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**Journalistic
Distortion: Neil
Sheehan's Portrait
of the Vietnamese
in A Bright Shining
Lie (1988)**

Nguyen Manh Hung

Neil Sheehan's **A Bright Shining Lie** (hereafter referred to as *Lie*) has been well received by the American press. Any book that is bestowed with a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award must be perceived as outstanding journalism. Outstanding journalism on major historical issues, however, should

standards of scholarship. Sheehan's award-winning book is the product of a long-held passion plus sixteen years of research. It reflects the author's fascination--some would say obsession--with the enigma of John Paul Vann together with the lasting impact of Sheehan's first impressions of Vietnam and the Vietnam War as a young reporter in the early sixties--impressions later embellished, but not reconsidered in the light of subsequent experience or research. The result, *Lie*, is a fascinating story told with both reportorial skill and personal intensity.

Sheehan uses Vietnam as a background to tell his story of the controversial and legendary John Paul Vann as well as the politics of

crusade. Sheehan's exhaustive investigation of Vann's personality and behavior, however, is not matched by his understanding of the intricacies of Vietnamese history and politics. As a result, there are a number of significant oversimplifications and distortions which should not go unexamined as the book becomes enshrined as one of the most readable accounts of the Vietnam agon.

Lie rehashes many of the old stereotypes about the Vietnam War begun by the cynical British journalist Graham Greene in *The Quiet American* (1955), a roman a clef written during the depressing years immediately following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In Greene's scenario, the war was fought between heroic communists—seen as true Vietnamese patriots—against cowardly troops of a corrupt government aided by well-intentioned, but naive, Americans. David Halberstam of the *New York Times* received his own Pulitzer prize for writing about the war ten years later in the same vein (*The Making of a Quagmire*, 1965). Sheehan's Lie merely adds a new twist to Halberstam's study of Vietnam and Vann: in the more recent account, the American hero, John Paul Vann, was not naive; he was deceitful. By implication, for Sheehan's narrative

becomes the essence of America's Vietnam adventure.

Like many Americans, Neil Sheehan has difficulty understanding the complexities of Vietnamese history and politics. Nor does he seem to care about the predicament of those decent Vietnamese who fought on the losing side. I will limit my discussion to three issues: Sheehan's portrayal of Vietnamese troops on both sides; his view of the Vietnamese leaders—North and South; and, finally, his way of handling selected "facts" of Vietnamese history.

Communist vs ARVN Combatants

Although Sheehan finally discovered that his former hero, John Paul Vann, was an immoalist, he gives credence to all of Vann's judgments about Vietnamese soldiers—communist and non-communist—and accepts, uncritically, Vann's interpretation of the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963. Sheehan holds a grudging respect for the Vietnamese communists, an admiration for American bravery, but utter contempt for the South Vietnamese government and its soldiers (the ARVN). He lets his prejudices loose in Book III of Lie where his narrative is entirely biased against the South.

While Sheehan devotes his criticism mainly to the politicians and military brass, he shows a great deal of sympathy for the American troops. His American soldiers and advisors are invariably well-intentioned and courageous; very few of them seem to make mistakes. Although Lie ends with Vann's death in 1972—which was well after many American draftees had lost their stomach for war and their morale and behavior were less than exemplary—there was no mention of demoralization, fragging, and drug use among American troops. (These developments occurred after Sheehan's brief Vietnam tour, but should have been known to him through written reports, or through the WGBH historical series on Vietnam aired for the first time in 1983, a series for PBS which gave much prominence to troop drug addiction and to low morale.)

The Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops, in Sheehan's Lie are always heroic, well-trained, and well-led. There is no mention of the impact of a combination of communist propaganda, threats, and various other devices of social control employed by the communists to command obedience. There is no mention of defeat, blunder, fear, and desertion as described in the writings of disillusioned communists who defected to the GVN side, such as Kim Nhat's *Ve R* (Going to the

Headquarters, 1968) and Xuan Vu's *Duong Di Khong Den* (Road to Nowhere or Crossing the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1973). Sometimes Sheehan was so carried away that one wonders whether he based his story on primary research or from communist propaganda. Here is his vivid description of the heroism of the Vietcong who fought against the ARVN tanks during the Battle of Ap Bac in 1963:

