

**A BETTER WAR:
UNEXAMINED VICTORIES AND FINAL TRAGEDY OF AMERICA'S LAST YEARS
IN VIETNAM**

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Scientists have proven the existence of synergism, whereby “the combined action of two or more substances or agencies achieve an effect greater than that of which each is individually capable.”² Lewis Sorley has proven the opposite—that two good ideas combined together can achieve a result with *less* effect than each is individually capable of. In his new book *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*,³ Sorley inartfully attempts to combine into one book what would have been excellent material for two separate books. The result is a book with an identity crisis, constantly fighting within itself to find its focus. At times the book seems to be a history of the last years of the Vietnam War. At other times, it seems to be a biography of the commander of the United States forces during those years, General Creighton W. Abrams.⁴ Unfortunately, neither subject matter comes out a clear winner, leaving the reader unsatisfied as to both.

A Better War is at its best when Sorley focuses on either the war or General Abrams. Sorley's discussions focusing on the last years of the war are particularly informative and thought provoking. As he points out in his

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2. WEBSTER'S II NEW RIVERSIDE DICTIONARY 698 (1984).

3. LEWIS SORLEY, *A BETTER WAR: THE UNEXAMINED VICTORIES AND FINAL TRAGEDY OF AMERICA'S LAST YEARS IN VIETNAM* (1999).

4. Although not obvious on its face, even the title of the book exemplifies this confusing battle for focus. At first glance, the title, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, seems to clearly indicate that the author: (1) wrote a book about the final years of the Vietnam War, and (2) for reasons the book will explain, believes that those years were fought as a “better” war than the previous years. Yet upon opening the book, the first thing one sees is a quote from Robert Shaplen, a correspondent for *New Yorker Magazine* during the war: “You know, it's too bad. Abrams is good. He deserves a better war.” *Id.* at unnumbered page following Table of Contents (quoting Robert Shaplen, *quoted in* Kevin Buckley, *General Abrams Deserves a Better War*, *N.Y. TIMES MAG.*, 5 Oct. 1969). One then begins to wonder if the book is actually about General Abrams and why he deserved a “better war.”

prologue, little is written about the last years of the Vietnam War, from the Tet Offensive of 1968 until the signing of the Paris peace accords in 1973. *A Better War* expertly fills that gap, detailing areas generally glossed over in other discussions of the war.⁵ For example, in the chapter on intelligence, Sorley describes the efforts of the United States to intercept and decode North Vietnamese messages passed along the Ho Chi Minh trail.⁶ He relates in an understandable and interesting manner the complexity of the North Vietnamese intelligence system and how the United States was able to break it. Sorley then analyzes and explains the tremendous value of this breakthrough—the ability for the United States to track and predict enemy movement along the Ho Chi Minh trail.⁷

Similarly, in various chapters describing military conflicts that took place during the last few years of the war, Sorley provides clear, interesting descriptions of on-going battles and their military significance. Each of these chapters provides helpful maps and descriptions, allowing the reader to easily visualize the conflicts. It is here, in describing military battles during the war, that Sorley shines. His background as an Army commander in Vietnam is evident, as he provides cogent descriptions that draw the reader in and describe the significance of different maneuvers, strategies, and tactics. In the chapter on the Cambodian incursion,⁸ before discussing the battle, Sorley spends time explaining the importance of cutting off the previously protected enemy base camps and supply lines located in Cambodia.⁹ Analysis such as this provides valuable context to understand the strategy behind the war we fought during those years.

Obviously, a book on the last years of the Vietnam War would not be complete without some discussion of the leaders during that time period. Sorley discusses several influential people during the time of the war, but focuses primarily on the leader of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General Abrams. When discussing General Abrams' reaction or conduct during a specific event in the war, Sorley rightly fits this information in as part of the war history he is writing. By citing several examples, Sorley paints a picture of the leadership skills and management style of the MACV commander during the war. For example, one of the first things

5. See, e.g., EARL H. TILFORD, JR., *CROSSWINDS: THE AIR FORCE'S SET-UP IN VIETNAM* (1993); MARK CLODFELTER, *THE LIMITS OF AIR POWER: THE AMERICAN BOMBING OF NORTH VIETNAM* (1989).

6. SORLEY, *supra* note 3, at 45-58.

7. *Id.* at 49.

8. *Id.* at 191-216.

9. *Id.* at 200-03.

