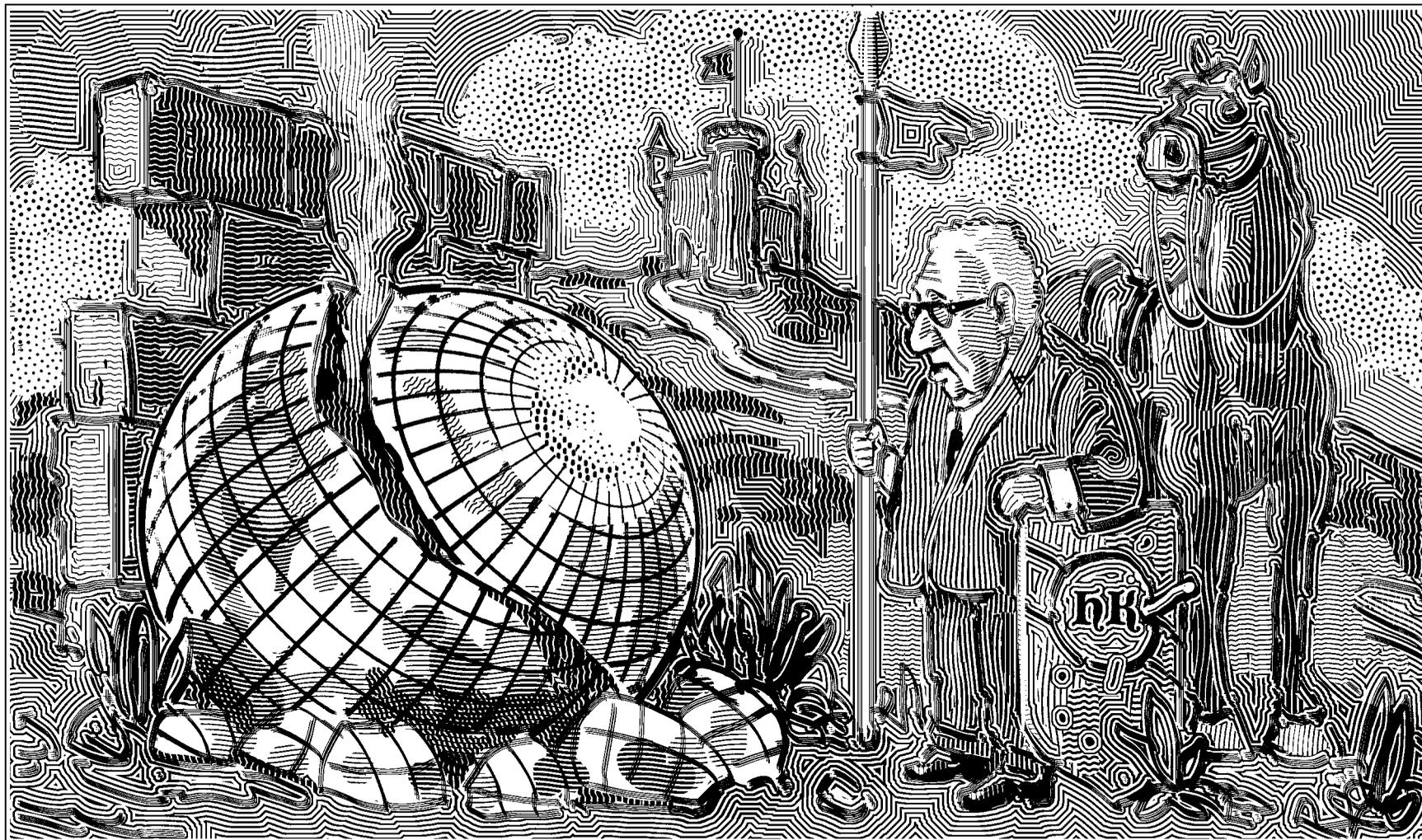


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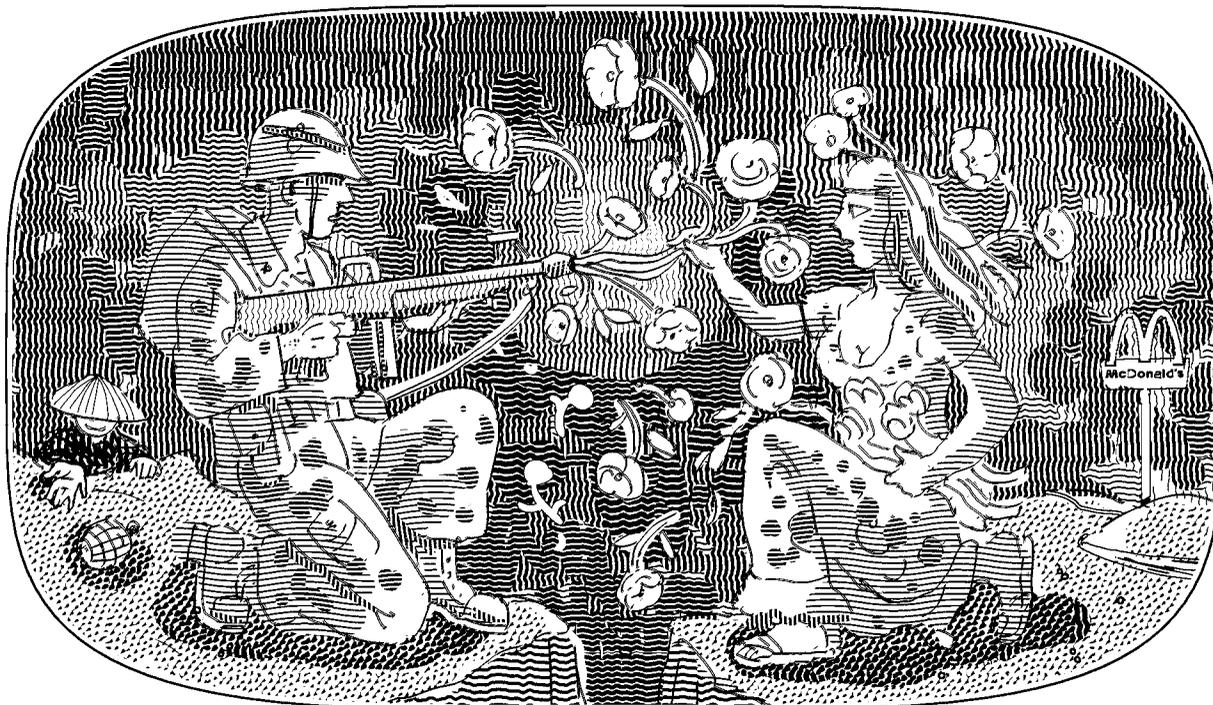
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Book Review by Christopher Caldwell

LETTING BYGONES BE BYGONES

American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity, by Christian G. Appy.
Viking, 416 pages, \$28.95



ON THE DAY AFTER THE UNITED States won the Gulf War in 1991, with the desert highway north of Kuwait City still strewn with charred Iraqi tanks, George H.W. Bush addressed a group of young visitors. “It’s a proud day for America,” the president said. “And, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” He was referring to a problem that had embarrassed the country since it fled Vietnam in defeat and disgrace almost two decades earlier. America claimed a role as the world’s leading democracy that required it to throw its weight around militarily. Yet in the wake of Vietnam, its democratic electorate—diffident, skeptical and repentant—refused to authorize such a role. That problem, Bush was saying, was solved.

Time proved him wrong. The president’s own son and successor, George W. Bush, launched a second war in Iraq a dozen years later that would come to resemble Vietnam in certain respects—its political utopianism, its strategic misjudgment, its ultimate failure. As all wars do, the younger Bush’s recast our understanding of previous engagements. The Gulf War, which in 1991 looked like a victory, now looks like a false augury in another de-

feat. The Vietnam syndrome was never really cured. It was in remission.

