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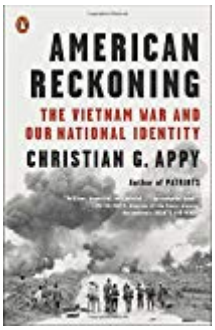

Christian G. Appy. *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity.* New York: Penguin Press, 2015. 416 pp. $18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-14-312834-2.

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The United States of America is the greatest nation on earth; it is peace loving and possesses a unique global mission to make the world a better, safer place through promoting democracy. This is the message I received as a high school student in the small town of Hollidaysburg, nestled in the Appalachian Mountains of central western Pennsylvania in the mid-1990s. In many ways, it was the same message my parents received as students in this same school district in the mid-to-late 1960s. According to *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, the latest work from University of Massachusetts, Amherst professor and Vietnam War scholar Christian Appy, these exceptionalist ideas were "shattered" by the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, Appy is wrong. These ideas were shaken, tested, challenged, and in some places, perhaps, overcome, but never shattered. The Vietnam War was traumatic and it did lead to a significant questioning of the United States, its history, and its mission in the world, a questioning that has never fully been embraced or dealt with by the whole of American society. In fact, the willful rejection of those individuals and ideas that challenge the "rah-rah" American narrative is perhaps as much an important legacy of the war in Vietnam as the challenges to the American exceptionalist narratives. However, if we simply assume that those who reject the challenges to the old vision of American exceptionalism are stubbornly clinging to vestiges of a dead ideology, we ignore and fail to understand their view of America. In 2016, as the United States braces itself for a Republican presidential campaign headed by Donald Trump that makes frequent and aggressive use of American exceptionalism, it seems that more than ever we need to understand the power of the mythos he wields and why it continues to thrive. Appy's *American Reckoning* points in a direction to understand this.

At the core of Appy's argument is that narratives about America and the need to perpetuate particular images as part of America's Cold War strategy led the United States into Vietnam and that ever since the war, the United States has at-

tempted to create stories to understand what happened without ever coming to terms with its own failures. Appy argues that the Vietnam War represented a unique moment in American history, a transitional moment when faith in American exceptionalism was broken. He goes on to argue that certain groups of Americans, unwilling to fully yield these ideas, have reforged and refashioned American exceptionalism; however, the neo-exceptionalism is more brittle and more fragile than its predecessor, leading its defenders to become more defensive and aggressive.

According to Appy, the long arc of Vietnam's influence on American national identity has never been fully explored by scholars. Despite thousands of books on the Vietnam War, Appy argues, none has attempted to explore how Vietnam entered the American consciousness and the wider sociopolitical ramifications of this connection. The text is divided into three parts, which develop the following ideas: how the United States got into Vietnam, how the United States fought in Vietnam, and how the United States remembers Vietnam. Appy begins his story in the 1950s as Americans were only slowly becoming aware of Vietnam and events unfolding there, using the novel *Deliver Us From Evil* (1956) written by naval officer Tom Dooley. The novel presents the United States as coming to the aid of Catholics persecuted by the Communists of North Vietnam, reflecting the Cold War Orientalism of the first decade and a half after World War II. Appy lays out how visions of Communist aggression and fears of emasculation propelled the US foreign policy apparatus into greater American involvement in Southeast Asia. The way in which the United States fought the war and the incongruity between those actions and what the administration told the American people it was doing helped to open a chasm between the public and the administration into which the public faith in government fell and ultimately shattered. Much of this story, especially in parts 1 and 2, is not new to scholars of the Vietnam War or Cold War America, yet for the popular audience Appy wants to reach, his presentation of recent scholarship is engaging and erudite.

The third part of *American Reckoning* represents the greatest contribution of this work. In the final chapters of the book, Appy argues that Americans following the Vietnam War had to come to terms with what the war meant and how it changed their visions of themselves and their nation. The argument rests on the idea that American exceptionalism was broken beyond repair as a result of the war, that the American people as a whole rejected the type of arrogant, jingoistic nationalism of the early Cold War era. Appy's arguments about the development of a victimized mentality among Americans in the wake of the Vietnam War are convincing, although his notion that the rise of conservatives (and neoconservatives) stemmed from an attempt to recreate American exceptionalism seems to miss the mark.

American exceptionalism had not been universally shattered; there was no radical sixties moment when the whole country turned against its earlier notions of American power and mission. Appy cites a 1971 poll that showed 58 percent of Americans believing the war in Vietnam was immoral, but those numbers do not show a majority of Americans turning away from the exceptionalist rhetoric of pre-Vietnam America; rather, they indicate Americans finding fault with the nation's actions in a particular instance. As Appy shows, a majority of Americans continued to support American military actions around the world in the wake of Vietnam. The growing and healthy scholarship on the conservative sixties makes clear that these years were not a period when all of American institutions and ideas were forsaken. More accurately, one could argue that this was a moment when liberals confronted the Cold War consensus and had their faith shaken.

In many ways, what Appy is writing about is not an American reckoning but a ***liberal*** reckoning. Liberals of the 1950s willingly accepted and promoted the ideas of American exceptionalism

encoded in Cold War Orientalism. Liberals supported the war in Vietnam as a necessary component of Cold War strategy, and their support was consistent with their visions of modernization theory, as Appy stresses. During the war, liberals recoiled in horror at the savagery of the American war in Vietnam, as embodied by the massacre at My Lai. Liberals emerged from the war less willing to accept the idea that the US mission abroad was to do good. Yet, far too often, Appy asserts, these were the actions and reactions of "Americans," which is simply too sweeping a generalization. If there was a conservative reckoning, it was the idea that never again would the United States lose a war by losing the home front—regardless if that was what actually happened during the Vietnam War. Further, conservatives, like the liberals Appy appears to focus on, did come to view the federal government with greater suspicion in the post-Vietnam War era, although this critique was already developing with Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign.

In exploring the construction of a post-Vietnam War American identity, conservatives took the lead in developing a refashioned American exceptionalism and constructing new narratives and myths that forestalled any true national soul-searching about the meaning of the war. The myths of spat-upon veterans and American victimhood became powerful totems in the post-Vietnam War national identity struggle, as they helped to forge the idea that the soldiers in the field and the policymakers in Washington were absolved from failure and shifted the blame for defeat onto the antiwar movement and a perceived lack of national pride among the protesters. The goal of the new national identity created in the post-Vietnam War era was to overcome the divisions of the 1960s, to reunite the nation around those things with which all Americans could agree. This reconciliationist narrative construction has distinct echoes of post-Civil War narratives that allowed for the rise of the Lost Cause and delayed any real reckoning with the meaning of the Civil War for decades (perhaps even still). But Appy fails to link adequately the two because of his insistence that the Vietnam War was unique and shattered all previous American conceptions of national identity.

Despite its limitations, *American Reckoning* is well worth the read. Though Appy targets a popular audience with this text, he does not dumb down his work's theoretical underpinnings but makes them accessible, and thus, this work serves to complicate the narrative of the Vietnam War, without complicated jargon. Appy skillfully integrates his analysis of primary sources with a healthy reading of the secondary literature. In the end, Appy's text serves to help us begin a conversation that is long overdue and to provide a framework for coming to terms with the war in Vietnam and its legacy into the twenty-first century. The American people today, across political lines, view the government of the United States in a very different light than perhaps they did in the 1950s; however, the notion of America's unique position in time and space carries forward and Appy asks us to consider why.

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