communism, like a great ravenous organism, would then move to Hawaii and then to the western shores of the United States. Sheehan uses the story as a vehicle to describe

how the United States came to be what it was in Vietnam, especially how the military leadership had evolved from a lean and hungry, almost desperate group at the beginning of World War II, to the victors of that war, to the aristocratic mis-directions of MacArthur in Korea and then to the delusional, bureaucratic and careerist misdeeds in Vietnam.

Sheehan also shows the greatness and shortcomings of the hero, John Paul Vann, a complex, fundamentally flawed man who is almost an intelligent, dark Forrest Gump; a sinister American Everyman of the middle of the twentieth century. Vann is shown as a microcosm of America's greatness and its immoral, ugly underside.

Riveting, compelling, and at times deeply thought provoking, the novel also tends to flounder under its own weight, as Sheehan's ambition is realized, but with flaws. The book won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, and is thoroughly well researched and crafted by a talented author, but it fails to answer many of the questions it raises and ultimately leaves the reader feeling educated and moved, but unsympathetic and without an enduring moral.

Christy says

I skimmed this book again over the last couple of weeks having plowed my way through it over some months in 1989, me a 30 year old twit in grad school in New Hampshire, co-reading with my historian of war Dad in Wyoming. He is a pro-military, conservative (Boll Weevil) type Democrat, and everything I read across the disciplines were pushing me further and further hard-left. I'm assuming that Ken Burn's series on Vietnam will drive further interest in Sheehan's story, and that will be good as it includes remarkable historical detail from the Pentagon Papers and also journalistic accounts that didn't always make it into the US media coverage of the war. I remember that this was the human story version of a work I greatly admired and emulated in its model of content analysis: Griffin and Marciano's Teaching the Vietnam War (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1...>) that showed how US media didn't cover so much of the darkness of the war in terms of our motives, our actions, and who was fighting against who and for what. Griffin and Marciano walked back and forth between what we were told about the war (newspaper accounts) and the quite contradictory evidence in the Pentagon Papers.

The Sheehan book particularly highlights for me the casual way sexual aggression to the end of rape is the spoils of war, as certainly how the main character used young Vietnamese girls would be considered sexual assault in the US, and is how he used and abused women both while in uniform and also when he returned as a civilian. Both books point to the language of the war - how even though US firepower was the greatest in Vietnam ever used on the earth and still holds that record, the North Vietnamese "agressors" are those that "attacked" us and the South Vietnamese, while we merely "retaliated" or "returned" fire.

I am interested in people's reaction to the Ken Burn's series. I find it mesmerizing, but also know of how some social activist friends in Veterans for Peace are thinking about it as less than accurate and with a clear US bias. (I did see it was funded by the Koch brothers, although I know they own everything...) There was a screening of the entire series for vets in New Hampshire (home state of Ken Burns!) and it sounded like all were critical of how US motives were portrayed as "honorable", the insinuation that on some level we "stumbled into" the war, perverting the desires of the No. Vietnamese, glossing over the reasons why we lost, and even Burn's view expressed in the series' narration that Americans are naturally drawn to war. (Some VfP folks were adamant that nothing is "natural" about modern warfare except that it's a pivotal part of our political economy and we have to socialize children into accepting it.) Here is a website of information VfP

put together reacting to the series: <http://www.vietnamfulldisclosure.org/>

Oh, and I thought the movie of Bright Shining Lie was horrible compared to the book - made into an adventure drama instead of a brilliant way to teach us all about the "lie" of Vietnam. My uncle is damaged from Agent Orange and I'm not sure if it was cause-effect but he did vote for Trump. (I've wondered how of those wounded by Agent Orange voted for Trump?) I hope Right-wing soldiers who were in Vietnam will reflect on the series, too, especially those drafted, even though we know fewer on the Right watch PBS.

We see Trump insist upon military decorum from our athletes on the sports field, as they're our secular soldiers - socialized as ready to die for the cause. It's fascinating the "take a knee" uproar is happening at the same time Burns' series is running, as disproportionately Black US soldiers were among the 10s of thousands who were killed, and now we see (primarily) Black football players getting no respect, still.

