

James Wright. *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War.* New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017. 464 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-250-09248-9.

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With a fresh round of Vietnam War fiftieth anniversaries around the corner and the Ken Burns documentary commanding wide attention, the inevitable talk of “healing” is already under way. In the American context, the presumed polarity is between “the protestors” and “the troops.” This problematic formulation was frequently articulated during the war and has persisted over the decades. The necessary “healing,” it is suggested, is between these two groups.

Against this background, James Wright’s important new book, *Enduring Vietnam*, has much to teach us. This is a military history that focuses on the experience of combat soldiers rather than on battle plans or their official outcomes. On its face, this is hardly a new subject. Library shelves are filled with memoirs, novels, poetry, and academic monographs on this theme. But while the author draws freely from this rich literature, he has produced a book that is original in its coverage, tone, and perspective.

Wright interviewed 160 combat veterans and their families, listening closely to their particular stories and placing them in historical context. His apparent goal, which might appear quixotic, is to make these soldiers real and by so doing deepening our understanding of the war. This is a daunting mission, but to a remarkable degree he succeeds in bringing these subjects to life, enabling

readers to think about Vietnam in a less stereotyped or ideological fashion.

These combat soldiers were baby boomers, Wright reminds us. Most were born in the aftermath of World War II and “grew up in an America of optimism, of expanding aspiration and growing opportunity, a nation of increasing mobility and freedom” (p. 109). It was a place where young people watched television, listened to rock and roll, chatted on the phone, and participated in sports. Yet there was always a darker side—a looming threat embodied in the Cold War, with the implication that eventually there would come a challenge when Americans would once again be required to fight for the ideals of freedom and democracy. It was young men of this generation, many still teenagers, who would find themselves in the rice paddies of Vietnam, carrying out this ostensible mission. Of the 2.5 million men who served there, between 25 and 30 percent were in combat (p. 2). Most of these soldiers encountered extraordinary discomfort, trauma, and danger for which civilian life had not prepared them.

While this book contains valuable statistical information, including many unfamiliar opinion polls, it is the gruesome anecdotes that stand out. For example, an army chaplain, after an ambush on the Mekong River, wondered: “Everyone wants water. How can I tell a man with his guts hanging

out his side that he can't have water?" (p. 257). Or, after every flight, Medevac pilots had to use watering cans to clean out the bottom of their aircraft "because the blood and guts and brains and everything else would get all over the place" (p. 258). Or the story about the kid who survived a rocket attack only to discover "his best friend all charred and trying to breathe" (p. 257).

Wright's narrative, with its spare, understated prose gathers negative momentum. It begins innocently enough with patriotic young men who expect to recreate the heroism of World War II. They arrive at military bases like Long Binh and Pleiku, with their volleyball courts, football fields, and weight rooms. But before long, the book brings us to Graves Registration, where other young soldiers are sorting through body parts in their effort to identify dismembered corpses. The author is quietly relentless in revealing the human cost of this conflict, bringing us back to America, where two uniformed men arrive at the homes of soldiers' families, bearing their unwanted news: "As a Representative of the President of the United States ... it is my duty to inform you..." (p. 271) (sometimes this sentence is not completed because the stricken mother, dad, or sibling begins screaming or crying).

The good news in this book resides with the generous, often courageous behavior of the young soldiers who sacrificed and took risks for their unit or provided assistance to Vietnamese civilians. Wright is not naïve about the interactions of American soldiers and local people, recognizing that there were many instances of racism and personal violence. Yet he also maintains that such incidents were not "representative" and that there were "countless occasions when the American troops tried to reach out with food, medicine and medical care" (p. 230).

What makes this an ultimately horrific story is not the behavior of American soldiers, who despite their youth often displayed exemplary qualities, but rather the war itself. This is where the

personal stories and Wright's discussion of American foreign policy intersect. From the outset, the United States' mission was a dishonest one, in which there was "a real difference between public conviction and private reservations." Perhaps this is the way political leaders often function, but given the cost, Wright finds it hard to reconcile "the private skepticism, the genuine ambivalence and uncertainty, the alarming cynicism ... and outright duplicity" with their public statements (p. 80).

