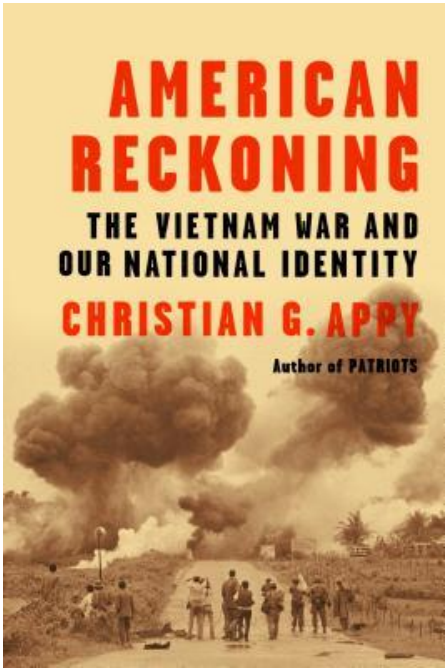

American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity

Christian G. Appy

American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity

Christian G. Appy

American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity Christian G. Appy
"Few people understand the centrality of the Vietnam War to our situation as much as Christian Appy."
--Ken Burns

The critically acclaimed author of *Patriots* offers profound insights into Vietnam's place in America's self-image.

How did the Vietnam War change the way we think of ourselves as a people and a nation? Christian G. Appy, author of the widely praised oral history of the Vietnam War *Patriots*, now examines the relationship between the war's realities and myths and its impact on our national identity, conscience, pride, shame, popular culture, and postwar foreign policy.

Drawing on a vast variety of sources from movies, songs, and novels to official documents, media coverage, and contemporary commentary, Appy offers an original interpretation of the war and its far-reaching consequences. Authoritative, insightful, sometimes surprising, and controversial, *American Reckoning* is a fascinating mix of political and cultural reporting that offers a completely fresh account of the meaning of the Vietnam War.

American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity Details

Date	:	Published February 5th 2015 by Viking
ISBN	:	9780670025398
Author	:	Christian G. Appy
Format	:	Hardcover 416 pages
Genre	:	History, Politics, War, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History

From Reader Review American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity for online ebook

Eric says

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

I know very little about the Vietnam War era and most of what I do know are pop-culture cliches: hippies in bell bottoms and flower prints, helicopters hovering in war zones, protests, and a general sense that America was pulling apart internally. So the opportunity to read American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity gave me new understanding of this time and its significance.

I'll admit that when I saw the book I sort of groaned and left it on the counter for several days - its not the type of book I would normally read nor is it a topic I would seek out. But having finished the The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931 (also a First Reads win), where the author left off with America as this emerging superpower, uneasily taking on the mantle of world leader, it seemed like Christian G. Appy's book would be a logical next step. I think the book provides a clear distinction between WWI/WWII America, with the sense of "rightness" we had in fighting those battles, and Vietnam, where we start to see leaders say one thing ("we want to help the Vietnamese people") while in reality doing the opposite.

Appy's book sets up a distinction between the idea of American power and identity - which he calls "American exceptionalism," that the U.S. is the unrivalled promised land of goodness, opportunity, and freedom - and the reality of what the Vietnam war showed a vast number of Americans. "Never before had such a wide range of Americans come to doubt their nation's superiority; never before had so many questioned its use of military force; never before had so many challenged the assumption that their country had higher moral standards." Appy explores this break in confidence by reviewing war and its impact in three parts: Why Are We in Vietnam?, America at War, and What Have We Become? Overall, it is a thorough, damning review of the war and the broader cultural changes in America.

The work is often gut-wrenching. The introduction opens with the terrible scene of an air force medic, cleaning the bodies of two small Vietnamese boys when their mother rushes in and wails in grief. Appy informs us that these boys were "hit by an American military truck driver who may have been competing with other drivers over 'who could hit a kid. They had some disgusting name for it, something like *gook hockey*.'" There's a terribleness that comes through strongly in the book - a bleak realization of the horrors we humans inflict on another for no other reason than being slightly different. It is a sad book, one that makes you question your own beliefs and the stock phrases and images used by politicians.

Appy is best when talking about the war and politics. I think he is less convincing in his cultural critiques of both Vietnam-era and later music and tv. Whereas his close and deep analysis of the language of war is enlightening, that same analysis of Bruce Springsteen or Cheech & Chong songs feels like a stretch. I understand why he added these elements to the book - they help to craft the "National Identity" of the subtitle - but his argument is strong enough that he didn't need to find cultural punctuation points.

I recommend American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity, especially for those people with only a passing understanding of the Vietnam time period. I do think it is helpful to have some background in the WWI/WWII era as a counterpoint to the topic, but the book can stand by itself. However, be prepared to feel disgusted with humanity when reading this book. It may not be a pleasant feeling, but it is

a real one.

Mikey B. says

I bought this book with the expectation that it would examine how the Vietnam War changed the U.S., during, and more so, after it ended in 1975.

