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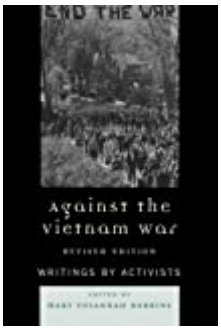

Mary Susannah Robbins, ed. *Against the Vietnam War: Writings by Activists.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. 287 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-5914-1.

Reviewed by Cyrus Zirakzadeh (Department of Political Science, University of Connecticut)

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Respecting Our Past

Mary Susannah Robbins has edited a wonderfully broad anthology of poems, reports, memoirs, and essays by activists who opposed the Vietnam War. She divides the literature into five groupings, each with anywhere from three to eleven chapters. Robbins avoids presenting illustrations of a single, generic "activist perspective." Instead, she has selected writings that describe antiwar activism from diverse personal and ideological perspectives. For the most part, the authors are openly sympathetic toward the movement, but a couple contributors are critical. Robbins has elected to be a passive editor. She does not begin each section with a discussion of how the chapters complement each other (and how they sometimes diverge from each other). Instead, she leaves the interpretive task of comparison to the reader. As much as possible, she intends for the "these documents of the past and the present, [to] speak for themselves" (p. xxiii).

The first set of entries provide historical context for the entire volume. David Harris, reminiscing on how opposition to the war redefined his life, urges fellow activists to employ lessons of the past to improve the United States in the early twentieth century, because "we as a people seem to be rapidly losing our capacity to engage in consideration of anything" (p. 3). Howard Zinn's historical overview of the Vietnam War highlights the hubris of successive presidential administrations that refused to take seriously the desires of third world liberation movements. Zinn also traces the multiple contributions of the civil rights movement and religious organizations to the antiwar movement, and reminds readers that opposition to the war often occurred off campus. In fact, surveys at the time revealed positive correlation between levels of formal education and support for the war. According to Zinn, "throughout the Vietnam War, Americans with only grade school education were much stronger for withdrawal from the war than Americans with a college education" (p. 27). In Zinn's opinion, the removal of troops from Vietnam testifies to the importance of everyday citizens and public opinion in shaping U.S. foreign policy. "Traditional history portrays the end of wars as coming from the initiatives of leaders," Zinn says. But, he then adds that the Vietnam War "gave clear evidence that at least for that war (making one wonder about the others) the political leaders were the last to take steps to

end the war–'the people' were far ahead" (p. 34).

The second section is the book's longest and perhaps deserves some sort of introduction in which Robbins explains her ordering of entries. She presents various types of writings (including poems) that convey activists' understandings of why and how they protested. The essays include writings by some very famous antiwar activists (such as Martin Luther King Jr., Noam Chomsky, and Daniel Berrigan) and by less famous yet prolific public intellectuals (Michael Ferber and Eugenia Kaledin). Robbins places the entries in an order that jars the reader's perceptions. Every chapter seems radically different in tone, format, and substantive lessons from the previous one. The remarkable heterogeneity prevents readers from jumping to superficial generalizations about the motivations and intentions of the activists.

Relatively young readers (born after the beginning of the Vietnam War) might be surprised by the tension between the sentiments of working-class activist Robert Malecki, who distrusts scholar activists and wealthy citizens in general, and the tendency of some former student and faculty activists to see no acute class conflict within the antiwar movement. A second interesting and ongoing conflict within the movement involved its relationships to the civil rights and black power movements. H. Bruce Franklin and Jane Bond Moore refer to this conflict in their contributions. The essays by Carl Oglesby and Jeff Jones address the issue of tactical militancy. Oglesby criticizes what he considers the cult of the "street fighting man" (pp. 127, 139) and Jones explains why complete opposition to "the system" (p. 145) was a sensible position to take at the time. All in all, section 2 contains a fascinating set of essays, which highlight the internal political battles that the antiwar movement had to overcome to speak with one voice.

