

## BOOKS

## LEGACY OF VIETNAM

your ass" and whose main tactic was the evasion of responsibility—the old Army game in a new corporate version. A lone VPA sniper rated an artillery barrage, and the rumor of an enemy squad in the area was enough to bring the B-52s into action.

It was a self-serving, dishonest war. The CIA got into the habit of writing its own "captured enemy documents" because the real ones didn't say what the top brass wanted to hear.

Accused collectivists, the communists fought a war that by its very nature relied upon the loyalty, ingenuity and guts of individual cadres and largely autonomous battle formations. The VPA's command structure was, perforce, decentralized. It expected, and got, more in the way of personal initiative from the ranks than probably any other army in history.

While democratic Washington was trying to bomb Vietnam into rubble on the liberal premise that communism would somehow be crushed in the wreckage, totalitarian Hanoi was using political weapons to woo people on every level of South Vietnamese society.

The NLF managed to create a dense web of cadres, spies and helpers who, at the right moment, were able to sow panic in Saigon's ranks, organize the rear areas, and pave the political way for the fast-moving VPA spearheads.

Burchett tells us they were so successful at this broadscale recruiting that in the closing days of the war hundreds of "loyal" Saigon cadres, many converted or planted years before, were able to take over most of the capital's key facilities from the inside and present them in pristine condition to the VPA troops at the hour of liberation. Even the invaluable files of Thieu's cops and spies were saved from removal or destruction by "plants."

#### Ordinary people.

Burchett is at his best detailing the resourcefulness and courage of ordinary people engaged in the extraordinary work of making a revolution. He talks about their suffering, the atrocities they endured, but to evoke respect rather than pity.

On the other side of the battlefield, he writes of his meetings with Kissinger and Harriman, letting their self-deluding statements speak for themselves.

Burchett deserves a bouquet here. He has covered most of the major hotspots of the postwar world—Germany, Eastern Europe, USSR, China, Korea, Cuba, Portugal and southern Africa—providing us with more and better information than the money press sees fit to print. He's a John Reed and a half, a legitimate hero for aspiring radical journalists.

Gen. Dung's book is a straight military history of the war-winning spring 1975 offensive that he led in the field. It should be read in conjunction with the book by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Dung's erstwhile counterpart on the American high command. The differences are revealing.

The Vietnamese, a weaver by trade, a criminal agitator by the lights of Paris and Washington, is a political revolutionary with military expertise. The American, a technician, frankly admits that

the politics of a supremely political war only confused him.

Dung's narrative, laced with poetry, is warm and worldly. Westmoreland's words march in lockstep while his mind remains at parade rest.

The collectivist, a colleague of the legendary Vo Nguyen Giap and the product of an incredibly complex and prolonged revolutionary experience, is a singular human being. The individualist, stamped out by the West Point cookie cutter, is indistinguishable from any other time-server in uniform.

#### A "no-win" policy?

Westmoreland's book is mainly a gripe about Washington's supposed "no-win" policy. It sounds vaguely plausible until Dung reminds us that at the apogee of the "no win" war, his troops were successfully engaging over 60 percent of total American conventional forces and a Saigon army of a million-plus (ineffective).

Or that the U.S. dumped ten million tons of bombs on Vietnam, more than were dropped in all previous wars put together. If this amounted to "no win" then the Normandy invasion must have been an exercise in surrender!

The yahoo's reply to this is that, after all, we could have nuked our opponents into oblivion. Implicit in this barbarous cop-out is the admission that American conventional forces, no matter how powerful or numerous, were inferior to those of a small peasant country.

#### Outfought.

The U.S. didn't lose the war because it was evil and Vietnamese revolutionaries were righteous, though there is a kind of truth in that romantic notion. It lost because it was outfought. The communists, inferior only in material things, were better organized, had higher morale, were more capably led, and were served by a Marxist praxis that, in very practi-

cal ways, was superior to the myths and wishful thoughts that guided the American warmakers.

