



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## FOOTNOTES

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## THE WAY OF THE SOLDIER: REMEMBERING GENERAL CREIGHTON ABRAMS

By Lewis Sorley



*Lewis Sorley is the author of Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times and of A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam.*

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Creighton Abrams was something quite rare in the military profession, a man of tactical and strategic brilliance, personal bravery and integrity of the highest order, and inspiring leadership who was also compassionate, modest and wise.

For nearly four decades, in three wars and in what passed for "peacetime" service in the interstices, he demonstrated the abundance of those qualities that made him a legend in his profession.

As some of you may know, I have literally filled volumes chronicling the life and career of General Abrams. Today I want to provide an overview to illustrate what I view as his most important and consistent attributes, the things that set him apart and made him a great leader. Thus I will concentrate on his modesty and selflessness, his love of the soldier, his physical and moral courage, his vision, his ability to inspire and lead others, and his absolute and unshakeable integrity.

### EARLY DAYS

Abrams came from a modest background, his father a railroad mechanic and his mother the daughter of an estate caretaker. From the beginning he learned sound values, including working part-time jobs, being serious about his studies, raising chickens and pigs in the 4-H Club, captaining an undefeated football team, and showing early on that he was a leader people wanted to follow. His sister Betty once described the family philosophy: "We're going to be the best regular people we can be."

### WEST POINT

At West Point Abrams was a member of the Class of 1936. He became a cadet lieutenant their First Class year, with great effort and determination lettered as a football lineman despite being small and light for the position, ran the stage crew for the Hundredth Night Show, and finished two-thirds of the way down the class academically. Later he claimed, with typical self-deprecating humor, that he had been elected to the Jewish All-American team, "the only

Methodist so honored.”

At graduation Abrams chose as his branch the cavalry, which in those days was still the horse cavalry. Said his write-up in the *Howitzer*, the cadet yearbook: “We believe the horses will have to work hard to keep up with him.”

## EARLY SERVICE

As a young officer commanding a platoon in the 7th Cavalry at Fort Bliss, Abrams showed early talent for leading and inspiring men. The Army of those days was small and poverty-stricken. In Abrams’s outfit, like many others, they were understrength in people but at full strength in horses. Thus when it came time to exercise the horses they would ride out, each man on one mount with two others on leads, Abrams at the head of the column.

Private Daniel Sanford was new at this, and his horses were giving him trouble. As he started around the left side of a dune with the horse he was riding, those behind took it into their heads to go around the right side. There was a brief tug of war, inevitably lost by Sanford, with the result that he ended up being pulled out of his saddle and dragged across the sand dune, which was covered with mesquite and cactus. This roughed poor Sanford up no little bit.

When the troops had gotten back to the stable and looked after the horses, Abrams lined his soldiers up, then said to them: “You men can take Private Sanford here as an example. They pulled him right off his horse but, by God, he didn’t let loose of his lead horses!” That had a tremendous effect on Sanford, who remembered many years later: “There I stood, with my ass full of mesquite and cactus stickers, but just proud as hell!” Throughout his career Abrams used to good effect that technique of making an example of someone who was doing a good job.

## WORLD WAR II

As war impended, Abrams volunteered for the newly-emerging armored force.

In July 1942 he took command of a tank battalion. He was 27 years old, still a captain, and just six years out of West Point. By September he was a lieutenant colonel and well established in the 4th Armored Division, where he would serve throughout the war in Europe.

The motto of Abrams’s 37th Tank Battalion was “Courage Conquers.” If ever a unit lived up to its motto, this one did. Abrams led from the front, in the turret of his own tank, which he named *Thunderbolt*. Recalled the driver of another tank in the battalion, “I can recall during our tank battles Abe was shooting tanks like the rest of the boys. He would mix in wherever the toughest battle was. It made us feel like fighting harder when you could see a great man like Abe alongside of you.”

In one of the largest tank-to-tank engagements of the war, known as the battle of Arracourt, the 37th Tank Battalion lost fourteen Shermans while knocking out fifty-five Panthers and Tigers and driving back a German counterattack.