I do wish Burns was more radical, but that's not who Burns is, and that is fine. He can't do a strong political economy of war and the Military-Industrial Complex on "public" airwaves. As Manuel Castells, the Spanish economist of war said, "all wars are fought for economic reasons. Social and political ones have to be evoked to make (war) palatable."

Brendan says

A great compliment to The Best and the Brightest.

This book focuses less on the domestic politics behind the Vietnam War and more on the military/operational realities than confronted the US military, as well as delving into the corruption of the South Vietnamese regime that the US tried to prop up 18 different ways, coup after coup after coup.

The conclusion of the book is basically that if the Vietnam War was ever winnable, it was no longer winnable after 1965-66. The failure of the LBJ administration and the WWII generation of Army and Air Force officers to understand the true nature of the conflict led to a pointless, protracted war in defense of a hollow, corrupt South Vietnamese regime.

Mike says

Well, I've finally finished this epic. Now all I have to do is read it a second time, and maybe I'll be able to retain close to 50% of it. Robert Stone wrote that it belongs to the same order of merit as Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and I agree, but the contents of the two books are very different. *Dispatches* is like a painting that conveys the impression of being there, at the ground level, as things were ramping up in the late 60s. Sheehan's book is also impressionistic, somewhat, but offers different angles: historical, operational, bureaucratic, societal, personal. Sometimes it seems to be a work of history, sometimes a novel, and sometimes a biography of John Paul Vann. It begins with a description of Vann's funeral, on June 16th 1972: "Some had come because they had admired him and shared his cause even now; some because they had parted with him along the way, but still thought of him as a friend; some because they had been harmed by him, but cherished him for what he might have been." Afterwards, at the White House, Vann's family has to talk one of his sons, Jesse, out of presenting Nixon with half of his draft card.

If you had never heard of John Paul Vann before, you're not alone. So who was he, and why should you spend your time reading about him? A lieutenant colonel and later a civilian, he was first sent to Vietnam in 1962, before it was clear (or even conceivable to many, including Vann) that there would be a full-scale US air and ground war there. Some of the early sections describe his attempts to cultivate a man named Cao, a Vietnamese ARVN commander in charge of an area designated as IV Corps (the Mekong Delta); Vann is assigned to be Cao's advisor. What may at first have seemed to be personal qualities of Cao's (his unwillingness, for example, to engage the guerillas in battle) turned out to be representative of the ARVN's institutional problems; the same might be said of Paul Harkins, the US General broadly in charge of operations in Vietnam, whose capacity for self-delusion (including the ability to convince himself that the American/Saigon side had fared well at the battle of Ap Bac) was part of a pattern in the US military that discouraged self-evaluation and -criticism, and earned him the nickname among journalists in country of 'Colonel Blimp'. In Sheehan's telling, Vann was one of the few members of the military who saw clearly the foolishness of the US/Saigon strategy; he became gradually bolder (and strategic) in speaking about it, which made him something of a hero to many of the young journalists covering the war, including David Halberstam (who was known to have pounded his fist on a table at a reception and declared that General Harkins should be court-martialed and shot, and whose increasingly grim appraisals of the war for the *New York Times* bore Vann's influence- at one point, Sheehan refers to Halberstam as Vann's "instrument") as well as Sheehan himself. Vann also became close friends with Daniel Ellsberg, who would later leak the Pentagon Papers to Sheehan and attend Vann's funeral, though he and Vann had come to differ strongly over the war. Sheehan freely admits that his own criticisms of the war in the early 60s, as well as Vann's, were confined to the methods with which the war was being fought. When he stumbles across a monument in a hamlet dedicated to those 'killed by the puppet forces in 1955-1956', ostensibly years of peace in Vietnam, he is told that Ngo Dinh Diem, the US-backed leader in Saigon, had orchestrated a campaign against the cadres that Hanoi had left behind in the south after Geneva in order to foment revolution, and that the number of dead had reached into the thousands. He thinks nothing of it until much later. "In those years, like almost all Americans", he writes, "I saw nothing wrong with shooting Communists and their 'dupes.'"

