

Naval War College Review

Volume 46
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 30

1993

Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times

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Recommended Citation

Kinnard, Douglas and Sorley, Lewis (1993) "Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 46 : No. 4 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss4/30>

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Sorley, Lewis. *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992. 429pp. \$25

Creighton Abrams was one of a kind. Achieving his fame as a tank battalion commander in the 4th Armored Division in the European Theater in World War II, he subsequently became a household word in the mid-century American Army. His career spanned the years from just before that war on through the Korean and Vietnam wars. He was a strong-willed man and a daring leader in combat, yet he was a man of humility who disliked ostentation.

Lewis Sorley has given us a splendid biography of Abrams. He follows him from his boyhood in rural western Massachusetts, to the West Point of the early 1930s (where he was not exactly a model cadet), into the prewar Army. Commissioned in the cavalry, Abrams was by 1943 a twenty-nine-year-old lieutenant colonel commanding the 37th Tank Battalion, with which he subsequently came to fame in Europe.

In successive chapters the author details Abrams's Cold War assignments, which led to his first star and a Pentagon assignment in 1956 as deputy to the Army Reserve Components Chief. It was on this assignment that the reviewer, as a major in the Army Chief of Staff's office, first became acquainted with Abrams. He struck me as an officer who kept his own counsel and stuck to essentials. On the many occasions that I observed him making presentations to the Chief of Staff or Secretary of the

Army, he was always well prepared, poised, logical, pragmatic, and, in his own way, a consummate actor. In his personal memoirs, which cover a later period, General William Westmoreland tells of Abrams's tendency to lose his temper at conferences—shouting and pounding the table. I never observed this behavior, but my surmise is that it was on most occasions a dialectical stratagem used to either nail down or win a point.

The most important part of Sorley's book is Abrams's Vietnam experience. Sorley begins with a most interesting chapter on the period of the Vietnam buildup, during which Abrams served as Vice Chief of Staff. The key event in this episode was Lyndon B. Johnson's decision not to call up the reserves in July 1965. This, combined with the continuing crisis in civil-military relations brought about by McNamara's management mode, makes Abrams's experiences during this period relevant to what happened later, and at the same time offers valuable insight into the logistical (writ large) dimensions of the war.

During Abrams's subsequent service in Vietnam, he served as Westmoreland's deputy for about one year (which included Tet 1968), then succeeded Westmoreland as COM-USMACV from 1968 to 1972. It is in this section of the book that the author develops an antihero in the person of William Westmoreland. To wit, Sorley quotes Abrams saying shortly before his death, "Nobody will ever know the goddam mess Westmoreland left me in Vietnam."

Abrams's main task as COMUS was to extricate the American expeditionary force at the same time that the burden of the war was shifting to the South Vietnamese. In his first year or so, he moved his forces away from an enemy-oriented strategy toward one that focused on the security of the friendly population and the neutralization of the Viet Cong infrastructure. He probably did as well as any commander could have, implementing a policy that was (despite all the rhetoric involved) to cut and run by 1972. In fact, there was no other policy possible, given the lack of support at this stage, for this tragic and unnecessary war, that had, in any case been lost on the American home front at Tet 1968.

One of the important aspects of Abrams's service in Vietnam, as the author develops it, was his generally good relations with the press, in contrast with Westmoreland's stormy experience. As Sorely sees it, "the answer was simple. He wasn't trying to sell anything, claimed nothing, predicted nothing, and treated the press with respect and candor." This relationship is a significant aspect of this or any modern war and will be covered authoritatively in William Hammond's second volume of his Vietnam classic *The Military and the Media* (Army Center of History), long delayed but, one hopes, forthcoming soon.

The major fault of *Thunderbolt* lies in the author's negative depiction of Westmoreland without any counterbalancing material. Westmoreland

followed the policy guidance he received as he interpreted it. His command in Vietnam was largely before Tet 1968, after which everyone saw things differently. We are all children of our own times, and when Abrams commanded, the policy and situation were totally different. Therefore, it is difficult to compare the two commanders, and to do so is unfair unless one provides the context as it existed in Westmoreland's tenure as COMUSMACV. Westmoreland, by the way, deserves a new biography himself, one that is both objective in outlook and analytical in style.

There is much more in this book than can be covered in the course of a review. For example, Abrams's actions with the Air Force, Navy, and Marines, and his thoughts about them in the Vietnam setting, are both interesting and provocative. The Green Beret murder case is discussed from Abrams's perspective. My own view is different. I think this was an occasion in which Abrams was guided by strong emotions, and his actions were both self-defeating and counterproductive on the national scene.

The author also adds insight into the three major military actions during Abrams's tenure (i.e., the Cambodian Incursion of 1970, Lam Son 719 of February 1971, which like all failures seems to be of ambiguous parentage, and the Easter Offensive of 1972).

The book is enlivened by a host of colorful characters: Kissinger, Haig, Melvin Laird, and Bruce Palmer, to name a few.

In aggregate, the book's treatment of the principal subject is noncritical, with only occasional allusion to his limitations. This is not an unusual fault of a contemporaneous historian. All in all, *Thunderbolt* is an outstanding piece of work. It is well researched, nicely written, and likely to remain the definitive work on this major leader of the American Century.

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Bland, Larry I. and Stevens, Sharon Ritenour, eds. *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall Volume 3: The Right Man for the Job, December 7, 1941–May 31, 1943*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1991. 772pp. \$45

Crosswell, D.K.R. *The Chief of Staff: The Military Career of General Walter Bedell Smith*. Conn.: Greenwood, 1991. 464pp. \$55

Wyant, William K. *Sandy Patch: A Biography of Lt. Gen. Alexander M. Patch*. New York: Praeger, 1991. 249pp. \$49.95

In retrospect, fifty years after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, American success in World War II appears to have been a foregone conclusion. Once the nation mobilized its vast reserves of manpower and industrial might, victory seemed somewhat assured. The reality was actually much different, but seldom in this country's history has the United States been blessed with such an array of military talent as in the period of

1941–1945. Two recent biographies and the publication of George C. Marshall's public papers profoundly illustrate the complexities of joint operations and coalition warfare that ultimately led to decisive victory in World War II.

Perhaps no soldier contributed more to American success than Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall. Heralded by Winston Churchill as the "organizer of victory," Marshall assumed his office on the day Hitler invaded Poland. In volume three of *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, editors Larry Bland and Sharon Ritenour Stevens focus on the first year and a half of the war. Published under the auspices of the George C. Marshall Foundation, the current volume does not seek to publish the records of the Office of the Chief of Staff but only those papers written by Marshall himself. The result is a compilation of 632 documents, 46 illustrations, and 8 maps that reveal the intricacies of joint and combined planning in a wartime environment.

The Marshall who emerges from these pages is an officer who is aware of the enormity of the task before him. As Marshall wrote to a comrade in 1943, "I am naturally deeply interested in you and your career, but I am much more interested, through necessity, in the development of the fighting spirit in our Army." Ever conscious that the pace of modern war had increased the burdens on leaders of all ranks, Marshall remained convinced that highly efficient and energetic leadership was essential to