The shadow Vietnam casts over Americans’ sense of themselves is the subject of Christian Appy’s *American Reckoning*. In earlier books, Appy, a historian at the University of Massachusetts, has described the Vietnam war from several angles—Cold War ideology, the class aspects of the military conscription system, the memories of combatants on both sides. Now, he takes a moral perspective. For two-thirds of the book, he describes what America did wrong in Vietnam, in both senses of the word “wrong.” He then laments our culture’s response to the war, a response he believes has been marked more by self-pity than by self-examination. Appy wishes we could come to a different understanding of Vietnam. For reasons both good and bad, we cannot.

THE VIETNAM WAR WAS BUILT ON MIS-conceptions. In a sense, it was over before the U.S. entered it. Although the victory of Ho Chi Minh over the French in 1954 led to a U.N. partition, Vietnam was never as divided as it looked. Ho’s Communists would likely have won the national election that the peace accords envisioned, had

the U.S. permitted one. Ho drew on broad nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments, however big the eventual role of the Soviet Union in supplying weaponry (especially MiG fighters and anti-aircraft systems) and of China in supplying personnel (including troops after 1965). The South Vietnamese government, by contrast, would have crumbled without U.S. support. Its troops were battle-shy, outnumbered, and outgunned by a domestic (i.e., South Vietnamese) guerrilla insurgency supported by the North, whom Americans (but not the guerrillas themselves) called the Vietcong. Eighty percent of the 5 or 6 million tons of bombs dropped in the war fell on the South, not the North. The United States dropped more bombs on the territory of its putative ally than it had dropped on all its World War II enemies. The guerrillas’ supporters and suppliers in the North were relatively shielded, at least until the Nixon Administration, by Washington’s fear of rousing the North’s Chinese sponsors to intervene directly.

The war had a Through-the-Looking-Glass aspect from the start. Lyndon Johnson got congressional consent to bomb Vietnam during the 1964 presidential campaign, in order to “retaliate” for a naval incident in the Gulf



of Tonkin that had been provoked (as Congress would discover only later) by U.S. covert operations. The bombing, rationalized as an alternative to sending ground troops, made ground troops necessary, once the elections were over, in order to protect the perimeter of the airbases from which the bombers left. But then *those* troops were attacked. The “perimeter” was gradually extended to most of South Vietnam, which became the temporary home of 2.7 million mostly non-college-enrolled American youths. Their matriculating contemporaries pressed the case against the war back home.

LEADERS MADE THE CASE FOR WAR IN the language of optimism, technocracy, and progressivism—the very aspects of U.S. political culture that young Americans supposedly valued most. John F. Kennedy’s exhortation to students at the University of Michigan on the eve of the 1960 election (“How many of you who are going to be doctors are willing to spend your days in Ghana?”) has often been taken as a glorious harbinger of the establishment of the Peace Corps. Appy sees it as tied to a more aggressive impulse. A country willing to rescue backward foreigners from bilharzia would surely be no less zealous in rescuing them from Bolshevism. Brotherhood-of-man imperialism is never far from the old-fashioned, hard-edged kind, and generally exists only under its protection.

David Halberstam and other journalists who were young in those days saw Vietnam as part of an attempt to give a “new sense of purpose” to a postwar America grown flabby from consumerism and suburbanization. Halberstam’s Washington-focused *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) has become the canonical account of the country’s downward spiral into war and defeat. While grand in its scope and narrative energy, it was nonetheless sourced heavily by Kennedy and Johnson Administration bigwigs keen to protect their own and their bosses’ reputations. It thus shields the martyred president from his full measure of historical opprobrium. Subsequent historians have followed Halberstam’s lead, making of the war a more bipartisan blunder than it actually was. They note the decimation of the government’s top China experts, many of them targeted during the McCarthy era for having been “soft” on Mao Zedong’s 1949 revolution. They note that Richard Nixon, as president, escalated the bombing and widened the war into Laos and Cambodia, even as he extricated American soldiers. Today, many Americans accept as certitudes two speculations about what John F. Kennedy would have done had he lived: he would have passed the

civil rights legislation he never stopped hindering during his lifetime, and he would have halted the Vietnam war that he never stopped escalating.

