

PRODIGAL SOLDIERS

HOW THE GENERATION OF OFFICERS BORN OF VIETNAM REVOLUTIONIZED THE AMERICAN STYLE OF WAR

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Historians usually discuss military history in terms of battlefield conquests. Very few focus on the day-to-day decisions and peacetime victories that shape the military organizations that fight those battles. James Kitfield takes this unique perspective in *Prodigal Soldiers*.² He uses defining moments from the lives of several military leaders to explain the metamorphosis of the American military from defeated pariahs in 1972 to heroes in 1993. He starts with Vietnam era catastrophes, moves on to a discussion of the “dark ages” which followed that era, analyzes the policy and doctrinal changes that carried us to the end of the eighties, and finally discusses the success of Desert Storm. He closes on a note of caution: the leaders of tomorrow must learn from the experiences of the last generation, or we are destined make the same mistakes.

Do not view *Prodigal Soldiers* as a work of military history. Instead, read it for its insightful analysis of military leadership. Kitfield shows that evolution is impossible when leaders do not have the moral courage to expose and to correct institutional weaknesses; defeat is inevitable when any military organization is unwilling to evolve. *Prodigal Soldiers* is a valuable addition to your professional reading list.

As advertised, *Prodigal Soldiers* explains “how the generation of officers born of Vietnam revolutionized the American style of war.” Kitfield supports this theme throughout the book with focused writing and tightly structured analysis. *Prodigal Soldiers* reads more like a novel than an academic treatise. Kitfield combines old-fashioned story-telling and blunt analysis in this tremendously readable illustration of the importance of moral courage to military failure or success. He takes you to the moment so that you experience it as it happens. For example: “Nights in the jungle were filled with such a cacophony of chirping, snuffling, and

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2. JAMES KITFIELD, *PRODIGAL SOLDIERS: HOW THE GENERATION OF OFFICERS BORN OF VIETNAM REVOLUTIONIZED THE AMERICAN STYLE OF WAR* (paperback ed., 1997) 1995.

buzzing that sometimes the loudest noise, the one that woke you up wide-eyed with a catch in your breath, was the sound of silence.”³

Kitfield illustrates his analysis with events from the lives of several top military leaders. General Barry McCaffrey receives the most attention, although Kitfield also highlights Generals Chuck Horner, Tom Draude, Mike Myatt, Jack Galvin, William DePuy, Colin Powell, and Admiral Stanley Arthur. Other analysts or historians may differ over which events really constitute turning points in this era of history. However, Kitfield’s selections support his analysis and place the reader in the moments that define this generation of officers.

The story begins in the Vietnam era. Kitfield resists the temptation to dwell on the major battles of that well-documented conflict. Instead, he describes unheralded events that were vitally important to the survivors so early in their military careers. These events later helped the future generals avoid the same errors in their own decision-making.

In Part I, the collected stories illustrate how doctrine and policy conflicts led to command and control failures, which in turn destroyed morale and integrity. When the United States first became involved in the Vietnam conflict, doctrine called for overcoming an enemy by overwhelming force. In other words, doctrine required that we would bring to bear massive quantities of troops and equipment until we crushed the enemy; we based all of our tactics and training on this doctrine. Contrary to doctrine, politicians in Washington only allowed the Vietnam conflict to proceed as a “limited war.” Political concerns overrode military concerns. As Kitfield demonstrates, the stage was set for failure.

Command and control failures flowed directly from the dissonance between doctrine and policy. While the Pentagon kept a tight reign on the scope of the conflict, General Westmoreland made company level command decisions from Saigon and would not allow local command discretion. For example:

Not only was Washington sending down detailed target lists, but they were also specifying the day and sometimes hour of attack, the types of weapons that could be used, in some cases even the *approach* aircraft could take to the target! If a mission was canceled because of factors that Washington had somehow over-

3. *Id.* at 88.

looked—like bad weather—then it could not be rescheduled without first clearing it with the Pentagon.⁴