In the introduction the author states he does not want to give a “conventional chronological history”. I wanted an exploration, as the subtitle suggests, of “Our National Identity” and how it changed.

I don’t feel the book was successful in this. What we do get is another history of the Vietnam War that, for the most part, has already been dealt with in other books. For example My Lai is brought up as how American troops became vicious, massacring Vietnamese civilians – and that it was only one of many such incidents in Vietnam. But this is nothing new.

The author discusses how Americans are imbued with the aura of their “Exceptionalism” – they are a God-selected nation preordained to spread the Goodness of democracy through-out the world (one might say the same of the British and French Empires of centuries ago). But a more careful reading of American history does away with this myth – slavery, the genocide of all the indigenous peoples, and the raw imperialism of Manifest Destiny. But as the author states, particularly those in power, cling and expound this “Moral Exceptionalism”.

The author does claim, that for many Americans, Vietnam obliterated this “Exceptionalism”. But this, again, is not news; think of the countless newsreels, documentaries and movies spawned from Vietnam portraying a very negative America.

The author is passionate, but the book is a re-hash of history. He did kindle my interest when he spoke of how the U.S. during the 1970’s and 1980’s became transformed to a “victim nation” – victimized by the oil producing countries and the Iran hostage crisis. Reagan, to some extent, removed the guilt of Vietnam but replaced it with patriotism. But the damage had been done, with many Americans losing faith in their government. The Reagan image was above government.

I would have liked more of an examination of the Vietnam War’s impact on the concept of “liberalism” which has now become a very dirty word in the U.S.

I would also have liked a discussion of how a country, like the U.S., which has a free press, copes with war. As a contrast, one reason given for the collapse of the Soviet Union, was that the Soviet people were unaware of what was going on in Afghanistan during their war in the 1980’s where so much blood was shed. The Soviet people, more than the U.S., felt betrayed by their government.

The author summarizes many recent events in Iraq and Afghanistan in a very cursory fashion and vaguely connects these to Vietnam. Overall this book lacked substance.

Here are some books that probe further:

A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam
Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975

Samuel says

Horribly depressing, but powerful in its descriptions of the lies, corruption, and doublespeak perpetrated by the government of the USA during and after the Vietnam War. I'm not sure it's got the best pacing, but it's well-researched, and it does an excellent job of pointing out the chasm between America's stated values and its actions on many occasions. At the bottom of it, it's a book about the importance of self-reflection, and I'm all in favor of self-reflection.

---

victor harris says

Definitely written with a liberal slant but is still a mountain of information about the level of government deception and the atrocities inflicted by the American side. What is striking is how compliant the media was in the early phases of the conflict as they chose not to probe the deeper issues and generally accepted the government version of events.
Excellent commentary on the effects of the " Vietnam Syndrome" as America tried to come to grips with the loss of prestige and how " not repeating the mistakes of Vietnam" would become part of the political narrative in the ensuing generation. In some cases, particularly under Reagan, the war would be recast as a heroic enterprise and films of the "Rambo" variety would help feed the revision. Much of it suggesting that the politicians "lost the war."
A biting, well-written account that is useful for those who are even superficially familiar with the war and how via McNamara, Rusk, et al, it spun out of control; but containing enough depth to satisfy those with more command of the material.

Paul Froehlich says

Let’s start with some Q & A.

Q: What was Billboard’s number one pop song for 1966? A: “The Ballad of the Green Berets” by Barry Saddler.

Q: What proportion of Americans sent to Vietnam had college degrees? A: Including officers, fewer than eight percent.

Q: What proportion of the 27 million draft eligible men were sent to Vietnam? A: Ten percent.

Q: Why did it take a year and a half for the My Lai massacre to be exposed? A: Because the Army lied to cover it up, claiming it was a successful battle against North Vietnamese troops, rather than the murder of some 500 unarmed civilians.

Q: What was the most heavily bombed country in history? A: South Vietnam, the country we claimed to be

saving, was pounded with almost twice as many bombs as the USA dropped in all of WWII. The U.S. dropped four times the bombs on South Vietnam as on North Vietnam.

Q. What was the most infamous statement in the war? A: One of them is certainly, “It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.” It was spoken by an American major describing the offensive in the Mekong Delta. Another is from 1967: there is “some light at the end of the tunnel,” claimed Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces from 1964-1968. A third is ‘peace with honor,” which is what Nixon claimed the Paris Peace Accords achieved.

These are examples of the fascinating information in American Reckoning. Those of us who lived during the Vietnam era may think we know a lot about the war, but this reviewer, a former American history teacher, found plenty of new information. I had forgotten, for example, how forcefully Martin Luther King, Jr. had spoken against the war in 1967: “What about Vietnam? I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government.”

It’s hard to believe today, but until the mid-1960s, about three-quarters of Americans told pollsters they trusted the government to do the right thing. That faith was shaken as the government’s statements about the war were exposed as unreliable if not false. By 1973, when the final U.S. troops were withdrawn, only one third of Americans still trusted the government to do what was right.