Squad leader Dung [one wonders how Sheehan managed to know the name of this lowly communist soldier] stopped the machines. He leaped from his foxhole and stood up right in front of the metal beasts. Their ugliness was part of the terrifying effect these evil contrivances had always had on him and his comrades. The fore ends angled down into broad snouts with popeyes on top where the two headlights for night driving protruded. Yanking a grenade from his belt, he pulled the pin, cocked his arm, and hurled it at one of the monsters. The grenade landed on top of M-113 and erupted with a great bang and flash. Carried beyond their fear by his courage, the men of his squad abandoned the protection of their foxholes to join him, throwing their grenades at the carriers too. A guerrilla

over on the left named Son also sprang up on the dike and shot a rifle grenade down the line at the armored tracks. From where he was lying on the paddy, Bowers saw two of the grenades burst in the air just above the carriers. Dung was apparently unhurt, but three of his comrades were killed, and all the other members of his squad were wounded by bullets from the armored tracks or by shrapnel from their own grenades. Whether the shrapnel also killed or wounded any more men aboard the machines is unknown. It did not matter. The deafening clap and the flare of the exploding grenades were enough to shatter what spirit the crews had left. [ARVN Captain] Ba allowed the driver of his carrier to back up, and the one of two vehicles persevering with him followed. The assault had failed. Ba was too stunned and emotionally drained to organize another attack. His crews were so demoralized they would not have obeyed him had he tried to do so. Mays made two last attempts with Cho's carrier to turn the guerrillas' flank by killing the machine-gun crew on the right end. Both sorties were driven back with the loss of two more .50 caliber gunners and riflemen. It was about 2:30 in

the afternoon. The Vietcong had accomplished the impossible.
(257)

The super-human efforts of the Vietcong and the cowardice of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in this passage go beyond Ap Bac; they are symbolic for Sheehan of the total performance of both groups during the war. Sheehan is unreserved in his contempt for government soldiers and officers. While he describes communist troops as "Vietnamese" soldiers, he labels the army of South Vietnam "Saigonese soldiers" who were "paid" by the Americans. In Lie, Ap Bac is a microcosm of their incompetence and cowardice.

What really happened during the battle of Ap Bac and what could be learned from it will remain disputed for quite some time. Sheehan's detailed narrative seems to be based totally on Vann's version. Between Vann's military "genius" and communist "heroism," it was easy and convenient to blame the disaster on the South Vietnamese. General Huynh Van Cao is singled out as a major culprit whose personal cowardice and political aspirations prevent him from conducting the battle properly. Cao has told me that he had five American advisors before Vann (who worked with him for only a few months); Vann was the only

advisor of the six who talked ill of Cao. By the time of Ap Bac, Cao had left the 7th division which was taken over by Bui Dinh Dam. He maintains that Dam did not listen to his advice which was to lure the guerrillas out into the open before surprising them with the M-113's, and that every battle should be fought in daylight and end before nightfall. Ap Bac was such a debacle because the reverse of these tactical principles was followed. There are

suitable all the time, or whether a more cautious approach that requires patience and perseverance would have succeeded over time. In addition to Ap Bac, Sheehan ventured to cover bigger campaigns of the Vietnam War such as the siege of Khe Sanh, the Tet offensive of 1968, and the Easter Offensive of 1972.

Of the Eastern Offensive, Sheehan focused on the battle in the highlands, notably the scene of cowardice at Tan Canh and confusion at Kontum where Vann, we are told, singlehandedly saved the day. While Sheehan dismissed Vann's claim of personal heroism in most major events



*ARVN Machine Gunner in Action, 1968
(Indochina Archive)*

other versions of Ap Bac; one which challenges Sheehan's recollection was written by Ted Serong, the Australian general who had participated in the successful campaign against the Malayan communists in the 1950's.

In his zeal for military action in Vietnam and his hatred for the Ngo Dinh Diem's regime, Sheehan never stopped to ask whether the abrasive and gung-ho approach of Vann was

(some of the Korean War episodes, his effort at the Boston Children's Hospital to save his son's life, and his rescue of his Vietnamese mistress), he conveniently believed Vann's claim about a single-handed victory at Kontum.

