

Vietnam and American Memory: A Review Article

Walter Capps, The Unfinished War: Vietnam And The American Conscience. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982. Pp.177. \$13.50

Loren Baritz, Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985. Pp.393. \$17.95

John Hellmann, American Myth And The Legacy Of Vietnam. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Pp.xiv+241. \$24.95

Myra MacPherson, Long Time Passing: Vietnam & The Haunted Generation. New York: Signet Books, 1985. Pp.772. \$4.95

John Wheeler, Touched With Fire: The Future Of The Vietnam Generation. New York: Franklin Watts, Inc. 1984. \$16.95

Arthur Egendorf, Healing From The War: Trauma & Transformation after Vietnam. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985. \$15.95

During and immediately after the end of American military involvement in Vietnam major publishers had little enthusiasm for literature about the war. In the past decade, however, the situation has changed dramatically. Autobiographical narratives of warriors' disillusion, classic patriotic captivity narratives, careful historical analysis of the military and political evolution of American involvement, and impassioned revisionist histories populate even the most bland of bookstores and book-clubs. The six books evaluated in this article measure both the impact of the war on American culture, and how the nation might begin the process of healing from the psychic as well as the physical wounds of war.

Capps, Baritz, Hellmann, and MacPherson began from the assumption that an important part of the American creed was violated by the war, engendering a crisis of faith that spread into every part of the culture. Capps wondered if there might not

be a break in the "narrative sequence" of the nation, and believed, with Morris Dickstein, that Vietnam symbolized more than military defeat, for "the 'idea' of America, the cherished myth of America, received an even more shattering blow." Baritz suggested that the foundational myth of "chosen people, chosen land" should have been shattered in the war. Unfortunately, according to Baritz, we are still susceptible to the crusading idealism that led us into the war. Hellmann traced the disruption of the American myth of the frontier, an ever-changing physical and mental landscape. In Indochina, Americans saw themselves entering another frontier, "'western pilgrims' on a mission of protection and progress." MacPherson assumed the drastic impact of the war and set out to excavate its divisive effects upon the generation who was asked to fight and moved to protest.¹

The Unfinished War was one of the first postwar treatments of the impact of the war. The war was symbolic from the first, Capps argued, Vietnam merely the stage for what policy-makers perceived as a test of wills with the forces of communism. Disillusion with the war came about largely because there was no satisfying ritual of entry, no recognizable tale of progression, and most importantly, no sense of redemptive ending. Capps focused on three cultural responses to the trauma of the war: the disillusion of the warriors; renewed interest in contemp-

¹ Walter Capps, The Unfinished War: Vietnam And The American Conscience (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), p.14; John Hellmann, American Myth And The Legacy Of Vietnam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.15.

lative religious practices; and the resuscitation of the religious Right.

Capps worked with the first wave of angry literature from veterans. By now the contours of response are familiar: ideal warrior types of the past proved inadequate models due to the nature of the war; the enemy was too often faceless and there was little sense of heroic mission. Indeed, the "mission" was often perceived as little more than concern for physical safety, with the war experienced as a surrealistic nightmare.

The war also sparked an intuitive turn to religious resources not found in the popular life of Western traditions. Those troubled by artificial constructions of enemies, and angered by the transformation of the war into religious crusade, looked for personal resources in the tragic sense of life found in the great traditions of the East and the contemplative tradition within Christianity. The rigor of personal spiritual discipline was necessary, then, as a fundamental ingredient for heightened discrimination of social issues.

In the most significant and timely chapter, Capps argued that the emergence of the religious Right was directly linked to the nation's perceived failure to live up to God's call to continue the endless battle against the forces of evil clothed in the guise of communism. Failure to win the war was the latest and most serious expression of the spiritual degeneration of the nation.

For Capps, the war was largely unfinished due to the bitter

ideological divisions engendered by the war, divisions that threatened to grow wider. In 1982 Capps was not able to do more than voice the general need for healing, lest the sores of Vietnam fester in more ominous ways.

For Baritz, the myth of the "city on the hill" led the nation rather blindly into the war, and, consequently, political assumptions carried a sense of inevitable tragedy. He argued that Americans at war valued managerial and technological strength, hence, the war was doomed from the beginning. All the familiar actors and events are described: the organizing power of the Truman Doctrine, the American entanglement with the French in Indochina, the specter of McCarthyism that spurred policymakers not to be "soft" on communism, and the ill-fated allegiance to the domino theory. None of this really needed to be told again. What will generate controversy is Baritz's passionate condemnation of the managerial conduct of the war. He spoke of controversies that still smolder: was there a failure to correctly assess the strength of the enemy for domestic political purposes? Was the effect of interservice rivalry as damaging as he makes it out to be? There are two indictments rendered, "doctoring numbers and lying to please the boss." All this done in the interest of careerism led to a "systemic corruption...caused by procedures within the Army that had been borrowed from other American bureaucratic institutions." Baritz confronted head on the neo-orthodox argument that the war was lost at home. It was lost, he argued, because the American manner

of making war did not fit the situation in Vietnam, and internal defects within the military contributed to a loss of the ability to make realistic decisions. Finally, there was never any clear sense of what victory meant anyway.²

