

James Kitfield. *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*. New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1995. Pp. 13 + 436. Notes and index. Review by David Kerby.

James Kitfield's *Prodigal Soldiers* argues that the experiences of Vietnam influenced the future leaders of the U.S. military in the 1980s and 1990s. He chronicles the lives of several different officers from their time as junior leaders in Vietnam to their actions as senior commanders during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Kitfield's motivations stem from his experiences as a Pentagon and military affairs reporter. He spent years following many of the personalities in his book and desired to tell their story. His foremost observation was that Operation Desert Storm displayed "professional soldiers who had never seen combat led by combat veterans who had known bitter defeat" (p. 14). After Vietnam, those who suffered most strove to prevent such a defeat from happening under their watch. Kitfield's work is a narrative. He organizes the book chronologically into four parts. Part one discusses the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1972. Part two follows American withdrawal, the subsequent collapse of South Vietnam, and the post-Vietnam military from 1973 to 1980. Part three discusses the period of reconciliation and improvement from 1981-1986. Part four chronicles 1989-1992, and Kitfield concludes that the U.S. military was a radically new organization by that time. Throughout each part, Kitfield retells personal stories and helps the reader see through the eyes of Kitfield's subjects. These personal stories make up the roughly ten short chapters in each part of the book. As a journalist, Kitfield's endnotes do not include a long list of secondary sources or primary sources. His primary sources are mainly oral interviews with the subjects of his work. He supports these interviews with memoirs or primary source accounts and cites these sources informally while discussing each chapter.

In part one, Kitfield discusses the main subjects' experiences in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972. These experiences inform these characters' actions for the following parts and influenced their ideas and motivations about the changes that America's military needed to make. Kitfield introduces the reader to each personality individually and recounts their experiences and emotions in Vietnam. The Army of Vietnam was one of draftees, unwilling Americans pulled away from their lives and thrust into a war in which many did not believe. Army training focused on obedience through strict discipline, and Army leadership was intolerant of criticism from within or without the ranks. Fundamentally, the Army based its doctrine on the industrial might and technological superiority of the United States. The Army believed that it could conquer any opponent by its superior numbers, equipment, and technology. At the highest level, Army-wide doctrine focused on attrition, the notion that the Army could win through the death and destruction of an opponent's army. On the tactical level, this doctrine manifested itself in suicidal frontal assaults by Army and Marine units in the jungles of Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The Marine Corps faced similar issues as the Army after General William Westmoreland prohibited the Marines from continuing their pacification policies.<sup>2</sup> Ground troops, Kitfield observes, learned lessons through combat and casualties, returning to the "school of hard knocks" from World War

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<sup>1</sup> Tactics = how to win the battle. Operations = how to win the campaign. Strategy = how to win the war. Grand Strategy = how to win the peace or how to prevent future wars.

<sup>2</sup> General Westmoreland commanded all U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968. He then served as Chief of Staff of the Army from 1968 to 1972.

I. In the Air Force, attrition manifested itself with higher-level insistence on bombing as a means for accomplishing this attrition. Additionally, the Air Force faced intense micromanagement and over-centralization of command under the Johnson administration. This strict bureaucracy resulted in civilians in Washington, D.C., selecting bombing targets for pilots in Vietnam. Often, leaders selected these targets irrespective of their relevance or the heavy presence of enemy air defenses. These conflicts resulted in the inappropriate utilization of airpower on its own instead of integrated with other branches of the military.<sup>3</sup> All military branches decried the replacement and rotation policy in Vietnam. Instead of keeping Marines, soldiers, sailors, and airmen with their units, individuals haphazardly rotated out. This rotation plan ensured a constant loss of hard-won experience and a continuous stream of un-trained individuals more likely to cause problems than add to unit effectiveness.

