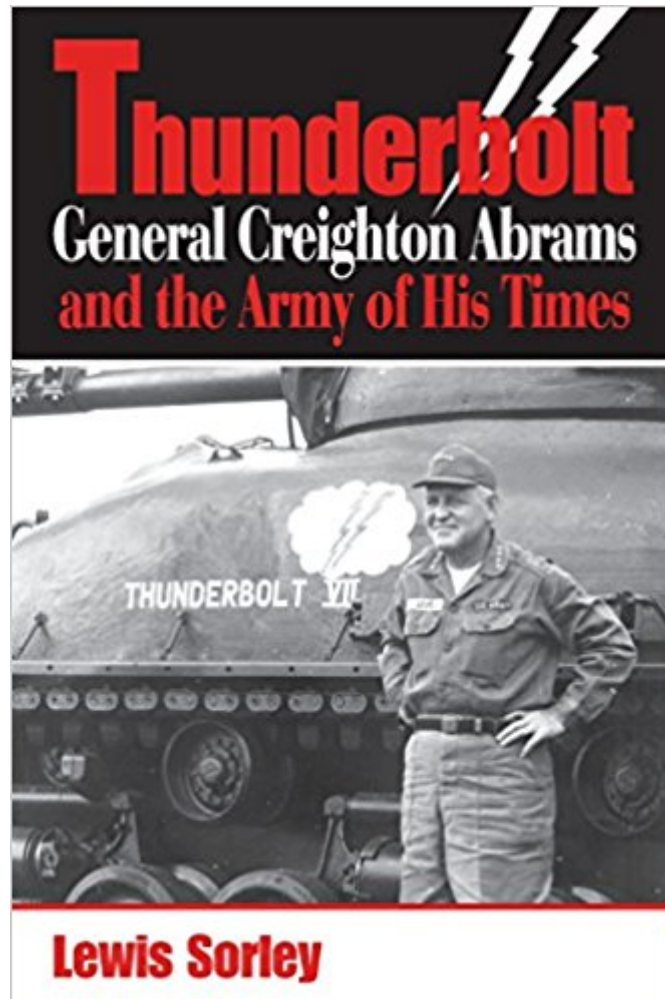


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Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams And The Army Of His Times



Synopsis

General Creighton Abrams has been called the greatest American general since Ulysses S. Grant, yet at the time this book was first published in 1992, he was little known by most Americans. For more than four decades, in three wars and in challenging peacetime assignments, Abrams demonstrated the skill, courage, integrity, and compassion that made him a legend in his profession. Thunderbolt is the definitive biography of the man who commanded U.S. forces in Vietnam during the withdrawal stage and for whom the army's main battle tank is named. With a new introduction by the author, this edition places the complex and sophisticated Abrams and his many achievements in the context of the army he served and ultimately led, and of the national and international events in which he played a vital role. Thunderbolt is a stirring portrait of the quintessential soldier and of the transformation of the U.S. Army from the horse brigades of the 1930s to the high-tech military force of today.

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Customer Reviews

Creighton Abrams may have been the greatest American soldier of the second half of the 20th century. He served as a tank commander under General George Patton at the Battle of the Bulge, in occupied Germany and wartime Korea, as commander of United States military forces in Vietnam, and as Army Chief of Staff. It was a remarkable career! Lewis Sorley's admiring biography of General Abrams narrates the principal events in appropriate detail. In the prologue, Sorley asserts that Abrams was "the quintessential soldier," explaining that Abrams "demonstrated strategic and tactical skill and audacity," extraordinary physical bravery and intellectual courage, the capacity to

