

White's methodology also contributes a persuasive description of the Missouri sharecroppers' demonstrations that saw protesters camped out on the side of public highways to stage the hunger and homelessness they faced when landlords evicted them to avoid sharing AAA subsidies. Modes of performance structured the public reaction to the event: sympathetic whites reported it through a lens of minstrelsy (describing protesters as patient, faithful, and singing old gospel songs), while opponents decried the "fakeness" of the protest (not all the participants had been recently evicted) in order to undermine the legitimacy of the critique.

The last chapter, an examination of the Federal Theatre Project's 1936 play, *Triple A: Plowed Under*, feels rather anticlimactic since sections of

the play were already introduced to head each previous chapter, to good effect. White concludes with a discussion of debates surrounding the 2013 farm bill, pointing to ways in which disagreements over the rights of producers and consumers still shape our ideas about citizenship.

*Plowed Under* will prove useful for scholars of agriculture, public policy, political culture, and the New Deal, and it presents an invaluable perspective for any historian of the twentieth century.

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## *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*

By Christian G. Appy

(New York: Viking Adult, 2015. Pp. xi, 335. Notes, index. \$28.95.)

Despite having ended forty years ago, the American war in Vietnam remains a political, social, and cultural force in the United States. Books, university courses, and movies about the war draw surprisingly large audiences, dwarfing popular interest in wars that have lasted as long (the U. S. war in Afghanistan, for instance) or had similarly destructive consequences (such as the U. S. war in Korea).

Yet Christian Appy claims that we still need "a clearer understanding of that war's impact on our national identity" (p. xiii). The huge body of literature on the U. S. war in Vietnam contains many works exploring both how American values prompted arrogance, violence, and ineptitude in fighting this war, and how the war has shaped many aspects of U. S. foreign policy, attitudes towards veterans, and

the national economy. But no recent single volume so accessibly and succinctly conveys the lasting legacy for the United States of this war.

The first of the book's three sections treats the key reasons given at the time for committing to a fight in Vietnam. The second section explores the ways the United States fought in Vietnam. The final section examines the war's legacy for the United States. Appy's engaging narrative relies on anecdote, biography, and investigation of popular culture. Readers somewhat familiar with the history of the war will profit most from *American Reckoning*, since the text spends little time explaining what happened. Instead, Appy ponders what the war has meant for the United States and for Americans.

Nearly all chapters begin by reminding readers of the ideals that informed U. S. policy in a particular arena, and then demonstrate how the conduct of the war did not merely betray those ideals but, indeed, subverted them. Some examples: the humanitarian ideals prompting Tom Dooley to engage in service to the Vietnamese turned into lies about who was suffering and from what cause. U. S. soldiers were sent to save South Vietnam from aggression and exploitation. Instead, these soldiers practiced horrific aggression, but many (as in Project 100,000) became victims of exploitation themselves. The sense of impotence that pervaded U. S. foreign policy after 1975 had the contradictory effects of limiting U. S.

interventions to easily winnable or easily abandoned conflicts, but also of imagining a need to reassert dominance. These observations, and the others explored in this monograph, are not novel. Appy, however, ably integrates the social, political, cultural, and foreign-relations literature to demonstrate the depth of the war's effect on the United States, and the ways in which that effect persists to the present.

Appy draws a straight line from (to simplify for summary) the duplicity before, aggression during, and malaise after the U. S. war in Vietnam to a multitude of problems in U. S. society today. A relationship certainly exists, but whether it is always as direct as he posits is doubtful. It was not only in Vietnam that Americans and the United States government acted in the name of ideals in ways that undermined those ideals. The Cold War in general, Watergate, slow and uneven government efforts on behalf of civil rights, and the hollowing out of the domestic economy all had similar effects, and were intertwined with the war in Vietnam in complex ways. Appy has drawn a sensitive portrait of one aspect of this intricate pattern.

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