

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Vietnam Reader* by Walter Capps

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A second reservation is that the book does not really “describe the animal”. Instead of an analysis of the role of business in Indonesian politics, what we have are fascinating accounts of negotiations between business leaders of three industries and certain parts of the bureaucracy. The social changes and the trend towards social pluralism which has taken place in the last decade are touched on, but not related to changes in Indonesian capitalism. Society has grown more diverse; the middle class is larger; capitalism has greater legitimacy as bourgeois values spread. But after showing so clearly that state officials also respond to pressures from outside the apparatus, we are left wondering what will be the impact of the growing political influence of the capitalist class.

A final comment concerns future directions for Indonesian political studies. Given the prevailing political culture and the burgeoning authority of the New Order state during the 1970s and early 1980s, it is not surprising that many observers took government pronouncements at face value and ascribed to the Indonesian state an unusual degree of autonomy from social forces. Local commentators have long been aware of the bargaining that takes place between business and government, and that it has become more intense in recent years. The social and economic climate which was responsible for state autonomy subsequently changed, but much foreign writing on Indonesia today continues to exaggerate the extent to which the state dominates society.

Indonesian society is becoming increasingly capitalistic in nature, as this book shows. What we badly need, therefore, are further studies which are also grounded on close empirical investigation of this changing society. Perhaps the most useful purpose of this book is that it serves to illustrate the sort of research which needs to be carried out.

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**The Vietnam Reader. Edited by Walter Capps.** New York: Routledge, 1992. 318 pp.

*The Vietnam Reader* is not what it initially seems. The book has little to do with the Southeast Asian country of that name, and almost everything to do with the United States' continued problem in coping with the legacy

of a war it failed to win. Having read this anthology, one could be excused for thinking that the Vietnam war was conducted in the United States, rather than in a distant Asian land. The editor employs a perspective that places the United States in the foreground, and off in the distance is the country where the war was fought, the people died, and the trauma began.

The book is an anthology of more than thirty brief pieces — all written by Americans — expressing their personal judgement on the war's legacy, both for themselves and their country. The contributors include: General William Westmoreland, Clark Clifford, Stanley Karnow, a number of U.S. Army veterans, academics, and "ordinary people", all of whom were affected by the war in one way or another. The book is divided into four broad sections: "the warrior's testimony" (by men who served in Vietnam), "lessons from war", "diversities of experience" (such as those of a journalist, a female nurse, and a serviceman), and "symbolic expressions, ritual healing". Amazingly, there are only two pieces written by Vietnamese, both of whom are now resident in the United States.

The publisher declares *The Vietnam Reader* to be "the first book to examine the war in a strongly philosophical way". Falling far short of this claim, the anthology is catharsis masquerading as a scholarly exercise. One contributor — an episcopal minister — calls for the "re-mythologizing" of America. "When I went to Vietnam, I believed in Jesus Christ and John Wayne. After Vietnam, both went down the tubes . . . . We believe America has a divine mandate to evangelize the world to its own political and economic systems. War is the sacred instrument . . . whereby this mission is achieved. Jesus Christ and John Wayne must again be linked after their brief separation by Vietnam". He added for good measure, "we cannot wage mere wars: we must fight crusades against the infidels".

The editor seems to desire a consensus within the United States about how to view the war, perhaps in order to retrieve some good from all the bad. One contributor claims that the Vietnam war was "surely the most tragic episode in the history of the United States in this century", and the "final tragedy" has become the country's inability to "look at that terrible experience through the same pair of eyes". As a result, the war is left in limbo, neither "elevated to a mythic plane or relegated to the cold storage of history". But can a country easily retrieve lessons from a war, such as that fought in Indochina, with total unanimity?

Possibly the main reason why the United States "lost" the Vietnam war was because of its confused, and yet epic, aims. In stark contrast to Hanoi's consistent bid to define and defend its small country on its own terms, Washington aimed to define the entire world on its own terms. The realistic scale of Hanoi's unchanging aim made victory feasible, whilst Washington circuitously shifted from "containing Red China" to

withdrawing from South Vietnam with honour. This is echoed in the contribution to the anthology by General Westmoreland, written in 1979. Westmoreland baldly states: “The handling of the Vietnam affair was a shameful national blunder”. He then cites about twenty cases in which the American people and politicians let the army down. For a military man, it is odd that little is said about how the war was actually waged “in-country”.

General Vo Nguyen Giap — Westmoreland’s adversary and opposite number — is interviewed by Stanley Karnow. Giap suffers no similar sense of betrayal while explaining the strategy employed by North Vietnam. For Giap, the decisive factor was “human beings”, steeled in patriotic fervour, fighting a “people’s war” (and as with many of Hanoi’s leaders, Giap lost several close members of his own family). Unlike Westmoreland’s ill-prepared men on a 365-day tour of duty, Giap’s men were part of the army he had founded twenty years earlier, whose tour of duty would last the length of the struggle. How could part-timers beat the professionals on home turf? Westmoreland’s reductive “body counts” could not measure the opponent’s grim determination, nor the losses it was prepared to sustain. Indeed, Westmoreland is quoted as saying “any American commander who took the same vast losses as Giap would have been sacked overnight”.

For any anthology to claim to examine the Vietnam war, it must cover a far wider scope. Where are the contributions by Noam Chomsky or Wilfred Burchett, Ho Chi Minh or Nguyen Van Thieu? However, the selective editorial scope of this anthology should not detract from some of the eloquent pieces to be found within its covers. A Vietnamese woman, now resident in the United States, addresses those Americans who directed the war in Vietnam; “For you, it was a simple thing: democracy against communism. For us, that was not our fight at all. How could it be? We knew little of democracy and even less about communism. For most of us it was a fight for independence”.

The final few articles are by veterans who were severely injured in the war, and yet have broken through the mass psychosis that today still haunts American popular opinion towards Vietnam. These men are able to regard Vietnam as a country inhabited by people; “the place the Vietnamese call home”. “Any soldier who has been in combat knows that there comes a time after the battle, when the smoke has blown away and the dust has settled, when you must lean down and give your foe a hand. For in that moment of generosity, the war is truly over”.

There is one point on which the anthology editor and this reviewer would agree, and that is that subsequent wars conducted — and won — by the United States have failed to erase fully the legacy left by the Vietnam

conflict. George Bush's post-Gulf War declaration in March 1991, that "we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" in many ways remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

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