Probably the most dramatic action, though, came in Belgium at a place called Bastogne. There the Germans had encircled the 101st Airborne Division during the Battle of the Bulge. The 37th Tank spearheaded Third Army’s drive, beginning with an approach march covering some 120 miles in fifteen hours. The ravages of long months of combat had taken a heavy toll on the battalion’s men and equipment, so much so that at this point they were down to only twenty-one operational tanks in the entire battalion out of the seventy they had had at full strength. When it came to the final assault, the lead company had only nine tanks. Supporting artillery fire from thirteen batteries crashed down ahead of them, so close that a friendly half-track was hit and disabled. When the armored column broke through the German encirclement and made contact with troops of the 101st Airborne, it was nearly dark on the day after Christmas, 1944.

“And as dusk started to come down,” a *Yank Magazine* correspondent reported, “Colonel Abrams rode through—a short stocky man with sharp features—already a legendary figure in this war.” To his wife General George Patton wrote that “the relief of Bastogne is the most brilliant operation we have thus far performed and is in my opinion the outstanding achievement of this war.”

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Afterward those who had served with “Colonel Abe” recalled his great fighting spirit. Abrams, noted one with appealing understatement, “turns out in a tactical situation to be a fairly impatient man,” while a young lieutenant in the division later remarked that Abrams “wasn’t painted in pastels.” General George Patton, in whose Third Army Abrams served throughout the war, famously said: “I’m supposed to be the best tank commander in the Army, but I have one peer—Abe Abrams. He’s the world’s champion.”

In the 4th Armored Division there was evidence to support that claim. Corporal John Gatusky was the gunner on Abrams’s tank. Time after time Abrams put his tank in harm’s way, and time after time Gatusky shot their way out of it. Gatusky knocked out the first German tank after the battalion entered combat. No one knew for sure how many enemy tanks he destroyed during the war, but everyone agreed it was more than any other gunner in the battalion.

Asked to explain his unit’s remarkable success, Abrams attributed it to what he called “one weapon more effective than any arm or service or equipment, the weapon upon which the future of the Army depends—teamwork inspired by objective and selfless leadership.” Later General Bruce Clarke would refer to “the revolution wrought by Abrams and others in the field when they made up what was to become the armored force that rolled across Europe. They had not been taught this,” he observed. “They invented it.”

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What strikes me as remarkable about Abrams in combat is not only that he was a courageous, hard-driving leader who inspired his men, but how he was regarded by them in human terms. Wrote one, many years later, “I never forgot your strong sense of values. I still respect you as a soldier and love you as a fine human being. I teach children to grow up to be like General Abe.”

Said another, the battalion’s maintenance sergeant, “I have fond memories of the kind of man Abrams was. He never made things more difficult and unhappy than they were as did some of the officers of far less rank.”

Many soldiers observed that his success, promotions and honors left Abrams unchanged and unspoiled. “He was no change from a captain to a colonel,” said his reconnaissance sergeant, who had watched him all the way.

Wrote Jimmy Cannon in *Stars & Stripes*, “Abe was cherished by his people because he respected them for what they did and they reciprocated. In two wars, Abe was the most impressive officer of any grade I met. He never seemed to use the force of his rank as a weapon of command. That was his style of greatness beyond his immense ability as a military man.”

His division commander summed it up at war’s end: “The brilliant combat record of Lt. Col. Creighton Abrams constitutes one of the sagas of this war. His command was first to cross the Moselle River, he led the advance which resulted in the relief of Bastogne, and his was the first element in Third Army to reach the Rhine.” Along the way Abrams was awarded two Distinguished Service Crosses, two Silver Stars, and a battlefield promotion to colonel.

Abrams gave the credit to his men, writing near war’s end to tell his wife Julie: “I have travelled in gallant company.”

## ARMY OF OCCUPATION

Abrams went on to command another tank battalion in the Army of Occupation and then the great 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment. In later years he would rise to the very top of his profession, and take on some of the most difficult assignments any military leader has ever been given. But here he had already staked out those professional values that were characteristic of him:

+ He established his ethical stance early in an assignment, then both demonstrated it in his own example and insisted on it in the conduct of others.

+ He set standards of performance that were tough and demanding, then coached and mentored his young subordinates, developing them so they could meet those standards. “In Abrams’s outfit nobody drifted,” remembered one of his sergeants.