IF KENNEDY’S CRUSADING MACHISMO lured the country into the jungles of Indochina, Lyndon Johnson’s can-do faith in government trapped it there. Many of LBJ’s biographers have been as eager to separate Vietnam from the rest of his agenda as JFK’s were. Halberstam is an exception, writing of Johnson’s ability to bully the Senate into giving him broad leeway after the Tonkin Gulf incident:

He was not berated for being a manipulator then, that term would come later. His ability to drive men to a program and policy beyond what they themselves considered wise was considered a national asset, since the men he was manipulating were largely old tired conservative Southern congressmen who headed committees and thus blocked progress.

Johnson’s modus operandi mixed falsehood, stealth, and vulgarity. “I’m going up her leg an inch at a time,” he told the skeptical South Dakota senator George McGovern, who was particularly worried that bombing might provoke the Chinese. “I’ll get to the snatch before they know what’s happening.” Johnson sounds petty and diabolical when Oval Office recordings and staff memoirs capture him speaking in this vein—in contrast to the “flawed giant” Lyndon Johnson who passed, among so many other things, Medicare and Medicaid and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts. But there were not two Lyndon Johnsons. The one who brought quotas to the Labor Department was the same one who brought Vietcong “body counts” to Ben Tre.

Johnson often complained that Congress would use the war as an excuse to underfund his Great Society programs, but he himself saw the two as complementary, not competitive. He frequently described the war as a New Deal-style project, even launching a Mekong River Redevelopment Commission. “I want to leave the footprints of America in Vietnam,” he said. “I want them to say, ‘When the Americans come, this is what they leave—schools, not long cigars.’ We’re going to turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley.” Daniel Patrick Moynihan and others in government were eager to use the military draft as an engine of upward mobility for blacks and the poor. If it were true that government knew better than its citizens what is good for them, a view burnished by Johnson’s 1964 landslide, it would be even more true when the world’s

most advanced country came into contact with backward peoples like the Vietnamese.

THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT IS OFTEN seen as the archetype of 1960s generational protest—a model for other clashes over race, sex, free speech, and poverty. This is a false impression. Most confrontations of the time pitted customs deemed bigoted or inefficient against the energetic application of up-to-date principles, undertaken by bureaucratic or corporate visionaries. Viewed this way, it was the war itself, not the opposition to it, that was the modern thing: the “leading experts” were on the war’s side, at least in the beginning. This impressed people. Halberstam grudgingly called Robert McNamara, the automobile executive who would serve both Kennedy and Johnson as secretary of defense and coordinate their bombing strategies, “a remarkable man in a remarkable era”—this on the strength of a career that had as its high point a marketing campaign for the Ford Falcon. In retrospect, McNamara appears a dime-a-dozen American type. His bamboozling of the American public with the gospel of “systems analysis” will remind readers of the present-day faith in “big data,” and McNamara himself is the forebear of today’s too-seldom-contradicted executive busybodies, from Mark Zuckerberg to Howard Schultz.

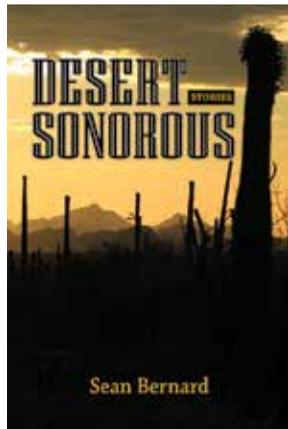
Domestic reform and military adventurism were impossible to disentangle—each helped legitimize the other. By the summer of 1966 it was evident that the war and social spending were set to open up a vast deficit that would make inflation inevitable. Johnson, with his cabinet’s help, bought time by falsifying the budget. A year later, McNamara, speaking privately to Tom Wicker of the *New York Times*, was unrepentant: “Do you really think,” McNamara asked, “that if I had estimated the cost of the war correctly, Congress would have given any more for schools and housing?”

