

Tenor of Our Times

Volume 8

Article 16

2019

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Recommended Citation

Womack, L. Olivia (2019) "Review of *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 8, Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol8/iss1/16>

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

By L. Olivia Womack

In his exploratory book, *A Better War*, Lewis Sorley compares the nature of the Vietnam War under General Creighton Abrams to his predecessor, General William Westmoreland, arguing that, 'a better war' was possible under the full direction of Abrams. From the beginning of his command in 1964 until 1968, the strategy used by Westmoreland had been primarily attrition warfare with 'search and destroy' missions and large-scale unit operations. Westmoreland focused on body count as a measure of the war, and repeatedly asked Congress for more troops. Abrams replaced Westmoreland after the Tet Offensive in 1968, and quickly enacted a contrasting war strategy. Abrams' 'One War' strategy focused equally on smaller unit 'clear and hold' missions, pacification efforts in rural South Vietnam, and the reinforcement of the South Vietnamese Army.¹ It became clear that Abrams "demonstrated his understanding of the true nature of the war" through this strategy.² Sorley proposes that Abrams' strategy was more effective and could have led to a victory for South Vietnam if that strategy had been employed from the start of the war. In fact, Sorley argues that by 1971 the South Vietnamese and American troops were essentially winning the war under Abrams' strategies. However, declining public opinion and waning political support in the United States led to the untimely withdrawal of U.S. troops and, ultimately, the collapse of South Vietnam.

The 'better war thesis' is the core of Sorley's work. It is a compelling argument that a winning outcome for South Vietnam was

¹ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Inc, 1999), 8-9.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

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possible, if only the strategy of General Abrams had been followed from the start. Sorley's thesis adds to the ever-expanding body of scholarship on the Vietnam War. By exploring the later years of the war, Sorley analyzes a part of the war that had been previously overlooked. Sorley has written four books on the later years of Vietnam, greatly contributing the body of scholarship about this time period, especially regarding the comparison of the strategies of Westmoreland and Abrams. These works include *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times*, and *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*. In his Acknowledgments, Sorley describes how he painstakingly collected the new and previously classified information that makes up the bulk of his work. As a veteran himself, Sorley used his military connection to gain access to what he calls "Abrams' Special Collection,": 455 tape recordings from U.S. Military Headquarters in Vietnam during the time of Abrams' command.³ This newly found primary source has illuminated the leadership of Abrams and influenced the way historians view this complex war. Most importantly, his analysis provides an original argument about the war's end.

A Better War and Sorley's historical thesis have changed the way many view the later years of the Vietnam War. Sorley's arguments are persuasive and "seductive," as one reviewer states.⁴ However, under closer inspection, it seems that Sorley's analysis is idealistic and overreaching at times. Many reviews dispute Sorley's claim that a better war was possible under Abrams. Gentile, in his review in *The National Interest*, contends that the Vietnam War was never actually winnable based on the costs Americans were willing to pay in blood

³ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Inc, 1999), 390.

⁴ Gian P. Gentile, "The Better War That Never Was," *The National Interest* 118 (2012): 90.

and treasure.⁵ Another review maintains that Sorley “ultimately does not convince” historians that, had Abrams been the General for the entire war, South Vietnam would have prevailed.⁶ Not only have scholars disagreed with Sorley’s thesis, but recent published works refute some of his key points. In an article for *The Journal of Military History*, Andrew Birtle rebuts the claim that Abrams’ tactics in Vietnam were more effective. Sorley claimed that a 1965 study of the progress in Vietnam had disagreed with Westmoreland’s ‘search and destroy’ tactics and thus revealed a need for Abrams’ new strategy. Birtle demonstrates that this 1965 study actually did the opposite as it conclusively supported Westmoreland’s tactics.⁷ Additionally, Graham Cosmas argues that there were more similarities than differences between the tactics of Westmoreland and Abrams.⁸

Despite the criticisms and rebuttals, *A Better War* made a major contribution to the study of the later years of the Vietnam War and the leadership of General Abrams. Sorley persuasively argues that there could have been a better war in Vietnam if only Abrams had been in charge from the beginning. Sorley conveys that under Abrams, the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had victory in sight, yet public support in the United States forced the withdrawal of U.S. troops that preceded the fall of South Vietnam. Whether a historian agrees with this thesis or not, most can agree that Sorley’s work has added greatly to the scholarship and has renewed the discussion of Vietnam War’s severe complexity.

⁵ Ibid, 90.

⁶ William J. Duiker, “Book Reviews,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 747-49.

⁷ Andrew J. Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: a Reappraisal,” *The Journal of Military History* 72, no. 4 (2008): 1213-1247.

⁸ Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*,

(Washington DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2006).