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# 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

**B**Y 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 into 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 Invitation 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."



## Glorious Cause

(Continued from page 11) liberty (the slavery issue notwithstanding), a profound respect for private property rights, and a conviction that good government was a social contract in which political power derived from an individual rather than corporate foundation. This ideology, Middlekauff suggests, was truly radical, given the militarism and tyranny prevailing in Europe; and it was taken as a standard not only by the merchants, lawyers, and landed gentry of the colonies, but also by the common people, cutting across class lines to form a popular, "glorious" cause.

Middlekauff further proposes that the Revolution was realized by "the actions of men who felt that Providence had set them apart for great purposes," and while the author seemingly shares this view, he is careful throughout the text to avoid fostering a cult of personalities or nation-worship. He discusses at length the darker aspects of the struggle for independence: the rivalries among various factions, such as the urban New England merchants and the rural Virginia planters; the deals forged as to which states would carve up the West (meaning the Mississippi Valley and environs) after the war; and above all, the ravages of the war itself, which brought with it all the classic companions of any armed struggle: disease, brutality, the slaughter of civilians, rape, banditry, profiteering, despair. Middlekauff freely admits that the glorious cause had an inglorious side as well.

*The Glorious Cause* sets out with the 1763 Treaty of Paris, by which Great Britain, France, and Spain ended the Seven Years War and France was stripped of its North American holdings. The treaty's terms enabled England to expand into previously contested territories and assured great future wealth, but the war had bled the country dry: at the time of the treaty's signing, England had accumulated a national debt of £122,603,336—a staggering figure by any standard. And, as we well know, nations retire their debts by taxing their citizens, no matter how great the burden on the populace.

The colonies, being affluent and essentially unrepresented in Parliament, were the first to feel the publicans' claw. Over a short period, the Crown decreed taxes set on cider, rum, molasses, timber, cotton, and, notoriously, tea and stamps. Despite widespread resistance to these measures in the colonies—sometimes manifested in the form of tearing a royal official's house apart brick by brick and tarring and feathering the occupants—Parliament obstinately refused to alter its course and lessen the tax burden and other repressive legislation. (Middlekauff is careful to note that the Parliament's decisions were far from unanimous.) A popular uprising of some sort was inevitable—though at the time, no one could have foreseen the extent to which it would spread.

Middlekauff's account of the Revolution's formative phases occupies the first third of *The Glorious Cause*, a more complete coverage than that offered by many standard histories of the period. It carefully analyzes hitherto undervalued aspects of the colonial situation—demographic shifts that increased ethnic heterogeneity; trade routes and commercial networks that linked the colonies to other parts of the Americas as closely as to Europe; the development of indigenous industries and growing economic independence from England; religious diversity and a flourishing deist movement that looked as much to the forest and rivers as to the sky for guidance.

*The Glorious Cause* details with equal care the more familiar episodes of the Revolutionary War itself, with a provisional government of sorts directing a surprisingly modern tactical campaign against England. Middlekauff traces the early disasters that befell the revolutionary army, from the British capture of New York to the abortive American invasion of Canada, to the later, tentative successes of Trenton and Saratoga

and the ultimate, hard-won victory at Yorktown. He documents as well the parallel development of the central government; of particular interest is his discussion of the compromises involved in drafting the Constitution to each state's satisfaction—a process that lasted two years.

The great revolutions of history have been the product of noble ideals. Ours was no exception—in fact, it was a model—although many of those ideals have been weakened, so that the militarism and tyranny the American revolutionaries fought to expel are now our daily companions. With *The Glorious Cause*, Middlekauff has done a fine job of reconstructing the spirit and substance of our nation's founding. □

## Voltaire and Ruskin

(Continued from page 5) Ruskin will find Hunt's book enthralling from the beginning, but I fear that he will lose the readers who need to be convinced. Hunt does not feel that he has to convince, so he tends to understate, for example, in his concluding comment on Ruskin's tombstone:

*Its intricate symbolism offers a conspectus of Ruskin's lifework: unhappily, it divides his artistic and architectural activities (on the eastern side, facing the grave) from his social and ethical (surmounted by St. George on the western side, looking towards Coniston Old Man).*

Ruskin was a great man—and a strange one. I do not see how Hunt could have done a more beautiful, tactful, intelligent, and honest job of admitting Ruskin's frailties, analyzing them and connecting them with his work—for good for or ill. Hunt obviously believes in the permanence of harm done in childhood, the psychosomatic nature of many diseases, and the sexual basis of most neuroses; if ever the life of a great writer begged for Freudian analysis, Ruskin's does. Hunt gives it, but very carefully, very discreetly. He provides plenty of information about the obvious damage that Ruskin's fussy, elderly parents did to their precious boy: "John James behaved as if the metaphor (of the family circle) were realized, literally closing himself and his family off for the better protection, education and perfecting of their little boy." He sees that such a childhood, without siblings or friends of his own age, virtually predetermined Ruskin's later relationships, particularly with young women:

*This Pygmalion ambition—a more than usually intense pedagogic energy that always characterized Ruskin's dealings with young people who were impressionable or uncertain—was intense and all-inclusive.*

Like father, like son! And yet Hunt does not excoriate Ruskin, and even subtly suggests that his later glory as a teacher was connected to this upbringing and with the repression of other parts of Ruskin's life. This is true, wise, humane Freudianism, not the clumsy stuff dished out by cruder biographers.

Always Hunt interweaves the history of Ruskin's life and the history of his work. Traveling in Switzerland and Italy influenced Ruskin's thoughts on art; abandoning his mistaken marriage to poor Effie gave him new intellectual freedom; his early religious training, though it may have hurt his sexual life, blossomed in the moral passion of his writing on architecture. Hunt never dwells on the pathetic, embarrassing details of Ruskin's sexual problems, or on the madness that finally engulfed him, in a way that could titillate a reader. He cares about the frailties only because he admires the man and his work.

The book offers other pleasures—plentiful quotations and lovely illustrations. No paraphrase can be a substitute for words like:

*There is so much of misery and error in the world which I see I could have immense power to set various human influences against, by giving up my science and art, and*

*wholly trying to teach peace and justice; and yet my own gifts seem so specially directed towards quiet investigation of beautiful things that I cannot make up my mind, and my writing is as vacillating as my temper.*

And it is a joy to everyone who loves Victorian England to see Ruskin's sketches, photographs of him and his friends, and facsimiles of his letters.

That does, however, bring me to a final observation: I do believe, in the end, that this book demands a little too much of its readers. The great names of Victorian England are here—Carlyle, the Brownings, William Morris—but Hunt barely bothers to tell us who they are. The book would have been richer, fuller, better if he had taken a little less for granted and explained the connections between the thoughts of Ruskin and Browning on Renaissance Italy, the influence of Ruskin on the arts and crafts movement, the spiritual affinity between Ruskin and Carlyle. He would also have done well to remind his readers that while Carlyle finally allowed his madness to influence his work, spewing his rage into his contempt for the ordinary people of England, Ruskin's nobility of mind kept his work virtually free from his madness. Of course he occasionally wrote and spoke aimlessly, but that is very different from allowing personal suffering and rage to become the substance of an intellectual vision. For a man as sad and as angry as Ruskin to keep his love for the common men and women of England untainted—that is true heroism, and Hunt could have said so a little more boldly than he does. English elegance and English reticence are fine when the subject is impotence; I'd like a little more American enthusiasm when the time comes to call a man a hero. □

## Vietnam

(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 Manichaean 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. □