

It's not as simple as whose side you were on

Vietnam
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Christian G. Appy's big oral history of the Vietnam War was first published in the US in 2003 under the title *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*. So far as I know, the American public has not been given a list of titles of the books read by President George W. Bush in his widely publicised contest with political adviser Karl Rove to see who could read the most books in the year 2006. But what if the now retitled *Vietnam: The Definitive Oral History, Told from All Sides* were on the President's list? What lessons would he extract from these accounts of how events in Vietnam from 1945 to 1975 affected human lives? Would he reinsert the flat notion of patriotism found in the American title? Would he reduce all sides to two and prefer one, with his trademark moral certitude? Would he have second thoughts about current US foreign policy?

Good oral histories, such as Joan and Robert K. Morrison's *From Camelot to Kent State* (2001), depend on how well the oral historians choose their informants and then use what their informants have to say. In a personally moving preface with two useful maps, Appy tells us that he interviewed 350 people in 25 American states and across the new united Vietnam during the period 1998-2003.

He used less than half of these in his book. Some major figures, such as Henry Kissinger and Nguyen Van Thieu, refused to be interviewed. Former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara characteristically vacillated, eventually declining on the grounds that "I suspect you're interested in feelings, and I don't want to talk about that". This is the controversially apologetic McNamara, after his *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995). But we should listen to what he is saying here.

Oral histories can give us insight into the calculus of state decision-making and the course of human actions. Appy does this through interviews with policymakers such as national security adviser Walt Rostow.

Rostow was, as one Vietnam specialist recalls, "completely impervious to area knowledge". In his interview, he still believed the massive violence he advocated during the Vietnam War saved southeast Asia from Communism.

But Appy also gives us what Studs Terkel gave us for the Second World War - profound insights into how people felt and still feel about decisions and events that overwhelmed their

lives. As Appy puts it: "Every individual I was able to include makes us aware of other experiences we might not have imagined and shows how the war's impact rippled from one person and event to another."

Appy lays out the accounts of his informants in a pathetically tragic chronological narrative. When Ho Chi Minh, trusting the declared US position on the right of former colonial peoples to self-determination, quotes from the American Declaration of Independence in Ba Dinh Square on September 2, 1945, we know why McNamara late in life was able to locate sadness in his own soul for how different the world could have been if the shapers of US foreign policy had lived up to American ideals.

The informants here give us little certitude, moral or otherwise. Barry Zorthian, director of the Joint United States Public Affairs Office in 1964-68, rethinks, as he speaks, his opinion that the media should not have given as much weight to the accounts of privates in the field as they did to General Westmoreland who "had the whole picture". In war, no one has the whole picture and the big picture guys such as Rostow miss the symptomatic details.

Dennis Deal recalls thinking after the Battle of Ia Drang Valley in 1965:

"Man, if we are up against this, it's gonna be a long-ass year." Reporter Ward Just speaks about 1966 when the Vietcong were leaving weapons in the field for the first time. American officials proclaimed that "morale is beginning to collapse among the Reds". A CIA station chief set them straight: "They have so many weapons coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail they no longer need to risk their troops to go out and police the battlefield for a few beaten up AK-47s."

When you get this book, give time and thought to the account of Anne Morrison Welsh, widow of Norman Morrison, the "Baltimore Quaker with Baby"

who set himself on fire in November 1965 near McNamara's office at the Pentagon to protest against the war in Vietnam.

Visiting Vietnam for the first time in 1999, she was stunned to discover that Morrison was a kind of national hero. His pacifistic act had rippled from the Pentagon into the minds and hearts of Vietcong soldiers, inspiring them to fight on. We can only say what American soldiers in Vietnam said about what was incomprehensibly real: "There it is."

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