Professor Christian Appy addresses three main topics: how the USA got into the war, how the war was conducted, and how the war influenced subsequent American foreign policy.

Besides the Civil War, the Vietnam War was the most controversial war in U.S. history. Given the failure to achieve the stated objectives, and the widespread public opposition, the Vietnam War brought about an identity crisis or reckoning. It challenged the popular belief that the USA is the world’s greatest force for good. It also challenged the assertion that America can successfully intervene in distant lands to crush insurgencies and install democracy.

It was a lesson that inhibited American use of force for a quarter century after the war, during which only a total of 800 American soldiers lost their lives in warfare. Though nation building failed in South Vietnam, the lessons of Vietnam gradually dissipated, and the U.S. tried nation building again in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the flailing efforts continue.

Appy’s prime target is what he calls the myth of “American exceptionalism,” the notion that the USA is a unique force for good in the world and has the responsibility “to be the Good Samaritan of the entire world,” as Henry Luce put it in his famous call for an American Century. Presidents have long subscribed to American exceptionalism – until now. Ironically, a Republican – Donald J. Trump – is the first President to publicly question whether the USA is morally superior to Russia. Appy contends that refuting American exceptionalism is essential to stopping endless military interventions around the world.

Appy reminds readers about the unprecedented degree of resistance within the armed forces. Direct refusals to obey orders to go into combat became endemic. In 1970, there were 35 “combat refusals” in the First Calvary Division alone. Desertions in the army jumped by more than five times between 1966 and 1971. The army reported 126 “fraggings” of officers in 1969, 271 in 1970, and 333 in 1971. This increase occurred despite the de-escalation of American troops. Such widespread mutiny is never discussed nowadays in national tributes to veterans.

Speaking of veterans, Appy calls it a postwar myth that Vietnam vets were spat upon by protestors. Not a single case could be substantiated. Another postwar myth is that American POWs were left behind. In fact the number of troops missing in action was far lower than in Korea (8,000 vs. 2,500), and all claims about purported sightings of American prisoners are unproven. In 1991, several Senators circulated a photo of three men claimed to be live POWs. Months after the photo got front-page coverage, it was exposed as a fraud, a doctored photo originally published in 1923.

The real postwar POWs, writes Appy, were Vietnamese who had served in the South Vietnam military or government. They were the live POWs held in concentration camps, though “Rambo never rescued them.”

One song about Vietnam vets is widely misinterpreted. Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” is about unemployed working class veterans. “These lyrics are about suffering and shame, not pride and hope. This is a song about betrayal and alienation.”

This is a readable and fascinating book. It confronts Americans with the contrasting depictions of their nation as the world’s greatest force for good, or its “greatest purveyor of violence.” ###

Jim Angstadt says

American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity by Christian G. Appy

The introduction asks us to examine our history, especially the military history, and specifically Vietnam. What have we learned from this dreadful experience? How has this history caused us to rethink ourselves and our country? Is American exceptionalism still as valid now as it was during the mid 1900's? Who are we?

The next 330 pages give a detailed chronology of what went wrong. Appy presents a constant stream of bad decisions by our government, lies and misrepresentations to hide the truth, emotional appeals to satisfy the ignorant, and the failure of media to ferret out the truth, or some truth. Although Appy spends much of the book on Vietnam, he also is able to detail and compare our Gulf War experiences. This is a constant stream of apparently factual data, with 44 pages of notes and citations. This seemed totally factual to me; how Appy builds on the facts might be open to argument. Besides facts and point of view, the tone Appy used was suggestive of years of argument, perhaps frustrating argument. The last two and one half pages were the summary. There were 10 chapter headings and no sub-headings.

This book was disappointing. For me, it missed what I was looking for. It failed to adequately summarize the content that it presented. It failed to adequately answer it's own question: Who are we? That question is left to the reader to answer.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Being a child in the mid to late 70s in the wake of Vietnam, oil shocks, Iranian hostages, stagflation one got the sense that America if it was ever great was going now going to hell in a hand basket. My first political

memory was Nixon's resignation from office. Anyone who lived in America at the time probably wanted a return to the days (that existed only in the imagination) when America was unified, righteous and stood tall. The seventies were very introspective and questioning of patriotism right or wrong because of Vietnam. This book brings back the horror and shock on Americans brought about by involvement in the war that by 1970 had a majority believing that it was not just a mistake but an immoral war. The story picks up in the 50s an age of supposed moral certitude and goes through the unraveling of American self confidence and moral assuredness during the war.
By 1980 we were remythologizing American exceptionalism again with Reagan's new patriotic themes of it is morning in America. We decided to go back to our dream of moral righteousness and standing tall under the rubric of the new right. Cognitive dissonance can only be handled for a short while. We forgot our history and so repeated it in later wars never to wake again after.
Enjoyed the book it captured the disillusionment and the quest for a new mythology under the likes of Reagan in the wake of the war.

Josh says

I'm not particularly lucid as I write this review, so here's my best shot at summarizing what I read. . .