Most Americans my age have grown up, I think, with a vague cultural understanding that the Vietnam War (also known as the Second Indochina War, or, in Vietnam, as the Resistance War Against America or the American War) was a mistake. But if someone had asked me why exactly it was a mistake, or what the nature of the mistake was, I'm not sure what my answer would have been. My impression from the book is that there are at least two good answers to this question, not mutually exclusive. One mistake was simply the broad foolishness of the strategy. The more-or-less indiscriminate bombing of hamlets and villages for example, aside from being morally wrong, was strategically stupid if the end goal was counterinsurgency (i.e., winning hearts and minds), and only reinforced the delusions of military leaders who believed that the 'numbers' demonstrated that the war was being won. The isolated outposts set up throughout the south, putatively a demonstration of strength for Saigon, were distributed American arms and then constantly ambushed and overrun, ensuring a steady flow of American weapons to the Viet Cong. At one point Cao, whatever his failings as a military commander, explains to Vann just one of the common-sense problems with what was called the Strategic Hamlet Program:

The religion of the majority of the Delta peasants was a meld of Buddhism, ancestor worship and animism- devotion to the spirits that were thought to dwell in the streams, rocks and trees around their hamlets. Cao...explained [to Vann] that many of the Delta farmers had comfortable homes by their standards. His government would profoundly anger the peasants...if it systematically destroyed their houses and made them leave their fields and the graves of the ancestors they worshiped.

The expectation that the average Vietnamese would side with and want to fight and die for General Edward Lansdale's creation in Saigon was just as foolish. Lansdale had helped to install a man named Ngo Dinh Diem, whose expectations of rule were dynastic. "His concession to modernity", Sheehan writes, "would be to call himself president." Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, became Diem's counselor. Nhu was "an

intellectual with a corrosive wit", and "responsible for the hodgepodge of ersatz Fascist and Communist techniques that the regime resorted to in its efforts at...control. Totalitarianism fascinated him." Steve Bannerr, I mean, Nhu- created an extralegal police force called the Republican Youth, also known as the Blue Shirts, to employ against enemies of the regime.

He was fond of convening mass meetings of his Republican Youth in Saigon...he would often arrive dramatically at the stadium or soccer field in a small French helicopter...Before Nhu gave his speech from a high podium, the assemblage of Blue Shirts would drop to one knee in obeisance, thrust a stiff arm into the air in the Fascist salute, and shout allegiance to the leader.

The bloodshed of 1955-56 that Sheehan discovered the monument to had occurred as a result of Diem's Denunciation of Communists Campaign, launched with US encouragement and support. The exact number of dead is unknown, but is in the thousands; arrests were often conducted at night, with men and women taken from their homes and either gunned down in the street for their families and neighbors to find the next day, or sent to 'reeducation' camps. Most of the Viet Minh sympathizers in the south, Sheehan writes, "...were not Communists. They were the non-Communist majority who had followed the Communists out of nationalism." Diem did not understand, furthermore, "...that if he persecuted the Viet Minh he would be persecuting a great mass of non-Communist Vietnamese who looked back on what they had done with the emotions of patriotism."

Another problem with the Diems was that they were Catholic. This was a problem because, Sheehan writes, "Vietnamese converts to Catholicism had been used by the French as a fifth column to penetrate precolonial Vietnam and then had been rewarded...for their collaboration. They were popularly regarded as a foreign-inspired, 'un-Vietnamese' religious sect." The significance of Nhu's flying a French helicopter would not have been lost on most Vietnamese. The US had announced, consciously or not, that they were picking up where the French occupation had left off. These were all strategic blunders that exacerbated the real problem, which Eisenhower apparently saw clearly enough in 1954: "...that if a free election should then be held in North and South Vietnam, Ho Chih Minh would win 80 percent of the vote as the father of the country in the eyes of most Vietnamese."