While the war was presented to the American people as a defense of South Vietnamese freedom and democracy, this was never its real purpose. "It was about a global geopolitical contest with communism, it was about America maintaining its international commitments, it was about protecting positions in US domestic politics" and other extraneous concerns (p. 101). By the time of John F. Kennedy's administration, it was well understood that the leadership of South Vietnam was corrupt and dictatorial, but this did not change official rhetoric or policy. Nor did it seem to matter that military success was increasingly perceived as unlikely—another reality carefully concealed from the wider public.

Into this fraudulent, precarious project were injected the patriotic "baby boomers" who found themselves surrounded by ungrateful people, facing a resilient enemy and traversing a nonexistent battlefield. As nasty as this was in 1965, when tens of thousands of American troops first arrived, by 1969 the situation was even worse. Wright focuses on this particular year perhaps because it contains the sharpest contradiction. In the post-Tet period the public had grown weary of the war and President Richard Nixon had concluded that the ground war could not be won. Yet he chose to continue it with more than ten thousand American deaths in his first year. While this figure would be reduced over the next three years, as the administration brought home more troops, for those left in Vietnam, the challenges were in some

ways greater. How do you navigate hardship and peril in a conflict that has lost its purpose?

The answer in part was narrowing your focus. One of Wright's most important points is that throughout the war, the troops paid relatively little attention to the political debates that were sweeping the United States. They were always more attuned to the challenges in their immediate environment—protecting their friends and surviving day to day. To some degree this insulated them from the negativity at home, but not entirely. As the author makes clear, morale was damaged by the absence of a clear objective and loss of legitimacy. When the soldiers finally came home, the national indifference, bordering on embarrassment, could be devastating.

With so many lives lost or blighted to no useful end, the reader is left wondering who is to blame for all of this? Wright offers a cautious, scholarly view of “the deciders,” with the clear implication that Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Nixon could have made better choices. Each of them took incremental steps, without adequate analysis of either the benefits or the risks. And in all cases, they were less than candid about their intentions.

Yet he chooses not to linger on this topic, arguing that, “as important as these analyses of the war were and are, they and the debates around them, can be reductive.” In focusing on “diplomacy and politics, on interpretations of meaning and consequences,” they “too readily generalize the actual experience of war.” As a consequence “the war on the ground becomes background rather than foreground” (p. 6). The entire thrust of this eloquent volume is to do something different: to place the experience of American troops to the front and center, to highlight for readers what these men endured, and to give long overdue recognition to their contribution.

Oddly, as I neared the end of this book—with its information about the hospitals, the mortuaries, the grieving households, the death of people

with real names and life hopes—I was reminded of Nick Turse's *Kill Everything That Moves* (2013), with which Wright explicitly disagrees. Published four years ago, Turse's book is a study of the many war crimes committed by American troops, with a focus on the victims, also people with real names and stricken families. These respective narratives are perhaps more intertwined than either author would likely acknowledge. But in considering them together, encompassing the wide range of misery created by this war, the issue of blame reasserts itself.

Who was responsible for all of this pain and why? In all of these years, American society has never come to terms with these questions, nor has any American political leader or high official been punished for their catastrophic decisions. Wright offers an especially sharp critique of the failure to hold perpetrators of My Lai accountable for their misdeeds, noting the perverse effect, which was to tarnish all soldiers. But what about national security advisor Henry Kissinger, whose recommendations year after year contributed mightily to the deaths of those twenty-one thousand “baby boomers” and more than a million Asians? Other than Nixon's, his was the most influential voice in 1969, and yet decades later he is still on television offering his wisdom. And he is hardly the lone example.

This gets us back to the matter of “healing.” Wright mercifully avoids the exaggerated dichotomy of protestors and troops. However, one important implication of this excellent study is that American society still owes a debt to those aging veterans, whose experience has been insufficiently honored. And there is certainly an unpaid debt to the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia still wrestling with the effects of unexploded ordnance and Agent Orange. Yet there is reason to think that the United States will never heal, without identifying the people, institutions, and ideology that caused this tragedy to happen and making relevant changes. After all, the Vietnam sol-

diers were not the last Americans to be dispatched to foreign lands in a false crusade for freedom and democracy.

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