



Michael Uhl. *The War I Survived Was Vietnam: Collected Writings of a Veteran and Antiwar Activist.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2016. 290 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6614-3.

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Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

The War I Survived Was Vietnam is a culmination of Michael Uhl's forty years of veterans' rights and antiwar activist writings. Uhl, a Georgetown graduate, served as a first lieutenant in combat intelligence during Vietnam, and became intimately involved in antiwar movements such as Vietnam Veterans Against The War and the Citizens Commission of Inquiry after his medical discharge. In his later years, Uhl and military lawyer Tod Ensign (a frequent co-contributor) founded Citizen Soldier, a veterans' rights group. Uhl's writing and speaking career began during the war and the latest material from the book dates from 2011. Much of the material penned by Uhl, an independent scholar, appeared in magazines such as *The Nation*, *In These Times*, and *The Progressive*, online leftist news sites like *CounterPunch* and *InTheMindField*, major newspapers near Uhl's residence in Maine including the *Boston Globe*, the *Bangor Daily News*, and the *Vermont Herald*, as well as in newsletters from Uhl's Veterans for Peace organization.

The book does not read as a historical monograph, and those expecting a lengthy bibliography or list of citations/notes will be sorely disappointed. *The War I Survived Was Vietnam* instead takes the form of a somewhat disjointed anthology of antiwar polemics, containing magazine and newspaper articles, poetry, speech transcripts, book re-

views, an essay, and selections from longer monographs. The works in the book draw from Uhl's involvement with post-Vietnam protest movements, inquiry commissions, and his current activities with Veterans for Peace and other leftist veterans' rights groups. Uhl's writings occupy a literary spectrum whose eclecticism lacks an identifiable, easily discernible thematic thread. Still, his wartime experience, coupled with his decades-long involvement in multiple antiwar/leftist veterans groups, gives his writing an intimate, accessible style that reflects his public writing background.

The anthology follows a fairly standard organizational scheme, opening with a set of featured articles, a series of self-selected articles Uhl considers to be his best. Due to the large number of works in the book and because my review would be considerably too long if I were to review each column individually, I will comment mainly on these featured articles. Uhl follows these with his antiwar poetry, followed by his "Being a Veteran in America" essay. A small section following the essay covers Uhl's writings on post-traumatic stress disorder, and after a lengthy section of book criticism and reviews, the book closes with around eighty pages divided more or less equally between explicitly activist writing and articles co-authored with veterans' rights lawyer and Citizen

Soldier co-founder, the late Tod Ensign, including three chapters reprinted from their book *GI Guinea Pigs* (1980), a work describing the effects of chemical herbicides like Agent Orange on American soldiers.

Uhl's selected writings appear to mainly fall in two categories: criticisms of US government action during the war and toward Vietnam, plus popular misconceptions which undermine or distort public memory of Vietnam. For example, Uhl criticizes the government for many reasons, but chief among them is his contention that the government held rank-and-file GIs criminally responsible for atrocities such as the My Lai massacre, while high-ranking generals and chiefs of staff who gave the orders escaped both blame and criminal charges. In "Searching for Vietnam's M.I.A.s," a 1994 *Nation* article, he lambastes veteran groups for their use of the POW/MIA issue to stir popular discontent against the payment of reparations to Vietnam, payments avoided by every administration since Nixon, according to Uhl.

While he offers no evidence in support of that claim, he engages heavily with a previous *Nation* article, "M.I.A.s," by H. Bruce Franklin, as a way of delegitimizing a report surfaced by the POW/MIA lobby in response to the Clinton administration's normalization of relations with Vietnam. According to the report, over 1,200 American prisoners remained in North Vietnam in 1972 in 11 prisons, but Franklin claims that after the Son Tay raid of 1970, North Vietnam reduced its prison capacity and reported that they were holding slightly less than 400 "captured American service personnel," noting that the NVA avoided using the term "prisoner of war."^[1]

Uhl also reveals by way of a telephone conversation with an old friend in "The Spat-Upon Vet Revisited" the implicit class imbalance between middle-class protesters and the working-class soldiers who shouldered the load of conscription during Vietnam. "The Spat-Upon Vet" reflects Uhl's question of how some remember Viet-

nam, focusing particularly the manufactured memories of protesters who repeatedly spat on returning veterans. Jerry Lembcke, who wrote a similar article in the *New York Times*, speculates that "[Listeners are] loath to question the truth of the stories lest aspersion be seemingly cast on the authenticity of the teller," even though the narrative served the interests of the military-industrial complex.^[2] "There were a lot of cry-baby vets," writes Uhl, "who couldn't get their dad's 'good' war out of their imaginations, and who knew god-damned well that Vietnam was no noble cause.... Class resentment runs deep and gets tragically misplaced in this society, while divide and rule fuels the myth that vets were spat upon, even when they weren't" (pp. 31-33).

