

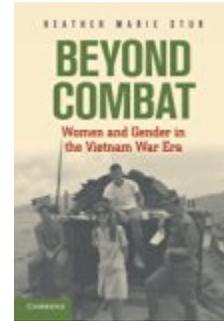
H-Net Reviews

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Heather Marie Stur. *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 278 p. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76275-5; \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-12741-7.

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H. M. Stur: Beyond Combat

Moving away from the battlefield, “Beyond Combat” explores the complex web of personal interactions between Americans and Vietnamese that took place in the brothels, bases, and boulevards of South Vietnam during the 1960s and early 1970s. These highly gendered interactions, Stur contends, were shaped by a range of key images—the “dragon lady,” the “gentle warrior,” the John Wayne figure, the “girl next door,” etc.—that were “passed down in basic training, popular culture, political speeches, and GI folk culture” (p. 2). By carefully investigating these central images, Stur reveals the ways in which Cold War gender ideals framed both American policy in and individual experiences of the Vietnam War.

Although Stur uses the war’s central gender images to organize her study, “Beyond Combat” focuses on the gaps between these representations and the lived experiences of American servicemen and women, Red Cross workers, antiwar activists, and Vietnamese women. To explore this terrain, Stur draws on ample secondary Vietnam War, Cold War, and war and gender scholarship, along with many rich primary source materials: oral histories, memoirs, more than forty of her own extensive interviews, a wide range of GI antiwar newspapers, magazines, cartoons, photographs, military training manuals and brochures, and other documents. By skillfully incorporating the voices of numerous nurses, Red Cross “donut dollies”, and Women’s Army Corps (WAC) personnel, Stur enriches her analysis while contributing to the growing body of scholarship on American women and the Vietnam War.

Despite the fact that “Beyond Combat” primarily investigates gender and the Vietnam War from an American perspective, the study fittingly begins with representations of Vietnamese women in the popular and military imaginations. At the heart of this analysis is a detailed examination of the “dragon lady”—“a cunning, beautiful Asian woman who transformed from seeming friend to deadly foe at a moment’s notice” (p. 21). However, Stur quickly moves to nuanced examinations of the miniskirt, the “ao dai”, prostitution policies and practices, and representations of Madame Nhu in the American media. Through Stur’s insightful analysis, these images highlight the patriarchal nature of the American mission, which called for protecting and dominating a feminized South Vietnam.

Chapter two explores the images and experiences of the approximately 700 American women who served as “donut dollies” in the Red Cross Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO) program between 1965 and 1972. In contrast to depictions of sexualized, sometimes dangerous Vietnamese women, these young, single, primarily white, Red Cross SRAO volunteers were cast as the American “girl next door,” representing “‘all that was wholesome and good about girls, women, moms, sisters, [and] wives’ waiting for U.S. servicemen back home.” (p. 65) Although the blue A-line dresses, makeup and grooming requirements, and specified recreational activities of the SRAO workers were designed to reflect American Cold War domestic ideals, Stur argues that many “donut dollies” challenged these ide-

als by escaping marriage and family and by occasionally crossing unofficial racial boundaries.

Building on the work of Elizabeth Norman, Kara Dixon Vuic and others, chapter three examines the ways in which the 10,000 military women who served in Vietnam both reinforced and challenged wartime gender expectations. Although Stur covers a fair bit of familiar scholarly territory in this chapter, her own interviews of nurses and WACs and insightful analyses of their experiences help complicate ideas about combat by identifying how these women not only dealt with potential enemy attacks on hospitals and bases, but also with threats of sexual assault and harassment from their own troops.

Departing from its primary focus on images and experiences of women, chapter four investigates three key representations of American masculinity and the respective roles they played in shaping American propaganda, policies, and practices during the war. As Stur carefully demonstrates, the popular “gentle warrior” image depicted the American serviceman as both a tough fighter and a humanitarian caregiver. Stur contends that this image also served as a metaphor for the U.S. mission in Vietnam; by building schools, healing the sick, and protecting South Vietnamese families, the “gentle warrior” democratized and modernized the nation even as his presence “harmed the ally [he] was ostensibly meant to save” (p. 143). Stur’s analyses of the John Wayne and sexual aggressor images are likewise compelling, and she effectively shows how representations of tough “cowboy” and heteronormative white masculinities affected both foreign policy and the actions and perceptions of servicemen themselves.

Stur’s final chapter focuses on the rejection of the warrior myth articulated by veterans, active duty soldiers and homefront activists in antiwar newspapers and other forums. Perhaps some of the book’s richest primary ma-

terial, these critiques of sexism and racism in the American military highlight the interconnectedness of the antiwar, women’s liberation and civil rights movements. Stur’s discussions of the Moynihan Report, Robert McNamara’s “Project 100,000” plan and African American women’s antiwar groups are especially interesting, and they call attention to the ways in which the Vietnam War not only challenged Cold War gender norms but representations of race as well.

“Beyond Combat” concludes by analyzing the changes within the U.S. military precipitated by ending the draft and by servicemen and women’s experiences during the later phases of the war. In particular, Stur examines 1970s recruitment campaigns targeted toward women and broader efforts to rebrand the U.S. armed forces “in response to the movement for women’s equality and the unpopularity of the Vietnam War.” (p. 217) According to Stur, despite efforts to expand occupations open to women, restrictions on women’s participation in combat demonstrate just how deeply engrained in military culture the heterosexual male warrior ideal is.

Highly accessible and thoughtfully organized, “Beyond Combat” will interest Vietnam War, gender studies, and Cold War history scholars alike. Because it is so fascinating, many readers will wish that it were longer or that it included a wider range of popular cultural materials such as films, television programs, and literary works in its examination of key Vietnam era images. Likewise some scholars might feel shortchanged by Stur’s lack of engagement with theories of gender and sexuality. Stur’s interviews and fresh use of GI antiwar newspapers and other archival sources, however, more than make up for any of these potential shortcomings. “Beyond Combat” is certain to inspire new research – especially on the gendered experiences of Vietnamese men and women – that will continue to broaden our understanding of the Vietnam War.

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