The book's third section focuses on soldiers who resisted the war. The first essay (a famous article first published in *The Washington Monthly* by James Fallows on class discrimination of draft laws and the class tensions within the antiwar movement) is probably misplaced. It better fits the book's second section as it is concerned more with the perceptions of antiwar activists who did not fight in the war than with the experience of soldiers. I found the other three essays profoundly moving (the three-page reflection by George Swiers will bring tears to many readers' eyes). Tod Ensign and David Cortright describe two currents of the antiwar movement–veterans' mobilization and the hundreds of antiwar soldier groups–that too often are neglected in popular culture depictions of the movement.

The penultimate section explores what antiwar activists have done since the war. The entries in this section seemed less dramatic and personal than the selections in other chapters. In place of narratives by actors, there are summaries of events. The first essay, by Eugene McCarthy, bemoans the continued corruption in Washington politics. The second chapter, by Jerald Starr, discusses the challenges to and opportunities for educating school children about the war and provides information on pedagogic tools that are currently available. Arlene Ash talks about the long-term healthcare problems that the war left in Vietnam, and the humanitarian issues U.S. citizens ought to remember. Dave Dellinger is the author of the final piece, which describes a kaleidoscope of demonstrations and protests that coincided with the 1996 Democratic convention in Chicago. Dellinger argues that the multiple events reveal that many social and political problems remain in the United States, that citizen activism remains alive and well decades after the war, and that different generations of activists should share their practical knowledge with each other.

The book closes with calls for action by Jane Collins, William Ayers, and Staughton Lynd. Collins worries that, decades after the Vietnam War, young people have become apathetic because they are too pacified by mass entertainment and too disillusioned by the difficulties of changing the world. She urges readers to continue to struggle for a world of mutual respect and set an example for others who might be reluctant to protest or demonstrate. Ayers worries less about the temptation of passivity *per se* than about the current appeal of dogmatism. He, like Collins, sees activism as useful, but he wants activism undertaken with "due thought and consideration" (p. 263). As Ayers puts it: "We must act; simultaneously, we must doubt" (p. 263). Lynd (who also writes the preface to the entire volume) contends that the Vietnam War is part of a historical pattern of U.S. expansionism that continues today, especially in the Middle East. To act effectively today, we must, according to Lynd, recollect and study past efforts to stem the war and derive appropriate lessons.

The book is not perfect. As a teenager in the mountain West during the 1960s, I was personally disappointed with the absence of discussions of aspects of the movement involving Chicanos and Native Americans. From my perspective, the book is concerned primarily with events in and figures from the northeast quadrant of the United States (with a few references to the San Fran-

cisco Bay Area). Antiwar groups and demonstrations in the country's conservative heartland (St. Louis; Lincoln, Nebraska; Boulder, Colorado) are not discussed. The role of subversive ideologies and non-mainstream political theorists in persuading young citizens to take a stand is largely ignored (I remember reading and debating with classmates the essays that would become Murray Bookchin's *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* [1971] and Immanuel Wallerstein's *Africa: The Politics of Independence* [1961] when I was an impressionable high school student awaiting my draft number). For better or for worse (my guess is for the worse), the topics of sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia within the antiwar movement are quite muffled in this volume. Last but not least, the transformation over time of the movement's leadership principles, tactics, and dominant political theories are not fully and systematically discussed. In this sense, the book is a step back from Todd Gitlin's *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (1980), which was published a quarter of a century ago.

Although *Against the Vietnam War* misses some topics and themes, it also is invaluable for reminding readers of the complexity within the antiwar movement. Robbins has composed an anthology with remarkable diversity in points of view, with due attention to resistance to the Vietnam War within the military and by veterans, and with respect for the political capacities of everyday citizens. It is a book certainly worth reading and talking about. It would be a good "primary source" for undergraduate courses and graduate seminars, and perhaps could be paired with Jeremy Varon's *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (2004), which explores the cultural context of the antiwar movement more systematically and which weighs alternative interpretations of activists' behavior and motivation.

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