Since 1950 the American military has been regularly drubbed by the small communist countries it has chosen to pick on. Drew Middleton, the Clausewitz in residence at the *New York Times*, says in his post-Vietnam book that the American losing streak is likely to continue. He believes that the Russians would whip us in a war in which, for one reason or another, nuclear weapons weren't used.

He even sees our military chances as dim in the kind of limited war situation that could erupt, say, in the Mideast. His pessimism is based on technical and social factors, but he evades the toughest issues.

It was American capitalism's decision after World War II to make our military both the guardian of empire and a function of our waste economy. The goals were incompatible.

Armies, like boxers, should be lean, clean and quick. Ours was made corrupt, infected with gout, and largely unable to apply its new supermarket doctrines of warfare to the real thing.

The Pentagon was turned into another of our great, business-serving state bureaucracies. Its ability to fight wars has become equal to HEW's ability to fight poverty.

We assume the Pentagon can blow up the world (providing, of course, that the missiles are more reliable than our Pintos or Mr. Coffee machines), but that's about all we can assume.

Meanwhile, an underlying truth in all four of these books can be boiled down to what an admiral told Drew Middleton: "Lendin said that an army reflects the society. Well, God help us if he was right, and our forces reflect our society."

—Peter Karman

Peter Karman is a freelance writer in Connecticut.

**The U.S. didn't lose because it was evil and the Vietnamese righteous; it was outfought.**



Wilfred Burchett, the quintessential left journalist, above on the scene in Vietnam. Below, Larry Heinemann.

## John Wayne-ing it with the Romeo platoon

### CLOSE QUARTERS

By Larry Heinemann  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977,  
\$10

This first novel is the most convincing condemnation of America's imperialist war in Vietnam thus far. It is all the more remarkable for not once addressing popularly held conclusions about the war to support its vision. *Close Quarters* is pure fiction: it exists in its own time, on its own landscape, with its own moral scheme, and reads as if it were the first American book ever about Vietnam.

Philip Dosier is the unromantic anti-hero and narrator, Pfc. and later Sgt. Dosier in the Third Battalion of the 33rd, U.S. Army, Vietnam. In Tay Ninh City, Dosier meets his motorized reconnaissance unit, Romeo platoon, the most unmistakable slice of Americana since the Big Mac. It is autumn 1967. Tet has not yet happened; Washington has not been marched upon.

Dosier's friends in Romeo platoon are crude, arrogant, racist, violent and sentimental; archetyp-

ical American men of the range and battlefield. They like to "John Wayne it"—walk tall, swagger, cock their jaws towards the sunset, drink beer, smoke Cambodian grass like Castro smokes cigars and screw dink women ("dinks" are all Vietnamese, enemy and ally). They drive the most rugged land vehicles, call in the most sophisticated artillery and aircraft with sophisticated radios. They might have won the war if they had ever figured out what they were fighting for.

"I'll fill your sandbags or burn your shit or wander around in the bushes," Dosier says, "because I simply do not care about anything but a drink and some smoke and laying my head down every once in a while to rest my eyes."

These are not James Jones' soldiers, nor Hollywood's. Heinemann's intimate, unflattering portraits of Dosier's Romeo platoon are of war criminals, committed to no one or nothing but action and a general loathing of Asians. Yet Heinemann's indictment is so subtle, oftentimes done with such



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Julian Bond

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## BOOKS

### LEGACY OF VIETNAM

tenderness, that its fictional authenticity is never jarred.

Rarely does the outside world intrude, though we know it's there: certainly the soldiers' hatred of Orientals began before Vietnam, and will continue afterwards. The violent, lyrical profanity is home grown; the John Wayne swagger made in America. Heinemann has done with Vietnam what a lot of writers have been afraid to do: he has put the finger on the soldiers who fought the war, rather than their leaders.