+ He gave his subordinates room to develop, to make mistakes and learn from them. He knew when to make an exception to policy, when to let himself be persuaded to change his mind. And he knew how to motivate people to give their best efforts and, as we might say today, “be all they could be.”

+ He cast his lot with the unit, subordinating personal ambition to his aspirations for the whole.

+ He cared about his soldiers, and had compassion and affection for them. This was seen by everybody, and earned for him their admiration and loyalty.

+ And finally—a crucially important point—he made it fun. A lieutenant from those days later said, “In Abrams’s battalion I didn’t go on leave for two years. I was afraid I’d miss something.”

A frequent Abrams technique was to relate a story in which he had suffered some humorous reversal. In the 2nd Cavalry a master sergeant was reduced to private for some infraction. Abrams thought that was too severe for someone with his long service, so he commuted the punishment to a one-grade reduction and took the man into his regimental headquarters. There he put him in charge of the movie theater, telling him to go to work and rehabilitate himself. This was troop leading at its finest, a compassionate commander personally intervening to put a wayward but faithful soldier back on the right track. But then, said Abrams, ten days later the man absconded with the proceeds of the theater.

## KOREAN WAR

Separated from his wife and family while serving in Korea, Abrams wrote to Julie about what he called “the real things. The relationship between you and me—our love and faith in each other—honesty and sincerity—love of God and devotion to country—fun in giving—satisfaction in doing—these,” he told her, “are the only things of real importance.”

## DIVISION COMMAND

When Paul Ignatius, newly appointed an Assistant Secretary of the Army, made an initial trip to visit troops in Germany he made a stop at the 3rd Armored Division, then under Abrams’s command, during field training. They spent several days together and got along splendidly. Later Ignatius told his Pentagon colleagues his observations of Abrams: “I was enormously impressed with him,” he said. “I found him to be a man who not only fulfilled, in meeting him, the image I had previously held of him as a rough, tough battle commander, but a man with a profound understanding of matters in general.”

As they visited units at platoon and company level, Ignatius said, “General Abe never intruded himself between me and the immediate unit commander.” They would arrive at a unit, land the helicopter, “and General Abrams would disappear, and I must say that I did not find in subsequent visits an officer in all of the services who was always willing to do that. He wasn’t standing there listening to what they were saying or coaching them in their answers, and I felt that this was an indication of the confidence he had in his people, and really the confidence he had in himself.”

General and Mrs. Abrams had six children, three boys and three girls. The eldest was married during this division command tour, and the youngest born then. All three boys became officers (and eventually general officers) and all three girls married officers, a solid reflection of how they felt about the profession in which their father (and mother) had served and in which they had grown up. Said son Bruce: “They instilled in us to do our very best, to commit ourselves to something greater than ourselves.”

## CIVIL RIGHTS INTERVENTIONS

While a major general serving in the Pentagon, Abrams played a little-known but crucially important role during

difficult days in the early 1960s when Army units were committed in support of federal marshals and local law officers trying to maintain peace during civil rights demonstrations.

He was sent to Mississippi in the role of personal representative of the Army Chief of Staff when James Meredith, a young black man, was being enrolled in the University of Mississippi under the protection of marshals.

One famous story that came out of that episode had to do with Abrams on the telephone when an assistant plucked at his sleeve, trying to get him to take another call. Abrams ignored him. In a few moments the aide was back, more insistent. Finally, on the third try, he whispers urgently, "General Abrams, it's the Attorney General for you." Warily Abrams says to the caller with whom he'd been speaking, "Just a minute, please, Mr. President. Your brother wants me on the other phone."

Later Abrams performed the same role when racial violence impended in Birmingham, then in Tuscaloosa. He went there on a moment's notice, in a seersucker suit, and kept the lid on what threatened to be an explosive situation. When one officious type suggested that he get into uniform, he calmly replied, "I believe they'll know who I am."

Recalled Cyrus Vance, who had worked with Abrams during those times, "It was a tremendous performance. He was unflappable, completely sensitive to the problem and straightforward."

## CORPS COMMAND

In July 1963 Abrams was promoted to lieutenant general and took command of V Corps in Germany. One duty was to run a large winter exercise called "Big Lift" in which units deployed from the United States to Europe, drew equipment from storage, and maneuvered against other elements stationed there.

