

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS



---

Review: A Statute of Limitations: Recent American Writings on the Vietnam War  
Reviewed Work(s): In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays, 1977—1991 by W. D. Ehrhart;  
Unholy Grail: The US and the Wars in Vietnam, 1965–68 by Larry Cable; Into the  
Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War by Brian van de Mark;  
The Vietnam Reader by Walter Capps

Review by: Alasdair Spark

Source: *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Apr., 1993), pp. 93–98

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the British Association for  
American Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40464081>

Accessed: 29-04-2024 21:24 +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](mailto: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>



Cambridge University Press, British Association for American Studies are collaborating  
with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of American Studies*

# Review Essay

## A Statute of Limitations: Recent American Writings on the Vietnam War.

ALASDAIR SPARK

W. D. Ehrhart, *In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays, 1977–1991* (Folkeston: McFarland, 1991, £18.75). Pp. 195. ISBN 0 89950 611 9.

Larry Cable, *Unholy Grail: The US and the Wars in Vietnam, 1965–68* (London: Routledge, 1991, £35). Pp. 292. ISBN 0 415 05043 X.

Brian Van De Mark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, £17.50). Pp. 268. ISBN 0 19 506506 9.

Walter Capps (ed.), *The Vietnam Reader* (London: Routledge, 1991). Pp. 288.

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1989 President Bush spoke of the future and his hopes for a “kinder, gentler, America,” and of the past, and a “a chorus of discordant voices. There’s grown a certain divisiveness. We’ve seen the hard looks and heard the statements in which not only each other’s ideas are challenged, but each other’s motives... It’s been this way since Vietnam. That War cleaves us still. But friends, that war began a quarter of a century ago. Surely the statute of limitations has been reached? This is a fact: the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can afford to be sundered by a memory.” President Bush’s desire to draw a line under Vietnam, and find final lessons is also evident in the recent crop of American writings about the War, though they might suggest a different interpretation of the phrase “statute of limitations,” as American scholars attempt to understand events, supply a narrative, and revise existing interpretations. One limit worth noting lies in the delineation and naming given to the conflict. President Bush’s quarter century hardly encompasses the experience of the Vietnamese, for whom the War began at the very least in 1945. The texts considered here do not make that error, though all deal with the American period of the War. Perhaps more significant is the confused problem of “Vietnam” or “Viet Nam”? The former is an American construction dating from the War, and is now rejected by a number of scholars

Alasdair Spark is Senior Lecturer in American Studies, King Alfred’s College, Winchester SO22 4NR, England.

*Journal of American Studies*, 27 (1993), 1, 93–98. © 1993 Cambridge University Press

—for instance the editors of the journal *Viet Nam Generation*—as a spelling for the nation, though not for the War. It is an irony that the spelling of the imperial party should have become so codified in books which seek to revise our understanding.

*The Vietnam Reader*, edited by Walter Capps (himself one of the pioneers of Vietnam War studies in his 1982 *The Unfinished War*) provides a digest of short material on the War, mostly dating from the Nineteen Eighties. The essays and extracts are diverse and interesting (and a boon to teaching), though one wishes for a commentary from Capps which might have criticised some of the inclusions more — as it is, they inevitably seem to provide a received history, and one with a direction. The four sections provided index a common compartmentalisation and structure of the American War: the warrior's testimony; lessons from the War; diversities of experience; symbolic expressions and ritual healing. It is difficult not to see this movement towards American "healing" as every bit as teleological as President Bush's plea: Capps's introduction manages to give credit to the historiography, memory, and collective culture stemming from the War as a "reconstructive effort [which] carries an ability to transform virtually everything it touches." This attempt to find in the War a narrative of guilt for national redemption is not uncommon, and has driven a good many texts on the War: Marilyn Young's recent *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–90* (Harper Collins, 1991) with its list of American atrocities and their continuations in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Grenada, is a case in point. In an excellent review essay in the *New York Review of Books* (October 10, 1991), Jonathan Mirsky points out the deficiencies of this focus on solely American failures and crimes, and outlines the problems of Vietnamese experience in the aftermath of the War. Capps himself is undercut by recent events, and finishes with a postscript reflecting on the Gulf War as a potential frustration to redemption, but he concludes, again, with faith in his narrative: "because it finally came out right, from the point of view of intrinsic American interests, the Persian Gulf War will, in the end, turn out to be more about Vietnam than it is about the Middle East" (p. 318).

