

Death of a Selfless Man

FOR THOSE OF US who knew and admired him, there was a profound sad symbolism in the death of John Paul Vann. This vital man suffered from no "death wish," but if he had to go, it was altogether fitting that he fall in the defense of Kontum, among the Vietnamese he scarified, defended — and loved.

In a different sense, John Vann was the incarnation of the war we didn't fight, the most fluent spokesman for those in the Johnson Administration who opposed the McNamara steamroller, the "Americanization" of the war, and urged an alternative course of action that finally became known as "Vietnamization."

HE, ALONG with the Australian Brigadier F. P. (Ted) Serong, Graham Martin, our brilliant ambassador in Thailand (now in Rome), and others, argued the folly of making Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian nations, into football fields where the United States could dispose of the enemy while the locals sat watching in the bleachers.

I recall an evening at Serong's house in Saigon in 1966 where Vann cut loose on the subject of helicopters. The gist of his violent diatribe was that the choppers, for all their utility, were a curse: that instead of clearing roads, riflemen simply flew over them then flew back.

If our sole objective was to catch the enemy's main force units, this had something to be said for it. But if you were interested in making the Republic of Vietnam a

viable entity, an equally significant objective was clearing the roads.

John Vann was convinced that, with decent training, leadership and equipment, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) could hold its own. Indeed, he literally dedicated his life to this proposition. The American passion for air and artillery enraged Vann.

The answer was to equip ARVN with adequate firepower, but somewhere in the Pentagon a computer must have decided that air and artillery were more "cost efficient" than M-16s. The contracts to provide ARVN with M-16s were not signed until the spring of 1968!

Meanwhile, John Vann, a prophet without honor in his own country, worked, stormed, and raged against the MACV leviathan (Military Assistance Command Vietnam).

NO INTELLIGENT MAN is utterly fearless, but John Vann had the incomparable courage of a man who believed in his mission. He died as he lived — he did not "go gentle into that good night."

John Vann's work in Vietnam exemplified the highest ideals of our Republic: a totally selfless commitment to the welfare of a small beleaguered nation off at the end of the world. I trust that President Nixon will memorialize our collective debt. The Presidential Medal of Freedom somehow seems more fitting than even the highest military decoration.