From the US perspective at the time, it was nearly impossible to imagine a homegrown national Communist movement independent of China and/or the USSR, Tito in Yugoslavia being an outlier that couldn't apply, or so the thinking went, to countries in southeast Asia. "Vann and the Americans of his time", Sheehan writes, "were mentally habituated to a globe halved between darkness and light." In other words, the explanation for the Communism of the North could only be that they were Soviet or Chinese dupes. But there was another, much older tradition in Vietnam: their long history of driving out more conventionally powerful invaders, from the Chinese to the Mongols to the French, by utilizing guerrilla warfare and the distinctive terrain of their country. The beginning of the war against the French was even marked by a surprise attack during the Lunar holiday of Tet (hint, hint). "The Vietnamese ideal became the intellectual and man of action who was also a great soldier, a mandarin-warrior", Sheehan tells us. "The Vietnamese had few gentle heroes like Lincoln. Their heroes, as a foreigner might notice after studying the porcelain figurines on shelves and tables in Vietnamese homes, were men on horseback or elephants, clad in armor, swords in hand." It was Ho Chih Minh, not the regime in the south (who were backed by and collaborated with the Americans, after all), who seemed to be following in this ancestral tradition that was profoundly important and a source of great pride to many Vietnamese. In Sheehan's telling, Ho Chih Minh became a Communist almost by accident. After WWI, Ho was unable to secure in Paris even an audience from any of the Allied victors to discuss autonomy within the French empire for Vietnam. "He discovered", Sheehan writes, "that Wilson's self-determination applied only to the Czechs and Poles and other white peoples of Eastern Europe...not to the brown and yellow peoples of Asia or to the blacks of Africa." Meanwhile, Ho found in the writings of Lenin what he took to be support for the independence of the victims of colonialism in southeast Asia. Yes, he would later appeal for help against the French from Stalin and Mao; but also from Truman and Churchill. The great struggle of his life was not for Communism, but for the independence of his country. It seems reasonable to

think that the same was true for many of his followers. Doug Ramsey, a friend of Vann's in Vietnam who was captured in 1967 and would be held until 1973, got a sense of this while talking with his captors:

"We have no fear that the present Chinese regime will attack us...", the youth said, "but if things changed in the future and a new government even dared to try..." He began to describe how the Vietnamese had smashed invading armies from China in centuries past.

Ramsey started to explain further why Americans saw the Vietnamese as pawns of the Chinese. Ramsey was wrong, they said. Just because China had become...socialist...did not mean that it could dominate Vietnam. The Vietnamese would not tolerate any foreign domination...least of all Chinese. [Ramsey] was fascinated that these products of a Communist movement, which denounced modern vestiges of 'feudalism', could identify so passionately with the figures of their feudal past...It occurred to him that Americans need look no further than this Vietnamese Communist enemy for the best possible native barrier against Chinese expansion into southeast Asia.

When the Viet Minh broke the will of the French at Dien Bien Phu, they solidified themselves as national heroes. Vann understood this at least by 1965 (and probably before), and understood that Saigon had to offer a better alternative, unless the endgame for the US was to rule in perpetuity as a colonial power over a hostile population. For Vann, this meant starting a revolution in Vietnamese culture; for this to happen, the US had to overcome what he viewed as its squeamishness about being seen as a colonial power and take the primary role in raising the standard of living in the country, instead of waiting around for the Vietnamese to do it. He wrote a letter to a friend in 1965 that seems to exemplify his thinking at the time. It was the closest he came, from what I can tell, to questioning the legitimacy of the war outright:

If it were not for the fact that Vietnam is but a pawn in the larger east-west confrontation, and that our presence here is essential to deny the resources of this area to Communist China, then it would be damned hard to justify our support for the existing government. There is a revolution going on in this country- and the principles, goals and desires of the *other* side are much closer to what Americans believe in...I realize that ultimately, when the Chinese brand of Communism takes over, that these 'revolutionaries' are going to be sadly disappointed- but then it will be too late- for them; and too late for us to win them.

* * *

One of the ways the book can seem somewhat off-kilter is that Sheehan takes much less time to describe the events from 1965-72 than he does 1962-65. In a way, it's almost all antecedent to the war we're familiar with from depictions in popular culture- *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, etc. I imagine there are books that are much more informative about the years from 1965 onwards. As for Vann, it becomes clear that this is not a hagiography. One of the other reviewers here says he is a 'jerk.' Maybe, although I've never understood why this should be a criticism of a book; I would say that we learn he had a dark side, like most people, and that I always find it more interesting to read the truth about someone's life, and more of an opportunity for self-reflection, than an idealized version. It might be fair to say that Vann found what he needed in war; it suited him; it satisfied his aspirational, physical, psychological, and even sexual needs. And if you feel like drawing a parallel with the US as a whole, well, I don't think Sheehan would discourage that.

