

John Paul Vann: A military iconoclast leaves a legacy

2-20-72

WASHINGTON — The irony in last week's military funeral for John Paul Vann at Arlington National Cemetery was the prominence of cabinet members and four-star generals symbolizing the very establishmentarians whose bungling in Indochina he battled for a decade.

Like the funeral, many eulogies have distorted Vann's unique role in Vietnam. Hawks have painted him as a superpatriot, bravely but simplistically questing

after military victory. Doves have depicted him as a former critic of the war

somehow corrupted by power into embracing what had once disillusioned him.

The facts are dramatically different. Besides being one of the very few heroic figures to emerge from the war, Vann from the first to the last was a non-conformist critic of tragically mistaken policies that moved Saigon and Washington. At the end, performing essentially military duties formerly entrusted to a lieutenant-general, Vann had not changed his critical outlook as an obscure lieutenant-colonel a decade earlier. That hard, critical view is his legacy.

Avoided criticism

What changed was Vann's discretion. Although still outspoken, Vann realized in 1970 that Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon would sack him at the next outbreak. Knowing his influence would abruptly end if he became a dismissed rebel, Vann avoided public criticism. But talking privately to us late into the night at campsites in the Vietnamese wilderness, Vann left no doubt he felt anti-Communist forces in Vietnam had made a mess of it.

Most important, Vann deeply believed 50,000 American lives lost in Vietnam were tragically unnecessary. He felt that if President Johnson in 1965 had fixed as hard U.S. policy the prevention of a Communist takeover and nothing more, as few as 100,000 U.S. troops would have sufficed.

But that would have required immediate strengthening of the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) — in effect, Vietnam-

New Orleans States-Item

Rowland Evans

and

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ization four years before it came. As a lieutenant-colonel in the early 1960s, Vann urged arming ARVN with M-16 automatic rifles in place of obsolete M-1 carbines. The Pentagon refused, forcing ARVN to lag behind well-equipped U.S. troops, who then did most of the fighting — and dying.

More respectable

With the advent of Richard M. Nixon and Vietnamization in 1969, Vann's views became more respectable and his voice more powerful. But he criticized the slow U.S. troop withdrawal and argued unsuccessfully with Gen. Creighton Abrams and the Pentagon against keeping tens of thousands of American combat soldiers in a useless residual role.

His private ire in recent years was strongest against President Nguyen Van Thieu and his intimate relationship with Ambassador Bunker. Whereas the embassy in Saigon viewed Thieu as the best Vietnamese leader available to the U.S., Vann felt his political intrigues undercut the war effort. In official circles, he made no secret he felt Bunker was much too soft on Thieu.

Specifically, Vann never forgave Bunker for not fighting Thieu's imprisonment

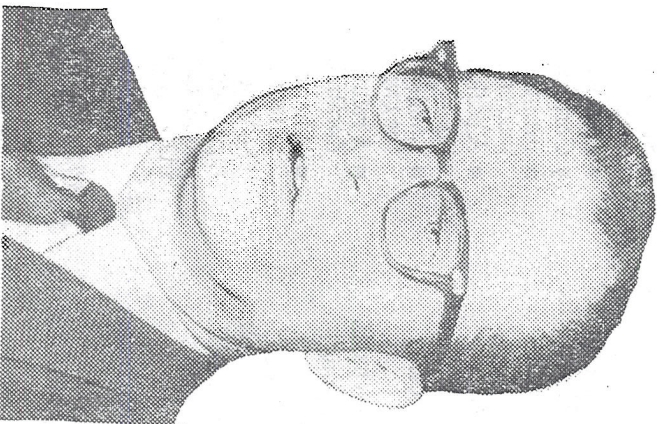
of opposition leader Tran Ngoc Chau ("one of the greatest men I ever knew"). To Vann, Thieu's peremptory personnel policies were steeped in crass politics and, therefore, damaged the war effort.

Vann often said U.S. military intervention in Vietnam should have been continuously supplied by sea rather than through the gargantuan logistical apparatus that overflowed South Vietnam. Acres and acres of now-deserted camps were seen by him as mute testimony to the stupidity of American military bureaucrats. He despised the armchair generals in their air-conditioned officers' clubs and loathed those Foreign Service officers assigned to the pacification program who valiantly tried never to hear a shot fired in anger. In return, they viewed Vann as a pop-off who did not play by the rules.

Beating the system

What dismayed them most was Vann's talent at beating the bureaucratic system. Against Gen. Abrams' wishes, he piloted his own helicopter — perhaps ensuring his death in battle but giving him a mobility unequalled among senior officials. Last year, he named a junior Foreign Service officer as his deputy for pacification, overriding determined State Department opposition.

It was this rare marriage of dedication and iconoclasm that made Vann indispensable. In assessing Vann's death, that is the essential point to be made, because the combination is so sadly lacking in the misery of Vietnam.



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