

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Unfinished War. Vietnam and the American Conscience.* by Walter H. Capps; *Vietnam in Prose and Film.* by James C. Wilson

Review by: Gareth Porter

Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Winter, 1983-1984), pp. 788-790

Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2758643>

Accessed: 29-04-2024 21:16 +00:00

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pacific Affairs*

Reform (MAR). At the top of the list was the appointment of Conrado Estrella, a Marcos loyalist with a genial personality but undistinguished as an administrator. Estrella, in turn, appointed his close associates as division heads of the land-reform program, and in the Central Office of the MAR, about 40 per cent of the personnel were from the minister's home province, Pangasinan. Moreover, many of the agency's bureaucrats were of the same social class as the landlords. Such personnel selections tended to maximize policies that focussed on political support of the New Society rather than on implementing land reform quickly, and contributed to decisions that were often biased against the peasants.

Tourism development is similarly plagued with problems. Many of the costs of the industry are disregarded by the regime. For example, a half-billion dollars of the government's money is tied up in luxury hotel financing, and since many of the hotels cannot even pay the interest on the debt the regime has been forced to convert loans into equity. Similarly, many of the First Lady's tourist-related projects, such as the Philippine International Convention Center and the Manila International Film Pavilion, are not calculated into the costs of tourism. Moreover, the government has exaggerated the economic benefits to the economy of the *Balibayan* (homecoming) program, and has glossed over the fact that when tours are packaged abroad, tourist dollars are recycled back to the visitor's country rather than staying in the Philippines.

The tourist industry is also beset by corruption. Many Marcos loyalists have profited exorbitantly from tourism as have friends of the minister of tourism, Jose Aspiras. Thus Richter concludes that tourism development, just as land reform, is geared more toward legitimizing the regime at home and abroad than toward financing the long-term economic development needs of the country.

Scholars interested in land reform and tourism development, as well as those interested in development under authoritarianism, will find this book interesting and useful. But for the specialist interested in contemporary Philippine affairs, the study is a *must*, for it fills an important lacuna in our understanding of politics and administration under martial law.

Arizona State University, U.S.A.

ROBERT L. YOUNGBLOOD

THE UNFINISHED WAR. Vietnam and the American Conscience. By Walter H. Capps. Boston: Beacon Press/Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside. 1982. 177 pp. C\$18.50/US\$13.50, cloth.

VIETNAM IN PROSE AND FILM. By James C. Wilson. Jefferson (North Carolina) and London: McFarland and Company. 1982. x, 130 pp. US\$18.95, paper.

THESE TWO BOOKS are relevant to Asian studies only in that they reflect in different ways the halting and, it would seem, largely unsuccessful efforts of American society to come to grips with the meaning of

the Vietnam War. Neither author is a specialist on Asia or on American society. James C. Wilson teaches about literature and film, while Walter H. Capps is a professor of religious studies. Read together, they raise important issues regarding historical understanding, moral judgment, and American culture.

Wilson looks at the film and literature of the Vietnam War from a viewpoint that is controversial but coherent: he is interested primarily in whether or not this material honestly confronts the moral issues he believes inherent in the conflict. What he finds is that, with few exceptions, these slices of American culture mirror "our evasions, our distortions, our denials." He believes that the American people have had enough historical facts on the war in order to form a moral judgment. Wilson's own perspective on the war turns on two central themes. First, the American war was in essence a continuation of the French imperialist war and therefore had to partake of its moral character. Second, American officials continued to deceive themselves about the nature of both friend and enemy in order to justify U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

This may be a historical oversimplification, as is any historical analysis; but Wilson makes a credible case that, over time, official self-deception spilled over into American society and spawned a culture which is despairing and cynical about the possibility of understanding the real historical meaning of the war. As a consequence, he suggests, the general view that has developed is that no moral judgment about the war was possible or necessary. Thus he devotes a chapter to novels and literary reportage (most notably Michael Herr's *Dispatches*) which treat the war in essentially surrealistic terms, as "dope and dementia" with no relationship to history. In Wilson's view, even the most highly-acclaimed fiction about the war, including Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, denies the possibility of moral responsibility on the part of those who carried out the war. Likewise, he sees *The Deer Hunter*—the most popular of all American films about Vietnam—as reinforcing the notion that moral responsibility is irrelevant, by its "smug and self-pitying portrayal" of Americans as the innocent victims of quintessentially evil Vietnamese.

Wilson concludes that, as a whole, the literature and film of the Vietnam War "are as nihilistic as any ever produced in America." Other scholars may quarrel with this assertion, but his suggestion that we may learn something about the essential character of a national endeavor by dissecting the moral quality of the culture it produces is worthy of consideration by historians. If it is true—as the campus sales-representative of a major publisher reports—that an increasing number of American college courses on the Vietnam War are using literature rather than historical narrative or documents to convey the reality of Vietnam, then Wilson's book ought to sound alarm bells among historians.

Walter Capps' *The Unfinished War* serves, in a curious way, to illustrate the problem analyzed by Wilson. Its subtitle, *Vietnam and the American Conscience*, is misleading, since Capps does not deal with the question of conscience, defined as sense of moral responsibility. His main concern appears to be that Americans, confused and frustrated by

Pacific Affairs

the outcome of the war, could be attracted to right-wing fundamentalism. Maybe so, but Capps' thinking seems to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Capps always stays at a safe distance from any moral judgment about the war. The main problem with Vietnam for Capps is that it split the U.S. into warring camps—one pacifist, the other militantly anti-communist—and that neither side could claim victory in the end. The issue is therefore how to reconcile the two views of the war, not to grasp the essential meaning of the war.

The author has little interest in the history of the war itself. He finds Dean Acheson's claim (in his memoirs), that the U.S. wanted to promote Vietnamese nationalism by supporting the French against the Viet Minh, a sufficient explanation for U.S. policy toward Indochina under the Truman administration. He passes over the critical point in the international politics of the conflict—the role of the U.S. in blocking elections for a reunification of Vietnam in 1956—with the anodyne statement, "civil elections did not occur." The war is presented as somehow unrelated to U.S. decisions. This morally neutral view of the war is summed up in the observation that the "events of the war simply steamrolled under their own momentum."

The Unfinished War adds nothing to our understanding either of the war or of American society—unless it is seen as an example of the moral evasions of that society at work through pop sociology.

*The Johns Hopkins University School of
Advanced International Studies, U.S.A.*

GARETH PORTER

H.J. VAN MOOK AND INDONESIAN INDEPENDENCE. A Study of His Role in Dutch-Indonesian Relations, 1945–48. *By Yong Mun Cheong. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 1982. xiv, 255 pp. Dfl. 57.20.*

THIS BOOK addresses a major gap in the burgeoning literature in English on the period of the Indonesian revolution—namely, the background to Dutch policy-making. Although an enormous wealth of primary sources is now available in Holland, Yong is the first to mine them primarily to understand Dutch actions, as opposed to Indonesian ones.

It seemed a good idea to use van Mook as the central figure of such a study, as there is poignancy in the failure of his own vision of a "modern" Indonesia, decolonized yet still giving generous room to locally-born Dutch and Chinese. Both van Mook and his wife were *blijvers*, born in the Indies of parents who chose to stay and die there. As a student at Leiden (1915–18), he felt himself similarly placed (if not personally close) to the Javanese and Chinese students there, and conceived his vision of a multi-racial Indies community no longer ruled from The Hague. While working his way up the Indies bureaucracy, he established a reputation as a progressive and effective champion of Indies interests—against The Hague, against the big Dutch companies,