The same tight grip on decision-making also affected operations in the bush and at sea. As the remote commanders were “blind to the realities of the field,” operations suffered. General Westmoreland kept increasing the number of troops in the field, thinking he could break the enemy’s will to fight. At the same time, he allowed political concerns to limit troop movements and operations. Meanwhile, the troops in the field saw the enemy’s tenacity firsthand, and were frustrated by illogical operational limitations. In this section, Kitfield also highlights how the rotation policy caused unit cohesion problems, and ineffective training brought unprepared soldiers to the battle—both with tragic results. By 1967, “the war and the way they were fighting it had simply ceased to make any sense. And in the vacuum of logic, a certain lawlessness had crept in.”⁵

Epidemic command and control failures effectively destroyed morale and integrity. In Kitfield’s words, “the first casualty of a war that made no sense was integrity.”⁶ Mid-level leaders struggled through a quagmire of moral ambiguity as they tried to comply with illogical orders from above without needlessly killing the people in their command. Staff officers developed the practice of reporting statistics “construed to show marked progress in a war where none really existed” in response to the distorted command emphasis on body counts.⁷ Officers in the field learned to develop their own tactics to survive. Sometimes this meant directly disobeying orders. One incident summarizes the depths to which the Army had fallen by 1970:

[T]he green officer had only just taken command of a platoon and had ordered some recalcitrant troops to join the unit on patrol or spend time in the stockade. Four of the men, who ran drugs for the unit and happened to be black, pulled their weapons and gunned the lieutenant down in front of the entire platoon.⁸

Fraggings, epidemic drug use, and rising racial tension grew out of the utter failure of leadership during the Vietnam era. By the end of Part I, the reader can plainly feel the frustration, at all levels, of having no moral

4. *Id.* at 46.

5. *Id.* at 82.

6. *Id.* at 84.

7. *Id.* at 73.

8. *Id.* at 121.

guidance. Morale is non-existent and accomplishing the mission is impossible.

Part II of *Prodigal Soldiers* takes the reader from the race riots of the early seventies to Desert One, the failed hostage rescue mission of 1980. During this period, the services also became an all-volunteer force. The reader follows the careers of Kitfield's focus generation of officers as their wartime wounds heal and they move into peacetime billets. They recognize the need for doctrinal change, realistic training, and public support. They try to incorporate the lessons learned in Vietnam, but rigid and narrow-minded leaders above them would have none of it. This is a depressing account of their repeated attempts to help their organizations move ahead despite frequently being slapped down for their efforts. Kitfield's narrative style is effective; you almost feel the sting of the slap yourself.

Part II illustrates how the senior leadership's rigid attachment to a misconstrued concept of tradition undermined integrity and subverted moral courage in the subordinate leadership. Decision-makers apparently believed that the tradition of loyalty to your service branch and your commanders meant that "bad news" could not be aired, even for the sake of fixing deeper problems. The leaders "still thought you could dictate readiness and morale . . . as if in punishing the officers whose units didn't measure up . . . you somehow got at the underlying problems, when what you really got were officers willing to bring you good news or none at all."⁹ In the context of evolution, moral courage takes at least two players: someone must have the idea and the courage to present it, and someone must be willing to hear the idea and implement it. By this time, the "generation of officers born of Vietnam" had only risen to battalion level command. They could see the problems and the solutions, but did not have the authority to do anything about it, except speak their minds.

In this part of the book, Kitfield emphasizes the evolution of today's doctrine, training practices, and command and control philosophy. Kitfield does a great job of setting the stage for today's focus on "jointness," and discusses how each service developed realistic training, such as Top Gun, Red Flag, and the Army's National Training Center (NTC). He also provides some short, but dramatic, leadership essays. One noteworthy account describes how, as a battalion commander in South Korea, General Powell ended the race riots in his command.¹⁰

9. *Id.* at 147.

10. *Id.* at 130.

In Part III, Kitfield continues the theme of introspection and evolution, from 1981 through 1986. The reader is finally treated to some successes, nicely contrasted to the failures so painfully described earlier in the book. In addition to realistic training, Red Flag and NTC created a new tradition of candor. Trainers and commanders concluded exercises with candid debriefings about battlefield decisions and actions. As Kitfield explains:

Though they did not yet realize it, [the] willingness of junior officers to openly question their superiors, and of superior officers to admit mistakes in front of their subordinates, was beginning to fundamentally change the culture of the Army. An organization that would once have considered such behavior little short of insubordination began to encourage self-criticism in an effort to get at the truth. Officers who thrived in that environment were those who rededicated themselves to learning their craft, who liked to get down and mix it up with the troops intellectually, and who led from the front physically.¹¹

All branches of the United States military enjoyed the benefits of this climate of candid self-analysis, and worked to apply the lessons they were learning to doctrinal and cultural change for the better.

