



**David Kieran.** *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62534-099-3.

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*No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now.* – Richard M. Nixon (March 28, 1985)

In *Forever Vietnam*, David Kieran explores how “the evolving and contested memory of the American War in Vietnam has shaped Americans’ commemoration of other events” and changed how Americans understand the Vietnam War (p. 3). This is not a history of the Vietnam War. Nor is it an analysis of how the war is remembered, or a history of the six case studies. Instead, the work must be read as a whole to see the effect of Vietnam on these six seemingly unrelated events.

Kieran’s work follows the scholarship of other memory studies academics such as Andreas Huyssen and Jay Winter.[1] The uniqueness of Kieran’s work is his exploration of how the Vietnam War shaped both American remembrance of the War, and how it shaped future understanding of subsequent conflicts. He argues that this change has affected the way in which various elements engage in political discourse, and how politicians have framed subsequent U.S. involvement in foreign affairs. Kieran shows “how various stakeholders used Vietnam’s legacy to craft that participation in culturally legible ways” (p. 6).

Kieran structures his argument on the analysis of six seemingly disparate examples. This work is not a comprehensive history of the six events analyzed below, but instead a study of how the changing remembrance—and manipulation of that remembrance—can be traced to the Vietnam War. He analyzes three events that occurred before the Vietnam War, and three events after to show how the remembrance of the Vietnam War changed how Americans not only understood the past, but also how they interpreted the future.

In chapter 1, “How Far is Andersonville from Vietnam?” Kieran examines how the use of the Andersonville Historic Site changed over a forty-year period. Americans’ understanding of the significance of Andersonville was “neither predetermined nor automatic” (p. 15). Instead, Americans constructed their understanding based on the dominant narratives about the Vietnam War. Andersonville began with the opportunity for Americans to question the involvement in the Vietnam War, but through “programmatic and curatorial choices” became a site dominated by a remembrance of American POW/MIA suffering inflicted by Vietnamese brutality (p. 50).

Chapter 2, “We Veterans of Mass Murder and Stupidity,” shows how the Vietnam War affected

the language and imagery used in WWII veterans' memoirs published after the Vietnam War. Kieran traces how the peculiar language of Vietnam veterans' experiences affected the images, themes, and discussions of violence in subsequent WWII memoirs. Kieran also explores how the diagnosis of PTSD in Vietnam veterans led to a cognizance of the similar sufferings experienced by WWII vets. This issue became highly politicized when it involved congressional funding of treatment for WWII vets. Kieran argues it was the way in which Vietnam veterans expressed the language of PTSD that afforded older veterans the opportunity to change the narrative about their own experiences four decades earlier. Older veterans' memories and understanding of their experiences in WWII changed because of their understanding of the Vietnam War.

Kieran shows in chapter 3, "We See a Lot of Parallels between the Men at the Alamo and Ourselves," how the Alamo similarly changed in significance based on how it was used as an evocative symbol. The remembrance of the Alamo morphed from a site where patriots had rallied around a call for freedom to a site where Vietnam veterans shared a brotherhood with those who understood the dignity and duty of fighting a losing battle. Veterans recast the idea of the Alamo to fit their narrative within a broader theme of patriotism, thus recapturing their service during the Vietnam War as heroic. This was for me the most interesting chapter, since his research clearly showed how the language used to describe the history of the Alamo changed based on the veterans' impressions of their own service.

In the fourth chapter, "We Should Have Said No," Kieran analyzes the ways in which Americans conflated U.S. intervention in Somalia with U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, with both instances portrayed as misadventures. Somalia was cast as either like and unlike Vietnam depending on the viewpoint of the stakeholder. Political leaders used the imagery of Vietnam to support argu-

ments both supporting and discouraging involvement. The only thing clear about Vietnam was that the lessons learned were not universally accepted. Additionally, post-Somalia memoirs took on the tropes of Vietnam War memoirs in their juxtaposition of American heroics and enemy brutality. Kieran does a remarkable job of tracing the parallels between Vietnam and Somalia veterans' descriptions of killing. When North Vietnamese and Somalis kill Americans it is depicted in brutish and animalistic terms, yet when Americans kill Vietnamese and Somalis it is described in more clinical terms.