When one compares what Sheehan wrote about Tan Canh and what Phan Nhat Nam, a Vietnamese military reporter, wrote in *Mua He Do Lua* (**Summer of Red Flames**, 1973)

about the valiant and stoic effort of the South Vietnamese 11th Airborne Battalion to defend Hill 960—nicknamed Point Charlie—that stood guard for Tan Canh against waves of attacks by the North Vietnamese Dien Bien Phu (320th) “steel” division, one cannot believe that one was reading accounts about the same military action. Where Sheehan saw cowardice and confusion, Nam witnessed heroism and “tragic bravery:”

Nho, the company commander, had just fired the last round from his 81 mm mortar, the barrel was still hot, the gunsight broken and its two legs stuck in the mountain earth. “Surrender and live, resist and die! Surrender and live, resist and die!” The Northern troops were lining up as for a 19th century military parade. Nho strained to pull up the legs of the gun, and raised his head.

“Surrender and live, resist and die!”

Two Dien Biens fixed their bayonets at his chest. Nho was stunned. How young were they. Could this be our enemy? There was no way he would give up and surrender to these little kids. Ten fingertips slowly curled back. Nho pulled up his strength and stood in a kungfu position, as firm as a piece of wood buried in the ground. “Kill!” The

shout exploded out of his chest and shot out like thunder. The two kids startled in surprise. Nho instantly saw the recoil of the two Dien Bien soldiers. With his left hand on one and right hand on the other, Nho wrenched free the two bayonets, then his two hands lashed out quickly as lightning and the two North Vietnamese soldiers collapsed with blood all over their faces.

A Northern squad had Nho surrounded. They didn’t shoot, they were determined to catch the sonofabitch alive. The squad leader gave an order and every head with a helmet and yellow star nodded. This was the first time they had seen a person with the ‘martial arts’ of the puppet Paratroops.

“Surrender and live, resist and die!” Several mouths stammered out these words in unison. They didn’t care what they said because their eyes were riveted on Nho. They “saw” curled fingertips and tense-muscled arms. Nho uttered another shout and flew at the squad leader who put up his weapon to fend him off. Nho’s feet kicked the weapon out of the squad leader’s hands and knocked off his helmet with the proud yellow star of the unit that had planted the flag on top

of de Castries' bunker [the French commander at Dien Bien Phu]. The Northern squad leader lay in convulsions on the ground. Nho had opened a way out of the encirclement and ran down the mountain. But not in time. Some sharp, pointed and very hard objects, it seemed like not just one but many, pierced his flesh and ran past his spine into his body. He had been stabbed by bayonets. Nho saw the green hills and light red mountains fade away in smoke and golden black, gradually darkening. Nho died held up six bayonets rigidly fixed in his body. (39-40)

In Nam's report, Sheehan's hyperbolic description of Vietcong heroism has found its match...and contrast.

Sheehan conveniently did not compare the Tet Offensive of 1968—when there were half a million American troops, plus other allied troops in South Vietnam and the bulk of communist troops committed to combat were composed mainly of Vietcong soldiers—with the Eastern Offensive of 1972 when, with American logistical support only, the South Vietnamese soldiers fought successfully against the onslaught of practically the whole North Vietnamese army (fourteen divisions). To do so would contradict Sheehan's theory about the incompetence and cowardice of South Vietnam's troops.

Sheehan's omissions in *Lie* are typified in his treatment of the Battle of An Loc, near Saigon, and the successes of South Vietnamese troops under General Ngo Quang Truong in pushing back the North Vietnamese Army during the Easter Offensive where there was no John Paul Vann to save the day. Others have not been so myopic; in 1991, after the success of "Operation Desert Storm," Truong was described by General Norman Schwarzkopf as "one of my greatest teachers." Writing to Truong from the Central Command's headquarters on February 26, 1991, the victor of the Gulf War told Ngo Quang Truong that "many of the strategies that I use everyday on this battlefield in the Middle East are things that you taught me so well twenty-five years ago when we were comrades-in-arms in Vietnam."