While Capps found ideological division rooted in current social movements a chief legacy of the war, Baritz found that conduct of the war paved the way for the triumph of the bureaucratic in American life. Spreading into every area of institutional life (he saves as much venom for university bureaucracy as he does for prosecution of the war), this virus has resulted in a frenzied focus on technique rather than goals, with a resulting loss of substantive citizenship in the nation. The nation has degenerated from a "city on a hill" to a "threat to the security of its own and other peoples," and only in his last chapter did Baritz reveal his vision of a reformed American. Not only did American styles of warring predetermine the outcome in Vietnam, the war was a deformity of what "real" America was and should be again. Where this real America was during the war and who spoke for it is not clear. Hence, in spite of his gloomy jeremiad, Baritz hopes for a chastened America, either recovering or shaping anew the ideal of the benign city on the hill. Baritz's blurry vision of a liberal golden age emerging out of the tragedy of Vietnam illustrates very well the liberal dilemma in post-Vietnam America. The religious Right's call for a return

² Loren Baritz, Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), p.299.

to the faith (and militant foreign policy) of our cold war fathers offers moral orientation in familiar terrain. The liberal vision offered by Baritz does not, for a variety of reasons, evoke the passion or offer the clarity that the cold war world-view provides. ⁹

John Hellmann followed Richard Slotkin's Regeneration Through Violence and Richard Drinnon's Facing West in using the frontier myth to analyze literary and film interpretations of the war. He offered insightful discussions of The Quiet American and The Ugly American as texts that provided Americans with images of Vietnam as a savage frontier for the battle between good and evil. The Ugly American warned of the dangers of a soft and decadent America, whose failure of resolve would result in the communists' takeover of southeast Asia. Kennedy's clarion call for the New Frontier was in part a response to these early warnings, and the archetypal New World Warrior emerged in the guise of the Green Beret. He contained both savage elements of the frontier (a natural warrior) and the civilized attributes common to warriors inspired by democratic principles.

The countercultural work of Mailer, McCarthy, and Sontag inverted the frontier myth. A rich, corrupt technological American giant was now warring on a gentle, natural people. Veterans' autobiographies and fictional works used a frontier hero engaged in a mission that dissolved into absurdity in the chaos of Vietnam. They could not connect with their fathers, the

⁹ *ibid.*, p.338.

heroes of World War II, and the words of JFK echoed mockingly in their ears, for their sacrifices did not pave the way for the resolution of conflict. Even the physical landscape of Vietnam was evil, trivializing the quest for heroism, providing a stage for acts of American depravity. Other works sought to redefine the American character after the war. In all of them, the hero retreated into a mental landscape to make some sense of the war.

Hellmann's analysis could be more critical of these "dope and dementia" interpretations of the war. In Michael Herr's much celebrated Dispatches, for example, Hellmann applauded the artistic brilliance of Herr's inner search for the "secret history" of Vietnam. What was this secret history? Was it adequate to look upon Vietnam as only a "bad trip?" In his own critical reading, James Wilson suggested that these works reveal "a very serious contemporary problem--the despair of not being able to understand external reality and history, " a quality without which the nation would not be able to ever penetrate the significance of Vietnam. ⁴

Hellmann's treatment of "Deerhunter" and "Apocalypse Now," would have been an appropriate endpoint, but he felt compelled to envision how fantasy (the "Star Wars" trilogy) might help the nation restructure its identity. Here Hellmann's infatuation with Freudian analysis, insightful in his treatment of the legacy of JFK, ran completely wild. Consider the "real" story of Luke

⁴ James C. Wilson, Vietnam In Prose And Film (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1982), p.51

Skywalker, part of "an American rebellion against a British father to preserve the father's lost ideals...." Turning to fantasy may indeed provide impetus to certain cultural fashions, yet the "Star Wars" trilogy seems more likely to provide a popular context for fascination with the Strategic Defense Initiative rather than as a sign of a mature post-Vietnam America.

During Charlton Heston's introduction to *Accuracy in Media's* angry television rejoinder to the PBS series on the war, a copy of Long Time Passing occupied a prominent place on a coffee table near Heston. Revisionists, however, will have a hard time constructing a heroic saga from MacPherson's powerful chronicle. Long Time Passing picked up the themes of never-ending war and ideological separations present in The Unfinished War. Whereas Capps outlined broad cultural responses to the war, MacPherson excavated the human pain from almost every conceivable group of Americans. They are all here. Veterans spoke from across the spectrum of ideology, race, class. They spoke from prison, and from across the border. We heard from those who "made it" and those who are trying to "come home." We heard from resisters, evaders, deserters, women who went to war and women who protested against the war.

