

# H-Net Reviews

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Philip F. Napoli. *Bringing It All Back Home: An Oral History of New York City's Vietnam Veterans*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013. 254 pp. Illustrations. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-7318-4.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Historian Philip F. Napoli, founder of the Vietnam Oral History Project, interviews a small, representative sample of New York City Vietnam veterans in his new work *Bringing It All Back Home: An Oral History of New York City's Vietnam Veterans*. His subjects were all residents of New York City and its boroughs during the conflict. But, most similarities end here. Napoli captures the diverse, cosmopolitan nature of New York City: recording the experiences of men and women, the working class, poor, and middle class, those who attended college or did not, draftees and volunteers, and people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Napoli carries the stories through the present and carefully illustrates how each person leads a productive, meaningful life despite the psychic and physical injuries of war. Through these various life narratives—which are sometimes contradictory—Napoli underscores the fact that “historians are tempted to construct for themselves narratives with seeming explanatory power” about the Vietnam War (p. 239). He contends that both popular culture and historical interpretations are guilty of perpetuating common clichés about the war, one being that war privations left veterans scrambling to escape homelessness, drug abuse, divorce, and unemployment. However, Napoli’s endeavor exposes how any interpretation of the conflict does “not reveal the whole truth,” but is rightfully subject to counternarrative (p. 239). Unlike the clichés, his interviewees wrestled with some of the above difficulties and eventually reckoned with their war experience, married, enjoyed parenthood, and found fulfilling employment. The war did not bar these men and women from finding happiness.

Napoli divides *Bringing It All Back Home* into thematic chapters that focus on no more than three individual recollections of the war. In general, these chapters cover veterans’ remembrances of Vietnam, homecoming, and the long-term consequences of war service. Chapter 1, “Making Soldiers,” examines how numerous interviewees found themselves in the military

during the war. The following five chapters—centered on veterans Richard Eggers, Sue O’Neill, Joseph Gianini, Anthony Wallace, and Joan Furey—describe the brutal, mentally taxing nature of limited war in South Vietnam. The laments of soldiers’ family and friends pervade chapter 7, “War and Loss.” Napoli shows how, when a soldier perished in the war, it devastated families and neighborhoods in New York City. A soldier’s death in Vietnam caused emotional ripples throughout his hometown community that, Napoli says, continue to exercise power over the lives of their descendants today. Interviews with former Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) members, famous journalist Bernard Edelman, and veteran Robert Ptachik (who lobbied for New York City’s Vietnam veteran’s memorial) all show the multiple ways that veterans drew on the legacy of Vietnam during their civilian lives. The final chapters examine the physical and psychological consequences of Vietnam, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange. These stories culminate in chapter 15, “The Diversity of the Veteran Experience,” where men and women recall their battles with PTSD, and also complications such as cancer, diabetes, asthma, and infertility from exposure to Agent Orange.

Instead of the stereotypical homecoming—being spat on, mocked, ridiculed, broken—most of these men and women received warmth and affection from those around them. For example, veteran Anthony Wallace remembered a professor at Brooklyn College scolding a student who ridiculed his service. Subsequently, the antiwar students left Wallace alone and he completed his bachelor’s degree. Veteran Jimmy Bacolo remembered how overjoyed his parents were at his arrival home from Vietnam. His father, a longshoreman, brought Jimmy down to a local bar where he celebrated the return to civil life with dozens of his father’s co-workers. His father placed a sign in the window that read “Welcome Home Jimmy From Vietnam,” and his neighbors expressed warmth and appreciation for his service. Of course, not all of Napoli’s

subjects were exempt from the alcoholism, depression, and drug abuse that sometimes followed military service in Vietnam and homecoming. However, in nearly every case these men and women received gratitude upon return home, utilized social networks and counseling, and eventually overcame the burden of war to enjoy productive, meaningful lives.

