

Where Myth Trumped Truth

VIETNAM CHRONICLES: THE ABRAMS TAPES

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WE HEAR often about "the fog of war," referring to the confused circumstances of battle, but the phrase can easily apply to misconceptions and confusion on the home front as well. During the Iraq War,

for instance, we have seen the media rush from one extreme to the other, offering both dire reports filled with pessimistic analysis and upbeat accounts heralding democracy triumphant. It is hard to know what the reality is at any given moment.

The Vietnam War suffered famously from such home-front confusion, and from policy confusion too. Thus "Vietnam Chronicles" is especially welcome—for what it

tells us about Vietnam, of course, but also for what it says about the myth-making and misperceptions that surround any war. The book consists primarily of recently declassified transcriptions of the weekly intelligence updates at U.S. military headquarters in Saigon—officially, at Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

The dominant figure is Gen. Creighton Abrams, who took command of MACV in the spring of 1968, following the tenure of Gen. William Westmoreland. Lest we forget, 1968 was a watershed year in Vietnam, although not in the way it is usually portrayed. The Tet offensive, in January, was a devastating military defeat for the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. But it turned out to be a psychological victory, thanks to the gloomy way the battle was reported in the U.S. press and received by members of the American elite, who were surprised that the enemy was in a position to launch an offensive in the first place. Post-Tet, many of our political leaders—not to mention Walter Cronkite—made up their minds about the war, believing, with Robert McNamara, that it was "unwinnable."

Still, the war went on for another seven years. During the time that Abrams was in command—1968-72—the tide turned steadily against North Vietnam. What we observe in "Vietnam



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less to say, such intelligence would be of help in Iraq, for monitoring insurgent forces.) We see a series of North Vietnamese offensives fizzle out—until North Vietnam finally abandons Tet-type attempts to foment a general uprising in the South. By the time Abrams left Vietnam in 1972 to become Army chief of staff, the war had essentially been won.

But then we proceeded to throw it all away. As circumstances improved in-country, home-side support declined.

The antiwar movement went from strength to strength, undermining what pro-war political will remained. Even as our combat forces began to withdraw, Washington slashed the funds that would have helped the South Vietnamese consolidate their victory.

Little wonder, then, that a sense

and after an invasion by the North with 18 divisions, which encountered a South Vietnamese army that never received the U.S. air support that had been promised at the time of America's withdrawal.

Those in the field understandably felt that they had given a good account of themselves in the war—but that, ultimately, America had abandoned the mission. That the enemy lost virtually every major military engagement against U.S. forces was "irrelevant," as North Vietnamese Gen. Giap later noted, in light of the political attitudes in Washington.

Over the years, we have had much talk about the "lessons of Vietnam." Among the real ones are: (1) Don't let a war go on so long that congressional and public support dwindles; (2) don't make cheery public statements that lead to false expectations and public surprise—so that a colossal defeat (like Tet) gets transformed into a political victory for the enemy; and, not least, (3) don't necessarily believe press accounts on how well or how badly a war is going.

Mr. Schlesinger was secretary of defense after the end of the U.S. combat role in Vietnam (1973-75).

Chronicles" is the actual progress of the war. Though only students of military history will wish to plow through all the detail, anyone seriously interested in understanding war—any war, including the current one—will want to sample the transcripts, not least for their vividness, real-time drama and strategic insights.

A Sense of Foreboding

Abrams (who died of lung cancer in 1974) was unquestionably a great military commander. In these recordings, his personality comes through—thoughtful, far-sighted, wide-ranging, with an explosive and amusing conversational style. Most important, the tapes show how he altered the war's basic strategy, setting aside Westmoreland's big-unit operations and concentrating instead on establishing village security, rooting out the enemy infrastructure, disrupting its logistics and destroying its pre-positioned supplies. Above all, he focused on training the South Vietnamese military and the South's regional and provincial forces.

In these efforts, Abrams was helped immeasurably by the improvements in intelligence that permitted us to monitor the infiltration pipeline from North Vietnam, including the "rank fillers" sent down from the North to fill out the supposedly indigenous Vietcong units. (Need-

of foreboding can be heard in these transcripts. Yes, the military balance was improving, regional forces were increasing their hold on the countryside, the Vietnamese army, with U.S. air support, was proving itself able to stand up to the enemy. And yet U.S. political support was not sufficient. The military men reflect on the press accounts of the war, which regularly undercut their efforts, on the negotiations in Paris, on the attitudes in Congress. Collectively these outside forces are referred to as "the umpires."

Post-Tet Attitude

Early on, Abrams comments on the umpires' post-Tet attitude: "Whenever this command goes out to explain how it did something well, they're calling you out before the throw is made to the plate.... The umpire—represented by the news bureau chiefs, he's swinging his thumb over the shoulder and, hell, the left fielder still hasn't thrown the ball. It's just that you started for home. And he's calling you out, by God, before the throw is made. That's the game we're in!"

To be sure, South Vietnam ultimately fell, but only after the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces; after Congress, in the summer of 1973, prohibited any use of U.S. military forces "in or over the states of the former French Indochina"; after Congress began drastically to cut aid;