The Battle of An Loc has been described by General Vanuxem, a French veteran of the First Indochina War, as "a symbol of the determination of the Army and of the people to stand at all costs in face of the enemy. It was the Verdun of Vietnam, where Vietnam had received, as in baptism, the consecration of her will" (*Thi* 67). A Vietnamese military analyst, Lam Quang Thi, has compared An Loc with Dien Bien Phu in **Autopsy: The Death of South Vietnam**:

To understand the battle of An Loc, it is necessary to compare it with another siege which took place 30 years ago when French troops battling the Viet Minh fought 55 savage days to finally lose the battle of Dien Bien Phu and eventually the war itself. A

comparison of forces and terrain would reveal the following differences and similarities between the earlier battle and the battle of An Loc.

The French had 15,000 men defending Dien Bien Phu whereas, at the peak of the battle, the ARVN had only 6,350 men in An Loc.

The attacking forces were two divisions, plus a number of independent regiments, totalling about 30,000 troops in the case of Dien Bien Phu. In the case of An Loc, the attacking forces were also two divisions; as indicated earlier, this amounts to some 18,000 troops, not counting the civilian labor force and other blocking forces which in both sieges probably numbered 5,000 to 10,000 men.

At Dien Bien Phu, the French had a perimeter of



ARVN in Helicopter Assault, 1967
(Indochina Archive)

defense measuring 16 kilometers by 9 kilometers, but An Loc had a defense perimeter only one-tenth as large. In other words, in the early stages of the siege there were points within Dien Bien Phu well beyond enemy artillery range; such was never the case at An Loc.

Dien Bien Phu had the disadvantage of being on a valley floor, subject to deadly artillery fire from enemy batteries well bunkered in the surrounding hills. Although the topography of An Loc is somewhat different, the city of An Loc itself is no less vulnerable as it is the only terrain in the middle of a forest of impenetrable bamboo and rubber plantations.

At Dien Bien Phu, the French had 28 artillery guns (twenty-four 105 mm and four 155 mm) and twenty-four 120 mm mortars. In An Loc, during the most critical days of the battle, only one 105 mm gun was available to provide close support. The French had tanks at Dien Bien Phu whereas the Viet Minh had none. In the case of An Loc, exactly the reverse was true. (66-67)

According to Thi, the South Vietnamese prevailed over tremendous odds by sheer determination and courage plus the help of American fire support. Unlike the French at Dien Bien Phu, the ARVN of An Loc emerged as heroes who halted the North's 1972 Eastern Offensive.

***Vietnamese Leadership:
North and South***

While heaping lavish praise on the communist political and military leadership and their supposedly liberating cause, Sheehan shows utter contempt for South Vietnamese leaders. No one will deny that there was corruption and incompetence within the South Vietnamese government, but that is not the whole story. South Vietnam had its share of cowardice and corruption, but also of bravery and idealism. These positive qualities are completely absent from

Sheehan's Lie.

Those, like Sheehan, who still believe that the Vietnamese communists are popular heroes and legitimate heirs of Vietnamese nationalism and revolution, should pay close attention to the consequences of sixteen years of communist rule since the "liberation" of South Vietnam. Here is the heritage of communist rule: one-party dictatorship, corruption, poverty, and social injustice. Sheehan as an historian should have listened to the dissenting voices of disillusioned party members such as Nguyen Khac Vien, Bui Tin, and Hoang Minh Chinh; to a new group of writers in Vietnam who denounce the inhuman brutality of a regime based on terror and deception--authors such as Duong Thu Huong and Tran Manh Hao; and to the Vietnamese students in Eastern Europe who are beginning to adopt revisionist views of Vietnamese history and the destructive role of the Communist Party of Vietnam in it.'

