

Anthony Libby

## The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience

Walter Capps

Beacon Press, 1982  
177 pages, \$13.50

"Let laughter flee," says one character in Robert Stone's bitterly cool Vietnam novel *Dog Soldiers*. "This is the place where everybody finds out who they are." To this suggestion that Vietnam is a testing ground for the American character, Stone's protagonist replies, "What a bummer for the gooks." A good line, which I couldn't help remembering when I read Walter Capps' description of Vietnam as a "trauma, a rupture in the nation's collective consciousness," and understood his intent to respond to that trauma and to the sufferings of those who experienced it most directly, the actual veterans of the war. Yes, I feel sorry for them too, but sometimes I worry even more about the people whose countries they trashed for us, those Asians we watched dying on television for so many years. Well, this is a time of narcissism; why concern ourselves about a continuing foreign trauma when we've got our own. So most of the new wave of books about the war tend to be about us; Vietnam is our shattered mirror, source of endless introspection, as well as bad bad luck. But wasn't it that passion for introspection, that will to understand the world as part of an American myth, that got us so mired in Asia in the first place? Capps thinks so, and his analysis convinces; if it's more introspection you want, this is an interesting and occasionally frightening book.

Much of Capps' analysis involves a synthesis of earlier and more powerful accounts of the war by such eyewitnesses as Philip Caputo and Michael Herr (who wrote, respectively, *A Rumor of War* and *Dispatches*), as well as a neat brief history of Vietnam from the start of the French occupation in 1858 (for those without enough time for Frances Fitzgerald's basic but endless *Fire in the Lake*). What makes this book special in its own right is Capps' investigation of a deep connection between religion and politics (or as he puts it, "the strong interdependencies between religion and warfare"), a connection suggested by a passage he quotes from Herr's *Dispatches*: "Holy war, long-nose jihad like a face-off between one god who would hold the coonskin to the wall while we nailed it up, and another whose detachment would see the blood run out of ten generations, if that was how long it took for the wheel to go around." Capps, a professor of religious studies who has written books on mysticism and Native American religion, hardly needs Herr to remind him of this aspect of the war, and his ideas about it are intriguing. If we are going to examine this war as an explication of the American psyche, as a war of myths, why not go to the root, to the most basic myth of all, and the most psychologically dangerous, the myth of Christianity with its dark prophetic history leading ineluctably from original sin to Armageddon.

Capps starts with a survey of the current victims of the war, the vets who did our killing for us and then returned to bear our scorn as well as their own guilt. In them the war is most literally unfinished, unless they choose a separate



peace; Capps notes that "since 1975 there have been as many suicides among Vietnam veterans as there were combat fatalities during the war itself... the number of such suicides... is not expected to peak until 1990." The suicides, of course, are only the edge of the glacier. Few could have survived Vietnam intact under any circumstances, but our warriors were singularly unprepared for this "mythological warfare." Capps describes their original world view in Woody Hayes Christian-soldier terms: competition is the stuff of life, and war is like an athletic competition in which the best team (with the most spirit and virtue, as well as the most power) wins. Well, we weren't Number One in Vietnam, and the boys (often literal boys) whom we sent off to war had to bear—along with the blood on their hands—the brunt of not-winning. They came back old.

Capps is more interested in the psychological effects of the trauma than he is in its moral implications, though his capsule history of Vietnam is written with a nice awareness of the pervasive moral ironies. He wants to regard the war as "tragedy," not morality play; no blame is to be laid "at the feet of certain factions, institutions, politicians, military strategists, the national leadership, protestors, or even flaws in the American character." Fortunately, he is aware enough of the realities of the situation not to live up to this high-sounding but morally evasive (and syntactically odd: flaws with feet? of clay?) claim to "objectivity." At times he seems too willing to accept protestations of U.S. innocence, or even idealism. But his tendency to balance visions from the two sides creates a structure of irony which is morally revealing, especially about the clash of theologies. Western involvement in Vietnam goes back over a century, and American involvement began in the 1940s, when naturally we supported Ho Chi Minh against the Japanese. In those days Ho tended to see his anti-colonial revolutionary posture as reminiscent of ours, him against the French, us against the British. But then he always had a nose for intercultural political connections; when Ho was a student, Capps tells us, he was fascinated by "the Irish struggle for home rule."