In the past, I've been a big fan of Christian Appy. I particularly enjoyed reading Working-Class War and Patriots. My initial thought, when I saw that this book was hitting the shelves, was "Great! A much-needed work that treats how the Vietnam War has shaped our nation's political culture since 1975!" Although the author ranges far and wide in his treatment of topics, I don't think that Appy has provided any clear or original narrative for how the Vietnam War has thoroughly changed U.S. national culture.

While the author intends to discuss how the Vietnam War affected American identity and American conceptions of its nation's purpose in the world, what the reader gets instead is a general survey of A) how the United States became involved in Vietnam; B) a general history of the war; C) An examination of the war's influence on foreign policy, political culture, conservatism, and popular culture during the last quarter century.

I won't say anything about the first part in detail. Appy rehashes much of the more extensive narratives from Frederik Logevall, George Hering, and H. R. McMaster. It's superbly written and well-summarized, and would serve well for an introductory text for undergraduates or interested readers who haven't read the other scholarly monographs. Nevertheless, there isn't much new in these chapters.

The second part, entitled "America at War," covers the social composition of soldiers, the "American Way of War," and finally the "War at Home." Once again, Appy provides a superb narrative and summarization of existing literature. However, his treatment of the "American Way of War" poses some problems. The first chapter derives mostly from Appy's Ph.D. Dissertation that he turned into the book Working-Class War. The third chapter in this section borrows heavily from most extensive histories of the anti-war movement in the United States: he covers the Kent State shootings, the Hardhat riots in New York, campus demonstrations, and self-immolations, among other things. Sandwiched into between is a chapter about the "American Way of War" in Vietnam. Appy leans on the recent work Kill Anything That Moves (2013) written by Nick Turse. He treats the air war and the land war in Vietnam separately within the chapter, but indicates that both were aimed toward the destruction of innocent civilians. Some historians, if you read enough Vietnam War histories, fall into two camps. Either they deny that atrocities were widespread and insist that My Lai was an anomaly perpetrated by a faulty command structure, or historians will insist that My Lai was indicative of

more systematic, organized, and directed efforts by the U.S. military to use extreme violence to instill a culture of fear among the Vietnamese. Both arguments are flawed and result from historians mining documents for evidence that fits their pre-existing stance on the Vietnam War. The worst histories have used fraudulent evidence to support their claims (usually unknowingly).

Nick Turse's work has received widespread criticism and has been somewhat discredited by most respectable scholars of the Vietnam War for relying on faulty sources and, aside from providing a slide-show of war crimes, did not situate any of his evidence in the broader context of the war or how America has projected power after 1945. Appy supports Turse, and certainly borrows some of his evidence from the National Archives. But I'm left not really knowing how Appy truly interprets atrocity in Vietnam. This is because Appy walks his argument back near the chapter's conclusion, when he suggest that
"It was not inevitable that every soldier would commit an atrocity—most soldiers did not—but they were commonplace nonetheless" (172). This is essentially what we've known all along! Long story short, Appy creates a rather one-sided view of how American soldiers fought tactically and how American commanders thought strategically during the war; in essence, Appy boils all this down to "search and destroy" missions. I would recommend someone read Westmoreland's War by Daddis if they want a more nuanced treatment of how American tactics were multi-faceted throughout the war.

Finally, the third part entitled "What Have We Become?" provides a roughly chronological narrative of American foreign policy and American popular culture between 1975 and 2011-2013. Appy suggest that the Vietnam War produced a number of themes and trends in American history that include a cult of "American victimhood" during the 1980s. Appy interprets "American Victimhood" as the semi-conscious assumption of American innocence and foreign treachery that generally obscures the causes for attacks (physical or otherwise) against American interests and then provokes a distorted view of appropriate responses to foreigners. Although the Vietnam War introduced a fear of "failure" into this narrative, Appy finds that Americans have continued to view most wars as righteous retribution for unprovoked outside aggression. In general, Appy concludes that between 1975-2011 most Americans lost enthusiasm for a narrative of "American exceptionalism," that the new American nationalism contained animus for "big government," and that popular culture and non-fiction writings that have extolled individual heroism have usually not connected individual triumph to national invincibility. There's some truly interesting material in these chapters, but the broader themes that Appy traces are already prominent in the historiography. If Appy had focused his entire project on exploring these aspects of the Vietnam legacy, rather than giving readers a 250 page rehearsal of the origins and prosecution of the American project in Vietnam, we might have received something truly unique: a detailed and sharp analysis of collective memory during the post-war years.

3/5 stars. This is an excellent read for those interested in knowing general information about the Vietnam War and post-1975 U.S. foreign policy. Even his analysis of popular culture (movies, novels, music) is fascinating. The book did need a more focused attention to his original objective.

Martin says

What were we supposed to have learned from the Vietnam War? If the key lesson was to stay out of the affairs of other countries, then we have failed that lesson based on the past half-century of proxy wars and wars of aggression.

