

THE UNFINISHED WAR
Vietnam and the American Conscience

Author: Walter H. Capps (1934-)
Publisher: Beacon Press (Boston). 177 pp. \$12.95
Type of work: Cultural history
Time: 1945 to the present
Locale: Vietnam and the United States

A historical examination of the Vietnamese war focusing on American involvement, the effect of the war on the American conscience, and the persisting consequences to the United States of its involvement in that war

Principal personages:

HO CHI MINH, leader of Communist forces in Vietnam
JOHN F. KENNEDY, thirty-fifth President of the United States, 1961-1963
LYNDON B. JOHNSON, thirty-sixth President of the United States, 1963-1969
RICHARD M. NIXON, thirty-seventh President of the United States, 1969-1974
JERRY FALWELL, Pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, and titular head of the Moral Majority

The thesis of Walter H. Capps's *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* is that the Vietnamese War remains unfinished for Americans. That war so badly fragmented the American soul that much patience will be needed before Americans will be able to feel comfortable with themselves and with one another again. The national crisis that the Vietnamese War engendered for Americans is, according to Capps, religious and moral. Such a wound to the national psyche will be slow in healing.

The proposition that the Vietnamese War is not yet over for Americans even after the formal end of hostilities in May, 1975, Capps argues, can be supported by many facts. First, the 57,692 dead and the 2,500 "missing in action" have left a trauma for family and friends. The increasing number of suicides among Vietnam veterans and the half-million veterans with psychological or emotional problems provide further testimony, as do the 30,000 veterans presently in prison and 2.5 million exposed to the chemical Agent Orange.

Capps believes that, aside from its tragic human costs, the Vietnamese War "was a national trauma, a rupture in the nation's collective consciousness, and a serious and somber challenge to the ways we wish to think about ourselves, our role in the world, and our place in human history." Capps cites recent speeches of major national leaders—Henry Kissinger, General William Westmoreland, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and others—to demonstrate a continuing, obsessive concern with Vietnam.

It is, however, in the area of religion, Capps suggests, that Americans have

felt the most traumatic impact of Vietnam, and religion is the major focus of Capps's book. Capps sees America's most significant contemporary religious changes—the conservatism of the Moral Majority on the one hand, and the growth of cults and various self-realization movements on the other—as legacies of the Vietnamese War. These religious changes indicate that Americans are undergoing a collective “dark night of the soul,” struggling to come to grips with the moral dilemmas of Vietnam.

Capps holds that the various examples of religious change “are appropriate responses when collective confidence wanes.” As faith in government, in the educational establishment, in business, in the press, and in the family has steadily declined, Americans increasingly have had to rely on themselves as individuals. The marathon runner has become the paradigm of the American, as life has come to be viewed as a test of individual endurance and achievement. Thus, both an increasing emphasis on individualism, such as has been described in Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* (1978), and a resurgence of religious fundamentalism have resulted from America's involvement in Vietnam.

Capps traces these changes back to the 1960's, during which a persistent conflict was played out on the nation's college campuses, in many cities, and each day on the television screen. The battle extended to changes in dress, manners, art, literature, music, and could be seen in rallies, marches, and sit-ins. It was a contest to determine the future. The contest took place between two differing American cultures, two distinct value-systems, two separate sets of priorities, two opposed views of the future, and therefore, two “alternative *ideas of America*.” Unfortunately, after sketching this polarity, Capps does not go on to discuss the contrasting ideas in any detail.

During the 1960's and early 1970's, Capps argues, the outcome of this ideological conflict remained undecided. Because Americans were divided as a nation, the meaning of the Vietnamese War was unclear. All sides, however, agreed that the Vietnamese War was a tragedy that defied successful resolution, and Capps believes that America has yet to achieve a moral and religious consensus in the post-Vietnam period.

Taken at face value, Capps's thesis is simply untenable: he ascribes too great an influence to the war in Vietnam. The United States in the 1960's and 1970's was undergoing a series of internal revolutions, including the youth revolution, the black or civil rights revolution, the sexual revolution, and women's liberation. At the same time, the nation was confronting environmental issues, the energy crisis, computerization, and other far-reaching problems. While all of this was going on, the United States and other Western nations were moving into the still ill-defined “postindustrial” era. These concerns and issues had a significant impact on Americans and their values in the period. That impact was surely intensified by the Vietnamese War, but to ascribe the many religious, moral, attitudinal, and other changes of the

period, as Capps does almost exclusively to the Vietnamese War, is to extravagantly overstate the case.

While the weakness of Capps's thesis is the most damaging flaw in *The Unfinished War*, there are other problems that require consideration as well. Capps's description of the background of the Vietnamese War starts with a survey of Vietnamese history going back to 1000 B.C. Since much of this information is irrelevant to Capps's study, it could have been eliminated, with correspondingly greater attention given to Vietnam since World War I. Capps's discussion of Vietnam in the twentieth century is focused on Ho Chi Minh, who is depicted as an advocate *par excellence* of democracy, freedom, self-rule, equality, and anticolonialism. Capps accepts Ho Chi Minh's words at face value, and no attempt is made to determine the meaning of "democracy," "freedom," and "self-rule" from a Vietnamese context, nor are any alternative political views in Vietnam considered. Thus, Ho Chi Minh is described as a nationalist, patriotically opposed to French colonialism. Such a view might be justifiable, but only after Capps provides much more proof.