Abrams did as commander was direct his subordinates to always provide him with bad news first during meetings, and only provide good news if there was time left over.¹⁰ Abrams also demanded that his command provide an accurate and balanced picture of their successes and failures. He insisted that any errors and bad news were to be reported and admitted as soon as possible.¹¹

Abrams's leadership style was to command with integrity, putting the mission first and his troops a very close second. His main objective was to have his troops ready to fight. If they were properly trained and motivated to fight, whether they happened to have shaved that morning or needed a haircut was not important.¹² Abrams was very concerned about the morale of the troops under his command, as evidenced by his statement that "the most powerful thing we've got here is the attitude of the Americans who are assigned here . . . if that ever deteriorates substantially, that'll be worse than any goddamn thing that Giap or any of the rest of them can think of."¹³ Abrams traveled extensively, visiting and interacting with his troops on a daily basis.¹⁴ By doing so, he set the example for his subordinate commanders. He empowered his subordinates to take care of their troops, with the concurrent expectation that they would carry out their responsibilities. As Abrams noted, "All of us [the military commanders], we've got to see that it is done right. That's what we stand for, and that's the way it's going to be."¹⁵ Sorley best sums up Abrams's leadership in Vietnam as that of "stewardship." As a leader, Abrams did the best he could with what he had to work with, and did it with selflessness, dignity, and integrity.¹⁶

When Sorley discusses General Abrams in the context of his position as MACV commander, the discussions fit nicely as one piece of the puzzle that is the history of the last years of the war. Sorley's analysis of the war, however, is soon overshadowed by his increasing focus on Abrams.¹⁷

10. *Id.* at 33.

11. *Id.* at 23-24.

12. *Id.* at 300.

13. *Id.* at 290.

14. *Id.* at 294.

15. *Id.* at 296.

16. *Id.* at 387.

17. One of the first symptoms of this changing focus is the inclusion of numerous direct quotes from Abrams. The quotes are occasionally interesting, and provide insight into the man and his thinking. However, the sheer number of quotes quickly becomes annoying and detracts from the discussion of the war. The reader soon begins to wonder if

When writing about Abrams, Sorley seems to lose the objectivity he initially displayed when discussing military aspects of the war. His uncritical support of Abrams begins to creep into his discussions of the war, undercutting his ability to accurately balance, analyze, and criticize events of the time.

From the beginning of the book, Sorley credits Abrams with bringing a new military strategy to the war, that of fighting “one war.” Under this concept, Abrams’s troops focused not only on military battles, but also on pacification¹⁸ and working with the people of South Vietnam to defeat Viet Cong guerillas.¹⁹ Sorley believes without question that Abrams’s shift in focus to the guerilla war ultimately defeated the enemy’s guerilla war effort and forced them to fight a conventional war.²⁰ Sorley goes so far as to harshly criticize the former MACV commander, General William C. Westmoreland for daring to suggest that Abrams’s shift in strategy was not fully responsible for the defeat of the enemy.²¹ Sorley’s desire to place all credit at Abrams’s feet ignores an excellent point made by Westmoreland and others. Abrams came to command shortly after the enemy’s Tet Offensive of 1968. There is no doubt, as even Sorley notes, that the Tet Offensive was a turning point in the war.²² The North Vietnamese suffered enormous losses, including the loss of a large majority of the guerilla fighters in South Vietnam.²³ By necessity, then, the North Vietnamese turned towards conventional warfare.²⁴ Not surprisingly, as they began to fight a war that fit more comfortably within the United States war-fighting strategy, the United States began to have more success fighting the war. The conventional war waged by the North Vietnamese required heavier logistics and supply lines, as well as more open maneuvering. These changes in the enemy’s war-fighting strategy provided a more target-rich environment for U.S. land and air forces to destroy.

17. (continued) Sorley included so many quotes to justify the amount of time he spent researching and listening to audiotapes. Sorley explains in his Acknowledgement that he listened to 455 tapes made of various meetings Abrams attended while in Vietnam. Based on these tapes, Sorley made nearly 3200 pages of notes. *Id.* at 390-91.

18. Pacification, or Vietnamization, was a program of working with the South Vietnamese population to provide programs of self-government, self-aid, and self-defense. The primary role of the military was to provide territorial security and protection from the Viet Cong. *Id.* at 63-64.

19. *Id.* at 18-19.

20. *Id.* at 30, 407-08 n.1.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 12.

23. *Id.* at 14; CLODFELTER, *supra* note 5, at 139.

24. CLODFELTER, *supra* note 5, at 139.