



Marcia A. Eymann, Charles Wollenberg, eds. *What's Going On?: California and the Vietnam Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 209 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24243-2; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24244-9.



Reviewed by John C. Putman (Department of History, San Diego State University)

Published on H-1960s (December, 2005)

## California Dreams and the Vietnam War

In late 1962, Governor Pat Brown proclaimed December 31st a special holiday, celebrating California's emergence as the nation's most populous state. To many, this momentous event simply confirmed that California was economically, politically, socially, and culturally the most important state in the country. Home to Hollywood, Disneyland, the Beach Boys, and Haight-Ashbury (a neighborhood that would soon become famous or infamous), California captivated Americans and impacted their lives. Yet, as the editors of *What's Going On?: California and the Vietnam Era* also remind us, "California was at the vortex of the storm created by the Vietnam War" (p. 4).

*What's Going On?* is a collection of essays published as a companion to the Oakland Museum of California's traveling exhibition of the same title. This volume, however, is not your typical coffee table museum piece loaded with images and scant text. The editors have brought together leading scholars of California and 1960s history, including Clayborne Carson, Ruth Rosen, George Mariscal, and Robert Schulzinger. By examining how the Vietnam War changed one specific region, *What's Going*

*On?* provides the "opportunity to look at the war from a myriad of perspectives that only exist in California and a new direction in interpreting a deeply contested and often stereotypical period in the history of the state" (p. 3). The eleven chapters thus offer both historical analysis and personal perspectives of California during this tumultuous time.

In order to make a case for the significance of California, the book first illustrates how the state was both a microcosm and a magnification of the national experience. Charles Wollenberg argues that California was the hub of the nation's military-industrial complex, the staging point for military operations in Vietnam, and the center of prominent social uprisings like the Free Speech and antiwar movements, Black Power, the Chicano movement, feminism, and the New Right. Furthermore, the state housed the celluloid purveyors of the war in Hollywood and the often forgotten human casualties—Southeast Asian refugees. Examining the economic relationship between California and the Vietnam War, Marc Jason Gilbert notes that California's cities and universities consciously courted defense indus-

tries and Pentagon officials. These relationships brought to California expanded military bases, testing facilities, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and Santa Monica's RAND Corporation, all of which contributed to the war effort.

The Vietnam Era did more than expand California's economy—it also shattered the liberal consensus that marked American politics in the postwar era. The state may have produced one of the nation's most liberal governors in Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, but Jules Tygiel reminds us that it also contributed significantly to the rise of the conservative New Right. The 1966 election of Ronald Reagan reflected this conservative shift as well as the limits of California liberalism exposed by the Free Speech and antiwar movements. While in the Bay Area the Berkeley campus housed the heart of New Left activity, R. Jeffrey Lustig suggests that Southern California's antiwar movement was more community-based. He not only compares these different movements, but also traces the evolution of the state's antiwar activity from teach-ins and marches to draft-dodging and the soldier's oppositional campaign.

Borrowing its title from Marvin Gaye's popular song, *What's Going On?* also explores the social movements associated with 60s America. Ruth Rosen, for example, acknowledges that the Vietnam War served as a catalyst for California feminists by encouraging them to question authority. She discusses how the radical milieu of Berkeley and Haight-Ashbury helped women challenge conformity and how California feminists contributed to the larger feminist movement through radical writings, self-help clinics, and education centers like the nation's first women's studies program established in 1970 at what was then San Diego State College.

Clayborne Carson examines the Black Power movement in California quite differently, by describing his personal journey from student to academic. One of the strengths of this essay is the balance it brings by exploring the evolution of Black Power in Southern California and its sometimes tense relations with the Black Panther-dominated Bay Area. Readers learn about his friendship with Stokely Carmichael, the internal conflicts within and between Black Power organizations, and his personal struggle to reconcile his interracial vision with the growing militancy of many Black Power advocates.

For Chicanos, the Vietnam War remained more central to their movement than it was to most Black Power groups. George Mariscal demonstrates the strong military sentiment in the Mexican-American community and

the conflicts that ensued when Chicanos chose to oppose the war. These dynamics produced vigorous debate about the war, making it, in his view, the most important factor shaping the course of the Chicano movement in the 1960s and early 1970s.

In no way discounting the contributions and insights these authors offer, for the most part, these topics will be quite familiar to students of California and 1960s history. What makes *What's Going On?* a particularly fascinating volume, however, are the essays that explore the experiences of Vietnam vets and Vietnamese refugees. John F. Burns, for example, argues that "[m]ore than anywhere else in America, California was at the center of the United States' interaction with Vietnam" (p. 143). The state was not only the last place soldiers saw on the way to the war, but also the first place they set foot on when they returned. Many vets remained in California, Burns suggests, because of its diversity, beauty, and liberal social environment. This book also examines the varied experiences of Vietnamese refugees, including an intriguing chapter on the struggle to build a Vietnam War memorial in Westminster, California. Khuyen Vu Nguyen argues that American commemorations have erased the role of South Vietnamese soldiers in this conflict. Vietnamese Americans, however, did not speak with a single voice as many debated the merits of reliving a painful past or questioned the portrayals of Vietnamese soldiers in early designs.

Despite the myriad of perspectives included in *What's Going On?*, the book does have its weaknesses. At times the framework of the Vietnam War is lost in the background, as certain essays seem to lose sight of the historical context the war provided. Such criticism may be unfair, since the subtitle of this book is "California and the Vietnam Era" and not "California and the Vietnam War." A chapter on the relationship between the counterculture and the war would have enhanced this work, since Vietnam greatly contributed to the decision of many hippies to "drop out" of society and profoundly shaped the often peaceful and communal values they expressed. Likewise, an examination of the war's impact on the music scene in California would have nicely demonstrated the centrality of California during this era.

A final weakness or perhaps strength of *What's Going On?* is the uncertain audience to which this book is aimed. It is clearly not a portable version of the exhibit, since it provides photographs but no images of other artifacts. On the other hand, the collection offers readers a broader and deeper view of the war's impact and legacy.

Teachers of California history will no doubt benefit from the richness of this volume, but more general courses might find the narrow focus on California limiting. Nevertheless, *What's Going On?* is an important work. It allows the reader to step out of Lyndon Johnson's Oval Office or the rivers of the Mekong Delta and explore both the important connections between the war and California. The book also illustrates, collectively, how this tragic conflict shaped and continues to shape the lives and experiences of many ordinary Americans.

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**Citation:** John C. Putman. Review of Eymann, Marcia A.; Wollenberg, Charles, eds., *What's Going On?: California and the Vietnam Era*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10975>

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