Many of the deployed soldiers, having come from a post in Texas, had never driven tanks on high-crowned roads covered with ice and snow, and they were having a rough time of it. One day Abrams, moving along in his jeep, came across a young driver trying unsuccessfully to extricate his tank from a deep roadside ditch.

Stopping, Abrams got out and went over to talk to the young man. "Having trouble, son?" he asked. "Yes, sir," said the soldier disconsolately. "Here, let me show you how," said Abrams. With that he took the youngster's place in the driver's seat. Gunning the engine to such a pitch that the crowd that had gathered thought the transmission would surely be ripped out of the hull, Abrams neatly popped the tank right out of the ditch and up on the road. "There," he said. "See how it's done?"

"Yes, sir," said the tank driver. "Think you can do it now?" "Yes, sir." "Good," said Abrams, and with that he reversed the tank back into the ditch, climbed out, got into his jeep, and without another word or a backward glance continued on his way. That was the essential Abrams on display, and of course word of the episode spread rapidly throughout the command, adding to the Abrams legend.

## VICE CHIEF OF STAFF

In early 1964 Abrams was appointed Army Vice Chief of Staff, serving under the new Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson. He thus stepped into his first role giving him influence on the entire institution of the United States Army. Wrote the noted military affairs correspondent S.L.A. Marshall of the Johnson-Abrams team: "Neither is a political general. 'Men of character' is the right phrase."

Abrams and Johnson developed a remarkable partnership based on shared values and devotion to the Army they had both served for so many years. The key responsibility for Abrams was managing the Army's expansion to meet requirements of the war in Vietnam, a task made infinitely more difficult by President Lyndon Johnson's refusal to authorize the mobilization of reserve components on which all contingency plans had been based.

Lecturing at West Point, Abrams talked about one of his favorite topics—soldiers. "They are the most precious product that this country has," he began. "And whatever is accomplished, it is accomplished with these people. We have to understand them. We have to have faith in them, and we have to like them."

Testifying before a Congressional committee on the Army budget, Abrams was asked his opinion of the caliber .45 pistol. "Well," he responded, "it all depends on the circumstances. In a crowded elevator, there's no finer weapon."

Later Senator Mike Mansfield observed that, "On Capitol Hill, General Abrams's name was a byword of professionalism, candor, and personal integrity." Senator Thomas McIntyre of New Hampshire described how Abrams had come across as a witness before the Senate Armed Services Committee: "In the veritable sea of uniforms, faces and voices that flows before the committee each year, his stood out. His voice, unlike some, was not loud, not overbearing, not pompous, not righteous, not indignant, not demanding. No. His voice was quiet. His thoughts were personal and candid. He spoke modestly but with force and meaning."

When, three years into their partnership, General Johnson had been unsuccessful in getting Westmoreland to change his approach to the war in Vietnam, the Chief of Staff shifted his emphasis to getting Westmoreland replaced. To that end he offered up his invaluable Vice Chief of Staff to go out to Vietnam as deputy and—soon, it was hoped—successor to Westmoreland.

#### DEPUTY COMUSMACV

Instead of taking command soon after arriving in Vietnam in early May 1967, Abrams spent what an aide described as a "long, lonely" year as deputy to General Westmoreland. Abrams concentrated on helping South Vietnamese armed forces increase their capabilities, and with considerable success—as was demonstrated when they acquitted themselves surprisingly well during the Tet Offensive of early 1968—probably, someone suggested, better than they thought they could.

#### COMUSMACV

General Abrams succeeded to the top command in Vietnam in June 1968. Even before taking formal command he had issued some important instructions: "Effective now," he stated, "the overall public affairs policy of this command will be to let results speak for themselves. We will not deal in propaganda exercises in any way, but will play all of our activities at low key."

In another revealing message Abrams told his commanders that "if an investigation results in 'bad news,' no attempt will be made to dodge the issue. If an error has been made, it will be admitted as soon as possible."

Said General Fred Weyand, "The tactics changed within fifteen minutes of Abrams's taking command."