There is some doubt if this 1977 book could have been a 1967 book. Our soldiers were then only following orders, Heinemann among them. (The author served a combat tour with the U.S. Army in 1967-68.) Neither LBJ, the people, nor the Army were yet aware of the enemy's strength or the cracks soon to show in the empire. Calling soldiers to defy orders was then, and probably still is, treasonous. It was safer and easier to pin the blame on the leaders. There were fewer of them, and the soldiers were from the peoples' ranks, so that even Rusty Calley could become a sympathetic scapegoat for some higher evil.

*Close Quarters'* implication of rank-and-file culpability promises to be controversial. Dosier's comrades in combat are not the best sort of men, worsened by an unjust war. Romeo platoon isn't fighting for America, or freedom, or even against Communism, but for the privilege of living out some half-assed version of a John Wayne movie (will America never be de-Waynized, as Krushchev de-Stalinized the Soviet Union?).

Sgt. Dosier's pathos in the face of war and his own alienation is made more poignant by his desire to understand. From his baptism in combat, through the Tet offensive and home to Chicago, Dosier is wary, confused, and vulnerable to some rational explanation of the war, though none is forthcoming. A spirit of tragedy pervades every intimate detail as this vivid, lively portrayal of the effects of war leads directly to an awareness of this war's causes: imperialism, militarism, and the blind aggressiveness of the American soldier.

—Jeffrey Gillenkirk

Jeffrey Gillenkirk is a freelance writer in Los Angeles and regularly reviews books for *In These Times*.

a folk song (by Tom Paxton) celebrating his conversion from total acceptance to radical rejection of the purposes and practices of the American "effort" in Southeast Asia.

Kovic's autobiographical *Born on the Fourth of July* is his own, rather naive account of how that change came about.

Much of the book is devoted to lyrical descriptions of a "typical" boyhood in Massapequa, Long Island. But the main message is that Kovic can no longer move his body from the waist down, so descriptions of his past are necessarily ironic.

He writes well about the dehumanizing and cruel atmosphere in the veterans' hospitals where he was "treated" after his return, as well as of his experiences with the Marines, both in the U.S. and in Vietnam.

The climactic action that results from his change of heart is the disruption in Miami. "I served two tours of duty in Vietnam!" I screamed to one newsmen. "I gave three-quarters of my body for America. And what do I get? Spit in the face." I kept screaming until we hit the side entrance where the agents pushed us outside and shut the doors, locking them with chains and padlocks so reporters wouldn't be able to follow us out for interviews. All three of us (veterans) sat holding on to each other shaking. We had done it. It had been the biggest moment of our lives, we had shouted down the President of the United States and disrupted his acceptance speech. What more was there left to do but go home?"

But how did this change come about, and where does it lead? We find out very little. There is almost no mention of friends, family support or non-support, books, ideas, or analyses of the problems inherent in a class-based society. As far as the reader can tell, this basic political change came about because Kovic was treated so harshly in the hospitals: "Something is happening to me in Room 17.... I feel myself changing, the anger is building up in me.... I have been screaming for almost an hour when one of the aides walks by. He sticks his head in the door, taunting me and laughing. 'I'm a Vietnam veteran,' I tell him. 'I fought in Vietnam and I've got a right to be treated decently.' 'Vietnam,' the aide says loudly. 'Vietnam don't mean nothin' to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass.'"

"Something happened" to Kovic all right, and his narrative is touching and dramatic. But the basic questions remain unanswered: how does personal radicalization come about, and what is the relationship of this to broader social change? Traumatic and discrete personal experiences do sometimes lead to complete value and belief changes. But most people do not become radicalized after experiences in hospitals or with any of our other dehumanizing institutions, unfortunate though their experiences and responses may be. Neither do most people change solely through reading, although books can help clarify one's own analysis of society-wide problems. Kovic mentions reading only once: "Skip's views were very dif-

## What does it take to change a man's mind?



### BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

By Ron Kovic  
McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1976

Ron Kovic has become a symbol of the disillusioned and therefore enlightened veteran of the Vietnam war.

As one of the Veterans Against the War, he took part in the demonstration that disrupted the Republican National Convention in Miami in 1972. Four years later, he was permitted to address the closing session of the Democratic Convention. And there is now