Through another featured article, "Vietnam's Shadow Over Abu Ghraib," Uhl addresses change and continuity over time with regard to media coverage of American war atrocities. The subtitle for the article is "What did Seymour Hersh know, and when did he know it?," referring to Seymour Hersh, the investigative reporter known for exposing the My Lai massacre as well as its cover-up. The confusing subtitle underscores this article's main issue—Uhl does not seem to know what point he is trying to make. He acknowledges the American news media covered the Abu Ghraib scandal in a willing manner whereas My Lai did not merit the same quality coverage, and draws frequent parallels between My Lai, Abu Ghraib, and Hersh's reporting. Uhl criticizes Hersh for suddenly being interested in examining the systemic causes of military abuse after Abu Ghraib when he had not given My Lai the same journalistic scrutiny. However, Hersh does note that the official government response from the Nixon and Bush administrations amounted to the same banal criticisms of a few bad apples.

Fitting with Uhl's theme of reexamining questions of power imbalances between military brass and rank-and-file GIs, as well as the implicit class biases, he praises Hersh for noting these failures

of Army leadership, writing that “affixing primary responsibility for atrocities that are hardwired into modern wars of ‘counterinsurgency’ onto the lowest-ranking soldiers, those tasked with carrying out the dirty work, while limiting the culpability of the command, is yet another echo from the My Lai massacre that resonates with Abu Ghraib” (p. 36). While “Vietnam’s Shadow Over Abu Ghraib” provides riveting parallels between the world Uhl experienced as a soldier and the one he inhabits as an activist, it falls short rhetorically because of Uhl’s weathervane-like pivoting between sundry criticisms of Seymour Hersh, the US government, and the military itself, as well as his attempts to highlight class battles within the military. Despite their minor shortcomings, Uhl’s featured articles clearly express his contentions about Americans’ remembrance of Vietnam—that these popular misconceptions fueled by the country’s elite hid the more unseemly conflict of class distinction and differences over the war.

Where the book’s largest fault comes, however (and this could be more a problem of editorial advisement rather than authorship), is in the organization and proportionality of the writings. The most glaring representation of this problem is the “Criticism and Review” section, which comprises 22 articles that equal 106 pages, or just over a third of the book. This is not to say the section is unnecessary, but it pivots from the main points and stymies the book’s flow. Some criticisms offered, like the interview Uhl and writer Carol Brightman had with Robert MacNamara, one of Vietnam’s infamous architects, are breathtaking and revealing. Others, like the three reviews dealing with the puffery of Senator Bob Kelley, could be whittled down.

While the reader sees a bevy of Uhl’s writings, they offer almost no observations on his career or the catalysts for his involvement in antiwar advocacy. According to Uhl’s memoir, *Vietnam Awakening*, a heated encounter with a colonel while Uhl recovered from tuberculosis (the ailment that

caused his discharge) “serve[d] as one of those emancipatory moments that mark a critical transition in a person’s life ... a redemptive return to civilian status from the nightmare of war and an oppressive, authoritarian military.”[3] It seems this is a missed opportunity to both personalize his political motivations, and provide evidence for the oppressive military Uhl was so frequently critical of.

Similarly, while Uhl’s writings frequently mention his time with the Citizens Commission of Inquiry, they do little to express the purpose or importance of the organization’s impact on his early activist career. Also in his memoir, Uhl states that the Citizens Commission of Inquiry served to assist disgruntled veterans, who “already possessed strong needs to communicate their disillusionment to the Middle American communities from which they sprang: these same folk who President Nixon caricatured as the silent majority ... among whom, nonetheless, the message and style of the antiwar movement played with such little sympathy.”[4] Seeing as *The War I Survived Was Vietnam* serves as an ultimate collection of Uhl’s writing, the book’s failure to provide context for both the man himself, and his motivations and actions, proves unsettling.

Despite the contextual and editorial shortcomings of the book, the collection adequately reflects Uhl’s decades-long struggle to encourage Americans to look critically at their own memories and strike back at the misconceptions and misrepresentations of Vietnam etched in the American psyche. The book’s intended broad audience, accessibility, and didactic potential proves tremendously important for a personal perspective on Vietnam activism. Fittingly, a snippet from I. F. Stone’s April 1965 *New York Review of Books* column describes Uhl’s work well: “What makes these books so timely, their message so urgent, is that they show the Vietnamese war in that aspect which is most fundamental for our own people—as a challenge to freedom of information and

therefore freedom of decision.”[5] Through his work, Uhl calls on us all to engage our past and question our present to enact a more socially sustainable future.

Notes

[1]. H. Bruce Franklin, “M.I.A.sma,” *The Nation*, May 10, 1993, 616-17.

[2]. Jerry Lembcke, “The Myth of the Spitting Antiwar Protestor,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2017.

[3]. Michael Uhl, *Vietnam Awakening* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 120.

[4]. Uhl, *Vietnam Awakening*, 124.

[5]. I. F. Stone, “Vietnam: An Exercise in Self-Delusion,” *New York Review of Books*, April 16, 1965.

Editorial note: This review has been updated to correct minor formatting issues.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

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