Abrams came to this difficult task, three years after the commitment of large numbers of U.S. ground forces to the war and still with nothing much to show for that, well equipped to do better. He understood the war in a way his predecessor had not. And he had the personality to go with his intellect and strategic insights. Said journalist William F. Buckley Jr. "Abrams retreats from difficulty about as much as a moth retreats from the flame." And, observed journalist George McArthur, Abrams had a voice "with the authority of a tank engine." Other characterizations were more amusing but equally appropriate, to include one reporter's opinion that Abrams looked like "an unmade bed smoking a cigar." Abrams found that quite amusing and afterward delighted in quoting it widely.

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Instead of a war of attrition, Abrams set about what might be called "a war of population security." No longer would the dominant tactical approach be "search and destroy," but now "clear and hold," with the "hold" being provided by upgraded and expanded South Vietnamese Territorial Forces. And in this kind of war "body count" was no longer the measure of merit. It was the numbers of the population protected that counted. Said Abrams: "It is important that the command move away from the over-emphasized and often irrelevant 'body count' preoccupation toward measures of progress more oriented to attainment of U.S. objectives."

William Colby, later Director of Central Intelligence, served as deputy to General Abrams for support of the South Vietnamese pacification program. Colby remembered gratefully that, in one of his first staff conferences after taking over the top command in the war, Abrams stated forcefully that he wanted to hear no more of the "other war" of

pacification—henceforth the entire effort was to be “One War.” What that meant was that all the key responsibilities—combat operations, helping the South Vietnamese military forces improve, and pacification support were to get equal strong attention and emphasis.

A corollary was that combat operations, characterized under General Westmoreland by concentration on large-unit operations conducted mainly in the deep jungle in the border regions adjacent to Laos and Cambodia, were now to be radically revised, featuring many small unit patrols and ambushes, day and night, situated so as to provide security to South Vietnam’s rural populace.

At a staff presentation on the annual campaign plan Abrams stopped the briefing, went to the front of the room, and on the chart displayed crossed out what was there and wrote “Protect the Population” as the primary mission.

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The objective of combat operations, Abrams believed, was not destruction but control. He was constantly concerned with reining in the spillover of weapons effects on the civilian populace, and preached this necessity to senior Vietnamese officers as well. In a speech at the National Defense College, Abrams spoke about the impact on achievement of national objectives of military operations. “I can assure you,” he said, “that no matter how frustrating, no matter what our past experience, restraint will and must govern virtually all of our activities.” Thus: “We cannot apply the full firepower capabilities of our military force throughout the countryside at will, for to do so would further endanger the lives and property and the governmental relationships with the very people we are all fighting to protect: your own citizens of Vietnam.”

Abrams was, wrote a journalist (in a clear comparison to his predecessor), “fighting the war without benefit of a manufactured image.” He was also realistic about the wider context of the war, including growing opposition to it in the United States. When the senior marine general complained to Abrams about all the news of domestic anti-war protestors on the Armed Forces Network, Abrams responded that he had looked into it and found the coverage to be balanced and accurate. “It is,” he said, “our job to persevere in the atmosphere of the facts.”

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Abrams had the ability to talk to everyone, from GIs in foxholes to South Vietnamese President Thieu, in ways that were meaningful and memorable to them. One evening in Saigon he had to dinner a Catholic chaplain, Father Charles Leteky (later to be awarded the Medal of Honor, and then become a well-known anti-war protestor). At midnight, upon returning to his billets, Father Leteky immediately wrote a splendid note to General Abrams: “I want to thank you for one of the most memorable evenings of my life,” he began. “This may be a little hard on your humility, but I must say it; I felt that I was in the presence of greatness. Not by virtue of your position, but simply by yourself and the way you come across to me.” And: “You gained an abundance of prayers, because I will be thinking about and praying for you every day.”

At MACV they had a weekly meeting of senior staff, held Saturday mornings. Once a month senior commanders from the field would also attend. This they called a WIEU (pronounced “woo”), short for Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update. It was far more than the name implied. Abrams used the WIEU as a forum, a place to think out loud, to impress the force of his personality on his staff and subordinate commanders, to put the pressure on, to entertain, bond, encourage, buck up. He gave and drew strength in it. It was a theater, and he was the star player for an audience that was also the supporting cast. They loved it. Said one regular attendee, General Abrams’s “eruptions” were always the best part.

