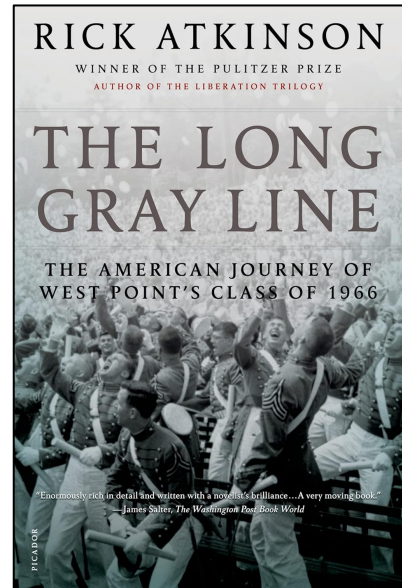


A Tapestry of Troubled American History



The Long Gray Line: From West Point to Vietnam and After – The Turbulent Odyssey of the Class of 1966

By Rick Atkinson
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989

Reviewed by Lieutenant Brendan B. McBreen, USMC

When the class of 1966 graduated from West Point, the United States was undergoing a decade of significant change. Social changes, racial issues, and cultural shifts were all magnified by the unpopular war in Vietnam. In *The Long Gray Line*, Rick Atkinson traces how these tumultuous years affected the lives of selected young officers in the U.S. Army.

From John F. Kennedy's 1962 West Point commencement address to the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans memorial and beyond, Rick Atkinson's *The Long Gray Line* explores twenty-five years of the American military experience.

As the subtitle states, this is a study of one single class from the United States Military Academy at West Point. Tracing the stories of select individuals, from young

civilians turned plebes, to upper class cadets, to wartime junior officers, and then middle-aged adults, the author gives a carefully detailed account of how Vietnam changed these men, the U.S. Army, and the country.

Each man's story reflects his West Point experience. Atkinson begins by examining the lifestyle of the cadets, the honor code, the standards of ethics and integrity, the four

years of rituals, training, pranks, and academics. Hundreds of characters color his narration. The fabric and history of West Point, its great traditions and its famous graduates carved in granite, are all skillfully tied to the ordinary cadets, their parents, girlfriends, and commanding officers.

Vietnam is the focal point of the book. Within months of graduation and commissioning,

followed in many cases by jump school and Ranger school, the new lieutenants found themselves fighting halfway around the world. Most discover that after four years of study they were still not prepared for Vietnam. The “real Army” was different. The mission was unclear, the ethics muddled. Standards of behavior and the morality of warfare, so strongly inculcated at West Point, were confusing in the real world.

Atkinson’s descriptions of combat in Vietnam are vivid, personal, and bloody. His characters describe ambushes, fire fights and helicopter inserts. One of the first members of the class to die is accidentally killed by his own rifle, a portent of the war to come. The Battle of Hamburger Hill in April 1969 claims the lives of multiple graduates. The West Point chaplain visits units in the field and returns questioning the sacrifices being made. Some 66ers become physical casualties, but the loss of youthful idealism and selfless service affects every man.

The officers who remained in the Army after Vietnam experienced the “hollow Army” of the 1970s. West Point itself is rocked by a cheating scandal. Those graduates who left the Army found a civilian society distinctly different than the one they had let go in 1962. Atkinson follows each of his subjects closely and describes the social changes wrought by Vietnam and the successes and failures, in business and in life, of the class of 1966.

The story of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the part played by 66ers is described in detail. The wall, with the names of so many dead classmates, becomes a powerful reminder of the dreams and memories of youth. Atkinson examines the institution that is West Point today. The changes in curriculum, the admission of women, and the elimination of some disciplinary practices are all commented on. In the closing, Colonel George Crocker, USMA 66, commanding a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division in

1987 talked to the author about the “new Army.” The colonel was doing what he loved, what he had trained to do, twenty-one years after graduation: Duty, Honor, and Country.

Recommendation

Overall, *The Long Gray Line* is an engrossing, close-up description of a troubled era in American history. Atkinson’s descriptions of the West Point experience and the U.S. Army, both in Vietnam and afterward, ring with authenticity. The book is well-written and researched. Atkinson’s narrative is absorbing and thoughtful. *The Long Gray Line* is powerful living history and a book well worth reading.

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