



American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity

by Christian G. Appy.

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The growing interest in the origins of the Vietnam War is improving our understanding of its outcome and lasting effects as well. In *American Reckoning*, historian Christian Appy (Univ. of Massachusetts–Amherst) locates the roots of the conflict in the aftermath of World War II. He also argues that the United States' Cold War interventions, especially in Vietnam, shaped its later involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He clarifies how the lamentable results of the American sense of responsibility for containing the spread of communism in Vietnam influenced the US decisions to intervene in and then leave Iraq. Finally, in light of ongoing problems in Iraq, he asks what part American citizens should play in shaping policy debates.

Appy contends that Vietnam dispelled deep-seated notions of “American exceptionalism.” Granted, the concept fluctuated between highs and lows. The United States experienced “a crisis of confidence,” for instance, after the failure of Desert One in Iran (1980). But such failures spawned greater coordination of Special Operations and the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.¹ Later reactions to the US failure in Vietnam included a patriotic conditioning and revisionism that pervaded American popular culture of the time—for example, the testosterone-fueled film *Top Gun* (1986), country singer Lee Greenwood's “God Bless the USA” (1984), and Bruce Springsteen's patriotic rock anthem “Born in the U.S.A.” (1984). The war indelibly altered Americans' national self-perception.

The book comprises three parts—I: Why Are We in Vietnam? II: America at War, and III: What Have We Become? Within each, four chapters explore relevant sub-themes and furnish context for the author's layered arguments. One chapter, for example, centers on opponents to intervening in Vietnam who saw the war as an imperialist continuation of France's exploitive practices in southeast Asia. Another addresses contentious issues like race and the unequal treatment of black American soldiers serving overseas.

The book is sometimes a little too thorough. Certainly, there is much to criticize about US actions in Vietnam, but a more selective and focused critique of core issues would have been more compelling. As for Americans who served in Vietnam, Appy does manage to balance a careful, respectful acknowledgment of their sacrifices against a justified condemnation of poor military and political decision-making. It is hard to commend soldiers for their patriotism and commitment while recounting atrocities like My Lai in the same chapter. But Appy judiciously navigates the ambiguities of warfare. In the end, he is more concerned with the question of American identity than rehearsing US failures and wrongdoings already analyzed elsewhere.²

1. See, further, James R. Locher III, *Victory on the Potomac: The Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 2004).

2. E.g., John Tirman, *The Death of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012), and Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (NY: Picador, 2013).

Nor does the author elucidate the international context of the Vietnam War, the subject of a burgeoning category Vietnam War studies.³ Instead, he investigates the apathy of the American people and the concomitant failure of their government to more thoroughly debate the conditions under which the United States should commit to war. Appy sets out to expose the folly of the “stubborn insistence that our nation has been a unique and unrivaled force for good in the world” (xix), the core of American exceptionalism. He describes how the “do-good” ethos of men like Tom Dooley in Vietnam or Graham Greene’s idealistic character Alden Pyle⁴ was ideologically contested in *Ramparts* magazine and editorials by I.F. Stone and others. He notes that such dissenters, however valid their criticisms, were castigated by the powerful “Vietnam Lobby” that emerged in 1955 and over the years consistently advocated US escalation in Vietnam. Appy, like other influential scholars,⁵ stresses that “The United States was not supporting democracy and self-determination. In fact, it had opposed the popular will of the Vietnamese, first by giving massive support to France’s bloody war to preserve imperial control (1946–1954) and then with the cancellation of nationwide elections in 1956 and its intervention to build a permanent non-Communist South Vietnam” (25).

Appy predictably adduces the CIA-engineered coups in Guatemala in 1954 and Salvador Allende’s Chile in 1973, along with US support for dictatorships in Latin America. But he makes too little use of these cases to buttress his larger argument concerning the US propensity to interfere wherever, especially in the western hemisphere, its hegemony was marginally challenged. The author wisely differentiates service personnel from those who formulated the misguided policies they executed. Americans have generally learned to do the same, but, sadly, not till after the Vietnam War. Appy sees this change as part of a larger project of national reconciliation regarding the war.

Ultimately, Appy’s attributes excessive American interventionism in the twentieth century to a conservative, Manichean worldview that came out of World War II. Hence the conviction that American liberty depended on winning the anti-communist struggle in Vietnam. In addition, the perceived need to preserve American hegemony goes far to explain US interference in not only Guatemala, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador, but also Vietnam, Laos, and other places. This is emphatically not to say that such interventions were wise or justified. Indeed, Appy decries them as unprovoked, immoral, and contrary to the American beliefs professed in the Atlantic Charter or Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms. The Truman Doctrine was less idealistically reconceived as an endorsement of the US policy of contain communism globally.

American Reckoning serves as a clarion call for closer engagement between American citizens and their government. Appy warns that fatally deficient appraisal of government action during the Cold War has persisted in the twenty-first century in the disastrous US adventure in Iraq.

The public was not to have anything to do with the president’s foreign policy. The public had no role, but its exclusion included a payoff—it would be expected to do nothing. It would not have to fight. It would not even be expected to pay higher taxes to pay for the war. The Bush tax cuts would be preserved and the trillions required by the Global War on Terror would be paid with loans. (317)

Instituting the all-volunteer military in 1973 enabled the government to make unilateral decisions while avoiding the popular scrutiny that a draft or other form of sacrifice would have entailed. Appy

3. See, e.g., Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2012), and Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010).

4. In *The Quiet American* (NY: Viking, 1955).

5. E.g., Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 1999).

sees George W. Bush's post-9/11 policies as an egregious case in point. Decreased public interest in the political life, let alone the foreign affairs, of the country has had dire consequences for the citizens in whose name policy is executed.

Christian Appy's intelligent, accessible, and persuasive critique of American exceptionalism will appeal to and instruct both specialists and general readers.