The attempt to find a personal and collective narrative applicable to the Vietnam War has been the hallmark of William Ehrhart's life. Ehrhart is an ex-Marine, a Vietnam Veteran, a schoolteacher, a novelist, and one of the foremost poets produced by America's experiences in Vietnam. For twenty years he has had an impassioned mission to ensure that his War should not be repeated in Central America, or the Persian Gulf for another generation of young Americans, and *In the Shadow of Vietnam* collects together many of his prose pieces, drawing from sources as diverse as *Gallery* (a soft-porn magazine) and *WIN* (a left-wing newspaper). The essays pre-date the Kuwaiti-Gulf War, but in his introduction Ehrhart writes of the American troops stationed in the desert: "I hope they all come home safely. There is nothing in that part of the world that I want them to die for. I have no interests there, and neither do they" (p. xi). In 1967 he wrote an "after my death" letter to his parents which finished "I believe in my country, and so I am willing to die for these United States." *In the Shadow of Vietnam* provides a chronicle of Ehrhart's views on War, and his political education, from one position to the other. What Ehrhart delineates might be described as a *Veteranpolitik* focused on the young, with its beginnings in the anti-war

movement, and organisations such as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and the essays chart the qualification of Ehrhart's views on sacrifice – he writes of the trust between government and people as “I will give you my life to do with what you will, so long as your cause is worthy of my sacrifice” (p. 135) – most explicitly in the unfolding revelation of the duplicity of the nation's leaders. Perhaps the fiercest essays in the book concern Ehrhart's passion for allotting responsibility for the War: in “A Letter to McGeorge Bundy” Ehrhart writes of his letters to one of the War's major policymakers, asking for an apology for the War which drew Ehrhart in, and cost the lives of his comrades. In “The United States Screw & Bolt Company” he alternates biographies of policymakers with those of Vietnam soldiers, some Veterans, some who died in Vietnam. The contrast has considerable effect.

Unlike some Veterans – and some commentators – Ehrhart does not ignore or disenfranchise the Vietnamese, America's enemy and the victors in the War. The other focus of his book is his unfolding attempt to learn about the people whom he tried to kill, and who tried to kill him. Several of the essays concern his return trips to Vietnam in the 1980s and 1990s, his visit to Hue, where he was seriously wounded in 1968, and his meetings with Vietnamese artists, poets, and Veterans – including several generals. The Vietnamese clearly considered the visit of Ehrhart and other Veterans as important, but to his credit, Ehrhart does not romanticise the Vietnamese, or credit them with some superior morality – he is aware of censorship and the totalitarian character of Vietnamese life. But he claims, this is a result of the United States continuing campaign to frustrate the recovery of Vietnam. The book closes with an account of his 1990 journey back, in which he recognises that the legacy of Vietnam is for him a frustrating, but entirely understandable irony.

“For perhaps the first time in my life I was not made to feel like the odd man out because I am a ‘Vietnam writer.’ In the US I get invited to read at ‘Tet plus Twenty’ conferences, but I’ve never been invited to read at the Breadloaf Writer's Conference, or the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. My poems are taught in college history courses on the Vietnam War, but not in classes on contemporary American Poetry. But in Vietnam everybody over the age of 35 is a ‘Vietnam Writer,’ and for once I feel like just one of the gang. No one thinks it odd to be writing about the War, much less its painful and lingering legacies. No one looks at you as if you are emotionally retarded. What I’ve done with my life and my writing makes perfectly good sense to them. They see it, as I do, as a duty and an obligation, a way of turning disaster into hope” (p. 187). It is a task that Ehrhart has realised very well.

One of Ehrhart's later essays related his experiences upon teaching a course on the Vietnam War at the William Joiner Center at the University of Massachusetts, Boston (a major study center on the Vietnam War). Ehrhart writes that his course had to combat the fact that “fewer than half a dozen students had ever read a book about the Vietnam War. But every single student in the class had seen at least half a dozen commercial movies about the War.” This, if we add to it the categories of novels and memoirs, describes the nature of the cultural production about the Vietnam War in America in the Eighties. For all the attention Vietnam got on the screen, in publishing, and in teaching, very little history was written,

and precious little of that came from the American academy. Ehrhart recommends a list of texts for use with students studying the War – in the main novels and memoirs – including George Herring’s history *America’s Longest War*. Herring himself wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in September 1987 that “Vietnam has not become the kind of hot topic that absorbs scholars the way, for example, that the origins of the Cold War absorbed and divided us in the 1950’s and 60’s” (p. A4). In the Seventies scholarship provided several foundational studies, chiefly Lewy’s *America in Vietnam* and Richard Betts and Leslie Gelb’s provocative *The Irony of Vietnam: the System worked*. Perhaps the most read history is Stanley Karnow’s *Vietnam: A History* (condemned by Ehrhart as inaccurate and biased), written as a companion to the PBS/Channel 4 TV series, though Gabriel Kolko’s lesser known *Anatomy of a War* is far better. Perhaps the premier study of the Vietnam War is written by an English academic – Ralph Smith’s multi volume series *An International History of the Vietnam War* (in progress). Whatever, five years on from Herring’s call, Larry Cable and Brian Van De Mark provide (as Larry Berman did before them) evidence that the process is under way, subject to the qualification that both books were researched, written or published within the framework of the military – at the Center for Military History, and the US Naval Academy. This is not to dispute their scholarship – both are outstanding – but merely to note that young academic historians of the mainstream are not writing about the Vietnam period. Why is this so? Paradoxically, one reason may be the sheer mass of material available. Due to the declassifications made possible by the Pentagon Papers, the Westmoreland vs. CBS libel trial, plus the ongoing release of military and diplomatic files and the records of the Presidential Libraries, any researcher is met by a jungle of materials in which the charts and finding aids remain imprecise. For this reason, both authors are therefore to be commended (as is Ralph Smith) for the groundwork they have laid in making sense not just of the events, but of the records.

