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Vietnam is set apart from other American wars by its sheer transformational effect on the American body politic and history, not only in terms of American defeat but the resulting erosion of trust in leaders, institutions, and ideals which have continued to define contemporary politics. Other than Civil War, no war besides Vietnam divided and disillusioned the populace resulting in a soul-searching of our national mythology, facilitated by remarkable advancements in media technology. *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* reflects upon how news media, particularly journalists, photographers, songwriters and filmmakers in addition to pop culture, shaped history while it was happening and in our collective memory of the uncomfortable history of Vietnam.

Christian Appy takes a big picture view of American involvement in the Vietnam era, examining the precedents of Vietnam from the missionary paternalism expressed by Thomas Dooley's 1956 book *Deliver Us From Evil*, to the legacies and perhaps forgotten foreign policy lessons of Vietnam during the Bush and Obama eras. During the conflict and in the decades and generations afterwards, Appy's core message is the profound effect failure in Vietnam had on the idea of "American exceptionalism" — the previously widely-held belief that America is superior in virtues of justice and freedom which made the military an undeniably force for good in the world. Appy takes a significant look into the era of domestic and foreign turmoil that has shaped politics and culture in the years since Vietnam, following the consequences of Vietnam's

reckoning from the anti-war movement to the conservative resurgence of Nixon and Reagan. He finally makes the argument that since 9/11, foreign policy leaders have disregarded the history of the Vietnam War by expanding the scope of foreign interventions. Appy concludes that America has been seduced by belief in the military's good intentions once more, that further reckoning is necessary to confront the "reality of a permanent war machine that no one in power seems able or willing to challenge or constrain" (335).

Like Appy, Streitmatter and Cooke describe the Vietnam War as a turning point for the role of journalism in forming public opinion and shaping history. Streitmatter focuses on television in particular, and the importance of media figures such as Walter Cronkite who had the credibility and platform to declare America's inability to win a foreign war and shape the course of future action. A month after Cronkite's report from Vietnam, President Johnson announced he would not seek reelection (Streitmatter 172). Streitmatter also points to the kind of reflection which challenged American identity as a direct result of the media's coverage of events in Vietnam. In response to the footage of a South Vietnamese general summarily executing a Viet Cong prisoner on the street, NBC's Edwin Newman asked, "What was this war turning us into? What kind of people allowed such things to happen?" (Streitmatter 171).

The iconic images from photographers on the ground in Vietnam brought the reality of war into the public realm and demanded visceral attention unlike any other type of coverage that was available during the history of American war over the previous two centuries. Streitmatter also mentions how footage of American soldiers burning villages with Zippo lighters in 1965 caused public outcry due to visibility of the cruelty, death, and destruction portraying American men as "heartless killers" (165-6). Like Appy, Streitmatter affirms the media's role in presenting

the darkest aspects of humanity. By presenting information like the My Lai massacre and Pentagon Papers the media fulfilled their purpose, and the public justifiably responded to the evidence by choosing not to condone the war (Streitmatter 174).

Cooke takes a different approach from Appy and Streitmatter, telling the history of Vietnam through a perspective of journalists and reporters directly interacting with the unfolding history through multiple presidencies. Cooke highlights how certain journalists were able to see past official government narratives, for instance Homer Bigart wrote in 1962 for the *New York Times*, a year before Diem's assassination: "the Vietnamese president seems incapable of winning the loyalty of his people" (146). However, the press and public would not have been united in their opposition to the war without a "gathering consensus" of reporters who could have a meaningful impact to turn the tide of history, ultimately pressuring Johnson to change course (165).

In addition to conventional wisdom surrounding the press' role in Vietnam, Appy highlights other ways in which the news media and larger social and political histories were intertwined. Reporters and photographers on the ground had a direct role in shaping how narratives were formed, whether in support of American force at the beginning of the war or in realization of the futility of bombing in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. Appy's mention of Martha Gellhorn's piece "Suffer the Little Children" published in *Ladies Home Journal* struck me as a significant moment for media in the war, since Gellhorn directly compelled middle-class housewives to feel sympathy for the suffering of Vietnamese children. The emotional power of Gellhorn's reporting "so enraged South Vietnamese authorities they never issued her another visa. She was effectively banned from the war zone" (Appy 55). Appy also discusses how Black

publications took a critical view of the military during Vietnam, highlighting the issues of inequality and violence at home which drew disproportionate numbers of poor and untrained African Americans to die in combat (138-41). Appy draws upon many forms of news media to stress the idea that the narratives and history of Vietnam led to an identity crisis over the nature of American ideals and the latent darkness exposed in our national character.

The effect of Vietnam on the national consciousness was directly felt at home as well as on the battlefield through domestic unrest and protest, manifesting in political and cultural change. As significant pieces of media, Appy includes music and film as inseparable from news in capturing the reckoning with history felt by artists and even American soldiers themselves. Beyond just entertainment, the music and culture of the mid-60s and '70s in Appy's view "encouraged young people to think about their relationship to the world and to history — to have grand aspirations and commitments" (124). *Dr. Strangelove*, Kubrick's 1964 film satirized the Cold War nuclear mentality, masculinity's attraction to violence, and impulsivity of military leadership through dark humor which reflected the fears of the general public towards the spread of communism (152). Songs like "The Ballad of the Green Berets" sung on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and "Okie from Muskogee" by Merle Haggard affirmed traditional patriotism and respect for military in contrast to the counterculture movement characterized with drug use and burning draft cards (124-6). In the aftermath of historic events, most notably "Ohio" by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, iconic songs of the anti-war movement had arguably just as great of an impact on shaping attitudes and conveying visceral ideas as print media or television (190). Appy also analyzes Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" in the context of Vietnam's legacy, the veteran narrator belts patriotic lyrics yet "wants to strip away that mythic America which was Reagan's

image” and face a more depressing reality (254-5). These examples of media’s reaction to Vietnam helped facilitate a reflection on American ideals according to Appy, shaping reality into narratives and widespread cultural shifts in national identity. Vietnam’s images and legacies continue to echo in America’s present cultural divides, largely due to media’s transformational role in exposing the horrifying meaninglessness of war.

## References

- Appy, Christian G. 2015. *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. New York: Penguin Random House.