MacPherson has captured the pain of the generation that fought in Vietnam and the pain of those who fought against it. The deep fissures engendered by the war are found on the first pages, as MacPherson introduced Chuck and Tom Hagel, brothers who

fought together in Vietnam and could not agree on the wisdom of the motives or prosecution of the war, nor on its lessons. Reflections on the draft by those who went and those who didn't revealed the depths of the class divisions. Veterans, even those bitterly opposed to the war, were contemptuous of those who criticized the war from afar and blamed the warrior for the war. MacPherson did not hide her anger at the emergence of a "Vietnam guilt chic" among some former opponents of the war who now look with nostalgia at lost opportunity for their male rite of passage.

What most troubled MacPherson was the erosion of any sense of shared ideals among the generation. Many veterans, even those who have emerged relatively unscathed, found, she believed, a lack of depth to their lives, "as if deep feelings had been drained from them during their youth, never to return." Those who deserted or went to Canada faced "profound alienation, bitter cynicism...estrangement." The result was either social nihilism or the revitalization of martial enthusiasm. MacPherson believed that people were more sensitized to specious claims of national security as a result of Vietnam, yet it would be difficult for any nation to appreciate one of the important lessons of the war, the paradoxical lesson of "nobility of service and inevitable misguidedness of policy." ⁵

MacPherson confronted the dark side of the war as well.

⁵ Myra MacPherson, Long Time Passing: Vietnam & The Haunted Generation (New York: Signet Books, 1984), pp.333,443,724.

She probed the psychic effects of atrocities, those incidents that called into question the traditional image of the humane American warrior. The massacre at My Lai, for example, transformed Lt. Calley into either monster or tragic hero. She spoke with those for whom the lure of drugs provided relief after Vietnamization began and all semblance of redemptive saga was gone. These were the "unspoken, awful, legacies" of the war that continued to haunt many.

MacPherson hoped against hope that the nation would emerge from Vietnam more cautious in its military interventions, and she wisely presented no grand visions of a cleansed postwar world. A veteran seemed to speak for her when he said, "only in the individual conscience will the rehabilitation and reconciliation be made."^e

Vietnam veterans Wheeler and Egendorf suggested that healing from the war has already begun. Wheeler was chairman of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, and Touched With Fire his statement of faith that the war in Vietnam might well be the revitalizing agent the nation needed, not the catastrophe that defined permanent separations. Quietly, but to great effect, Wheeler argued, veterans have been leading this regeneration of national spirit. The war did cause major separations. Men who wore the uniform and those who didn't are alienated. The war, which energized the women's movement ("the Vietnam war was the proximate cause of women's equality in America") separated

^e *ibid.*, pp.602 and 623.

women from men, for the "feminization" of American culture--some things are worth living for--gained ascendancy over the masculine principle-- some things are worth dying for.⁷

For Wheeler, the war was redemptive in many ways. Organizational experience gained in Vietnam gave birth to Federal Express. Discipline and loyalty instilled in the veterans found expression in various Vietnam veterans groups as well as in the California Conservation Corps. Final reconciliation awaited the mea culpa of those who chose not to go to Vietnam. It also awaited a national act that would "fully acknowledge the integrity of service and the embodiment of cherished values represented in the soldiers sent to Vietnam." Wheeler used the same "guilt-chic" non-vets that so angered MacPherson as characteristic of those who didn't go. While they fit well into Wheeler's scheme of things, it is completely inaccurate to use these "celebrities" as ideal types of the millions in the Vietnam generation who did not serve.⁸

Also essential to Wheeler's vision of healing was the recovery of the masculine principle. When war protestors, said "no more Vietnams," they really meant, according to Wheeler, "I wished we lived in a world where nothing is worth dying for!" Again, this sort of generalization fits his vision, but is indiscriminate. While some protestors might have meant this,

⁷ John Wheeler, Touched With Fire: The Future Of The Vietnam Generation (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), p.140.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.29.

others meant "I see no tangible danger which moves me to offer my life." In the moral accounting of MacPherson and Wheeler, most of those who went to war went with clearly articulated value systems, while those who stayed home usually did so for base reasons. It would be more accurate, I believe, to suggest that a mixture of conscious and unconscious moods and motivations were present in decisions made by all.

It was most appropriate for Wheeler to call for a healing that transcended the bitter ideological divisions Capps and MacPherson have described, and it was courageous to suggest that there might indeed be a redemptive ending to this tragic story. Nevertheless, important questions remain: if there are things worth dying for, how are we to decide? Or, are we to let others decide for us? Were not some warriors and some protestors both motivated by various visions of American patriotism? Are Wheeler's masculine and feminine principles so clearly distinct in real people, or are nurturing and self-sacrificial impulses found, in different degrees, in both men and women? And, finally, does Wheeler's call for healing transcend the separations within the generation or does it simply call for atonement on the part of the non-veterans and the reawakening of a masculine principle, a crusading Americanism that initially energized American involvement in Vietnam?

