



Late Thoughts on an Old War: The Legacy of Vietnam

Philip Beidler

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Philip D. Beidler, who served as an armored cavalry platoon leader in Vietnam, sees less and less of the hard-won perspective of the common soldier in what America has made of that war. Each passing year, he says, dulls our sense of immediacy about Vietnam's costs, opening wider the temptation to make it something more necessary, neatly contained, and justifiable than it should ever become. Here Beidler draws on deeply personal memories to reflect on the war's lingering aftereffects and the shallow, evasive ways we deal with them.

Beidler brings back the war he knew in chapters on its vocabulary, music, literature, and film. His catalog of soldier slang reveals how finely a tour of Vietnam could hone one's sense of absurdity. His survey of the war's pop hits looks for meaning in the soundtrack many veterans still hear in their heads. Beidler also explains how "Viet Pulp" literature about snipers, tunnel rats, and other hard-core types has pushed aside masterpieces like Duong Thu Huong's *Novel without a Name*. Likewise we learn why the movie *The Deer Hunter* doesn't "get it" about Vietnam but why *Platoon* and *We Were Soldiers* sometimes nearly do.

As Beidler takes measure of his own wartime politics and morals, he ponders the divergent careers of such figures as William Calley, the army lieutenant whose name is synonymous with the civilian massacre at My Lai, and an old friend, poet John Balaban, a conscientious objector who performed alternative duty in Vietnam as a schoolteacher and hospital worker.

Beidler also looks at Vietnam alongside other conflicts—including the war on international terrorism. He once hoped, he says, that Vietnam had fractured our sense of providential destiny and geopolitical invincibility but now realizes, with dismay, that those myths are still with us. "Americans have always wanted their apocalypses," writes Beidler, "and they have always wanted them now."

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