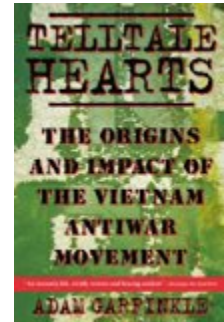


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adam Garfinkle. *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. xiii + 370 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-16363-1.

Reviewed by Lloyd C. Gardner (Rutgers University)
Published on H-Pol (October, 1997)



No End of the Madness

Adam Garfinkle tells us that it took him several years to “reduce my thinking about the Vietnam anti-war movement to two words.” What nagged him for such a long time was that he needed to find the exact reference to suggest that things “we believe to be dead and buried are not as inert in our lives as we sometimes think” (p. ix). He found what he was looking for in Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “masterpiece,” “The Tell-Tale Heart.” For those unfamiliar with Poe’s narrative, Garfinkle reminds us that a murderer has hidden his victim beneath the floorboards. When the police come to investigate, the murderer hears the tell-tale heart beating, louder and louder, until he finally cannot stand it any longer and confesses. I confess that I wonder if the time was well-spent searching for the title. “Dracula’s Children” might have served his purpose better, for it conveys the notion of evil forces rising from the dark night after night, year after year, to do all sorts of harm to the innocent.

Garfinkle’s thesis reduced to a few more than two words is this: The anti-war movement, despite a carefully cultivated mythology in some academic circles, not only did not help to bring about an end to the war, it actually slowed down the process by producing another psychological reason for staying the course—and, as is common in similar accounts, by encouraging the enemy. But the bulk of the book is really about the aftermath of the war, and the pernicious influence the anti-war movement has had on the nation’s political life ever since, particularly in the creation of an adversary culture that has distorted the classical role of American liberalism, as defined in the New Deal era. Thus one of the most famous

historians of the anti-war movement, the late Charles DeBenedetti, must be censured for buying into—and then furthering—the notion that liberalism can be stretched to include anti-communist socialists. Before Vietnam, *liberalism*, argues Garfinkle, was a “legitimate” inside-the-mainstream term in American political culture. In those years, a liberal was one who accepted the “basic institutional arrangements of capitalism but would use government to soften the social discontinuities of a private economy.” DeBenedetti and others have so blurred the definitions that their work “is a measure of how far the liberal parts of the political spectrum moved Left during the Vietnam War” (p. 308).

There are a number of troublesome issues here. There is, to begin with, the problem of definitions. Today’s liberal may have much in common with yesterday’s conservative, as the Clinton presidency might suggest to some—or, conversely, with the once thought radical notion of national health care, as the Clinton presidency might suggest to others. I think that many readers will require a somewhat more specific definition of the “basic institutional arrangements of capitalism” before setting out to define what a liberal’s role has been in the past, or should be in the future. A second problem concerns Garfinkle’s apportioning of responsibility for the leftward extension of the normal (?) political spectrum. Did the anti-war movement cause this development, or are we to assign primary responsibility to its chroniclers like DeBenedetti for legitimizing the illegitimate? One concludes that DeBenedetti is, in Garfinkle’s view, at best, a misguided historian for accepting the anti-war socialists as modern

liberals, and, at worst, a willful agent of those seeking to alter the “basic institutional arrangements of capitalism” by allowing them to infiltrate the mainstream of American political culture. Another historian of the anti-war protest movement, Mel Small, also comes into sharp criticism for concluding, against all his own evidence, that the movement was effective. He is faulted for writing about Nixon aides becoming upset with the numbers of important educational and cultural leaders rallying to the protest side of the spectrum. Thus he, too, laid the foundations for a mythological construction of the past that involved little more than “strained conjecture” (p. 12). Professor Small’s argument is somewhat more sophisticated than Garfinkle’s summations would suggest, however, for it concerns the development of the “credibility gap,” and posits the impact of the anti-war movement in exaggerated claims about the light at the end of the tunnel and the worthiness of the Saigon regime. It is the strained nature of Garfinkle’s argumentation about the historians of the movement that provides a weak basis for the remainder of this effort to conflate current think-tank conservatism with reality.