The lesson learned, at least by our leaders over the decades, seems to be, as Christian Appy persuasively argues in American Reckoning : The Vietnam War and Our National Identity, that whatever mistakes were

made in Vietnam can be -- must be -- rectified elsewhere: in Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq, and on and on. These interventions happened despite the fact that many Americans, because of what happened in Vietnam, no longer accepted the notion that U.S. foreign policy and military might are always benign.

"Since the height of the Vietnam War many Americans have challenged the idea that their nation has the right or capacity to assert global dominance." (p. 335)

Instead "America's persistent claim to unique power and virtue" is a myth exposed by our repeated failures to achieve our objectives, whatever they may be. It seems obvious that it is impossible to win the hearts and minds of the people you are killing.

Yet as long as the U.S. avoided "another Vietnam" -- a prolonged war with high U.S. casualties -- even those who questioned the fundamentals of American exceptionalism can swallow a tidy little war or humanitarian intervention now and then, and move on with their lives. Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, Somalia quickly vanished from the radar screen. Why intervening in such tiny, powerless countries became so important to our survival is a question without convincing answers, but one that will inevitably be asked again.

Yet the pattern doesn't always repeat so "bloodlessly." Less than a half century after the United States destroyed Vietnam, it destroyed Iraq. And in the case of the latter country, international condemnation preceded its invasion and proved incapable of stopping it. So much for "Never Again!" Millions of people in the U.S. and overseas publicly demonstrated against the Bush administration's preemptive attack on a country the U.S. once supported. But how many ordinary Americans realized Saddam Hussein owed his survival in the Iran-Iraq war to the Reagan Administration? By 1990, he was another Hitler, according to George H. W. Bush, just not *our* Hitler any longer. (By contrast, public opinion was behind the U.S. project in Vietnam until the mid to late 1960s).

A reason, in my view, why we cannot break the pattern is that our democracy is a charade. As Appy puts it, presidents, Congress, the foreign policy establishment and military, and the immense, unaccountable national security state perpetuate empire in an invisible realm of drone strikes, domestic and foreign spying, and covert military operations, to say nothing of conventional war-making.

But "the public is not blameless. As long as we continue to be seduced by the myth of American exceptionalism, we will too easily acquiesce to the misuse of power, all too readily trust that our force is used only with the best of intentions for the greatest good."

Appy contends one key element of American exceptionalism is America as victim. Thus, in the emotionally charged atmosphere after 9/11, our leaders could convince us that we were living in a permanent state of national emergency (even though the terrorist attacks were over in a few hours) and tap into our sense of victimhood to justify a global war against anyone they deemed a danger to U.S. national security. (Never mind the U.S. helped create the jihadist network in Afghanistan in the 1980s; we were attacked for unknown reasons). And whatever questions some may have had about the wisdom of attacking Iraq in 2003 were swept away by desire to right the wrong of 9/11.

These are some of the arguments Appy lays out in his concluding chapter about the ways the myth of American exceptionalism lives on, however wounded it was by the Vietnam experience. The first two parts of his book make for an insightful, even scathing, appraisal of American identity vis a vis the Vietnam war.

In our common memory of Vietnam, we think of helicopters when the better image ought to be the B-52

bomber. But as it was then, the B-52 remains invisible today-- floating high outside the range of our vision, leaving in its wake things we'd rather not have to think about.

Sure, but that's *not who we are*. Indiscriminate bombing of Vietnamese villages. Napalm, free-fire zones, strategic hamlets, etc. All wrong, but that's *not who we are*. Actually, Appy argues, it *is who we are*. It was the American way of war. Today, we place our faith in precision-guided missiles and "smart bombs" instead of carpet bombing. This faith blinds us to the fact U.S. military interventions still cause catastrophe -- just not for our soldiers, usually. Death comes to those we don't consider. That is who we remain.

Laurel says

Very good for a required reading textbook for a class

Greg says

As one who actively resisted the Vietnam War, I remember the tremendous political and cultural divisions that it created within the United States. It is tragic that this war, which offered an opportunity for a much-needed, honest discussion about America’s interventionist foreign policy and the ideological messianism underlying it, came to be interpreted instead in ways that have resulted in an even more myopic nationalism. American Reckoning is a balanced, thoughtfully written investigation of how this came to pass. Professor Appy believes that the Vietnam War “still matters” because the crucial questions it raised are still unresolved.

“Should we [the United States] continue to seek global military superiority? Can we use our power justly? Can we successfully intervene in distant lands to crush insurgencies (or support them), establish order, and promote democracy? What degree of sacrifice will the public bear and who among us should bear it? Is it possible for American citizens and their elected representatives to change our nation’s foreign policy or is it permanently controlled by an imperial presidency and an unaccountable military-industrial complex?

“Our answers to those questions are shaped by the experience and memory of the Vietnam War, but in ways that are cloudy and confusing as well as contested. I believe we could make better contributions to our current debates if we had a clearer understanding of that war’s impact on our national identify, from its origins after World War II all the way to the present…

“My main argument is that the Vietnam War shattered the central tenet of American national identity – the broad faith that the United States is a unique force for good in the world, superior not only in its military and economic power, but in the quality of its government and institutions, the character and morality of its people, and its way of life. A common term for this belief is ‘American exceptionalism.’”

