

The Price of Defeat

The Unfinished War Vietnam and the American Conscience

WALTER H. CAPPS

Beacon Press, \$13.50 cloth, ISBN 0-8070-3260-3

BY ALL ACCOUNTS CLARENCE STICKLER was a man tormented by his past. According to his family and friends, the thirty-five-year-old combat veteran would weep uncontrollably when he thought about the men, women, and children he had killed during search-and-destroy missions with the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam. Unfortunately, Stickler never recovered from his experiences in Vietnam. On September 15, 1981, he leapt to his death from the eleventh floor of the Los Angeles Hilton Hotel. Stickler's veteran companions said Stickler, who suffered from delayed stress reaction, died because of "gross criminal negligence" at the hands of local Veterans Administration hospital staff who "failed to give him adequate treatment."

The war had ended for Clarence Stickler as it had for the thousands of Vietnam veterans who have committed suicide since 1964. For other Vietnam veterans, the terror of war has not ended. Two thousand five hundred Americans are officially classified as "missing in action." A half-million more suffer from delayed stress reaction. About 2.5 million Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange must live with the uncertainty of disorders associated with the chemical.

In *The Unfinished War*, Walter H. Capps proposes that the war has also continued on another level. The author maintains that the mentality which propelled the United States into Vietnam survived the evacuation of Saigon in 1975, receded temporarily, and reemerged with the New Right and, most dramatically, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Central to Capps' treatment is an analysis of what he terms "competing ideas about the nature of America." These rival, mutually exclusive, even antagonistic notions of American identity possess an unresolved quality. During the war these two notions about American destiny found expression in the anti-war and pro-war camps that divided the American people. Capps writes:

Those who protested the war objected from the first to the idea that America was being locked into a battle to the end with Communist-inspired international forces. Those who perceived world events in terms of this basic ideological conflict believed that their opponents had become 'soft on communism' and subversive of the nation's cherished interests. Thus it was the idea of America that was tested and contested.

From Capps' perspective, the involvement of the United States in Vietnam is essentially a symbol or a myth. The fact that the war occurred in Vietnam is largely irrelevant. Capps notes, for example,

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Some of the scenes apparently fit, but the central plot seems to have been transplanted from somewhere else. The actors, too, were primarily 'imported,' and many of the issues became attached to Vietnamese soil by the projection and attribution of outsiders.

This made the Vietnam conflict symbolic, even mythological, from the outset. The ideological battles eventually became more real and substantial than anything taking place on the field, which placed the combatants in grave danger, for they were not trained for mythological warfare. Besides, there was no real consensus as to how to read the symbolism. The driving conflict was over alternative interpretations of mythological events. When the skirmishes ended, the larger, sweeping, pervasive, and mythological contest continued to be fought in even more serious terms.

Capps then proceeds to spend the better part of 100 pages probing the historical origins of modern Vietnam as well as the official rationale for U.S. involvement there. Here Capps clearly overextends himself.

Whatever the reasons—real or imagined—for American intervention in Vietnam, the results were generally catastrophic. The various rationales used to justify the carnage, and the credibility of institutions that promoted these reasons, collapsed... absurdity as the brutality of modern warfare manifested itself. The very idea that American power was always associated with a just and moral cause was destroyed along with any sense of confidence that things would somehow turn out right in the end. Capps writes, "As Morris Dickstein put it, the myth of America was broken. When this occurred no one had any longer a firm hold on the American dream." The final casualty in Vietnam was, therefore, American innocence.

The response to the crisis introduced by the war took many forms. Survival naturally tended to dominate the lives of those in combat. Another avenue consisted in legal and illegal withdrawal from the conscription machinery and the military. A third way, what Capps refers to as "the surrealistic route," sought to make sense of the senseless by simply acknowledging chaos as an American way of life. From this perspective, what happened in Vietnam is little more than an expression of the American future. Capps notes in reference to this last option that,

it created the possibility that the locus of the war would be almost completely transferred from Asian soil to American self-consciousness; then, once this had occurred, all collective psychological dysfunctions would be projected onto the battlefield. In this interpretation, the war in Vietnam was a projection of the deep sickness and ambivalence within the American soul. Americans were at war with themselves; the skirmishes with the Vietcong were secondary to the battles within our own collective unconscious.

At the end of his book, Capps elaborates his original thesis concerning the bipolar nature of the modern American identity. He refers to one side as "the Armageddon mentality." The other he calls "the Eden mentality."

The Armageddon mentality he describes as:

the eagerness to divide the world into sharp contrasts: right versus wrong, truth (Continued on page 12)

WALTER CAPPS IS PROFESSOR OF religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has written and edited eight books, including *Religious Personality* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1970), *Seeing with the Native American Eye: Essays on Native American Religion* (Harper and Row, 1976), and *Silent Fire: An Initiation to Western Mysticism* (Harper and Row, 1978). A new volume examining monastic life will be published

soon. He has also served as the director of the Robert Maynard Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, a Santa Barbara-based research center devoted to the interdisciplinary study of national and international policy and the underlying issues. For the past five years Capps has been tracking and analyzing the spiritual, social, political, and psychological legacies of the Vietnam experience, and its lingering influence on

American life and spirit.

Despite the best efforts of some Americans to idealize the ordeal of Vietnam and revise the history of U.S. involvement there, such attempts inevitably break down when confronted with the ongoing suffering of the participants in that war, notably the Vietnam veterans. Nowhere is this more sadly in evidence than in the suicide rate for Vietnam veterans. Capps states on the first page of

his book, for example, "since 1975 there have been as many suicides among Vietnam veterans as there were combat fatalities during the war itself. Equally compelling is the fact that the number of such suicides increases each year and, by Veterans Administration projections, is not expected to peak until 1990."



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(Continued from page 7) *versus error, good versus evil, light versus dark, providence versus waywardness, blessing versus curse, in the most rigorous fashion possible. The mechanism that enforces this way of thought is the fusion of the contrast between America and anti-America with a revised Manichaeian mythology about the fundamental and pervasive conflict between God and the Devil.*

Capps defines the Eden mentality in this way:

Everything in Eden belongs: all inhabitants are citizens, and all are entitled to the resources of Eden, without exception. There are no hierarchies, no polarization, no stratification, no class struggle. There are no deceptive choices, either; the goal is simply to maintain Eden. Eden is garden instead of battleground, it is harmony rather than conflict. It is warm, fecund, full of vegetation, beautiful, alluring, original, and all-encompassing.

Capps identifies the former with the ascendancy of the Reagan administration, the proposals of the New Right (in particular, Jerry Falwell), and "a time of counterrevolution" which these elements represent. The latter he identifies with the "counterculture" of the fifties and sixties. Vietnam was the result of the projection of this internal "quarrel" onto Southeast Asia. Says Capps, "The war remains unfinished because the quarrel has not been resolved."

Although *The Unfinished War* has much to recommend it, Capps fails to make a single mention of the ongoing war in Indochina. What has happened in this area for the past seven years is ample vindication of his contention that the war in Vietnam did not end in 1975. Furthermore, in his concentration on the realms of ideology, the collective unconscious, myth, and the psychological dynamic of projection, Capps tends to obscure the fact that U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina was the result of specific acts and decisions by a privileged elite of government officials. The words "trauma" and "tragedy" can never be permitted to cloud over this simple fact. □