As Halberstam writes of McNamara:

[S]omething about him bothered many of his colleagues. It was not just Vietnam, but his overall style. It was what made him so effective: the total belief in what he was doing, the willingness to knock down anything that stood in his way, the relentless quality, so that other men, sometimes wiser, more restrained, would be pushed aside.

We begin to see how Vietnam became not just a foreign-policy or a military problem but a social problem as well. The arguments over it, like our own arguments over war, took place against the backdrop of a fragmenting consen-

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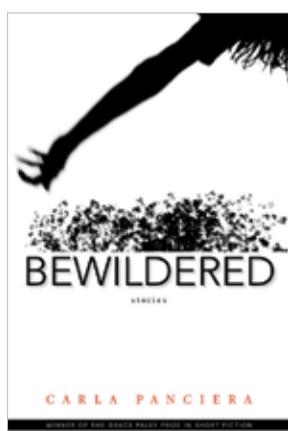
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sus. When all the metaphysical structures are being knocked down, the advantage goes to a person like McNamara, a person whose ego makes him a metaphysic unto himself. The least introspective person becomes the most powerful. Strongly felt urges—sex, money, fame, power—roll over considered judgments. On top of that, the Kennedy assassination brought Democratic supermajorities and a sense that to oppose the new president's agenda was to dishonor the slain president's memory, which Johnson quickly recognized as his greatest political asset. The killing in Dallas thus removed many incentives to self-restraint and self-doubt. Asked in 1976 if he had failed in Vietnam, Kennedy and Johnson's national security adviser, the former Harvard dean McGeorge Bundy, replied, "Yes, I did. But I'm not going to waste the rest of my life feeling guilty about it."

GEORGE H.W. BUSH'S VIEW OF THE "Vietnam syndrome" was that the war's errors led Americans into an excessive prudence. Appy's view is that the war's crimes led Americans to a justified revulsion—or at least ought to have. The first two thirds of his book touch on outrages: Kennedy's "strategic hamlet" program, in which ancient villages were ordered evacuated and razed, driving peasants off the land and into the arms of urban Communist parties; the assassination of the ruling Diem family in a 1963 coup to which Kennedy gave the go-ahead; the widespread use in bombing of a gelatinized gasoline called napalm; the measuring of progress by "body count" rather than territory seized; the millions of Vietnamese dead; the My Lai massacre. Viewing the 1972 photos of Kim Phuc, the 9-year-old survivor of a napalm attack, running amidst other crying children from the village of Trang Bang with her clothes burnt off her, made Americans feel party to a ruthlessness that few of them associated with their own country. The U.S. killed 3 million Vietnamese in a war that it never saw fit to declare, and for which no clear *casus belli* was ever enunciated. While Appy never makes the point explicitly, he implies that America should treat Vietnam as it does slavery and segregation, or as Germany does the Holocaust—through memory, commemoration, and atonement.

Nothing could be further from the way the war is dealt with in popular culture. Appy is especially bothered by those Vietnam films of the 1980s—*Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo II* (1985)—which sought a fictional redemptive cause (such as the rescuing of one's buddies) to superimpose on a morally dubious real-life war. He objects, reasonably enough, to a 1991 law that ordered the

black-and-white POW/MIA flag flown over federal buildings, on the grounds that it "gave the POW/MIA emblem an official national status never conferred on any flag other than the American." And he regrets the cheapening of the word "hero," which once was conferred only on rare men of daring, but now applies to anyone who ever wears a uniform for any purpose. "By the 1980s," Appy writes, "mainstream culture and politics promoted the idea that the deepest shame related to the Vietnam War was not the war itself, but America's failure to embrace its military veterans."

