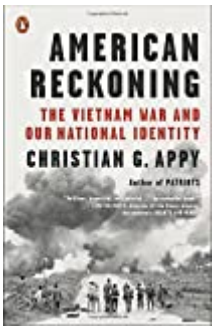
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Christian G. Appy. *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity.* New York: Penguin Press, 2015. 416 pp. $28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-02539-8; $18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-312834-2.

Reviewed by Benjamin Griffin (University of Texas Austin)

Published on H-War (February, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and National Identity*, Christian G. Appy wrestles with the legacy of the war on ânational self-perceptionâ (p. xiii). He argues that the conflict destroyed the âcentral tenet of American identity,â namely, the unshakeable faith of the Americans that their nation is âa unique force for good in the worldâ (p. xiv). Appy divides his work into three parts, exploring why the United States embroiled itself in Vietnam, how it waged the war, and how the war transformed the way Americans view themselves and their country. The approach, while logical, yields mixed results in practice. In the first two sections, the author is overly prone to indulging in sarcastic asides and angry moralizing, which distract from an otherwise reasonable thesis. In the final portion of the book, Appy finds his stride and raises interesting questions about the importance of public history and memory in the current political environment.

In its early sections, *American Reckoning* too often takes creative liberty to advance its argument. A prime example of this comes when Appy explores the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. In the anecdote, Johnson describes a recurring nightmare, in which history remembers him as another Neville Chamberlain and as a betrayer of the Kennedy legacy. Appy casts doubts as to the veracity of Johnsonâs clam to experience the nightmare every evening, but then goes further. Rather than use the dream to explore Johnsonâs motivations for escalation in Vietnam, Appy instead constructs a âmore plausibleâ nightmare for the president to experience (p. 84). In the authorâs version, Johnson faces protestors of the war calling him a murderer before the crowd parts to reveal a triumphant and heroic Robert F. Kennedy delivering his address to Kansas State University. The message of the construct is clear, if only Johnson had listened to the âraging and howling mobâ and been a statesman in the vein of Kennedy then everything would have worked out (p. 84). This exercise in fiction oversimplifies Johnsonâs options and decisions and relies too heavily on the questionable notion that RFK would find the exit in Southeast Asia any more quickly than Richard Nixon did.

The edited dream is not the only case of Appy seeking to craft evidence that better fits his thesis. When examining Robin Mooreâs novel *The Green Berets* (1965), the source for the John Wayne movie of the same name, Appy argues that if one were to remove the âaction-adventure frameworkâ and Mooreâs âunwavering assumption that the Green Berets are serving the cause of freedom,â then the book is really a powerful and âvery

effective anti-war manifestoâ (p. 127). This contention is as ridiculous as it is unnecessary. Appyâs desire to co-opt a piece of culture that runs contrary to his thesis results in a missed opportunity. The commercial success of *The Green Berets* despite poor reviews offers the chance to explore how the political and cultural schisms created by the American entry into the war linger into the present day. Instead of seeking universality in his argument, Appy would benefit from embracing the complexity and diversity of opinions to craft a more compelling and accurate narrative.

It is not until the last third of the book that *American Reckoning* finds its footing. Appyâs exploration of Bob Hopeâs USO tours, and the comedianâs ability to balance his distaste of the war with his support of the troops, demonstrates an early version of the present-day âsupport our troopsâ mentality. The book then traces how over time this led to a âwatered down and militarized reconstruction of heroismâ (p. 237). Although the examination of US foreign policy that follows this is overly brief and exceptionally partisan, Appyâs argument that American diplomacy became overly militarized and under-debated is an important one. Perhaps the most interesting comparison that Appy raises is one that he leaves sadly unexplored. *American Reckoning* raises interesting similarities between the development of the public memory of the Civil War and the Vietnam War. The book correctly notes that in the wake of each conflict a large segment of the population faced the challenge of âfinding honor in a lost and ignoble causeâ (p. 258). The conflation of the âlost causeâ with âpeace with honorâ is fascinating, and a subject that merits further exploration. Unfortunately, the idea receives only a single paragraph in Appyâs work.

Despite a clear and eminently reasonable thesis, *American Reckoning* achieves mixed results in blending diplomatic and cultural history. Appy often seems oddly unwilling to embrace complexity in his arguments, and his efforts to craft evidence that better fits his desired narrative is jarring. While the book does raise important and interesting ideas, the wholehearted embrace of a very partisan narrative and some questionable leaps of evidence also serve to diminish the overall impact of the argument. *American Reckoning* seeks to build on the work of Christina Klein, Melani McAllister, Andrew Bacevich, Frederick Logevall, and many others, but in the end falls short.

Citation: Benjamin Griffin. Review of Appy, Christian G., *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2016.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45103