

Dodging lies and bullets in Vietnam

A BRIGHT SHINING LIE: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam. By Neil Sheehan. Random House, \$61 pp., \$24.95.

By ROBERT DERWAE

The Vietnam War, in all its maddening ambiguity, is an abiding national obsession. The profusion of articles and books about the war is proof of its power to simultaneously haunt and fascinate and yet, oddly, it seems the more we learn the less we understand. Questions that were once rhetorical now beg for responses and the pool of ready answers has evaporated.

Anyone interested in coming to grips with the war finds that the better and more popular books about Vietnam tend to fall into two broad categories. They either take the sweeping, historical "macro" view typified by Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam* and George C. Herring's *America's Long War*, or the "micro" view of the memoir or narrowly focused study represented by Philip Caputo's *Rumors of War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*.

These complementary perspectives possess virtues and unique insights, but they offer pictures that are necessarily incomplete.

A new and remarkable contribution to the literature of the war skillfully combines the two approaches in a way that's as absorbing as a first-rate historical novel, with no sacrifice of scholarship. Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* is the astonishing story of a courageous American warrior, who spent the better part of a decade fighting the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese and obdurate American leaders.

But as its bulk would suggest — the book contains over 300 pages — *A Bright Shining Lie* is much more than simply a topography of a dynamic swashbuckler who dared to challenge the system of which he was a part. Vann's story is the frame which supports and gives shape to Sheehan's impressively detailed and critical appraisal of the American military involvement in Vietnam.

The well-documented, flowing account describes how the tragedy was fueled by Cold War fears, professional and institutional arrogance, rampant corruption, willful deception, cultural ignorance and plain old-fashioned stupidity. And the sins were committed by everyone, civilians and

military, Vietnamese and American.

Sheehan artfully draws us into the world of the charismatic Army lieutenant colonel the way he was drawn in as a young UPI correspondent when he first met John Vann in 1962. We see Vann, then serving as the senior military adviser to the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam's (ARVN) 7th Division in the northern Mekong Delta, as an astute and fearless leader, eager to win the war and outwardly optimistic.

But his official reports expressed concern about the will of the South Vietnamese soldier to fight, the reliability of Vietnamese military commanders (whose principal responsibility was to protect the insanely corrupt Diem regime from coup) and the wisdom of waging a war of attrition. The commanding general, Paul Hawkins, ignored Vann's constructive criticisms; the order of the day was to accentuate the positive and suppress the negative in reports that read as if they'd been written by an investment counselor. True, the casualty of war, died the day the war in Vietnam began.

Out of frustration, Vann went public with his negative appraisal after the disastrous and fateful battle of Ap Bac, the first major conflict of the war to expose the intractable failings of the ARVN.

By sharing his thoughts with reporters (including Sheehan and New York Times correspondent David Halberstam, who wrote a profile of Vann in 1964 for *Esquire* magazine), Vann educated a generation of war correspondents on his minority viewpoint of the war, and at the same time appeared to place his military career in jeopardy.

The journalists judged his outspoken criticisms — the description of the war as "a bright shining lie" was Vann's — to be admirable acts of moral courage. When he chose retirement from the Army in 1963 they viewed his renunciation of a general's star as a heroic protest against the mismanagement of our dirty little war.

But as Sheehan unravels Vann's background — in the process revealing the staggering military ethos that developed out of World War II and which contributed to America's hubris in Vietnam — it becomes clear that the legend of John Vann was a papier-mâché image with a dark, empty space inside. While he possessed physical and moral courage, he hadn't given up what he loved most, the



John Paul Vann, center, with Dan Ellsberg, right, and an unidentified Vietnamese official.

Army, to protest the fabrications and delusions of the war.

With the deftness of a master storyteller, Sheehan teases the reader along before finally disclosing, far along into the book, a despicable crime for which Vann had almost been court-martialed and which would have prevented him from ever being promoted to general.

After an unsatisfying stint in private industry, Vann returned to Vietnam in 1965 as a civilian employee of the Agency for International Development. (The Army wouldn't have the maverick back.) He worked his way up through the ranks, finally receiving the unprecedented appointment, in 1971, of military commander of II Corps, the most important of the four corps regions in Vietnam. With a brigadier general as an assistant, he finally had the level of command and authority to put his ideas into action.

In an ironic twist of fate, disillusionment with the progress of the war began growing by leaps and bounds after the Tet offensive of 1968. Thus, by the time Vann took the command he'd always wanted, he was among only a few who believed "Vietnamiza-

tion" — the phased reduction of American troops coupled with a transfer of fighting responsibility to the ARVN — was the road to success.

He died in a helicopter crash in 1972, vainly trying to make a concept he'd helped formulate work. In a few short years he'd been transformed from a man ahead of his time to a man the times had passed by, unable to redeem a decade's worth of effort.

While the ballad of John Vann is the book's linchpin, the supporting cast of characters reads like a "Who's Who" of the era. The enlightening vignettes of the greater and lesser lights add a compelling human dimension to the history of our sad involvement in Vietnam and add drama in a way that sustains our interest even though we know how it's all going to end. In depicting both the light and dark side of Vann's character and the benighted leadership that was the norm during the war, Sheehan has brilliantly illuminated a shadowy corner of America's closet with his bright shining light of a book. Watch the rats scatter.

Derwae, a free-lance reviewer, served in Vietnam with the U.S. Army in 1970.