Van De Mark and Cable overlap the same period of the War – *Into the Quagmire* is a detailed study of the policy process which led to large scale intervention in the air and on the ground in 1964/65; *Unholy Grail* begins with the same, but continues to a study of military operations, up to the decision to withdraw in 1968. Van De Mark relates the discussions within the Johnson administration on intervention in Vietnam almost day-by-day, providing verbatim (if narrativised) accounts of policy meetings. His conclusions are largely familiar: the inexorability of intervention into a conflict which meant sailing between the Scylla and Charybdis of an unpopular and a too popular war, and the pessimism of even the most ardent hawks in the Johnson administration that the effort and expenditure put into Vietnam would bring the reward that was hoped for. Yet, given this, there is a problem with the book’s governing metaphor, as displayed by its title: can Vietnam properly be described as a “quagmire” if America’s leaders drove into it, spending lives and money, knowing full well the narrow prospects for a successful transit? After all, this revelation is what so enrages Bill Ehrhart, and if Van De Mark is to call it “tragic,” or a “quagmire,” it surely needs qualification for Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, Robert MacNamara and the others.

Cable's book is the second in a series he is writing which will follow the War from the American perspective, not just in policy but in military operations. It is this which makes his book so very valuable, for as he argues: "the decision whether or not to go to war in South East Asia was not the central intellectual task confronting the Johnson Administration and its military command structure. The central task, the most important intellectual process, was determining the purpose for which war was to be waged, against whom it was to be fought, how it was conducted, and how the United States would know if it was winning or not" (p. 19). Cable expertly threads his way through the descending levels of strategic theory, policy process, and military plans to operational experience, and he is good at delineating the flawed relationship of one to another in Vietnam, where the pursuit of an impossible military victory came to lead the policy decisions. His success is such that he overcomes one of the central difficulties in writing about the Vietnam War from the operational level: the deficiencies of the narrative, given that the war was not focused on a simple territoriality, had no front line, and contained few reliable indicators of progress (or regress), bar the statistics "collected" by the Pentagon. Perhaps no narrative condition makes this clearer than the fact that American operations were identified by code-names, not locations – since the latter would have been meaningless in the American war-schemata. Hence Cable is to be commended for the skill by which he makes a credible history and a meaningful chronology out of the lexicon of Operation Abilene, Farragut, Scotland I & II, Junction City, Happy Valley, and the like. Of course, in doing this, Cable also demonstrates the same truth realised by Ehrhart, of the difficulties faced by American soldiers – officers and men – attempting to make their own sense out of events which were not to lead to victory.

So, the cultural historian finds structure and narrative in the redemptive possibilities of knowledge about the Vietnam War, the Veteran in the passion of war-time experience and subsequent political revelation, and the military historian in the unfolding archives and the details of American policy. But, to recall and go beyond Ehrhart's student class, what of the Americans who read very little of what little history is written about the War? It was with this audience that the President's concern lay, though one ought to note how much Bush recognised the failure of his predecessor's desire, voiced almost a decade earlier, for the public to accept the War as a "noble cause." That failure (and hence, in fact, the "memory" Bush spoke of) might be attributed largely to the intractable popular cultural narrative of the War in the Eighties, which continued to present Vietnam as a place of horror, contamination, and flashback, in formulations as diverse as *Rambo*, *Platoon*, *China Beach*, and the Veterans Memorial. These may have been a brake on President Reagan's Central American endeavours, but what must be realised is that this too now belongs in the past. Bush's plea has been met, and what is evident about Vietnam War popular culture today is its passing – the TV shows are cancelled, after a flood the movies have dried up, the memoirs and novels are once again a trickle, and those interested in the War again a consuming minority. Nor do the public seem much interested in Viet Nam proper, except as a locale for the mythical soldiers missing in action. As Capps feared, the Gulf War surely has some responsibility, by providing an apparent closure to Vietnam in a later victory. For the military analyst no doubt a Vietnam–Gulf axis will

provide fruitful comparisons indicating lessons both learnt and ignored, as for Ehrhart there is evidence of the continuing duplicity of government, and for Capps proof of a grander narrative still. But then again, while the Gulf may have put a lid on Vietnam, its own very obvious unsatisfactoriness as a victory has failed to provide a significant popular cultural alternative – there seems little desire for films about the road to Basra, or the survival of Saddam. But, then again, perhaps President Bush need not have worried, since public attention was already becoming saturated, and the Vietnam War so thoroughly penetrating, that it had become de-natured – such that even Mr Skinner, Bart Simpson's school Principal, had flashbacks to the 'Nam. It is notable that *JFK*, the most influential recent film to deal with Vietnam (and another product of Oliver Stone's War industry) is premised on the proposition that Vietnam could have been edited out of history. Whatever, if the Vietnam War continues to wane in public attention in the coming decade, perhaps it will ironically breed mature and more reflective study, not least from the archival historians – but then again, will such neglect encourage anyone except academics to read it?