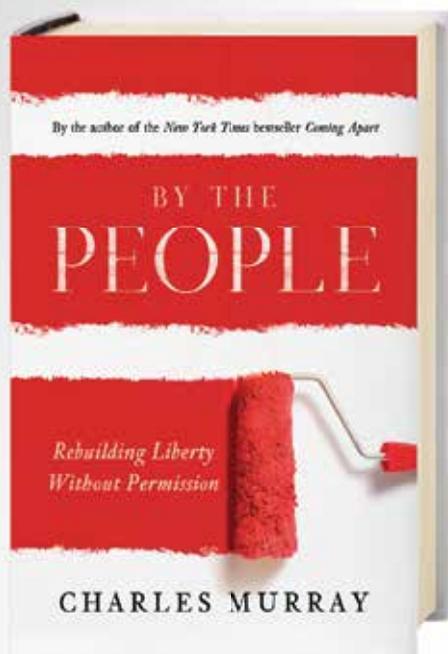
THE VIETNAM GENERATION WAS NOT made up of cynics, malingerers, or agnostics. Appy describes it as "one of the most patriotic ever raised." In 1967, 42% of Americans said they would support using nuclear weapons if that would win the war. The heroism displayed in Vietnam, from the first major post-escalation battle at Ia Drang in 1965 to the infernal multi-week siege of Khe Sanh in the wake of the Tet Offensive in 1968, matches anything in the annals of American combat. Certainly there was misbehavior and indiscipline among the soldiers, particularly as the war wore on. According to the Army there were 126 "fraggings" (intentional maimings or killings of officers) in 1969, 271 in 1970, and 333 in 1971.

Under the circumstances, one might have expected far worse. Soldiers told they were fighting for the Vietnamese people arrived in country expecting to be loved and supported by them. They weren't. One infantry lieutenant who had interviewed villagers day after day for a year recalled in a television interview: "I never once heard a Vietnamese say, 'Don't go down that trail, there's a mine.'"

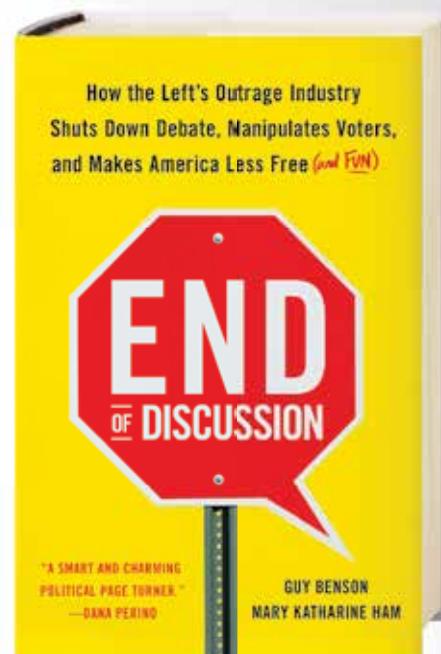
The sense of betrayal must have been unfathomable. The glorious victory in Europe and Japan that had made America master of the world was still in the foreground of young men's imaginations; the near-debacle in Korea had been airbrushed out of the national memory. This is what makes the Vietnam war not just a defeat but a tragedy: the bravery of the soldiers had the same root as the hubris of their leaders. It is quite natural that the GI "grunt" of the era has become an American archetype, like the Minuteman or the Forty-Niner or the Okie or the flapper, and that Americans have been obsessed in retrospect with the fate of their own soldiers, even to the exclusion of other things.