Capps's treatment of the events leading to American involvement in Vietnam is similarly flawed. He suggests that American politicians were so narrowly anti-Communist that they could only see Ho Chi Minh as an enemy, despite his advocacy of democracy and self-rule. Such narrow-mindedness was strengthened by the Korean War. The French defeat at Dienbienphu, the Geneva Conference on Vietnam, and the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization all took place in 1954 and signaled increasing American involvement in Vietnam. These events require much more detailed description than Capps has provided, nor does he describe Vietnam from 1954 to 1960 or American involvement in Vietnam in that period.

Capps's analysis of the commitment of President John F. Kennedy to Vietnam is also deficient. Readers are given no insights into the nature of Kennedy support of the Diem regime in Vietnam or into the views of Kennedy's advisers and analysts. Capps's coverage of the Administration of President Lyndon Johnson is equally unsatisfactory: he views Presidents Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson (President Eisenhower is curiously missing from the book) as Cold War warriors who linked American patriotism to involvement in the Vietnamese War and opposition to Ho Chi Minh. It was a relatively simple step for Americans to endow such a point of view with religious authority, and patriotism soon expressed itself as religiosity. This process, if indeed it took place, is only briefly outlined by Capps.

Capps's treatment of the domestic American debate over Vietnam ignores the multiplicity of problems that engendered controversy in the 1960's and 1970's. Capps seeks to organize all such problems around Vietnam. Thus, while recognizing that the Berkeley "Free Speech" movement led by Mario Savio started as a civil-rights movement, Capps says that it was soon converted into an antiwar movement, but he does not satisfactorily explain how this

happened. Capps moves on to discuss the views of Walter Lippmann and Senator Frank Church in their opposition to American involvement in Vietnam. One of the more interesting parts of the book is its description of President Lyndon Johnson's justification of American support of South Vietnam: Capps shows how President Johnson wove together patriotism and quasireligious notions. What is missing here, however, is a chronological analysis showing the development of the President's thinking, the growth of American commitment in Vietnam, and what was being said by White House spokespersons and presidential supporters and advisers.

When Capps moves on to the Administration of President Richard M. Nixon, he mentions the role of Nixon's foreign-policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, in formulating a "get tough" policy toward Vietnam, but on the whole, Capps provides little analysis of the foreign policies of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon Administrations. Policies are described in the most simplistic terms. For example, the rationale for and process of Vietnamization under President Nixon are hardly described; this is equally true of the Cambodian incursion, while the Tet offensive is not even mentioned. Similarly, the Communist takeover of South Vietnam is not described. Instead, Capps focuses his attention on the issue of American disillusionment with the war in Vietnam.

Capps describes disillusionment in three areas: among combat veterans; in a contemplative passivity; and in religious conservatism. The author characterizes American troops as moving from an initial patriotism and advocacy of contest to demoralization. When American troops returned home, they were not viewed as heroes, but as victims. This reception led to confusion, disorientation, and disillusionment, exacerbated by popular support of draft resistance. This is one of the better sections of the book; Capps provides a fine analysis of the thinking of the Vietnamese War veteran and what happened when he returned home to the United States.

The war in Vietnam also generated a growing passivity among Americans, Capps argues, and fostered acceptance of the world view characteristic of Asian religions. Capps concedes that this orientation had been developing prior to Vietnam, suggesting that it had its origin in the terrible destructiveness of Hiroshima and the Holocaust and in the willingness of allegedly rational and sane governments to destroy human life so horribly and so indiscriminately. Unfortunately, this theme is not developed. Western religions are action-oriented, seek to change life, and work to achieve goals, while Eastern religions tend to accept things as they are. Vietnam reinforced the latter orientation by showing, in Capps's view, the folly of the former orientation. In accepting an Eastern orientation because of the Vietnamese War, many Americans became strangers in their own land.

Capps also attributes the resurgence of fundamentalism to the disillusionment growing out of the war in Vietnam. In one of the finest sections of his book, Capps provides an exciting exposition of the ideas of the Moral Majority

and its spokesman, Jerry Falwell. Here, Capps shows how religious conservatives view the failure in Vietnam as a failure of courage, resolve, and self-confidence. Seeking to rectify the situation, they advocate military preparedness, renewed patriotism, and a wedding of national goals and objectives with fundamentalist Christianity. They argue that America has strayed from its Christian orientation and must return to such religious principles; only in this way will America's resolve be restored.

Finally, Capps concludes with the hope that somehow a process will be initiated that will heal all the still-suffering victims of Vietnam and end the national trauma that Vietnam generated. *The Unfinished War* is an interesting and provocative attempt to analyze the contemporary American psyche. While it offers some insights and assesses the role of Vietnam in generating religious, moral, and attitudinal changes, Capps's book is merely a first step toward an accurate, multidimensional analysis of the enigma facing twentieth century America.

Saul Lerner

Sources for Further Study

Library Journal. CVII, August, 1982, p. 1458.

Publishers Weekly. CCXXI, June 18, 1982, p. 66.