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*Our Year of War: Two Brothers, Vietnam, and a Nation Divided* superbly traces the Vietnam War experiences of brothers Chuck and Tom Hagel while they served together during the conflict’s most volatile year. Beginning his discussion with the pre-Tet Offensive period of 1968, author Daniel P. Bolger provides a prism in which readers can witness America’s divisions through his protagonists’ eyes. While serving in the same unit, each brother may have saved the other’s life when the other sibling suffered combat wounds. Moreover, Bolger details the intricacies of their wartime experiences, and he pinpoints their disagreements.

After the war, Chuck’s conservative-oriented endorsement of the American Vietnam War policy and Tom’s left-leaning animus toward it resulted in the two coming to violent blows during a night of heavy drinking. Following their near arrest from the altercation, the University of Nebraska-Omaha college students agreed to abstain from discussing the controversial conflict while in the other’s presence. Even so, each knew where the other stood. As Bolger contends, they embodied the polarization arising from an ongoing military saga that transpired with no easy solutions and no apparent end in sight. As had developed in their relationship and in the sphere of public opinion, the Vietnam War ostensibly inflicted “collateral” damage on all sides of the divide.

After volunteering for the draft, an action only 10 percent of draftees took, the brothers entered the thick of the fighting (p. 54). As members of the notable Ninth Infantry Division stationed in the dense, unforgiving climate of the South Vietnamese Delta region, they frequently partook in combat missions. Like others in their division, they were tasked to implement General Julian Ewell’s “constant pressure” policies that “generated more contacts” so American forces could use overwhelming firepower to inflict elevated kill ratios (p. 102). As Bolger affirms, Ninth Infantry Division Commander Ewell adhered to General William C. Westmoreland’s “search and destroy” attrition strategy with complete fidelity. Thus, his orders put all participants—enemy
troops and Ninth Infantry forces—in a heightened state of danger and anxiety.

Ewell’s callous but dogged approach contributed to a loss that even affected the Westmoreland family. On July 3, the day of his swearing in as army chief of staff, Westmoreland received the heart-wrenching news that his brother-in-law, Frederick French “Fritz” Van Deusen, and six other Ninth Infantry Division soldiers had been killed in the South Vietnamese Mekong Delta. Van Deusen, a well-known “hard-charger” and West Point graduate, died while on a “cavalry” mission when his Huey helicopter received an AK-47 machine gun onslaught from a well-hidden Viet Cong soldier (p. 185). As Van Deusen’s helicopter hovered above the nearby Vann Co Dong River, the bullet blows caused his helicopter to nosedive and crash. After the horrific scene, Tom located the combatant within the grassy surroundings and killed him, an action the brothers had done on countless occasions as members of a military mechanism assigned to inflict devastating enemy body counts.

In addition to detailing the Ninth Infantry Division, Bolger’s narrative of the Hagel brothers’ war experiences is a quintessential window into personal, national, and international divisions; coping mechanisms; and wartime perspectives of the most divisive year since World War II. For instance, Tom struggled to overcome the wartime atrocities he had witnessed, particularly the visual memory of the accidental shooting of a pregnant woman gunned down by an edgy, trigger-happy lieutenant or a civilian orphanage indiscriminately fired into during a night mission. However, his brother Chuck, who went on to become a Republican US senator before assuming the prestigious secretary of defense post under Democratic President Barack Obama, tried to move on. He refrained from public discourse about his combat experiences. Despite their differences, each fought with valor for the other and for their fellow comrades in arms. As Bolger clarifies the predicament and consensus they maintained, soldiers “fight for each other” more than they fight for patriotic ideals. As a result, “America shrinks to the men to the right and left willing to shoulder a rifle,” Bolger reveals, and “Chuck and Tom sure did” their part and kept “each other going” (p. 134).

Even as Bolger provides an outstanding narrative, his portrayal of General Westmoreland’s wartime outlook needs modification. Based on hours of research on his Vietnam War experiences and personal notes, or diary, Westmoreland knew the Vietnam conflict would last an indefinite, long-term, number of years. He also understood the heightened importance of public support and its relationship to his two-front “victory” agenda. In countless communications, he frequently noted the conflict would continue to have inordinate challenges and complexities. In contrast to Bolger’s contentions, Westmoreland did not exude overconfidence. He knew an approaching “crossover point” persisted with the American public, hence his hyper-focus on using an attrition-based strategy. His misstep came early in his command when he underestimated how quickly the public would shift against or become ambivalent about the war. Projecting progress near the end of his tenure of command did not mean Westmoreland believed “impending victory” was near, as Bolger puts it (p. 11). Only General Paul D. Harkins, Westmoreland’s predecessor, had forecasted a swift “victory” in South Vietnam.

These quibbles aside, Bolger rightly asserts that America’s future political leaders need to refrain from involving military personnel and American resources in counterinsurgencies and limited wars. As history has revealed, they proceed with no conceivable endpoint. Despite Bolger’s heavy focus on historian Lewis Sorley’s research to substantiate his own claims about Westmoreland’s character traits and military strategies, his declaration places him at odds with Sorley’s contention that “good” generals can “win” such nation-building counterinsurgencies. Without the
prospect of long-term public support and mainstream media endorsement, Westmoreland, too, came to Bolger's conclusion once South Vietnam collapsed. In light of America's recent prolonged misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bolger's takeaway along with the book's many other fascinating elements makes this a must read for those anxious to keep pace with the mounting number of other intriguing works on the Vietnam War.

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