Why Did the United States Get Involved in Vietnam?
Our slide into war in Vietnam was neither accidental nor unintended. It was a clear choice, prompted by an unquestioned faith in American’s unique role in the mission of spreading democracy and from the mistaken interpretation of seeing the ongoing Vietnamese national struggle to jettison colonialism as but another manifestation of the sinister intent of communism’s agenda to take over the world.

1) The Driving Ideology of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny

• The widespread, often subconscious, belief in American exceptionalism – the conviction that our divine mandate to spread economic and political "freedom" grants America a unique role to play in the world – is central to the unfolding of U.S. history. Its roots lie in its pre-independence, colonial era when many of its original settlers, having come to the New World to escape religious persecution in Europe, sought to create a new society where religious tolerance and widespread democracy would serve as "a beacon to the rest of the world."

• As this central myth continued to evolve through passing decades it came to also embrace manifest destiny – the conviction that the United States was destined to expand throughout the continent of North America as well as in the Western Hemisphere. (Two early manifestations of this were the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 and the Mexican-American War of 1848.)

2) Ideological Blinders that Confused Nationalism with Communism

• It is important to remember how the Cold War framed every development in those days. Only scant years after the end of World War II, the world seemed to be divided between two armed camps, the United States and its allies on the one side and the Soviet Union and its allies on the other. American leaders believed that it was their responsibility to take the lead in halting the "spread of communism" wherever it threatened to occur.

• This era was characterized by a relentlessly dualistic process of interpreting the words and actions of "our side" vs. "their side":

• Because these "two sides" represented completely incompatible values, not only was some kind of violent clash seemingly inevitable, but also any kind of compromise was out of the question. (For, if we were in the right and they were in the wrong, any attempt to "compromise" became equivalent to actual "betrayal.")

• Nations were either "with us" or "against us," and other countries were simply either "free" or "communist." (This is the reason the U.S. often found itself aligned with nation-states controlled by dictators and tyrants.)

• A nation that "fell" into "Communist hands" was a loss to "our side," while any nation that "chose the side of freedom" was a clear gain for "us."

After Communist troops defeated Nationalist forces in China in 1949, a shocked American elite realized that it must broaden its focus from threats to Central and Western Europe to include those in Asia as well. This was a key factor behind the U.S. to join South Korea in opposing its invasion by North Korea.

How Did This Lead to United States Involvement in Vietnam?

In 1954, the Geneva Accords forced France to grant independence to Vietnam (originally acquired from China by force in 1885). One of the important provisions of the Geneva settlement stipulated that the country would be separated – for a brief time – into northern and southern zones, a concession to the reality of the situation on the ground. American leaders, who had viewed France as the last bastion against Communism in Southeast Asia, reacted with alarm. If we stood idly by, was South Vietnam, too, destined to "fall" to communism?

Even though the Geneva Accords also provided for a general election in 1956 through which all of Vietnam's people could determine their own future, the United States joined South Vietnam in declaring that free elections were simply "not possible" as long as the north was under communist rule. Thus, the "temporary" division of Vietnam was morphing into a "permanent" one.

By the early '60s, President John Kennedy began to send a small number of "advisers" to assist South Vietnam's military. Though by early 1963 he was having second thoughts about continuing American involvement there, his assassination in November of that year ended possible changes. Ironically, while both of his successors – Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon – apparently wanted to get out, they feared that if they did so before winning several clear military victories, then outsiders would perceive America as "weak" while the domestic Right would assert that we had now "lost Vietnam" just as we had "lost China."

So the stream of troops sent to Vietnam became a flood, as did the casualties. It took ten more years before the United States finally withdrew.

What Should Americans Have Learned from the Vietnam War?
• That we need to ditch our secular theology. America is not an “exceptional nation,” nor have we been appointed “sheriff of the world.”
• That the large community of nations have multiple, legitimate understandings of what constitutes the “best” society or the “most desirable” political structure.
• That, with a more fully informed understanding of our own history, we would understand – maybe even apologize for – how often we have intervened in the internal affairs of other nations, often prioritizing the protection our own commercial and political interests instead of the interests or wishes of those other nations’ peoples.
• That our tendency to act on our own has served to weaken the organizations designed to collectively share the burden of maintaining the world’s peace and stability, the same structures that we helped create.
• That American politicians have ill-served citizens by masking or distorting history and by manipulating the public’s belief in American exceptionalism.
• That, because the United States has become the “military-industrial complex” that President Eisenhower warned us about, fundamental policy changes are absolutely necessary if American democracy is to have a chance at survival.