Sheehan does not treat Ngo Dinh Diem fairly. He describes Diem as "a fervent reactionary, intent on founding a new family dynasty in a country where most other thinking people thought dynasties were anachronisms;" also that "he let the Americans make him their surrogate" (144). He lets his imagination run wild when he says that, since there had

once been a Ngo dynasty, a brief one, in the tenth century, "Diem saw himself as heading a second one to replace the Nguyen dynasty that had been discredited by the degenerate Bao Dai" (144). Exaggerated also are Sheehan's claims that Diem spent his years before the end of WWII "hunting and horseback riding" (177) and that Ngo Dinh Nhu was a "heavy user of opium" (178). As a newcomer to Vietnam in the early 1960's Sheehan knew nothing of the surge of euphoria and a sense of hope Diem brought to many people in South Vietnam with his return in 1954, especially after his success in getting the French out of Vietnam. That new spirit could be easily found in the accounts of the generals who later plotted to overthrow Diem, such as Nguyen Chanh Thi's **Viet Nam: Mot Troi Tam Su** (Vietnam: A Personal Memoir, 1987) and Lam Quang Thi's **Autopsy: The Death of South Vietnam** (1985), and of writer such as Nguyen Manh Con's **Dem Tam Tinh Viet Lich Su** (Writing History with the Heart, 1958). (Note the publication dates of these accounts.)

Sheehan's condescending attitude toward the Vietnamese peasants and cynical account of Diem on his official visit to Tuy Hoa (when he was mobbed by the people) could be seen as an effort to put on an air of sophistication by a foreign observer who is, at best, ignorant about the

mood of the local people (141). Apparently, Sheehan knew little of the despair of living under communist rule during the war and the sense of renewal and hope that emerged during the early years of peace. Sheehan's guesswork did not benefit from the experience of writers native to the area such as Vo Phien who recounted it in his famous short stories "Thac Do Sau Nha" ("Waterfall in the Backyard") and "Mua Dem Cuoi Nam" ("Rain on New Year's Eve").

Sheehan's attack on Phan Trong Chinh, the commander of the 25th division, for corruption is off the mark (549-52). General Chinh was considered one of the four incorruptible top commanders in the Vietnamese armed forces. There was a popular saying that among the "cleanest" generals, Thang (Nguyen Duc) was the top, followed by Trinh (Phan Trong), then Thanh (Nguyen Viet), and Truong (Ngo Quang). ("Nhat Thang, nhi Trinh, tam Thanh, tu Truong"). Trinh's major sin was that he belonged to a group of brave but intensely nationalistic officers who were not fond of the Americans arrogantly meddling in their affairs; this group shared a similar distaste for abrasive, but militarily ignorant, journalists. These officers could be easily labelled anti-American. During his tenure as commander of the 25th division, Trinh was known to have circulated an imitation of an

"Exhortation to the Troops" by the famed general Tran Hung Dao who defeated the Mongolian invasion of Vietnam in the 13th century; the circular was seen by many as a veiled attack on America's "imperialistic" attitude. Soon afterward, Trinh was stripped of his command.

Vietnamese History

Sheehan came up with some unique and startling revelations about Vietnamese history.

Lie joins those people who believe Archimedes Patti's speculation that Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist who could have broken loose of the Soviet Union, in spite of the fact that he had been for years a Comintern agent and faithfully followed its instructions.² According to Sheehan, Ho had his representative in Kunming send Truman a message through the OSS station there asking the US to "make Vietnam an American protectorate on the same status as the Philippines for an undetermined period" (147). Sheehan also claims Ho had hinted that he would give the US a naval base at Cam Ranh if only the US would protect the Vietnamese from the French (149). Here, as elsewhere, Sheehan's journalistic epic lacks citations, thereby leaving scholars unable to verify or refute his assertions of fact and opinion on key issues. (Clearly, some of these

assertions derive from Sheehan's involvement with the Pentagon Papers publication project at the New York Times, re-enforced by the work of Patti. Many scholars--most recently, Phillip B. Davidson--have questioned this threadbare interpretation.)

In an obvious effort to put down Ngo Dinh Diem, Sheehan maintains that there were three alternatives confronting Vietnamese during the first Indochina War: "to join the Communists to win the liberation of their country, as many did; to collaborate with the French for a variety of reasons, as many others did; or to avoid participating in the most important moral and political conflict of the time, as a minority, including Ngo Dinh Diem did" (168). The facts were more complicated for the plight of non-communist patriots was not so simple. A record of their anguishing dilemma can be found in memoirs such as Bui Diem's *In the Jaws of History* (1987), and Nhi Lang, *Phong Trao Khang Chien Trinh Minh The* (*The Trinh Minh The Resistance Movement*, 1985). In the case of Trinh Minh The and his followers, they opted for a fourth alternative: from their jungle stronghold they fought both the French and the communists. Furthermore, Ngo Dinh Diem did not really avoid that "most important moral and political conflict of the time." He did take a stand serving as a

representative in Viet Nam of Phan Boi Chau and Cuong De in the early 1940's; later, in 1945, after being arrested by the communists and brought to face Ho Chi Minh, he defiantly rejected the latter's invitation to work for Ho's Viet Minh.

