



2015-068

David Kieran, *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory*. Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2014. Pp. xii, 305. ISBN 978-1-62534-100-6.

Review by Michael R. Dolski, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (michael.r.dolski.civ@mail.mil).

The eminent historian Jay Winter has aptly identified a veritable “memory boom” recently sweeping through academia and pop culture. A feature of that surge has been a great deal of attention to the nature of collective remembrance; in the case of military historians, this has meant pushing beyond standard tales of the outbreak, conduct, or consequences of wars. The best of their work has described how societies create usable pasts in rather politicized terms. In *Forever Vietnam*, David Kieran¹ seeks to build on the new literature on America’s remembrance of the Vietnam War.²

Kieran argues that “the evolving and contested memory of the American War in Vietnam has shaped Americans’ commemoration of other events in ways that inform their understanding of themselves, the nation, and the global interests and obligations of the United States.... Americans have persistently used Vietnam’s remembrance to memorialize and contextualize other events” (3, 236). To demonstrate this, he discusses the American collective memory of six “events”—the siege of the Alamo in 1836; the Civil War POW camp at Andersonville, Georgia; the memoirs of Second World War veterans; the United States’ 1993 intervention in Somalia; the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, on 9/11; and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The author aims to “encompass the sweep of American militarism from 1836 to 2011” (5), a questionable periodization.

Fully conversant with both the relevant military history and the literature on collective memory, Kieran deftly reveals the links between, for example, the memorializations of Flight 93 and of the Vietnam War. He highlights the interplay between veteran reminiscences, memorial construction proposals, and messages attached to items left at the Flight 93 memorial site and the Vietnam Veterans Wall in Washington. He concludes that the patriotic ardor exhibited in communal “remembrance of Flight 93 has relied on the evocation and revision of discourses central to Vietnam’s legacy” (164, chap. 5 *passim*). Other astute pairings of artifacts and subjects demonstrate the profound, if often veiled, influence of Vietnam’s legacy: the 1970 television production of *The Andersonville Trial* and the 1968 My Lai massacre (25–31); popular and medical conceptions of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (63); veterans’ memoirs and the hundreds of interviews in *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young*³ (131–39).

The strength of the book is its author’s demonstration of the malleability of America’s Vietnam (218). Kieran cites invocations of Vietnam’s perceived legacies to either support or oppose US military interventions abroad (133, 144–49). In the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, he writes that the mutability of Vietnam remembrance “reveal[s] that if Vietnam was a frequent referent during the first decade of the twenty-first century, it was a contested one, and that Americans mobilized its remembrance in competing ways as they confronted two protracted wars” (205). Yet Kieran himself concentrates on the more militant side of Vietnam remembrance, pointing out the baleful influence of latter-day interventionists who employ reckless Vietnam (and other) analogies in public policy discussions. “In constructing Vietnam as a morally just, well-intentioned intervention of the sort that Americans should embrace in the future and in arguing that soldiers’ service should be honored despite the political realities of the wars they fought, revisionist scripts prohibit critiques of the Vietnam War and of the reliance on military power to sustain American empire more generally” (94).

1. He was Visiting Professor of American Studies at Franklin and Marshall College in 2014.

2. E.g., Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: U Mass Pr, 2009), and Michael Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2009).

3. Subtitle: *Ia Drang—The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam*, by Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway (NY: Random House, 1992).

Despite the daunting research that went into this book—documented in 1,100-plus footnotes—and the use of such novel evidence as the design entries for the Flight 93 Memorial and the mementos left at the site (e.g., 181), Kieran has not erected scaffolding sufficient to support his argument. One problem is his unidirectional claims for Vietnam’s effects on the remembrance practices for many later events. “Over the past fifty years, the recalling, revising, and redeploying of the memorial practices and tropes central to the remembrance of Vietnam became *the primary means* through which Americans made remembrance of other events into vital spaces for debating issues about war, militarism, foreign policy, and veterans’ affairs” (3, my emphasis). This sweeping claim ignores the celebration in the 1980s of “good war” tales about the Second World War, which shows the presence of other lodestars in American collective remembrance. At one point, Kieran rashly asserts that the Vietnam POW experience display at Andersonville “enables visitors to read the experience of earlier wars through a construct *that emerged* during the Vietnam War” (45, my emphasis), as if harsh treatment in captivity and the longing for return were tropes that originated only with that conflict. In fact, the Civil War centennial events shaped public perceptions of the commemorations held at Andersonville in 1966 far more than did the actions of Vietnam veterans (24).

Also damaging is Kieran’s contention that Second World War veterans did not begin to report their war’s carnage with unflinching frankness until Vietnam veterans paved the way years later. This overlooks, among other things, the celebrated war novels of Irwin Shaw, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.⁴ Kieran also attributes the disenchantment over the gap between expectation and reality in veteran Paul Fussell’s World War II memoir, *Wartime*,⁵ to the influence of Vietnam veteran Phil Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*⁶ (79). But in his well received *The Great War and Modern Memory*,⁷ Fussell had already explored in detail the dissonance between imagined and actual war experiences in the poetry and other writings of First World War soldiers. Similar lapses vitiate the book’s film analyses, which disregard the influence of the war film genre (151).⁸ More generally, the intent here to deconstruct any given major component of American militarism is undercut by the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes “militarism.” Indeed, Kieran often seems to confuse the ideas of military action and militarism proper (196).

Kieran writes of a “POW/MIA myth” (40), blurring the critical distinction between prisoners held long after the war’s conclusion and those simply missing or whose remains are lost. American MIAs are no mere “myth.”⁹ And to write that Vietnam “was vigorously protested by much of the public” (4) overstates the case and raises doubts about the author’s familiarity with the history of the protest movement. Finally, the book is marred by overlong paragraphs, tortuous sentence structure (see, e.g., 5–6 and the quotations in this review), and odd phraseology—“the moment’s war weariness” in the 1970s (37); one memoir “exceeds” another in tone (78).

Although Kieran clearly understands the patterns of American remembrance of Vietnam, he is too often guilty of dubious arguments and half-baked ideas. *Forever Vietnam* does provide interesting vignettes illustrating how Americans’ struggle to come to terms with Vietnam has led them along some unpredictable avenues. But the legacy of Vietnam is not so monolithic or imperial as the book suggests. David Kieran’s parting advice that “[s]cholars must be more attuned to how one event’s remembrance affords possibilities and limitations for remembering others” (238) is well taken, but that attunement is more apparent in the works of other historians¹⁰ than in *Forever Vietnam*.

4. Respectively, *Young Lions* (NY: Random House, 1948), *The Naked and the Dead* (NY: Modern Library, 1948), *Catch-22* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1961), and *Slaughterhouse-five* (NY: Delacorte Pr, 1969).

5. Subtitle: *Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1989).

6. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.

7. NY: Oxford U Pr, 1975.

8. See Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (1986; rpt. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U Pr, 2003).

9. Kieran cites H. Bruce Franklin’s compelling, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U Pr, 1993), but Franklin carefully distinguishes between the numbers of persons missing in action and those listed as prisoners of war. Michael Allen (note 2 above) clarifies the mythologizing of the POW in a more nuanced manner than Kieran.

10. See note 2 above.