Sadly, however, the profoundly different “lessons” that entered cultural consciousness were a result of multiple, reinforcing layers of misunderstandings, ideological biases and outright deceit, forces that continue to bedevil America in the 21st century.
The Vietnam War did seriously undermine citizens’ confidence in their government. However, under the sway of the far Right, the object of citizen animus has changed from anger over the government’s deceit about the war to a general disbelief in the government’s competence and ability to do anything well. Furthermore, this same interpretation affirms that while the government may be venal and bumbling, the people – and the troops that serve them – remain pure and honorable. (This helps explain why so many citizens block out stories of alleged atrocities by U.S. forces, whether in Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan; clearly, decent people and noble troops cannot commit evil acts.)
America’s failure in Vietnam, therefore, has come to be understood by many Americans to be not a misguided venture – for in trying to “save the people of South Vietnam from the evils of communism” we were being faithful to our moral calling to defend “freedom” – but, rather, a mistake resulting from government incompetence: we should have known better than to get sucked into a land war in Asia.
Many Asian nations are demanding that Japan face up to – and admit the truth of – its imperial misadventures. The United States needs to do the same. Otherwise, the 58,000 American troops – and upwards of 3 million Vietnamese people – killed during the Vietnam War will truly have perished for naught.

[For those interested in delving further, I recommend two additional works: The Untold History of the United States, by Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, that is a scathingly honest and focused account of the past 100 years, and The Irony of Manifest Destiny: The Tragedy of America’s Foreign Policy, by William Pfaff, which offers meaningful insights into American mythic beliefs.]

Jamie Barry says

Fascinating and provoking exploration of the political decisions leading up to and during the US involvement in Vietnam. This was not a "history" of the war reciting battle outcomes, but a look at the US leaders and their reasoning for staying in this war long after victory was achievable. The book was filled with apparently thoroughly researched facts and quotes from well-known politicians of the era. This was an eye opener for those of us who lived through this era, but paid too little attention to what was actually happening in this small country. We were products of our upbringing and our belief in the goodness of our country and the unthinkable assumption that the US could be involved for any reason other than the prevention of the spread of communism. Appy describes the post Vietnam Cold War as a continuation of the same thought processes that led to so much destruction. America’s proclivity for supporting immoral governments to maintain its own interests, in spite of the destruction of innocent lives of civilians should fill any reader with disgust. Appy tells of many incidents that are historically well known but when described in the context of America’s bullish attitude of being above international law leads us to shake our heads in disbelief. Appy’s careful and thorough research of the sixty years since the US turned its attention to Southeast Asia describes how the policies embarked upon by the US cannot be considered acceptable by international humanitarian standards.

Tony Laplume says

His basic premise seems to have been taken directly from a poorly-reasoned paper he himself would hopefully have graded accordingly in his capacity as a university professor: Appy has accepted the rhetoric he simultaneously rejects concerning "American exceptionalism." The whole book is like this. He apparently has no grasp of history, even though his job at the university is designated in that subject. And, absurdly, he dances around an apparent approval of communism, which in theory is fine, while overtly scoffing at capitalism. This is a screed that all but screams at the reader, "I opposed this because I am pro-peace at all costs. Basically." Which is fine, but then what do we make of his implied role of objectivity as someone attempting to set the record straight?

This is a book full of valuable stories from the Vietnam War era, but it tells only one side of those stories (and surprisingly, that side does not at all include the Vietnamese side), one that heavily favors his conclusions, a far less critical endeavor, then, than Appy would have his readers believe he's undertaken. This is not the first or even the last word on the Vietnam War, which makes such a stance all the more strange. It's an attempt to explain why America as an idea came to an end, without ever bothering to explain how it began (although even if he starts from the relative beginning, WWII, he would introduce a whole can of worms he's not remotely prepared to handle), in the midst of another unpopular war (the Revolutionary War), and in fact a whole series of them. Dissent has in fact been the single unifying theme of the nation's past, and a force to be reckoned with as it heads into the future.

As to his argument that America should have left South Vietnam alone when it showed every willingness to embrace communism, what would Appy say to those who might equally suggest the American South should have been able to keep slavery after all? It's not exactly equivalent, but the reasoning is the same. These are matters historians of greater perspective than Appy consider as a matter of course. He can get away with this because Vietnam is still an unpopular war, and it now has a pair of modern echoes, and so connecting those dots seems easy and his conclusions sound. America found itself in an unfortunate position after WWII, and the history of the world since that time has been a matter of every country trying to figure out the same messed-up landscape. But the landscape was messed-up before that, and it'll be messed up long after anyone who reads this book dies (what I'm saying is, it will be quickly forgotten as almost instantly irrelevant, no matter what he thinks). Assigning blame only goes so far. What he really wanted to explore was the topic of intervention in a global culture. Or, just perhaps, why the whole world watches what the whole world is

doing, and so little of it seems to do anything about what most of us have considered very bad human relations.

Next time, be a little more forthright about your intentions, your motives, and try to remember that one piece of history is invariably linked to another, and another, and the link stretches further back than the present sometimes seems willing to admit. A tale of imperfect people acting however tremendously imperfectly will not prove any thinly-conceived thesis. Preacher, step away from thy choir.