Strangely, as Sheehan tells it, it was only after Tet that Vann came to believe that the war could be won, after all. Once again, he was out-of-step with the consensus. Part of this may have been psychological; the more time, energy and blood you invest in something, the more difficult it is to finally just let it go and admit that it will come to nothing. The Vann of '62 foresaw that full-scale American involvement would bring catastrophe; the Vann of later years had at the least reconciled himself to Westmoreland's strategy of

attrition. He became an enthusiastic proponent of the war, he met once with Nixon, and he advised Kissinger on how to break his friend Daniel Ellsberg's defense strategy while Ellsberg was getting ready to stand trial for having leaked the Pentagon Papers. He died in a helicopter accident in 1972. Part of the effect of the compression of the book's later sections is that it's difficult to tell how stark Vann's transformation really was; he was a compartmentalized person, and Sheehan understands that Vann had always shown him the parts of himself that he wanted Sheehan to see. A review of the book I found online talks about how Vann is 'Conradian', and it occurred to me that *Heart of Darkness* is really about an idealist who either changes or discovers what was part of his nature all along, depending on how you read it. This as I see it is an example of the ambiguity of most great art, and Vann's story contains this ambiguity as well. Sheehan, for his part, offers a final opinion: "He died believing that the war had been won."

Sa`a` says

If it is your first read no doubt, you will find the book a very good classic of American Military History and the involvement in Vietnam, many topics of which have become pivotal in addressing the topic since it was first published. However, for a new and a more contemporary read do have a pinch of salt handy for a much more deeper understanding of the message of the book. As tragic as it is we are all humans and can stomach somewhat of a reality.

Betsy says

This was one of the first books I read about Vietnam, and that was years ago. I suspect that should I read it now I would give it more stars. It seems hard to believe that the Vietnam War, which played such an important role in my young adulthood, has now been over for over 40 years. Also, "the domino effect" of losing the war never occurred. Unfortunately, we still have not learned all the lessons that war could teach us.

Rob says

It's surprising that such an idiosyncratic book has become the most popular history on the Vietnam War. While it offers some historical background, this isn't a general history of the war or of America's involvement in Vietnam. Some parts of the war are handled in great detail (the Battle of Ap Bac), while periods of the war (including its climax in '68-'69) are glossed over.

What Sheehan gives us the story of John Vann, a remarkably complex man who through sheer force of will and personality probably had more impact on the war than anyone outside Ho Chi Minh and the top brass in America. Sheehan uses his own friendship with the man to vividly capture Vann's charisma and energy, his way of getting to the truth of the matter and inspiring other men. Then Sheehan pulls the rug out from under our feet with the disclosure of the other side of Vann, one of deception and exploitation. How much the two faces of Vann - the heroic and the self-serving - represent the U.S. involvement in Vietnam is left up to the reader.

While this was a fascinating insight into the war Sheehan experienced, and a compelling biography of a tragic person, I'd hesitate to give it full marks as a history of the war. The author was too deeply involved in much of the story he covers, from his friendship with Vann in the early days of America's involvement, to the run-ins he and his friend David Halberstam had with the American authorities. I can't shake the feeling I

need to read more on the subject to correct for Sheehan's personal bias - moreso than is typical in the histories I read.

Molly says

A Bright Shining Lie by Neil Sheehan is a superior book that took 5 months, and every ounce of my concentration, to finish. I recommend it to anyone interested in American military history, specifically the Vietnam war, but warn you that you are in for a long, difficult read. Sheehan's research and writing style are without fault, I think. After all, he was there. The lynchpin of the book is John Paul Vann, a fascinating, complex man, who may have allowed the U.S. to win the war in Vietnam, had the U.S. listened to him at the time. The book is painful to read, not only because one knows how everything will end, both for the war, and for Vann himself, but also because one finds oneself immersed in a person for whom one feels empathy, yet simultaneously finds morally repugnant.

The book is also difficult to navigate (for me, anyway) because of the extremely large number of names and personages, many of them in a language altogether foreign to me, that one is required to remember. An index would have been good. However, I feel a great sense of accomplishment having finished the book, and am eager to learn more about the circumstances of the war.

David says

Sheehan's "...Vietnam" is certainly no disaster.