lead and inspire men, [and] talent in dealing with complex and ambiguous managerial challenges." The measure of the value of this book lies in whether Sorley effectively makes that case. I believe that he largely does, as the result of which this is a very good, if not great, professional biography. Although Sorley's approach to biography is conventional, he demonstrates on several occasions that Abrams's views could be very unconventional. Early in his chapter about West Point in the mid-1930s, for instance. Sorley asserts: "From the beginning Abrams was alienated by some aspects of the cadet experience." According to Sorley, Abrams was highly self-motivated and self-disciplined, and he resisted the petty tyranny of cadet life. After Abrams graduated and was commissioned, Sorley writes that he "was tolerant of his soldiers' having fun." (Sorley quotes one Abrams subordinate that the general, if Abrams had a weakness, "he sometimes was too easy on some people.") After World War II, while Abrams was serving in the Plans Section for Army Ground Forces in Washington, D.C., he was assigned to prepare a study on the future of the horse cavalry and quickly concluded that there was none. In 1965, shortly after President Johnson ordered American forces in Vietnam out of their advisory role and into combat, Abrams was briefing a civilian official about the sociological impact of the draft and stated that "the only Americans who have the honor to die for their country in Vietnam are the dumb, the poor, and the black." According to Sorley, "[o]ut in the field Abrams disliked briefings, especially of the canned and rehearsed variety," and "[o]ne of [Abrams's] favorite ways [to find out for himself the truth of what was going on] was through small groups of young officers he would have in for dinner." And when Abrams left Vietnam, Sorley writes that "he went as he had come - no bands, no ceremonies, no flags, no fuss." Similarly, when he arrived back in Washington, according to Sorley, he got rid of the Chief of Staff's "big black Cadillac limousine...using instead a small Chevelle from Pentagon motor pool that was painted robin's egg blue. No amenities, not even a star plate." Sorley occasionally offers significant insight. For instance, Sorley writes that Johnson's decision not to call up the reserves at the beginning of the expansion of the war in Vietnam was "perhaps the most fateful decision of the entire conflict." (Abrams explained the impact of this decision: "We decide[d] to use the Army in Vietnam, minus the National Guard and the Army Reserve.") In addition, according to Sorley: "A pervasive atmosphere of mistrust and antagonism characterized civil-military relationships in the Pentagon of the 1960s." Sorley describes the battle of Tet in 1968 as a "true watershed," which is not penetrating analysis, but he proceeds to explain: "Before Tet, America was seeking a military victory in Vietnam, but after it she was seeking to get out." About Abrams's appointment to the position of Army Chief of Staff, Sorley writes: "Creighton Abrams returned from Vietnam to head an Army that was widely viewed, both by the nation and from within its own ranks, as dispirited and desperately in need of reform. His

appointment was the first step in getting on with the job of rebuilding."In other places, Sorley's approach to his subject approaches hagiography. For instance, although Abrams' performance during the relief of Bastogne was heroic, Sorley's assertion that this made Abrams "the most famous small unit leader of the war" is debatable. And Sorley's assertion that "Abrams command in Vietnam was...arguably the most difficult any top American soldier in the field has ever had to face" seems extreme. But Sorley may well be correct in writing: "In terms of prior experience Abrams was probably the best-qualified man ever to assume the duties of Army Chief of Staff."This biography concludes with Abrams's death. I would have much preferred for Sorley to devote a few pages to placing Abrams's accomplishments in the context of American military history from World War II through the middle of the Cold War. But Abrams had an extraordinary career, and this is a very good narrative of it.

Creighton Abrams is one of the best soldiers of the American Century, perhaps ranking only behind George C. Marshall in selfless devotion to soldiering. Lewis Sorley's *Thunderbolt* is both thoroughly researched and well written. Abrams was a true man of virtue, and an inspiration to all who served with him and under his command. I was lead to this book by Sorley's more recent book, *A Better War*, which focuses more specifically on Abrams's Vietnam years. Anyone who believes that Army values of duty, honor, and country have been corrupted by 20th Century experience should read this objective tribute to a truly great man of humble origins whose tank column liberated Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge and who eventually rose to be Chief of Staff of the Army. A biography well worth reading.

Sir Robert Thompson, a British counter-intelligence expert, called Abrams "the best U.S. General since Grant." Reading Sorley's terrific account of Abram's life, it's hard to argue the point.Abrams was an armored warfare genius. His gruff, no-nonsense exterior masked a big heart and an abiding, deeply rooted love for his men and his country. His selfless devotion to duty is a model for us all.For a more in-depth analysis of Abrams'considerable (though largely overlooked) post-Tet, post-Westmoreland successes in Vietnam, read Sorley's "*A Better War*."

GEN Abrams was responsible for the quality of the Army today and since he was the Chief of Staff. His wisdom and insight into soldiering, leadership, and combat ability is what won the Gulf War. Dr. Sorley is right on the money. It is obvious that Dr. Sorley really admires GEN Abrams and he has done his homework. It's a shame that GEN Abrams died so early, he tranformed the United States

Army into the force it is today, or was at the time of the Gulf War. I met GEN Abrams in 1973 in Germany as a young Corporal and he spoke with me for a few minutes, but he struck me as unpretentious and humorous. I met Captains and Majors who had a bigger ego than him.

I was 9 years old when I first met General "Abe" in Germany in 1959. Lewis Sorley did a masterful job describing this American hero. Reading the biography, I was amazed to find out about the breadth of the impact that Gen. Abrams had on the events of modern America from World War II (liberating the 101st Airborne at Bastogne!), through the Civil Rights movement in the South (key advisor to President Kennedy insuring the peaceful implementation of desegregation at the Univ of Alabama), and finally the conclusion of the Vietnam War. Abrams' character and capability are the standards we should demand from all of our leaders. If someone is looking to find out about who was making good things happen in the second half of the 20th century and what it takes to be a truly great person, read Sorley's book. It will make you wonder why we don't have people like Abrams, not only in our highest military positions, but our highest elected offices today. It is ironic to think that cigars robbed us of this incredible person at the pinnacle of his career at the young age of 59. It was a great loss for America. You don't have to be a military buff to enjoy this book. You just have to have an interest in who shaped the 20th Century and what kind of leader you want in your company, town, or country in the 21st!

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