Sir Robert Thompson, a British counterinsurgency expert, observed General Abrams closely during the Vietnam War, then pronounced him America’s greatest general since Ulysses Grant. It is not surprising that he would reach that judgment, since Abrams is the one general since Grant who was most like him. The comparison brings to mind an observation by General William Tecumseh Sherman. “Grant is as good a leader as we can find,” he stated. “He has honesty, simplicity of character, singleness of purpose, and no hopes to usurp civil power. His character, more than his genius, will reconcile armies and attach the people.”

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As the drawdown of U.S. forces from Vietnam continued, Abrams would go to say goodbye to departing units and thank them for their service. In his remarks he would reveal his own values and convictions. Abrams told soldiers of the 1st Infantry Division this: “The 1st Infantry Division...represents a constance of those essential virtues of mankind—humility, courage, devotion and sacrifice. The world is changed a lot,” he said, “but this division continues to serve, as it had in the beginning. I choose to feel that this is part of the cement, and the rock, and the steel that holds our great country together.” Then he closed by quoting to them their own great division motto: “No Mission Too Difficult, No Sacrifice Too Great—Duty First.”

Altogether Abrams served for five years in Vietnam, the last four as overall commander of U.S. forces there. Near the end he remarked at a staff conference, “Some of the days are kinda long, but the years go by very quickly.”

During those years Abrams converted to Catholicism, instructed by his old friend Chaplain John Benson and confirmed by a visiting Cardinal Cooke. Afterward the Cardinal wrote Abrams a remarkable letter. “Seeing you there,” he said, “gave me a balanced picture of a great human being and a great gentleman—a man of peace striving to come successfully to the end of a difficult and awful war and anxious to guarantee a just peace for his own people and for those other to whom he had been sent to help and support. I never have the chance to be with you but that I come away grateful to God for the dedication and for the courage which you have.”

Earlier, when Abrams was Vice Chief of Staff, he had made a speech at a prayer breakfast in which he said that “religion is a very personal matter, but each of us, by our prayers and by our faith in God, is seeking not only an inner peace, but also the courage to face what lies ahead and to do what must be done.” Speaking of his decision to become a Catholic, Abrams told Melvin Laird that he had been “struck by the power of the faith in the Catholics he had known.” Said his wife Julie of her husband’s conversion, “He just felt that he had to have more help.”

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As U.S. forces continued their withdrawal, more and more it was the South Vietnamese who were carrying the load and achieving a better war. Military operations were accompanied by widespread governmental improvements, to include comprehensive land reform, introduction of “miracle” rice that greatly increased harvests of that vital crop, strengthening village governments, and resettlement of large numbers of refugees created by the war.

At the time of the 1972 Easter Offensive, about all Abrams had left with which to help the South Vietnamese was airpower and naval gunfire. He had by then essentially done something perhaps unique in warfare for the commander of an expeditionary force—he had sent his army home before himself.

Finally Abrams himself came home to try to rebuild what remained. At the final staff conference before his departure, Ambassador Bunker made these remarks to him: “I think it’s clear—it’s certainly clear to me—that without *your* leadership, and without what your colleagues have *done* here, there wouldn’t *be* any Republic of Vietnam today. And this has been due to your leadership, to not only highest intelligence and *professional* skill, but to sensitivity, effectiveness, *with* what the Yankees call plain common sense. By *that* means you’ve gained the confidence and trust of the Vietnamese, which has been essential to success here. So we’ve all learned from *you*. And now that you’re leaving, we all take great satisfaction and pride in the fact that you’re taking over as Chief of Staff, the top position in the Army. And I think—you *know*, I don’t have to tell you—that you leave with not only the great admiration but the greatest *affection* of all of us.”

As you of course know, all this heroic and self-sacrificing achievement was squandered when the Congress of the United States decided to drastically reduce logistical and fiscal assistance to South Vietnam, this at a time when the North Vietnamese were getting greatly increased military assistance from their patrons. Cabled Tom Polgar, our last CIA Chief of Station in Saigon: “Ultimate outcome hardly in doubt, because South Vietnam cannot survive without U.S. military aid as long as North Vietnam’s war-making capacity is unimpaired and supported by Soviet Union and China.” (Fortunately Abrams would not live to see that shameful outcome.)

