

John Paul Vann: soldier with rich vein of American patriotism

WASHINGTON — John Paul Vann was a brilliantly able, infinitely brave man, with a deep, almost primitive vein of American patriotism. He died as he would have wished — if he had to die at all, for he loved life — in the service of his country and giving aid to South Vietnam.

The helicopter crash that killed him came in the course of a routine trip taken to reorganize and strengthen the defense of Kontum. He had just scored another of his triumphs; for he had made a major contribution to the shrewd and courageous defense of this little town in the Vietnamese highlands. The failure of the North Vietnamese attack on Kontum once again made fools of all the prophets.

John Vann was also this reporter's friend; so this is a deeply felt personal loss, as well as a great national loss. Indeed, it is not a loss that is easy to write about. So maybe the best memorial to this man who deserved so well of the republic is to note that at long last John Vann is highly likely to be proved right this year.

He thought the war in Vietnam was worth fighting because he was convinced that defeat in Southeast Asia would be a disaster for the United States. He thought North Vietnam was worth defeating because he could not bear the prospect of South Vietnam under Hanoi's iron, murderous rule. Above all, he always thought this was a war that could be won — an almost unheard of view.

It is Vann's third, almost unheard of view that now seems so likely to prove out before long. Predicting battles before they are fought is worse than counting chickens before they are hatched. The coming battle for Hue may still upset every calculation. Yet the evidence to date is all the other way.

In the Hue-Quang Tri region, the enemy has expended many thousands of

men without any decisive result. A new enemy division has crossed the DMZ; but thus far, the South Vietnamese retain the initiative. At Kontum, again, the enemy has just suffered a sanguinary defeat, closing John Vann's career at a moment of victory against heavy odds.

The truly heroic South Vietnamese defense of An Loc has succeeded, although Hanoi spent three of the best North Vietnamese divisions trying to take the little town. Inside South Vietnam, in sum, the enemy's three main thrusts have proved horribly costly failures thus far. The odds are also heavy that they will continue to be failures.

In North Vietnam, meanwhile, President Nixon's bold program of port blockade combined with highly selective bombing is obviously beginning to have devastating effects. For example, Hanoi's stocks of oil fuel should be exhausted in under three months. You can also read the effects in the recent exchanges between Hanoi and Moscow, which are so openly bitter on Hanoi's side that they deserve separate analysis.

If anything, John Vann was even more astute about the enemy's problems than about our side's problems. We had a long evening together, for he liked to talk things out even after the kind of hellish day he had just had. He said history would show Hanoi had in truth made three dire mistakes, which he summarized as follows:

"The first was in 1965, when the United States intervened. If they had gone back to classical guerrilla war instead of pouring North Vietnamese big units into the south, God knows what we could have done. The second was Tet, which we've covered already. The third, I'm sure, will prove to be this offensive. The interesting thing is that each mistake essentially took the form of a decision to double Hanoi's bets."