

Sorley, Lewis. *A Better War?: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Viet Nam*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Historian Lewis Sorley is a third generation graduate of West Point with a doctorate from Johns Hopkins. His two decades of military service included teaching posts at the Army War College and West Point. In *A Better War* he provides us with a clearly-written and well-documented study of the last years of the US presence in South Viet Nam under the leadership of General Creighton Abrams, who succeeded William Westmoreland as US commander in 1968. (Sorley has already served Abrams well in his much-admired 1992 biography *Thunderbolt*.) Some of the most important events and processes of the entire war took place under Abrams' post-Tet command. By then, however, US media concern with Viet Nam had declined and become even more ritualized. Thus, most of the limited attention Americans give that conflict focuses on the period from the Johnson escalation to Tet (1965-68). Thereafter, the story quickly descends to how American extricated itself from the "unwinnable" war. Drawing on much material only recently available, Sorley offers a powerful corrective to this distorted and deceptive image. He calls our attention to truths that are unfashionable, little-known or quite forgotten. And he effectively reveals Creighton Abrams as one of the nation's finest officers, a commander who truly deserved "a better war."

Besides Abrams, the heroes of the account are Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and Saigon CIA chief William Colby. This impressive triumvirate all shared a "one-war" approach to the struggle. With their support Abrams made security for the civilian population a top priority, replaced massive sweep operations with clear-and-hold tactics, dumped the corrupting body counts, improved the equipment and training of the South Vietnamese army (ARVN), and decreased the destructiveness of US firepower in civilian areas. Thus, Sorley gives us a well-drawn picture of what the war should have and could have been like years earlier. But these sensible and efficacious reforms were occurring in the midst of the unilateral US drawdown of forces. Abrams' army was melting away under his feet.

Abrams understood that, although the South Vietnamese could not have defeated Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive without US air support, this support would have availed little if ARVN had not stood firm. Sorley shows that by 1973 the south was well able to stand against the communists, provided it could count on continued help from the US (as the South Koreans and Israelis do, for example). In fact Sorley, like Abrams, is convinced that the allies had won the war as far back as the Cambodian Incursion of 1970. The VC were finished. Then in the 1972 Easter Offensive the PAVN took its best shot -- and failed.

There are also villains in the book: Westmoreland of course, but also Clark Clifford and Averell Harriman. Sorley is so right about Harriman, a major conspirator of the Diem debacle and the real father of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. One is tempted to say that all Sorley's evaluations of the better-known figures are just; he even provides an insightful estimate of President Thieu. There is perhaps one exception: with all his undoubted faults, William Westmoreland did labor under unprecedented and ultimately disastrous

constraints emanating from the White House basement. But the general's perplexities evoke scant sympathy from Sorley.

In his summation, Sorley explains why, if South Viet Nam was in such good shape by 1972 with the failure of both the VC and the PAVN, it still went down to ignominious defeat. Of the many causes of this lamentable and preventable denouement, Sorley emphasizes limited competence in the highest levels of the Southern army and the failure to close the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But above all it was the moral and physical effects of being openly abandoned by their US allies that sank the South Vietnamese, undoing all of Abrams' intelligent and fruitful efforts.

This excellent book might do a great deal of good. So few Americans even (or especially) today grasp the big lesson of the Viet Nam War: however expansively and destructively, the Americans and their allies totally defeated the vaunted Communist People's War strategy. Yet the effects of Sorley's book may be limited because, as he perceptively and disturbingly reminds us, it was necessary that the South Vietnamese lose in order to preserve the self-esteem of a huge flock of honking pundits, academics and politicians. In any case, *A Better War* deserves a very wide audience, and certainly belongs in every collection, however modest in size, of works not only about Viet Nam but also about the neo-Clausewitzian trinity of warfare, politics and leadership.

Anthony James Joes
Saint Joseph's University