

THE UNFINISHED WAR

VIETNAM AND THE AMERICAN CONSCIENCE by Walter H. Capps (Beacon: \$12.98)

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

I picked up somewhere—it must have been as a little kid at the knee of an intimidating adult—the notion that human maturity was another word for perfect. I'm now among the many who've had to adjust to the sadder reality that coming of age is in fact coming to terms with one's physical, mental and moral limitations—with what you are, what you can be, and what you'll doubtlessly never be, like it or not. While maintaining the quest for improvement, maturity must include graceful accommodation to creaturely imperfection, a sighing resignation to one's shortcomings. Cast in theological terms, it's to rely finally not upon ourselves but upon the succor of divine forgiveness. I think to deny mortal flaws is to court a despair that lasts as long as breath.

These things can also be said about the world's nations attaining maturity, and Walter Capps explores similar ideas as the United States tries even now to extricate itself from its terribly traumatic coming of age in Vietnam.

Where has Vietnam left us? Not only, says Capps, with a nationful of psychically scarred, uncomprehending veterans

(some shamed by their defeat, some shamed by their involvement), but with the conscience-stricken nation itself still split down the middle. One camp calls for a more contemplative orientation toward human life, and a more benign American role in it. The other chafes to re-establish vibrant, vigorous and unrepentant American resolve through a reawakening of religious and political conservatism.

And whither America? Are we, in our chagrin, to fall back into an arrogant adolescence, a blustery defensive posture that itches for a nuclear shootout? Or can we grow up healed and whole; at peace at last with ourselves and with the world we share?

Though Capps is impressively conversant with his subject and its literature (he has directed Santa Barbara's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and is now a professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara), he cannot foretell which future awaits us. But in this admirably non-strident study of the "consequent malaise" of Vietnam he has posed the questions with thoughtful precision and clarity.

How the war's veterans and their families will recover (if they do) from either the casualties of combat or the unprecedented social punishment inflicted upon them is problem enough. Henry Kissinger tells them the Vietnam War was "a terrible tragedy into which the United States should never have gotten involved," and a one-armed survivor of a battle near Tam Ky is told by a stranger in Denver who observes the wound: "Serves

Reviewed by Huston Horn

you right." For such people the war remains unfinished as long as there are Vietnam-related suicides, criminality, family disintegration and physical reactions to Agent Orange.

But whether the two Americas we live in can ever be reconciled—can ever find together an equanimity of middle age—is more gravely troubling still. Many, for example, hear the voice of unassailable reason (maturity?) in the words of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "It would seem to me," he said not long ago, "that the lesson of Viet-

nam is that our motives aren't all that different from those of any other country, and that there are limits to our power and our virtue, and that we're not omnipotent and we're not omniscient, and that we must, instead of trying to run the world, try to define where our vital interests lie and concentrate our powers and concerns there."

A little progress there, one might sense, from the time a Washington official declared that other nations have "interests" whereas the United States has "a sense of responsibility." But such a stance of measured humility and confidence is seen by the religious Right (and plenty of others not so religious, but equally Right) as a perfidious abnegation of America's biblically enjoined commission. And that is? To drive from the face of the earth the Anti-Christ, whose deceptive coloration nowadays is godless Communism and such related sins of the flesh as homosexuality, deteriorating family life (men doing the cooking), abortion-on-demand and the ERA.

Never mind that Ho Chi Minh was once perceived by the U.S. State Department as a lover of human liberty one might favorably compare to Patrick Henry. It is just such devils God has in mind, the fundamentalists tell us, and America's divine assignment is to obliterate them—or be obliterated for apostasy. Our faltering resolve in Vietnam was not because of increasing second thoughts that we had possibly launched ourselves on a misguided mission; rather it was because we lacked godly fortitude. It is high time the rascals were shown we are made of better stuff than that!

One may not take that highly dubious, favored-nation theology seriously, but one is warned to take those who espouse it seriously—and then some. But while we're talking Bible, let's recall that puffed-up Jonah was disabused by Yahweh himself of such narrow, self-serving nationalism centuries ago. All the same, something deep in the national psyche still resonates

Please Turn to Page 7

'Unfinished War'

Continued from First Page

to religious calls to patriotism, and Capps can assert that the irresolution of Vietnam and the chastening side effects have created Jerry Falwell's success.

It is a silly grown man who forgets his own impurities and who expects (and depends on) the best from everyone else; it is a silly grown nation which does the same. The mature in both cases search for a middle ground of reality between (as Capps says) the

impulses of a too-innocent Eden and the expectations of an apocalyptic Armageddon.

Concludes Capps: "A world so easily divisible into such absolute contrasts is already severely fragmented. The real issue is whether healing can occur and wholeness be discovered before the trauma of the unfinished war is reenacted."

Horn, an Episcopal priest, is the director of the Caltech Y in Pasadena (and does the cooking at home).