

BOOK WORLD

Vietnam: Will It Ever End?

The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience

By Walter H. Capps
Beacon Press; 177 pages; \$13.50

By Jean Collins

Since America's nightmare in Vietnam ended officially in 1975, there have been as many suicides among veterans as combat fatalities during the war. This astonishing statistic is alleged by Walter H. Capps in his book, "The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience."

He says 2½ million veterans, exposed to Agent Orange, are only now recognizing its effects; "delayed stress reaction" is erupting among another half million; about 30,000 Vietnam veterans are in prison. Yet, for most of us, the Vietnam War is past — and we'd like to forget it ever happened.



Walter H. Capps

But to Capps, the war not only continues to affect Vietnam veterans, it pervades the social fabric of America — even to the extent of helping to create the Moral Majority.

Capps, former director of the Robert Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and now on sabbatical from his teaching post at UC Santa Barbara, was in San Francisco recently

and shared his thoughts about the Vietnam era.

"Before Vietnam," he says, "it was easy to tell our children the story of America in a positive way. We had confidence that we were the best hope of humankind. There were our heroes — Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln. We landed on the moon and translated that to a capacity to solve other problems.

"But the outcome of the Vietnam experience undermined our optimism. We lost ... and Americans don't lose. We stand in a covenant relationship with God, so we *shouldn't* lose. God doesn't want losers."

Nor, of course, do Americans: "So many veterans had an athletic temperament," Capps says. "They talked John Wayne, used macho football terms. They responded to their country's call as if a coach were telling them to go out there and do their best."

In his chapter headed "The Combatants," the author shows how much of American life is competition-oriented and how this "transfers easily to the discipline of military involvement." Even our Judeo-Christian tradition, Capps believes, entails a form of battle, and this is where the Moral Majority comes in.

"The Moral Majority is trying to revive collective confidence and give it religious sanction. In a way, that's legitimate. But there's the other connection: while the Vietnam War was an apocalyptic occurrence that should have been prevented, the Moral Majority doesn't fear apocalypse — in fact there's a yearning for it. I heard Jerry Falwell say he's not worried about MX missiles because Christians will survive them. ... If we had won the war in Vietnam, I doubt we'd have this religious movement playing to a motivation that America must never again be defeated."

In the book Capps calls this the "Armageddon Mentality" with its "eagerness to divide the world into sharp contrasts: right versus wrong, truth versus error, good versus evil ... " The Armageddon world, he says, is "shaped by conflict," and by a simplicity that many people seem to want.

"Vietnam also involved some Americans in Eastern beliefs," Capps adds. "It's ironic that, while the war was fought in Asia, most Americans didn't know anything about Asians. Now they seek out Asian religions that are often the reverse of ours. Western religions are success-oriented. When there's failure, the individual feels lost. Some veterans are going through a 'dark night of the soul,' an absence of God. They can't find God and, if they could, wouldn't like Him.

"Eastern religions teach people to expect suffering and eliminate anxiety."

As for the need for a "collective healing" to finally bring the Vietnam War to an end, Capps suggests, "The real issue is whether healing can occur and wholeness be discovered before the trauma of 'the unfinished war' is re-enacted."

Jean Collins in on the staff of The Chronicle

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