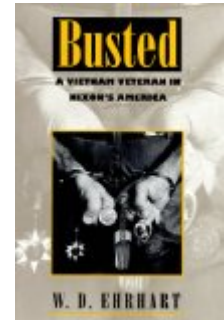


W. D. Ehrhart. *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon's America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. xxii + 146 pp. \$21.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87023-955-7.



Reviewed by Lewis Carlson

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With the exception of the Civil War, about which romance and fiction have long overwhelmed the horrific and real, no American war has inspired more impassioned writing than has Vietnam, and especially by those who did the fighting. Unfortunately, too few of these veterans have written about the long-term societal and personal effects of this most controversial of American wars.

Bill Ehrhart is arguably more widely acclaimed for his several volumes of poetry than for his prose, but his autobiographical memoirs, of which *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon's America* is the third volume, present an important non-fiction *Bildungsroman* of a young, idealistic, small-town boy, who, eager to serve and even die for his country, becomes a bitterly disillusioned, guilt-ridden veteran who angrily strikes back at the society that so willingly sent him and his generation to fight and die in Vietnam. *Vietnam Perkase* charted the transformation of a seventeen-year-old, patriotic, honor roll student into an effective and highly decorated Marine who only late in his twelve-month tour began develop-

ing serious doubts about the American mission in Vietnam. *Passing Time* chronicled Ehrhart's post-war years in college and his growing conviction that the war was not so much a mistake as a cynical and deliberately planned aggression, orchestrated by mendacious political leaders who cloaked their intentions in popular warnings about communism, falling dominos, and the rights of free men everywhere. *Busted* continues the story of Ehrhart's growing disillusionment with what he considers a hypocritical society that arrests him for marijuana possession rather than for the more serious crimes he believes he committed in Vietnam:

I'm guilty of murder, assault with a deadly weapon, robbery, burglary, larceny, disorderly conduct, you name it, I've done it. And according to our so-called system, it was all perfectly legal. They gave me a medal for it.

But it is not only Bill Ehrhart who is "busted." Using his highly personal experiences, he describes a country whose contradictions seem so painfully obvious that Ehrhart can only rage, "If

there is a God in heaven, She'll never forgive us. Not you. Not me. Not any of us."

Set to the backdrop of the House Judiciary Committee's Nixon impeachment proceedings, the contradictions are obvious: alcohol versus marijuana; the author's scruffy appearance, which on at least two occasions leads to his being picked up by the police as a suspicious character, contrasts sharply with the proper decorum of those sure he is a Hippie draft-dodger; his trial for marijuana possession vis-a-vis what he considers his role in the destruction of Vietnam and its people; his ongoing confrontations with family and other "elders who had been far more eager to send me off to war than to welcome me home from it"; but, above all, it's Nixon versus Ehrhart: a sitting president, accused of attempting to subvert the legal system, versus a former war hero who discovers he is MIA in his own country.

Busted examines the raw fury that induced too many returning Vietnam veterans to withdraw from American society, some literally to wilderness retreats, others simply to the tortured recesses of their own minds. Like these other so-called drop-outs, Ehrhart is an angry man. He is emotional, uncompromising, even violent in his crusade to expose past wrongs, but these are precisely the qualities that made him an eager and effective combat soldier. There will be those readers who would prefer a more dispassionate assessment of America's Vietnam agony, and there are certainly those who think it is time to put aside the painful memories of that most unhappy of eras. This reviewer, however, is not among them.

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