Ironically, it was American Catholics, Irish and otherwise, who provided a strong lobby for the beginning of our real involvement, which was probably marked by the installation in 1954 of Cardinal Spellman's protegee Ngo Dinh Diem as premier ("never fully accepted by the Buddhist segment of the population," as Capps rather delicately puts it: he was a fascist and they hated him.) Then there was John Kennedy, the classic innocent (?) American and friend of Diem, who began to pour money and troops into Vietnam in hopes that "some miracle" (his very words) would establish freedom and democracy for our Asian brothers. Meanwhile, Tom Dooley the Catholic missionary and would-be saint had been regaling large American audiences with accounts (probably true) of Communist atrocities in the North, as if in rebuttal to Ho's ancient complaints about the activities of the Church under French colonial rule. Capps quotes the young Ho: "The Catholic Mission alone occupied one quarter of the areas under cultivation in Cochinchina... It fleeced its flock no less ruthlessly than the planters..." If only all of these men could be alive to see the radically different activities of Catholic missionaries (Maryknoll, as in Vietnam) in El Salvador now, as politics and religion continue to dance their strange dance.

But the religious/mythological war that primarily interests Capps is a more traditionally American one, which surfaced in the protest movements of the sixties, when the countercultural "Edenic" types interested in social justice faced off against the believers in the primacy of the struggle against the commies, even to Armageddon. Obviously that split still divides us; as

Capps writes, "The war remains unfinished because the quarrel has not yet been resolved." But now the partisans of Armageddon grow increasingly more powerful, led not by Catholic anti-communists but by fundamentalist Christians who tend unself-consciously to act out the suspicion of the world and the flesh implicit in most forms of Christianity. Nuclear holocaust doesn't scare *them*, brother; the bad old world deserves it, full up as it with commie sympathizers and the commies themselves (who have killed, according to a Moral Majority tally that Capps quotes, 147,000,000 souls since 1917.) Anyway, Christ will come again in the whirl of the atomic firestorm.

Capps says that one result of the war was that the Edenic types, chastened by disillusionment both with American and (later) with the Vietnamese communists, withdrew into a Buddhist-tinged introspection, while the death-squad Christians, infuriated by military defeat, rampaged into power, waving Reagan like a tattered flag. (Of course in a reactionary time the conservative academics come out of the closet in support; Capps is far to the left in the spectrum of current books on Vietnam, some of which present the same old arguments: that with the proper strategy we could have won, that the evils of the commies justified anything we did, etc. Good luck in Latin America, fellas.) But the Eden/Armageddon opposition Capps imagines may be too neat. That cradle of rebellion, Sproul Plaza, Berkeley, September 1964, stood for Edenic idealism and sincere political opposition, but also for we've-had-enough-of-your-shit-you-take-some-for-a-change. The protest movement was in some respects genuinely leftist, but it was also vengeful, anarchic, apocalyptic. And after the 1970 bombing of Cambodia—which destroyed not only the land but any possibility of a moderate political structure, creating a gap soon to be filled by the forces of chaos and night—there was in the Movement a dominant sense of despair. OSU in the exciting spring of 1970 was the locale not so much of idealistic protest as of violence (sometimes gleeful) and rage. Bring the war home. Let it all come down. Then, and maybe now, the apocalyptic dream was not just in the minds of the hawks. What America had let loose in Vietnam was so extreme that there could be no recovery from it; it was the end of the world, for a strange variety of reasons devoutly wished by many.

In the end Capps does not mention justice as a means to finishing the war; who could imagine it? Ridiculous even to suggest that we might be willing to help in the reconstruction of Vietnam, though we did so generously for Germany and Japan, nations that injured us far more directly, but had the grace to lose to Number One. He does try to imagine a "healing process" more psychological than political, somehow patterned on the "ritual healing" that has kept some endangered vets from suicide or insanity. But his heart doesn't seem to be in his last chapter; he can muster little hope that healing rituals can balance the more traditional American ones, which tend to be violent and terminal. The trauma of Vietnam, inadequately confronted, cries out for Armageddon, the self-fulfilling prophecy of Christianity, and perhaps the logical end of the Faustian American romance. Maybe we will be healed. But if not, if the war within emerges once again, it will, I think, finally come all the way home.

---

*Anthony Libby* is an Associate Professor of English at Ohio State. His book, *Mythologies of Nothing*, a study of secular mysticism in contemporary American poetry, will be released in November by the University of Illinois Press.

---