As the war continued, military members faced increasing criticism and resentment from the American public, including many former friends who had recently left the service. This feeling of isolation and public shaming left deep impressions on Kitfield's characters. Notably, three of Kitfield's subjects collaborated on two crucial documents that helped them define the problems of the Vietnam-era military. First, the *Pentagon Papers*, a secret bureaucratic history of the conflict, allowed the author and other participants to trace the series of errors that led to the ill-fated intervention in Vietnam. Second, an Army War College study determined that the U.S. Army had inadvertently instituted a systems-based approach to war that attempted to reduce warfare to numbers and formulas. This systems-focus drove leaders to obsess over procedures and processes instead of reality and the human element of war. On paper, America was "winning" in Vietnam; the numbers said so. These revelations left deep impressions on those officers who survived Vietnam to lead the post-Vietnam military.

In part two, Kitfield argues that Vietnam affected all of his subjects and convinced them that the U.S. military needed to change. He discusses how these officers' experiences in Vietnam influenced their approaches to the problems of the post-Vietnam military from 1973 to 1980. After Vietnam, officers witnessed increasing racial tensions with riots, gangs, and intimidation common throughout the ranks. The Johnson administration's Project 100,000 resulted in a non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps of terrible quality.<sup>4</sup> Drugs continued to be a problem, and the U.S. Navy estimated that half of all sailors were using drugs. U.S. Army units were understrength and composed of poor-quality troops incapable of completing basic tasks. As the Army revolutionized training in response to the failures in Vietnam, challenging and realistic training revealed units wholly unprepared for combat. Still influenced by the "systems approach" mentality from Vietnam, the military continued to insist on statistics and data culled from mind-numbing inspections. The Air Force faced similar issues at their fighter pilot training

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<sup>3</sup> Combined Arms calls for the integration of the different arms (air, artillery, tanks, infantry) to effectively counter enemy strengths and target their weaknesses. "Combined arms is the full integration of arms in such a way that to counteract one, the enemy must become more vulnerable to another." United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997): 94.

<sup>4</sup> Project 100,000 called for the incorporation of 100,000 previously unqualified civilian recruits into the military. These recruits lacked the appropriate education, intelligence, or clean disciplinary record the military traditionally required. Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) serve as the experienced mid-level managers in the U.S. military. They are the middle-man between officers and enlisted personal. Generally experienced and knowledgeable, Project 100,000 created a weak NCO corps as experienced NCOs left and the poor-quality Project 100,000 soldiers took their place.

school, but Vietnam veterans successfully re-designed the training to better mimic actual operations. The Navy took a similar approach and created their “Top Gun” fighter pilot school, popularized by the Tom Cruise movie of the same name. Additionally, the 1970s witnessed the U.S. military’s transition to an all-volunteer force after the end of the draft. To make the all-volunteer force successful, military leaders led several initiatives to improve the quality of life in the military. Better food, better uniforms, more privacy, better education, and higher pay all helped draw recruits from across American society. Additionally, revamped recruiting methods appealed to the younger generation by emphasizing adventure instead of duty. Leaders eased racial tensions to build cohesive units that were home to diverse service members, and the military actively recruited women to fill the ranks.

Part three argues that the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the adoption of Air Land Battle doctrine, and improvements in military culture heralded a brand-new military compared to the one that fought in Vietnam. Kitfield focuses part three from 1981 to 1986. In the 1980s, the U.S. military still exhibited many of its earlier shortfalls. First, the national command structure lacked unity and the “jointness” needed for effective military operations globally.<sup>5</sup> In 1982, the retiring Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff called for reformation among the Joint Chiefs and the national chain of command. At the time, each service chief was responsible for the administration and employment of their separate branch. However, these chiefs also acted as advisors to the Secretary of Defense and the U.S. President. Further complicating matters, military forces operating around the world had regional commanders to answer to. For example, a Marine Corps unit in Iceland answered to the U.S. Navy’s Atlantic forces commander, the European theater Commander-In-Chief, and the Marine Corps’ Commandant (the Marines’ service chief). This organization placed subordinate units at the mercy of three separate, and often argumentative, bosses. Kitfield cites two events from the 1980s that exposed the system’s weaknesses. The death of over 200 Marines from a suicide bomb in Beirut and the near-disaster of the 1983 invasion of Grenada resulted from infighting among services.<sup>6</sup> The passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act in 1986 streamlined this command structure. The act defined service chiefs as only administrators of their branches. It assigned the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the sole military advisor for the President. For operational command, the act assigned commanders-in-chief by geographic region to coordinate the actions of *all* the branches in the area. Returning to the example of the Marines in Iceland, they now only answered to the Navy commander, who answered to the overall commander in Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> Jointness is the ability of the different branches (Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy) to work together towards a common goal. Traditionally, the different branches insisted on independence from oversight by any other branch. It was offensive and grounds for a physical brawl if one service suggested taking command of units from another branch.

