

## The Changing Perceptions of the Vietnam War

Andrew Martin. *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998. 170 pages.

America's attempts to understand the legacies of the Vietnam War have varied considerably in the past thirty years. The questions of what went wrong, what happened to America's ability and willingness to fight, and who is to blame have been themes in the analysis of the Vietnam war. According to Andrew Martin, author of *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture*, the discussion about the war continues to miss the real questions about Vietnam: why was America there in the first place, and how has the legacy of the media's role during the war shaped contemporary American policy making? Martin delivers an interesting and thoroughly researched argument about how American perceptions of the war have changed with the intellectual and cultural changes from 1950 to 1991.

Martin begins by examining the social and cultural forces that helped propel America into the conflict. Martin first discusses how the "Vietnam Syndrome" still haunts the American media and American policy makers. This "Syndrome" describes the tendency of the American people and the United States Congress to be skeptical about the use of military intervention in the third world, and the need for leaders, especially the President to contrast interventions with Vietnam. Congressional and public

resistance to intervention in Nicaragua (although advisors and money were certainly there) during the 1980s, is one example. Martin further explains how President George Bush and the media trumpeted the message that the war would "not be another Vietnam." Dozens of articles appeared in popular journals contrasting the climatic, geographical, and political differences between the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Other articles dealt with the advances in military technology and the difference in troops (who were highly motivated volunteers compared to the frightened draftees of the 1960s).

Martin then delves into the past to explain how cultural trends and the technology of mass media created the militarized and adversarial atmosphere that allowed Americans to enter Vietnam. Television in the 1950s espoused Cold War rhetoric subtly through entertainment programs and blatantly through its news coverage. According to Martin, the media simplified issues and painted a world of black and white: the battle of the good United States versus the evil Soviet Union. Ideological fundamentalism mixed with the legacy of an undefeated military to create the myth of an indestructible America on a holy mission to thwart godless communism.

A small number of individuals argued against American policy in South East Asia, but such works rarely found an audience. Novels like Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1956), portrayed American policy makers as politically naive and ignorant. Ignored at first, this work

was recast in the contemporary images of American intervention. The book, *The Ugly American*, and a film, *The Quiet American*, turned the message of Greene's novel on its head. In these works, Americans in Southeast Asia were portrayed as brave, stalwart foes of communism and European defeatism. Works like this convinced Americans that Vietnam was another chance for the conquering of a primitive landscape, an extension of America's frontier thesis.

However, the 1960s saw massive cultural shifts that challenged these ideas about America. The war became "a whole cultural event that eventually drew into itself" during the 1960s. Martin traces the history of American Cultural studies to explain how intellectuals and the intellectual framework fit into the "Vietnam Continuum." Martin explains how the Cold War began to shape cultural criticisms. The close financial links between academia and the government added a bias to many important academic studies. Increasingly, American studies defined Americanism in the way the government wanted it to, that is, through anti-communism.

In the heat of the space race of the 1960s, the U.S. government demanded more scientific and technical information. Thus, the government required the use of intellectuals and technical experts who supplied this information. Both Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson brought many intellectuals and technical advisors into their cabinets. Soon, the government controlled the funds and the future of the intelligencia so closely that criticism of the culture and the

government had nearly ceased among the more mature academics. Only younger intellectuals, such as Susan Sontag, could become the critics of government policies. But eventually the American Mythology, constructed by American Studies, could not answer the calls for massive social change and equality that characterized the 1960s and early 1970s. This shattered the intellectual hegemony of Myth Symbolism.

Martin then examines how the print media treated the war. He examines writings and thought in two different areas: intellectual and popular culture. Among intellectuals, the debate over the Vietnam war was divisive. Many intellectuals supported government policies because of government control of research funding. Others, such as Walter Lippmann, became members of the New Left, in strong opposition to the war. Others slowly converted from one camp to the other. One example of a pro-war intellectual who eventually came to oppose it was Daniel Ellsberg. Ellsberg worked closely with Robert McNamara in 1967 in defining Vietnam policies, but released the Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times* in 1971. The 1965 White House Festival of Arts served as a public forum for intellectuals in the artistic community to protest the war. Some boycotted the event; others displayed art works with obvious anti-war messages. President Johnson said, "Some of them [the artists] offend me by staying away and some of them insult me by coming."<sup>1</sup>

Popular novels and memoirs were more consistently anti-war and showed combat from a firsthand point of view, since many authors

<sup>1</sup>Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture*, Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory Series (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 68.

were veterans. Although very realistic and often praised by critics, works of this type published during the war did not sell very widely. David Halberstam's 1968 novel, *One Very Hot Day* was well-received by critics, but could not find a market in the war-weary public. The book was a fictionalized account of the early (Kennedy) phase, and followed two characters, one American soldier and one Vietnamese soldier, as they come to the same conclusion: America cannot win the Vietnam War. However, when released in the 1980s, this book sold very well. Other later released novels and memoirs critical of the war also found wider audiences. A list of these novels includes *Dispatches* (1977), the domestic drama *In Country* (1986) and *Going After Cacciato* (1978). Memoirs included *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) and *A Rumor of War* (1977). These books demonstrate the changes in the debate about the Vietnam War. They were more often about the sense of loss and anger felt by Vietnam veterans, and their families' attempts to deal with their changed sons.