In Part IV and the Epilogue, Kitfield relates events that happened from 1989 through 1993 back to those dark days of Vietnam. The Gulf War victory, in comparison, seems nothing short of a miracle. It was a highly successful mission, accomplished by an all-volunteer, well-trained, joint force. This portrayal is not hard to accept based on Kitfield's analysis of the preceding thirty years.

When he wrote *Prodigal Soldiers*, Kitfield apparently assumed his readers would already know of the events he describes. Whether he assumed too much or too little depends on who you think his intended audience is. It is certainly not readers just starting to learn about this period of history. Do not consider *Prodigal Soldiers* as a historical treatment; it is too superficial to serve that purpose. Instead, read it after a more in-depth study of modern military history, or as a supplement to your own military experience. The incident descriptions are no more than brief memory aids. They set the factual stage on which the analysis unfolds.

11. *Id.* at 311.

Readers should look elsewhere for tactical analysis or detailed documentation of the era.

Perhaps the intended audience is Kitfield's friends at the Pentagon. He writes with the air of a Pentagon insider, tossing general officers' names around like drinking-buddies, and peppering his narrative with language from inside the beltway. As the profiled leaders make their marks, you can almost hear the band playing Sousa in the background. Most likely, this book is intended for mid-level leaders who have done some studying on their own, and who want to learn more about military decision-making. Kitfield uses plain language throughout and does not pull punches about what he sees wrong with the decision-making process, so there is much to learn here.

While most military writers focus on dramatic battlefield events, Kitfield's perspective is refreshing. He connects the dots between the battlefield, the conference room, and institutional thinking. He puts events into historical context. For example, the Marine Barracks bombing in Beirut is portrayed as a basis for tough rules of engagement negotiations at joint planning sessions for Desert Storm, ten years later.

Kitfield's analysis is credible. He is the Pentagon analyst for *The National Journal* and is a contributing editor for *Government Executive* magazine. *Prodigal Soldiers* is based on years of close observation and, when necessary, criticism of defense department policies and decision-makers. The stories in the book come from personal interviews, newspaper accounts made at the time, and more in-depth books of other authors.

Tomorrow's leaders can take many lessons from the failures and frustrations analyzed in *Prodigal Soldiers*. Kitfield uses both positive and negative examples to show that military institutions benefit from cultivating leaders who recognize the need for change, understand and develop solutions, and exercise the moral courage to effect the needed changes. He also shows the danger of ignoring this lesson.

The reader will see many parallels to service in today's military. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Kitfield's commentary ends in 1993. Since then, several widely publicized incidents have highlighted the need for continued vigilance. The sexual harassment cases at Aberdeen Proving Ground and the charges against the Sergeant Major of the Army demonstrate that leaders cannot allow institutional values and leadership principles to drift into the background. Budget cuts show a lack

of public support for the military; this declining support is uncomfortably similar to the public attitude of the 1970's. At the same time, force reductions keep the zero defect mentality alive. Strength reductions force the services to cut good soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines from their ranks to meet congressional mandates. If the "zero defects" mentality becomes the rule of the day, leaders can forget about the self-analysis and honesty that has evolved at NTC and Red Flag. Without the ability to correct themselves, the services will begin to decay. Leaders will not be convinced of the need to change because no one will have the moral courage to point it out.

Most importantly, as Kitfield's focus generation retires, the United States military will become a peacetime force, with very few combat seasoned leaders. As world politics move into an era of peacekeeping, as opposed to war-fighting, the next generation must be ready to fight the conference room battles to prevent subjugation of command and control to political concerns. When recruits are issued "time-out" cards, leaders must stop and wonder whether we are providing the intensive training a person really needs to survive in combat. Questions like these will continue to come up; leaders must have the moral courage to confront them.

Prodigal Soldiers is a must-read for any military professional. As a compact summary of pivotal events between 1965 and 1993, the book pulls together the variety of military reading you may have done on this era. More powerfully, the book stands as an engaging treatise on military leadership, particularly as it highlights moral courage as a value.