The actions of those on Flight 93 do not betray support for a particular patriotism or cause, yet as Kieran argues in chapter 5, "It's Almost Like the Vietnam Wall," they have been appropriated as *a priori* support for President Bush's preemptive foreign policy. Kieran also explores how the memorial in Shanksville, PA, was influenced by the practice of leaving items at the Vietnam Memorial. Individual military members also drew an unusual connection to the people on Flight 93, speaking about them as brothers in arms. Kieran misses a key point in this chapter. His criticism that military members inappropriately connect the actions of the "heroes" of Flight 93 with their own as soldiers is incorrect. The myth of the American citizen-soldier is deeply held. It grew out of the minuteman tradition from the Revolutionary War, and was solidified with the idealization of the citizen who enlisted to fight WWII. In *Citizen Soldiers* (1997), Stephen E. Ambrose tests the question of how well General George Marshall and a "handful of professional officers ... had done in creating an army of citizen soldiers from scratch." The connection of citizen and soldier in America goes much deeper in history than the Vietnam War. The use of Shanksville, and the Flight 93 memorial by Vietnam veterans is not so much unique to the Vietnam War as it is to deeper American myths about patriotism.

In chapter 6, “The Lessons of History,” Kieran discusses how the Vietnam War affected the discourse on Iraq and Afghanistan. Kieran clearly traces how the tropes from the Vietnam War were used (and misused) both to support and to oppose military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Vietnam War cast a long shadow over American political discourse. Politicians drawing lessons from history (correctly and incorrectly) is not unique to the Vietnam War. In *Analogies at War* (1992), Yuen Foong Khong argues that the lessons policymakers drew from Korea and Munich predisposed them toward military intervention in Vietnam. This technique has been used repeatedly to muster popular support and to explain the logic of action. Kieran acknowledges this phenomenon at the end of the book when he finds that political and military leaders were using Iraq in debates over American foreign policy (p. 240). This chapter is interesting, well written, and thoroughly researched, but does not support his thesis as strongly as the previous five chapters.

Human history is replete with examples of tropes, images, and symbols being appropriated. The Roman symbol of crucifixion, for example, meant to humiliate criminals, instead became a symbol of salvation and triumph for Christians. Whoever “owns” the narrative and the symbols is free to change stories and understanding to fit his or her needs. In this respect, Kieran makes a persuasive argument for how America’s understanding of Vietnam has affected our collective understanding of these six other events. He wrote a remarkably enjoyable and insightful book, which took six seemingly disparate examples and cogently explained how the Vietnam War affected each. The individual chapters vary in the strength of their arguments and logic, but taken collectively the book makes a compelling case. Despite the few instances of bias, this work is thoroughly researched and well written.[2] It is a fascinating discourse on how America’s understanding of the Vietnam War has changed how we collectively remember other events in our history. Because the

Vietnam experience lacked a positive collective memory of the event, it grasped at other well-known American events and used their tropes to shape the understanding and placement of those events.

To me, the most interesting part of his work was the realization that Vietnam veterans themselves have changed the narrative, raising certain issues in an attempt to place their service within a larger context of meaning, sacrifice, and validity of action. Kieran’s goal was to “illuminate the wider story of how the remembrance of one event has created the conditions according to which Americans have meaningfully remembered other, seemingly unrelated, events” (p. 6). Overall, he does just that.

#### Notes

[1]. Andreas Huyssen analyzed the impact of Holocaust remembrance on Argentinian memorials to victims of the military junta. Jay Winter studied how WWI survivors shaped the way future conflicts were imagined and remembered (p. 6-7).

[2]. I did catch a specific instance of bias when he refers to the “racial problematic and imperialist policies central to the war” as a fact (p. 16). Additionally, there are several instance where the tone of the work is slightly antimilitary. Yet, these instances were relatively minor and did not detract from the overall quality or scholarship of the work.

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