Martin also examined another form of media. He asserts that "without a doubt, much of the contemporary understanding of Vietnam . . . owes a great deal to the mass circulation of cinematic reconstructions of the war."<sup>72</sup> He explains how popular culture's film narratives have changed with shifts in the cultural landscape. The pro-Vietnam film *The Green Berets* (1968) starring John Wayne was nothing more than a retelling of the classic cowboy story, with the Viet Cong replacing Apaches as convenient cannon fodder for superior American firepower. However, the Western format

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 95.

Rambo, who explains: "I did what I had to do to win. But somebody wouldn't let us win."<sup>73</sup> Other films also feature veterans (invariably Green Berets) finishing the war they were capable of, but denied, victory in. These titles include *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *First Blood Part II* (1985) *P.O.W.: The Escape* (1986) and the *Missing in Action* series (1984-1985).

The 1986 release of *Platoon* signaled a change in the perspective of Vietnam War films. Certainly more realistic and emotionally powerful, it showed no superhuman Green Berets fighting the war single-handedly. Instead, it shows the confusion and terror of battle from the eyes of the grunt. Other films with similar themes include *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Casualties of War* (1988), and television shows like CBS's *Tour of Duty*. These mass media presentations showed war to be a frightening and dangerous thing, not a glamorous and exciting adventure. However, they do not deal with the economic and political issues that explain why the United States invaded Southeast Asia in the first place. In this way, the films are critical of war in general, but ignore the important issues and policy decisions that brought the United States into the Vietnam War.

Finally, Martin examined how portrayals of the Vietnam experience have drifted even further from the subject of the war and have become a more familiar melodramatic method. Martin analyzes television series such as *China Beach* and *Tour of Duty*. In their last seasons, both of these series moved away from stories

about the war and toward stories about relationships between characters. Martin explains that this had to do with both the pressures of the ratings war (in an attempt to "tighten up" and obtain more viewers) and of the real Gulf War, which created an atmosphere where the government pressured the media into showing more positive examples of America. Martin also applies a Freudian analysis of Vietnam films as searches for lost masculinity and cephalic identities, dealing more with masculinity and fatherhood. Examples include the closeness of the "heads" in *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, a father's search for his lost son in *Uncommon Valor*, and the unity and self-sacrifice displayed in *Hamburger Hill* (1987).

Martin concludes with a very strong statement about the war. He believes that all the conflicting messages about the Vietnam War and the legacy it has left the United States have avoided the real issues about Vietnam. Martin believes that the new myth about Vietnam is that it was "a war between victims," with the United States suffering as much as anyone. He believes that the US should come to grips with the fact that it has basically destroyed a third-world country.

As Martin sees it, the second true legacy of the Vietnam war is the enhanced "power of the media to silence opposition"<sup>74</sup> and to manipulate public opinion into supporting government policies. Martin's example is the Gulf War. He quotes an observer of the Gulf War who says, "we didn't learn to end war with Vietnam, we learned how to manage it."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 169.

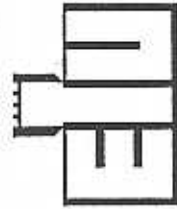


He concludes that although the images and discussions of the Vietnam war have changed in the past three decades, they have all continued a trend of intellectual and cultural dishonesty about its legacy. The images are different, but the effects are chillingly similar to previous ideas about America's self-righteousness and indestructibility.

One of Martin's weaknesses is his reliance on Freudian analysis. The constant discussion of "symbolic castrations" and "oedipal desires" seems a bit trite. Fortunately, he does not rely too heavily on this analytic tool. Aside from this, the book was compelling and very clearly written. Martin's wide and varied bibliography only strengthens his arguments. Although numerous works concerning Vietnam in American culture have been written, Martin

demonstrates an encyclopedic knowledge of related literature and makes a new argument concerning the true legacy of Vietnam. He relied on works about film, literature, philosophy, historiography, history, and post-modernist feminist thought. He examined works ranging from popular books to the work of intellectuals, from B-movies to Oscar-winning performances, and from Westerns to documentaries. Martin presents a convincing argument that America needs to come to face the true Vietnam legacy: the legacy of the atrocities it committed against Vietnam, and the overwhelming power of the government and the media. Although much has been written on this subject, I recommend Andrew Martin's *Receptions of War* as a fresh insight into America's Vietnam legacy.

—Jeff Walckhoff



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