Jim Coughenour says

As usual on a Sunday, I started the day at Peets, the cafe in my San Francisco neighborhood. I'd brought along *American Reckoning*; it seemed like the morning to finish a book I've been reading on and off for a couple months - and I finished with something like a deep inward groan, a sense of sadness and equally futile anger. Then I walked a few stores down to Books Inc. where Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer is prominently displayed on the new fiction shelf. I picked it up, flipped through it; the mood I'd brought from Appy's book only deepened. Then I came back home for breakfast and the *New York Times*, starting as usual with the Sunday Review. Immediately I saw and read Nguyen's essay Our Vietnam War Never Ended. Exactly what I'd been thinking all morning.

> For many, like the southern Vietnamese veterans who will not find the names of their more than 200,000 dead comrades on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, the war has not ended. That is because they are not “Vietnam veterans” in the American mind. Our function is to be grateful for being defended and rescued…

For those of us who vividly remember Vietnam and its aftermath, Appy's book is a bitter reckoning. I was lucky enough to be too young, just barely, to be drafted. The older brothers of my high school friends were not so lucky; they came home in body bags. My own background is carved deep in the American grain – conservative, Christian, Midwest, uncomplicatedly convinced of American exceptionalism. My father loudly defended Lieutenant Calley. It wasn't until the killings at Kent State and the revelations of Nixon's invasion of Cambodia that it even occurred to me to question the dominant narrative – although, as Appy documents, this narrative was under siege from every corner of American society.

I've inserted my story in this review because Appy's book is fundamentally about how the invasion of Vietnam affected everyday Americans, not refugees like Viet Thanh Nguyen. It's not a military history of the war, which comes in many flavors (for me the best is Gabriel Kolko's Anatomy of a War). Instead it's a summing up, a reckoning of accounts. It follows, documents and judges decades of politicized arguments about how the U.S. invited itself into Vietnam, how it waged a war that its own sponsors knew it could not win, and how we ingloriously extricated ourselves and left behind shattered countries (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), poisoned landscapes, murdered populations. The only victim, according to the still dominant narrative, was our righteous, perhaps nobly-mistaken, American self.

Appy's overview is swift and unsparing. Sadly, our current political life is so polarized it will only irritate those who refuse its lesson, and grieve those who take it to heart. His story takes us through the long, dispiriting aftermath (the chapters on the Reagan years are scorched with irony), up to the present where pattern repeats itself not as tragedy or farce but with the resilience of a cancer. In the words of Kevin Tillman, who was in the same Ranger unit as his brother Pat in Iraq and Afghanistan:

> Somehow we were sent to invade a nation because it was a direct threat to the American

> people, or to the world, or harbored terrorists, or was involved in the September 11 attacks, or received weapons-grade uranium from Niger, or had mobile weapons labs, or WMD, or had a need to be liberated, or we needed to establish a democracy, or stop an insurgency, or stop a civil war we created…
>
> Our elected leaders were subverting international law and humanity by setting up secret prisons around the world, secretly kidnapping people, secretly holding them indefinitely, secretly not charging them with anything, secretly torturing them. Somehow that overt policy of torture became the fault of a few "bad apples" in the military.

This is a fine angry history, calmly told, supported throughout – but for me it poses, again, the haunting horrible possibility that we are incapable of learning from history or of taking responsibility for what American exceptionalism has actually meant for the world. Are we paralyzed by our own poison, are we incapable even of creating candidates for political office who are not simply genetic repetitions of the past? Do we prefer blindness to insight? Books like this one give me hope; books like this one enforce despair. I'll end as I started, with the words of Viet Thanh Nguyen:

> We can argue about the causes for these wars and the apportioning of blame, but the fact is that war begins, and ends, over here, with the support of citizens for the war machine, with the arrival of frightened refugees fleeing wars we have instigated. Telling these kinds of stories, or learning to read, see and hear family stories as war stories, is an important way to treat the disorder of our military-industrial complex. For rather than being disturbed by the idea that war is hell, this complex thrives on it.

Rachel says

For people from my generation, I feel like this is an essential book. I was not taught much about the Vietnam War in school, but I do remember some of the cliches about America never having lost a war, spat upon Vietnam veterans, American troops being hamstrung by lack of popular support at home, etc. Reading this book made me upset with portrayal and lack of knowledge of this most controversial war to those born in the post Cold War era. For those who share that feeling, or just feel like they ought to know more about such an important and revealing part of American history, this book is for you.

This book promises in the title to concentrate on how this war altered/revealed American national identity. However, I feel like most of the author's energy was spent on providing an accurate depiction of the war and its political portrayal. Only in the last third of the book does the author talk about post-Vietnam ramifications. Perhaps if you already know quite a lot about the war, the first two-thirds would seem like an unnecessary history lesson. However, I feel that one of the author's primary points is that we as a nation have forgotten/ignored/distorted the lessons that history should have taught us from our failures in Vietnam. Repackaging these failures as success or dismissing morally reprehensible actions because they do not fit with our pure and perfect national image as global moral heroes will lead to us blindly repeating history. I love my country and believe in our potential for a bright future. However, I hope to be informed about our history (successes AND failures) and to remember that just as human beings struggle for balance between good and bad, so will a nation of imperfect humans struggle to maintain that same balance.