Sheehan's "Facts"

Neil Sheehan's *Lie* reveals very little about the intricacies of Vietnamese politics and the complexity of its history. He does not understand the plight of the noncommunist nationalists in Vietnam. Nor does he really care for what the people of Vietnam want or think. Yet *Lie* is a passionate book about the author's feelings toward John Paul Vann and about America's foreign policy motives and actions after World War II.

It is one thing to read Sheehan's *Lie* to learn about a complex figure like John Paul Vann; it is a different thing to read it in order to know about the Vietnam War or Vietnamese history. While it is unreasonable to expect from Vann a sophisticated understanding of Vietnamese society and politics, it is equally erroneous to regard him as a clear-headed observer of the subject. Furthermore, most readers of *Lie* who are familiar with many of the sources cited here wonder what Sheehan was doing during those sixteen years of

painstaking research; why did he not show some familiarity with the public narratives, essays, and stories cited here? There are other methodological problems: *Lie* lists me as a consultant, which I was not. Mr. Sheehan lives less than twenty miles from George Mason's Indochina Institute. Had Mr. Sheehan visited the Institute, my staff, faculty and I would have been happy to put this type of source material before him.

A whole new generation of writers and intellectuals in Vietnam (Tran Manh Hao, Duong Thu Huong, Phan Dinh Dieu) and dissident party members (Bui Tin, Nguyen Khac Vien, Hoang Minh Chinh) now are criticizing past and current mistakes of the communist leaders. As they do so, they are undermining the core of Sheehan's thesis about the Vietnamese revolution and the credibility of the Vietnamese communists. At least for experts in Vietnam studies, the evolving record will continue to diminish the aura currently surrounding Neil Sheehan's *Lie*.



Notes

¹ Vietnam on April 30, 1975. In an article written in response to his critics inside the party published in the Vietnamese-language newspaper, *Ngay Nay* in Houston, April 1, 1991,

he said that all ruling communist parties "owe a debt to deliver genuine freedom and democracy to the people," that they have been making "false promise" and "renege on their debts to the people," and demanded that "now is the time to pay that debt." General (ret.) Hoang Minh Chinh is a leading party's theoretician who has fallen from favor. In an open letter dated January 22, 1991 making suggestions to revise the party's draft program, Chinh maintained that the "extremely fatal mistake of our party is dogmatism, leftism, and infantilism which are the root causes of all other problems;" and that "leftist dogmatism based on Stalinism and Maoism has wasted so many lives and much money."

Tran Manh Hao is the author of the banned novel **Ly Than** (Separation, 1987) in which he exposes the cruelty of a system based on lies, deception and blackmail. Duong Thu Huong is the author of **Nhung Thien Duong Mu** (Blind Paradises, 1988) in which she denounces the injustices of the land reform and class warfare, and describes the suffering, deprivation, disillusion and humiliation of Vietnamese youth caught in an inhuman system. After being criticized for demanding the party to abandon two "backward and primitive principles: [proletarian] dictatorship and [democratic] centralism," Huong

quitted the party. She was later arrested for passing out materials critical of the government. At the time of this writing, she is still in jail.

The most active groups of Vietnamese students in Eastern Europe are those in Czechoslovakia. They publish **samizdat** voicing their determination to struggle for democracy and human decency and against the party's dictatorship. They are now joined by Vietnamese students currently studying in the Soviet Union and Germany. The group in Germany has formed the Social Democratic Party of Vietnam. Members of the group who have returned to Vietnam are known to have published the first issue of their **samizdat, Tia Sang**, inside Vietnam on the eve of the Seventh Party Congress.

²For a well-documented study of Ho's ties with the Comintern, see Ton That Tien, **Ho Chi Minh and the Comintern**, Singapore: Information and Resource, 1990.

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