

will also appear in Book Forum 1982 The Litchfield County Times Company

Understanding the Pain And Wounds of Vietnam

Susan J. Shepard
68 Jack's Bridge Road
Woodbury, Ct. 06798

The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience. By Walter H. Capps. Beacon Press. \$13.50

By SUSAN SHEPARD

One-half million American men and women are the "walking wounded" of Vietnam. Some are disabled in body, almost all carry crippling wounds of the mind and of the heart. The resulting human self-destruction we rather benignly label as "delayed stress syndrome."

Author Capps makes the most overlooked, and the most chilling point about the progress of this unfinished war: "Since 1975 there have been as many suicides among Vietnam veterans as there were combat fatalities during the war." There were 57,692 combat fatalities.

BOOK REVIEW

"The Unfinished War" is one of those very rare books that goes beyond accounts, beyond bitterness and dispenses with rhetoric and propoganda.

Mr. Capps attempts only to understand what engendered our involvement, the trauma that resulted and the reaction we, the nation, are undergoing today. He does not argue either the wisdom or the witlessness of America's Vietnam policy.

Vietnam was horrible. Vietnam happened to all of us and we shall all have to reckon with our national "delayed stress syndrome."

What was Vietnam all about? We are not even sure what it was; indeed it was not called a war for much of the time it was being fought. There was never a clear strategy designed to achieve a military goal. True, our soldiers were not allowed to win, as certain politicians now claim, but what were they to win? As Mr. Capps states, "What could it mean to be a warrior when there were profound questions concerning the identification of the enemy?" What can it mean to be a veteran, or a nation, "when everybody recognized we had lost?"

A short, readable account of Vietnamese history sets the context for a coherent discussion of United States involvement from 1945 to the end of the

It is here that the Capps book becomes fascinating and challenging; the weaving of history and insight is compelling.

"Fundamentally," he says, "the Vietnam War was a contest between two views of human priorities." But the contest was not in Asia, the contest was within America. Our sense of ourselves fell into something called a "credibility gap," the catch phrase for the almost ritual way in which the contestants did not hear each other's arguments. There were two American cultures emerging and they projected their struggle for control onto Vietnam. The struggle has continued.

It was this fundamental truth that placed the final, unbearable burden on the veteran. "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."

In his discussion of the attraction of armed conflict, even nuclear conflict, for those of an Armageddon inclination, Mr. Capps is brilliant.

Americans are perhaps midway in a long search for a sense of purpose. The myth of the American and the nation was shattered by the war, and particularly devastated by revelations of atrocity that continue to make their way into the public mind. We are all participants in the reshaping of the American dream.

This is not necessarily an unhealthy thing for an individual or a nation. But, in Mr. Capps's view, this need for a new sense of purpose is being perverted. It is being dangerously exploited by the evangelical and patriotically militant Moral Majority and similar groups.

We need to heal our national wounds, but if we permit our present doubts and confusions to be confounded, we risk repeating the experience of Vietnam. We risk having the final experience of war, Armageddon.

Mr. Capps is the author of several books exploring religious life. He is professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The present book is the result of five years of research, and it should be read as a careful, intelligent record and inter-