The night before he left Vietnam, General Abrams had all the sergeants major in for drinks in his quarters. And in remarks after dinner that evening in the command mess he told his senior associates: “The longer I serve the more I become convinced that the single most important attribute of the professional officer is integrity.”

Later someone mentioned to General Abrams's eldest son, also named Creighton, what journalist Robert Shaplen had once said, that his father deserved a better war. "He didn't see it that way," young Creighton responded at once. "He thought the Vietnamese were worth it."

## ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF

In the autumn of 1972 Abrams became Chief of Staff. Senator Strom Thurmond called him to say that the Senate had, by an 84-2 vote, confirmed his nomination (Senators Proxmire and Church voting no). Abrams celebrated by going home to have lunch with Georgie Jessel.

Faced with rebuilding an Army that had suffered greatly during the long years of the Vietnam involvement, and with the daunting task of transitioning to an all-volunteer force, Abrams concentrated on two key tasks: readiness of the force and the well-being of its soldiers and their families.

He put in place common-sense training for leaders at all levels, and for units; he eliminated or cut back bloated staff and headquarters, including the one he inherited, and put the manpower saved out in the units; he made readiness for combat the be all and end all of every Army activity. The job was not finished when he was taken, but the course had been set.

"You've got to know what influences me," he said repeatedly. Then he would describe the three wars he had served in, how unprepared America had been for each of them, and the enormous costs that unpreparedness entailed—costs borne by the soldier. "We have *paid*, and *paid*, and *paid* again in blood and sacrifice for our unpreparedness," he would stress, hammering out each time, each war, as he did so. "I don't want war, but I am appalled at the human cost that we've paid because we wouldn't prepare to fight."

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While serving as Vice Chief of Staff to General Harold K. Johnson, Abrams had had to deal with expansion of the Army to meet the requirements of Vietnam, and to do so without resort to mobilization of reserve forces (something Lyndon Johnson refused to authorize). The result, said Abrams, was that the buildup "consisted entirely of privates and second lieutenants." Determined not to let that happen again, Abrams now restructured the force so that certain essential elements for fighting a war were located exclusively or primarily in the reserve components. "They're not taking us to war without the reserves again," he told his compatriots.

When a new Secretary of the Army took office in mid-1973 and was about to embark on initial visits to key Army units and installations, Abrams issued some succinct guidance to the field: "I cannot emphasize too strongly the critical necessity for candor. Tell it like it is."

Abrams was genuinely and passionately committed to equal opportunity and fair and respectful treatment of every soldier. Speaking to his senior associates, he told them: "You can't do it by directive. Somehow there has got to be a conviction among almost everyone that it has to change, and that we have to look at each other as humans and equal, and that the opportunities for each one of us are all there."

Over the course of the years Abrams collected a number of "sayings," as others began to call them, observations or comments having some explanatory power and usually some wit or humor as well. I'll cite just a few to give you the flavor. On reporting honestly and promptly: "I've never known bad news to improve with age." On integrity: "Nobody in the world can take your integrity away from you. If you're going to lose it, you have to give it up yourself." On achievement: "There's no limit to the good you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit." On soldiers: "Soldiers are not *in* the Army, soldiers *are* the Army." On service (perhaps his favorite): "Soldiering is an affair of the heart." And of course the immortal Pig Rule, which he found had many useful applications: "Never wrestle with pigs. You get dirty and they enjoy it."

## PERORATION

Abrams fell ill in the late spring of 1974 and died in early September. The end came ten years to the day after he was first promoted to full general, and just ten days short of his sixtieth birthday. Altogether he had served as a general

officer for eighteen of his thirty-eight years in uniform.

In Abrams's last days many touching messages poured in. One was from journalist George McArthur in the Saigon bureau of the *Los Angeles Times*, who cabled: "Eye know the rumped walrus likes his privacy, but will you please inform him that some of us out here are still rooting for a good man in a good uniform."

Many tributes followed his death. One of the most eloquent was from Joanne Patton, wife of the younger George Patton. "There will be no replacing him," she told Julie Abrams, "but the time has come to prove we have learned the lessons his great example taught."

Cyrus Vance also wrote to Julie: "He was a superb man in every way," he said of her late husband. "His strength, courage and leadership were uniquely coupled with compassion and understanding and humor. His leadership in restoring the Army's confidence and pride in itself was a magnificent achievement."