<sup>6</sup> In 1983, over 200 Marines stationed in Lebanon as a peacekeeping force perished after a truck bomb exploded by their barracks. Due to political conflicts, the Marines were garrisoned in an exposed, unprotected area. Additionally, political rules dictated that Marines could not even load their weapons. Consequently, when the truck bomb sped towards the Marine barracks, the gate guards were unable to load their weapons fast enough to stop the truck from reaching its target.

On the island of Grenada, communist revolutionaries took American medical students as hostages during a communist uprising. While the U.S. invasion of Grenada succeeded in saving the lives of the medical students, the operation almost failed. Navy, Army, and Marine Corps units struggled to work together and committed a series of errors, including almost directing air strikes onto the building housing the American hostages.

Second, in 1982, the U.S. Army adopted its first iteration of the Air Land Battle doctrine. The doctrines of Vietnam and World War II relied on America's material wealth and industrial might to win wars. The Air Land Battle doctrine instead emphasized rapid, intelligent maneuver combined with precision artillery and airstrikes. Instead of crushing an enemy, Air Land Battle relied on the rapidity and precision of maneuver and fires to shatter an enemy's will to fight and ability to resist. Kitfield points out that Air Land Battle's adoption triggered a sort of revolution throughout the Army. Training and the quality of soldiers continued to improve. The National Training Center in the deserts of California instituted large-scale mock battles for Army units. This training disregarded previous obsessions with check-lists or rote battles and pitted commanders against each other. The Army staffed an entire 4200-man brigade to role-play as Soviet forces and even went so far as to construct fiberglass versions of Soviet tanks. Throughout the 1980s, Army units continued to test and experiment with the concepts of Air Land Battle and refine their fighting edge.

Third, military culture drastically changed in the 1980s. Air Land Battle doctrine's adoption helped herald some of these changes. The doctrine's emphasis on individual initiative promoted critical thinking among younger soldiers. The 1980s witnessed more junior officers willing to question or critique their superior officers. Standards of living across the military also improved. More troops were married, pay doubled, benefits continued to improve, and the military provided more support for military families. Strict enforcement of drug policies, requirements for higher levels of education, and focused recruiting efforts on higher-quality high schools improved the overall quality of troops throughout the military. Reenlistments also increased as the previously-mentioned benefits convinced many new service members that the military was a path to a better life and upward social mobility.