Napoli implicitly analyzes the motivation for each individual's enlistment in the Armed Forces during the Vietnam War. Although the Selective Service conscripted some of the men, many others volunteered for service. Likewise, his female interviewees willingly enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps or served as civilians attached to the Red Cross. Veterans Sue O'Neill and Joan Furey both admitted that financial opportunity, independence, and the ability to travel all served as significant enticements to enlist as nurses. Men volunteered for a number of reasons, but were most influenced by family tradition (several recall fathers, uncles, or other male role models who served during World War II), intense poverty, a sense of adventure cultivated by popular culture, or the fear of conscription. His findings fall in line with previous scholarly arguments offered by historians Christian G. Appy and Kyle Longley, both of whom found that socioeconomic class, male role models, and popular culture played some role in volunteerism.[1]

The author's methodological approaches are rather transparent. In a useful afterword, Napoli explains why he decided to employ the "life-story technique" for transcribing interviews (p. 237). He asked veterans and family members to "explain how they became the people they are today." This allowed each veteran to produce "narrative reconstructions of their lives," where they selected "bits and pieces" of memory to create a "meaningful" story to share with Napoli and a wider audience (p. 237). Moreover, Napoli stayed far away from asking specific, leading questions, or focusing entirely on each person's relationship to the war. This broad question allowed the author to describe a subject's life from childhood through the present. In his note on methods, he also rightly highlighted the fact that oral history does not present a more truthful account of historical events. Rather than allowing historians to access a more objective interpretation of the past, oral history brings the subjectivity of experience into high relief. The diverse, contradictory remembrances of Vietnam as both barbaric and honorable, uplifting and depressing, crippling and encouraging, beg us to remember that oral history derives from an individual, subjective frame of reference. Fortunately, in the editorial hands of Napoli, these oral histories are placed in the context of race, class, gender, and a number of other fac-

tors to help interpret why these experiences are often at odds. I must also add that, when available, Napoli marshals together diary entries and letters sent home by soldiers during the Vietnam War to complement (and corroborate) soldiers' memories of their lives—all valuable source materials effectively used by previous journalists and historians in edited works like *Letters from Vietnam* (2003) and *Dear America* (2002).

My quibbles with *Bringing It All Back Home* are few. There are areas where Napoli could relax his editorial hand and allow the interviewee's voice to come through more clearly. For example, Napoli describes veteran Richard Eggers as now being respectful of "people who made the decision to resist service and flee to places like Canada" (p. 37). How did Eggers, whom Napoli describes as a volunteer professional, bridge the ideological gap between his opinions of the Vietnam War as just and the antiwar rhetoric of draft dodgers? For this, and many other cases, the text would benefit from Eggers' (or the subject's) voice, along with more explanation from the editor. Although Napoli incorporates a note on his method for collecting, transcribing, and presenting these oral histories, he should also have included a brief appendix of common questions that he posed for veterans. Besides questioning how these men and women became who they are today, did Napoli find it necessary to pose further questions for clarification, specificity, or more detail on certain aspects of the war?

I highly recommend Napoli's work for use in undergraduate courses, informed readers, and even scholars of the Cold War and Vietnam War who may find some of these oral histories relevant. Despite the author's lengthy narration about some of his subjects, he does pay careful attention to the various factors shaping each individual's experience of the Vietnam War, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. Instructors who assign oral history projects to their undergraduates might peruse Napoli's work for templates that their students can model.

On the whole, Napoli clearly demonstrates how historians should employ the subjective nature of oral histories to break down stereotypes and interpretations that pigeonhole veterans into roles such as victim. *Bringing It All Back Home* forces us to reconsider one principle in our own historical research: the experiences of historical actors are subjective and unique, and the interpretations we derive from these sources are likewise limited and open to counternarrative and complication. As Napoli contends, we should eschew explanatory interpretations that pretend to use the experiences of a few veterans to

describe those of many.

Note

[1]. Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American* E. Sharpe, 2008).

*Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (New York: M.

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