In Healing From The War, Arthur Egendorf charted his own liberating voyage home from the trauma of the Vietnam war. Now a psychotherapist and co-author of the congressional study Legacies

of Vietnam, he has been an intense critic of the war and its destructive effects on veterans. Using his own experiences in Vietnam veteran rap groups, Egendorf movingly dissected the anger and pain of veterans. This is not his only purpose, however. He, like Wheeler, is also interested in healing. Unlike Wheeler, healing would not begin with the revitalization of a masculine principle that had been lost, but with self-knowledge brought about through creative struggles with others to find the source of the pain and channel its destructive effects into inspiration for a new mission.

This new mission would be led by enlightened veterans who have learned that pain leads to insight and forgiveness of others is the crucial ingredient for national reconciliation and the development of a global vision. Like William James, and more recently, Robert Jay Lifton, Egendorf called for a rebirth of the warrior spirit. This transformed warrior would use the lessons of duty, devotion, and love of country to bring about the "new modes of thinking" that Einstein saw as so crucial for the survival of the planet. Consequently, for Egendorf, Vietnam veterans, "properly healed and called to a new mission," would utilize revered warrior virtues to lead in the "greatest of human projects," the movement of humankind away from the war that threatens all. ⁹

Healing From The War may remind readers of Joanna Rogers Macy's Despair And Personal Power In The Nuclear Age. Both

⁹ibid., p.251.

authors argued for the primacy of personal empowerment as part of the great cultural transformations about to break upon us. This empowerment is to be brought about through the use of a hodge-podge of meditative practices. It is only through such changes, apparently, that the current set of intractable dilemmas facing humankind can be resolved. Egendorf's arguments are made with great passion, yet substantive questions about such "new age" thinking need to be addressed. What is the role of new vision in bringing about social change? Can the changed perception of a committed few (Vietnam Veterans Against the War, for example) compete with the escapist interpretations of revisionists Gunter Lewy or Norman Podhoretz? Are the ideological polarities brought about by the war susceptible to transformative healing? Capps asked this question several years ago, still the ideological civil war shows no signs of ending.

In his masterful multi-volume history of the United States, Page Smith commented on the vast literature generated in response to the Civil War. It was, he wrote, "as though by the mere volume of uncountable pages the depths of the reality of the war could be plumbed."¹⁰ Certainly the same could be said of recent response to the American war in Vietnam. Still, there are submerged themes that need to be addressed more forthrightly. Running through most of these works is a sense of foreboding about the life of the body politic, as though the war has

¹⁰ Page Smith, Trial By Fire: A People's History of the Civil War and Reconstruction, vol.V (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p.992.

destroyed something intimate yet indescribable in the relationship between the government and the governed. Lamentation about the loss of the "public center" and a call for new community does not only come from the Right; it is evident in such sophisticated lamentations as Robert Bellah's Habits of the Heart.

Other issues are also opened for inspection. Contending perceptions of sacrifice run through these evaluations of the war. Were the warriors offering a regenerative blood sacrifice in a sacred cause similar to that of their martial ancestors? Did the wisdom or futility of the cause change the nature of the sacrifice? Such sacrifice, powerful and moving for some, was equally meaningless and obscene to others. Contending images of sacrifice sometimes changed even the funeral ceremonies of those who died in the war. For some the "truth" of Memorial Day, if not ignored, had to be consciously believed, not subconsciously assumed. How then should the nation look upon future sacrifice: in Lebanon? in South America? in a conflict involving nuclear weapons? Contending memories of the war in Vietnam shape, intimately, current constructions of patriotic sacrifice.¹¹

Vietnam, readers are told, was a war that the United States "lost." What has been lost depends on where one stands. Loss has been measured in moral, political, and strategic terms. It remains, however, that the American South in the Civil War is the

¹¹ For an account of how the loss of the idea of redemptive sacrifice changed one family see, C.D.B. Bryan, Friendly Fire (New York: G.P. Putnam's Son's, 1976).

only part of the nation to have experienced the shared horror of devastating physical and spiritual defeat. Without such sober memories, is the nation wise enough, then, to adequately assimilate the "lessons" of the war? Will most accounts of the war remain dissections of American suffering or will they speak with equal force of the suffering of the Vietnamese: both friends and enemies? And how will the war be assimilated through policy decisions in the future? Visions of healing are welcome, but the war remains--unfinished.

Edward Tabor Linenthal is author of Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America (1982). He is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and in 1986-1987 is a Sloan Research Fellow in the Defense and Arms Control Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.