In part four, Kitfield argues that Operation Desert Storm demonstrated that the 1991 U.S. military had fully recovered from its failures in Vietnam. In 1990, Iraq invaded and occupied the neighboring country of Kuwait. Iraqi armored forces also began massing along the border with Saudi Arabia, fueling fears of an invasion into this oil-rich ally of the United States. A global cry against this violation of Kuwait's sovereignty pushed President George H.W. Bush towards international cooperation. Against this backdrop of international politics, Kitfield argues that the U.S. military stood at its highest readiness levels in history. Additionally, the military's relationship with America's civilian government allowed for unprecedented cooperation and analysis of military intervention. Unlike during Vietnam, the U.S. government, the American public, and the U.S. military openly discussed the strategic goals, desired outcomes, and likely challenges facing a military intervention. The Goldwater-Nichols Act successfully reduced the politicization that hindered earlier military endeavors. Senior military advisors had all served in Vietnam, which tempered their advice and recommendations to civilian leaders. President Bush's memory of Vietnam also tempered his thoughts. He assured the American people, "Let me assure you, should military action be required, this will not be another Vietnam" (p. 376). Military and civilian leaders agreed, there would be no gradual escalation, no sole reliance on airpower, and no micromanagement from Washington, D.C. Generals and admirals from Vietnam quickly shut down any suggestions to the contrary. Unlike Vietnam, the American military went to Iraq with an enormous amount of public support. Even citizens who disagreed with military intervention supported the troops, their fellow citizens, who had to fight it. Unlike previous operations, general officers displayed a high level of "jointness," or the ability to work together despite surface-level service rivalries. Generals and admirals quickly discarded their pride in deference to cooperation and to protect their troops.

Unlike the years following Vietnam, the U.S. military espoused levels of readiness that surpassed all previous wars. High-quality soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines formed the ranks. Despite fears that an all-volunteer force would result in a military of only America's most desperate, the opposite appeared to be the case. On top of that, women and minorities increasingly occupied technically skilled and critically important roles. While officially prohibited from serving in combat roles, women repeatedly found themselves in such roles and performed honorably. While the Army adopted the Air Land Battle doctrine, the Marine Corps adopted its version with a new publication, *Warfighting*. This doctrine did for the Marine Corps what Air Land Battle did for the Army. The Marine Corps performed so well during the opening days of Desert Storm that commanders had to slow the Marines down as they overran Iraqi positions faster than all previous estimates. Weapons technology had also advanced and resulted in a massive disparity between American and Iraqi forces. While technology alone did not win the day, technology served as an essential asset when paired with high-quality soldiers well-trained in its use. The improvements in training also paid off. Massive training and planning exercises in the states allowed military commanders to quickly adapt to Iraq's situation. Military planners quickly recognized patterns they had seen in training exercises and drafted plans that accurately identified Iraqi weaknesses and how American forces would exploit those weaknesses. Army and Marine units easily overcame Iraqi resistance on the tactical level after having fought against high-quality role-players in the United States. American forces rapidly defeated Iraq's Soviet-based technology with minimal casualties. With memories from Vietnam, American commanders anticipated 500 to 20,000 casualties but found themselves overwhelmed with Iraqi prisoners and surprisingly low American casualties. Kitfield argues that the U.S. military had not wasted the decades since Vietnam. Neither had the Vietnam veterans forgotten the lessons they learned. Troops, training, doctrine, technology, and relations with the American public had all improved. The American commander-in-chief of forces in the Middle East, General Norman Schwarzkopf, commented during a briefing, "We're not going into this with one arm tied behind our back" (p. 367).

Kitfield's *Prodigal Soldiers* is an engaging and moving account. With his deeply personal narratives, Kitfield guides the reader through the traumatic experiences of his subjects. He effectively explains how their experiences motivated them to build a different U.S. military. Kitfield's narrative weaves emotion and memory into every aspect of his work. The further his subjects got from Vietnam, the more their memory and emotional loss influenced them. On the eve of Operation Desert Storm, this memory was the strongest, with military leaders staunchly vowing that Iraq would not become another Vietnam. The diversity of his sources adds to the effectiveness of his work as well. While the Vietnam veterans interviewed were all white males, Kitfield includes military wives, black troops, and women veterans as the narrative proceeds. Specifically, his inclusion of Captain Eddie Ray's and Major Marie Rossi's stories aptly demonstrate how radically the U.S. military had changed.<sup>7</sup> While Kitfield's collection of sources

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<sup>7</sup> Captain Eddie Ray was a black Marine officer in charge of a Light Armored Reconnaissance company. During Operation Desert Storm, his nineteen Light Armored Vehicles (a lightly armored reconnaissance vehicle) were providing security for the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division's headquarters when an Iraqi tank brigade counterattacked. Captain Ray expertly and courageously charged his nineteen outmatched vehicles against the Iraqi brigade to buy time for the evacuation of the headquarters. Captain Ray survived and leaders credited his unit with destroying fifty Iraqi tanks. Captain Ray received the Navy Cross (second-highest medal after the Medal of Honor) for his actions.