From Vietnam, where the war still raged on, came a tribute from General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff with whom Abrams had worked closely. Wrote Vien of General Abrams, "we in the Vietnamese Armed Forces shall forever cherish his memory and look upon him as a shiny example of patriotism and military virtues."

Some years later General John Vessey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, contributed his own assessment of what General Abrams had accomplished during his service as Army Chief of Staff. "When Americans watched the stunning success of our armed forces in Desert Storm," he wrote, "they were watching the Abrams vision in action. The modern equipment, the effective air support, the use of the reserve components and, most important of all, the advanced training which taught our people how to stay alive on the battlefield were all seeds planted by Abe."

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Because General Abrams died while he was still on active duty, he was not able to do the usual extensive end-of-career oral history the Army's Military History Institute conducted after their retirement with most very senior officers.

Lieutenant General DeWitt Smith, who was at that time Commandant of the Army War College, had as an infantry lieutenant been in 4th Armored Division in World War II and had known and admired Abrams. To make up in some measure for the lack of an Abrams oral history, General Smith commissioned a special set of interviews, to be known as "The Creighton Abrams Story."

In his own contributory interview General Smith said of Abrams, "I think he was absolutely genuine. Sometimes he was quite rough-hewn, but you never got the sense of a man acting a role. You had the sense that this was the real fellow bubbling out or bursting out or roaring out from the cracks in his exterior."

Over a span of several years fifty-five people who had known Abrams well during his life and service were interviewed, to include his widow Julie Abrams and his sister Betty. The interviews were conducted by pairs of student officers from the Army War College classes.

At some point the interviewers began to realize that the portrait they were getting was an overwhelmingly positive one. They worried whether they might be criticized for whitewashing their subject. Thus they began to state this concern very candidly to those being interviewed, asking specifically for any negative aspects of the story. They got next to nothing.

Major General George Patton's response was typical. He agreed that Abrams was human. "He had his faults, just like anybody else," said Patton, with the interviewers no doubt at that point leaning forward expectantly, "but not very damn many of them!"

I said in an Abrams biography that he could exhibit monumental moodiness—grumpy wouldn't begin to describe it—especially in the morning; that he had a volatile temperament often unleashed during meetings and conferences (sometimes, it seems clear, for calculated effect); that he could be uncommunicative, with little use for small talk; that he drank a lot (but never, by any competent testimony, to the detriment of mission performance); and that, as

one reporter put it charmingly, “he let the goddamns fall where they may.”

It is clear on the Abrams tapes made while he commanded in Vietnam, some 2000 hours of them recorded over a period of four years and at many different times of day, that he is in those highly stressful circumstances operating in full control of his abilities—insightful, questioning, articulate, even funny—throughout a long, hard war.

That was about it. Another reporter once wrote that Abrams gained from his imperfections, a judgment shared by many who served alongside him. “He wasn’t perfect,” recalled a close associate, “but he was special.”

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The way of the soldier was made for Creighton Abrams. He found in it the ideal manifestation of his strength of character, depth of commitment, ability to organize and lead men, grasp of complex organizations and fast-paced events, physical and moral courage, intellect, integrity, endurance, spirituality, need for a sense of purpose. He reached the top of his profession on the strength of these qualities of heart and mind and spirit, and he did so with a genuine modesty and compassion for others quite rare in the profession of arms.

“For people of his generation,” said General Robert Shoemaker, “Abrams was driving the Army. It’s not necessarily the Chief of Staff who’s driving the Army, unless he has the moral authority to go with his official position. In his day Abe drove the Army.”

After General Abrams died a small monument was erected in his memory at the Army War College. It was just a chunk of rock, really, but positioned so that every student could see it every day upon leaving the main academic building.

On it were these few words of Abrams’s own: “There must be, within our Army, a sense of purpose and a dedication to that purpose. There must be a willingness to march a little farther, to carry a heavier load, to step out into the darkness and the unknown for the safety and well-being of others.”

That, and rebuilding the Army after Vietnam, and the combat vehicle that bears his name—the great M1 Abrams main battle tank—are his memorials and his legacy.

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FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).