Having disposed of the presumed myth makers, Garfinkle sets out to provide readers with a proper setting. He attempts to locate the anti-war movement within other leftist expositions, finally concluding that despite its eventual allegiance to an “authoritarian Marxist spirit,” it always “contained a deep streak of nativist North American anarchism.” Which is the operative word here—*nativist* (as in Richard Hofstadter’s old charge against Populism) or *anarchism*? One has often encountered the suggestion that the 1960s radicals had something in common with nineteenth-century American utopians. Emerson and Thoreau are sometimes mentioned as precursors. *Nativist* is usually reserved, on the other hand, for a xenophobic trend in nineteenth-century politics sometimes synonymous with splinter parties such as the “Know-Nothings.” When this is paired with *anarchism*, we have a bit of a puzzler, for the author is presumably not talking about the current para-military survival communities that dot the Western hills in Idaho, but a historical trend. Most history texts suggest that nativists and anarchists, while perhaps sharing a deep suspicion of government, were otherwise opposites. Our problem is somewhat lessened if we take Garfinkle’s sentence to suggest anarchists native to North America, but since this is, as one commentator put it, “an intensely felt” book, such a relatively neutral phrasing seems out of tune with the overall accusatory tone.

The tragedy of the Vietnam War was, Garfinkle ar-

gues, in large measure, the result of faulty military strategy. It was, he insists, “winnable within a reasonable definition of strategy” (p. 8). The anti-war movement did not save lives; it “probably cost them” by unwittingly abetting the paralysis of the Johnson Administration, and, apparently, preventing it from casting off self-doubts and enunciating a sound military strategy. It is far from clear how that scenario plays out, however, for, on the one hand, Garfinkle argues that it was the “intellectual frailty” of the military establishment that cost the nation a victory, and, on the other, that both Johnson and Nixon over-estimated the influence of the anti-war movement that led to “irresolution and confusion.” Presumably, the connection is the faulty advice of the Wise Men in the wake of the Tet offensive. This is rather an old argument, voiced by both Walt Rostow and Henry Kissinger, to the effect that the “Establishment” lost its nerve in the face of the Spock generation. The putative leader of the Wise Men, Dean Acheson, was hardly one to be faced down by anyone, whether Dean Rusk or Tom Hayden. He was, however, more than a little nervous about the gold balances and the European situation in 1968, and, like Clark Clifford, more than a little dubious about the Joint Chiefs request for 200,000 more troops to “finish off” the defeated survivors of the Tet debacle.

It is really crucial for Garfinkle to establish that the claims of the anti-war movement that the war was not winnable, and a waste of lives, are false. For on that proof depends the argument of the rest of the book that the recombinant factions of the anti-war movement have created the greatest danger to our society’s well-being today, “eco-anarchism, the new paradigm of American radicalism.” In other words, what was illegitimate yesterday cannot be legitimate today, and will lead us to perdition. Readers will have to decide for themselves if Garfinkle’s case is persuasively stated, resting as it does upon the sins of the historians of the anti-war movement. For the remainder of the book is basically a Cold Warrior’s celebration of how the Reagan-Bush Administrations gave the Russkies a dose of their own medicine by inverting the situation and aiding the peoples fighting an over-extended “evil empire” in such Third World places as Afghanistan. Some people, he notes disapprovingly, recognizing that the Reagan-Bush bark was often stronger than its bite, have called the 1980s foreign policy “Detente III.” But that was not so. The real way in which the anti-war movement helped to end the Cold War he suggests, is by electing Richard Nixon twice—and, therefore, producing discredited Detentes I and II, which, in turn got Reagan elected with all the elements

of the old Democratic coalition behind him. Out of such convoluted logic emerges the perils of eco-anarchism—and its allies among radical feminists and other groups. “When the next political crisis strikes, it could well explode into prominence—it could even launch a successful third party bid for national office if the two main parties cannot find a way to co-opt it first ... Like its precursors, it too is a search for the sacred” (p. 296). Religion is indeed an important theme here. Garfinkle thanks Richard John Neuhaus for grasping the central points of the book. The true heroes are the repenters. Throughout the book runs a brooding “True Confessions” threnody to which Garfinkle constantly repairs, making the real heroes of the anti-war movement those who have fully repented, such as Eugene Genovese, David Horowitz, Peter Collier—and (inevitably in such a self-parodying book)

Adam Garfinkle himself, who, by his own statements really was only on the fringes. All the guiltier, it appears, for not having abandoned the faith of the fathers sufficiently so as to deserve to be truly forgiven today. Only when “we” accept the ironies of an anti-war movement that prolonged the war and produced such monstrosities as the eco-anarchists, he writes, “will we ever forgive ourselves for what we have said and done to each other these many long years.” To which, “Amen” is the only appropriate ending.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Lloyd C. Gardner. Review of Garfinkle, Adam, *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1420>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.