Major Marie Rossi served as an Army transportation helicopter pilot during Operation Desert Storm. She deployed with her husband, a special operations pilot. Major Rossi, as a woman, was prohibited from flying combat missions, but she ended up flying in combat zones to deliver much needed supplies to troops. After the official

is impressive, I feel he missed some of the key persons responsible for many of the changes described. Colonel John Boyd receives only a passing mention for his fame as a fighter pilot. Kitfield completely neglects Boyd's later work that eventually culminated with the Army's Air Land Battle doctrine and the Marine Corps' Maneuver Warfare doctrine. Generations of Pentagon staffers and military thinkers sat through Boyd's notorious fourteen-hour-long *Patterns of Conflict* brief. Boyd also played a crucial role in developing the strategy behind the successful Operation Desert Storm. General Alfred "Al" Gray also receives minimal attention despite his pivotal role in adopting Boyd's theory and forcing Maneuver Warfare doctrine onto the Marine Corps. General Paul van Riper was another Vietnam veteran, a supporter of Maneuver Warfare, and an ally of General Gray. General Anthony Zinni was an early adopter of the new doctrine and proved its effectiveness in large exercises. Colonel Mike Wyly served in Vietnam and worked under Gray to revolutionize the Marine Corps officer education system away from the outdated industrial version. Kitfield's organization of the book into small chapters and four greater parts compliments his narrative approach. This approach appeals to the general reader and keeps one engaged with the narrative throughout, despite the work's 435-page length. This book presents a challenge to the academic reader hoping to parse out Kitfield's main points through dedicated skimming. Kitfield gives the academic no such option and quickly draws in such a reader until they find themselves reading every word on every page, cover to cover. Eliot Cohen's review in *Foreign Affairs* applauds Kitfield's work but justifiably questions his objectivity. Cohen critiques *Prodigal Soldiers* as a "good book, but an inside story told to a sympathetic journalist by top brass."<sup>8</sup> C.H. Wesley's review in *Military Law Review* warns that a reader should not take Kitfield's work as military history. Instead, Wesley views it as a work on military leadership. Wesley finds the book compelling and effectively organized, but he also critiques it as more of a narrative than academic work. Wesley concludes that the book is a must-read among military professionals and adds that Kitfield's warnings on the need for moral courage in leadership continue to be relevant.<sup>9</sup>

Moving and inspirational, Kitfield's work shows that change is possible in the most entrenched and traditionalist of bureaucracies, the U.S. military. His work adds to the historiography a personal look into the lives of service members who suffered in Vietnam and then rose to command a successful military intervention of their own almost twenty years later. Kitfield blends social history into a larger historical narrative that is a must-read for late-twentieth-century military historians or active-duty military members. Critically, Kitfield's descriptions of the post-Vietnam military closely resemble conditions in the 2020 U.S. military after almost twenty years of involvement in the Middle East. Junior officers from Iraq and Afghanistan are due for similar, severe challenges as the U.S. military finds itself in a rapidly changing world with a resurgent post-Soviet Russia, an increasingly aggressive China, and a foreign policy shift from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

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conclusion of hostilities, Major Rossi tragically perished in an aviation mishap while transporting Iraqi Prisoners of War.

<sup>8</sup> Eliot Cohen, review of *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*, by James Kitfield, *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May/June 1995): 173.

<sup>9</sup> C.H. Wesley, review of *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*, by James Kitfield, *Military Law Review* 158, (December 1998): 172-78.