Appy's case that America's conscience should be more troubled than it is by the war is strong. But in his unwillingness to hear the Vietnam-era military effort spoken well of in *any* way, he becomes unreasonable. Most

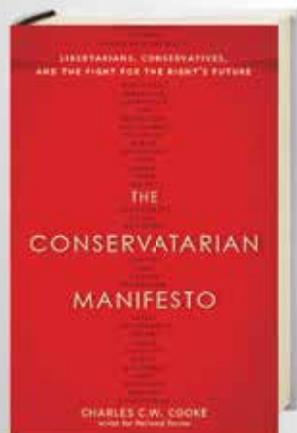
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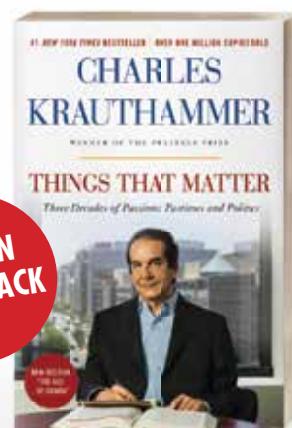


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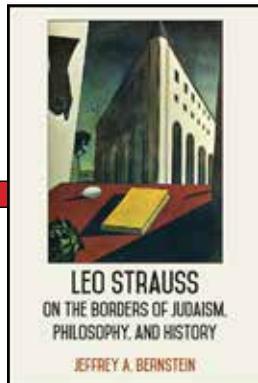


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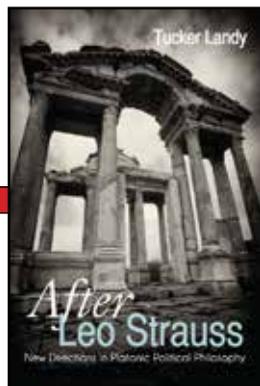
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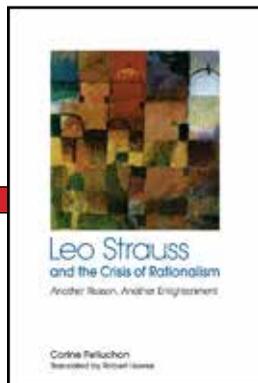
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Americans were stirred by the close of Ronald Reagan's 1981 inaugural speech—in which the new president gestured across the Mall to the crosses and stars of David on the slopes of Arlington National Cemetery, and paid tribute to men whose lives ended “in places called Belleau Wood, The Argonne, Omaha Beach, Salerno, and halfway around the world on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Pork Chop Hill, the Chosin Reservoir, and in a hundred rice paddies and jungles of a place called Vietnam.” Appy, though, is appalled by Reagan's words: “He simply attached Vietnam to a long tradition of heroic military service, yet one more place where brave Americans had died for their country,” Appy writes. “There was no need to question the righteousness or consequences of any specific war.”

Why should there have been? Soldiers are certainly responsible for their country's righteousness in their capacity as citizens. And in combat they must obey the code of military conduct. But the battlefield is not a place for self-expression or reflections on righteousness, the way ballot boxes are. It is a place for service. What is honored about soldiers in statuary and oratory is often independent of the war aims of politicians and the wisdom of commanders. We know that Reagan believed military service a duty, not an endorsement of the regime to which it was offered. In 1985, on the 40th anniversary of the Allied victory in Europe, he attended, at the request of German chancellor Helmut Kohl, a memorial ceremony at a military graveyard where Nazi soldiers were buried.

FOR A BOOK SO FOCUSED ON THE VIETNAM war as an unjust cause, *American Reckoning* pays little attention to the war's context—as part of America's Cold War struggle against the ideology of Communism in principle and the Communist powers in practice. This is a failing the book shares with the majority of Vietnam war histories. Today, we can see that Cold War ideology was never as important a factor as the war's protagonists said it was at the time. But their belief in its importance was sincere. Once the U.S. was engaged in Vietnam, U.S. leaders found themselves in a contest of prestige that made the costs of ending the war seem prohibitively high.

We know that the Cold War justifications for the war were exaggerated because the definitive defeat of Communism in 1989 has done nothing to dim enthusiasm for Vietnam-like wars in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. We are frequently urged to begin the ritual of threats and bombing raids that would lead to similar conflicts in places like Syria. (Nor has the Vietnamese

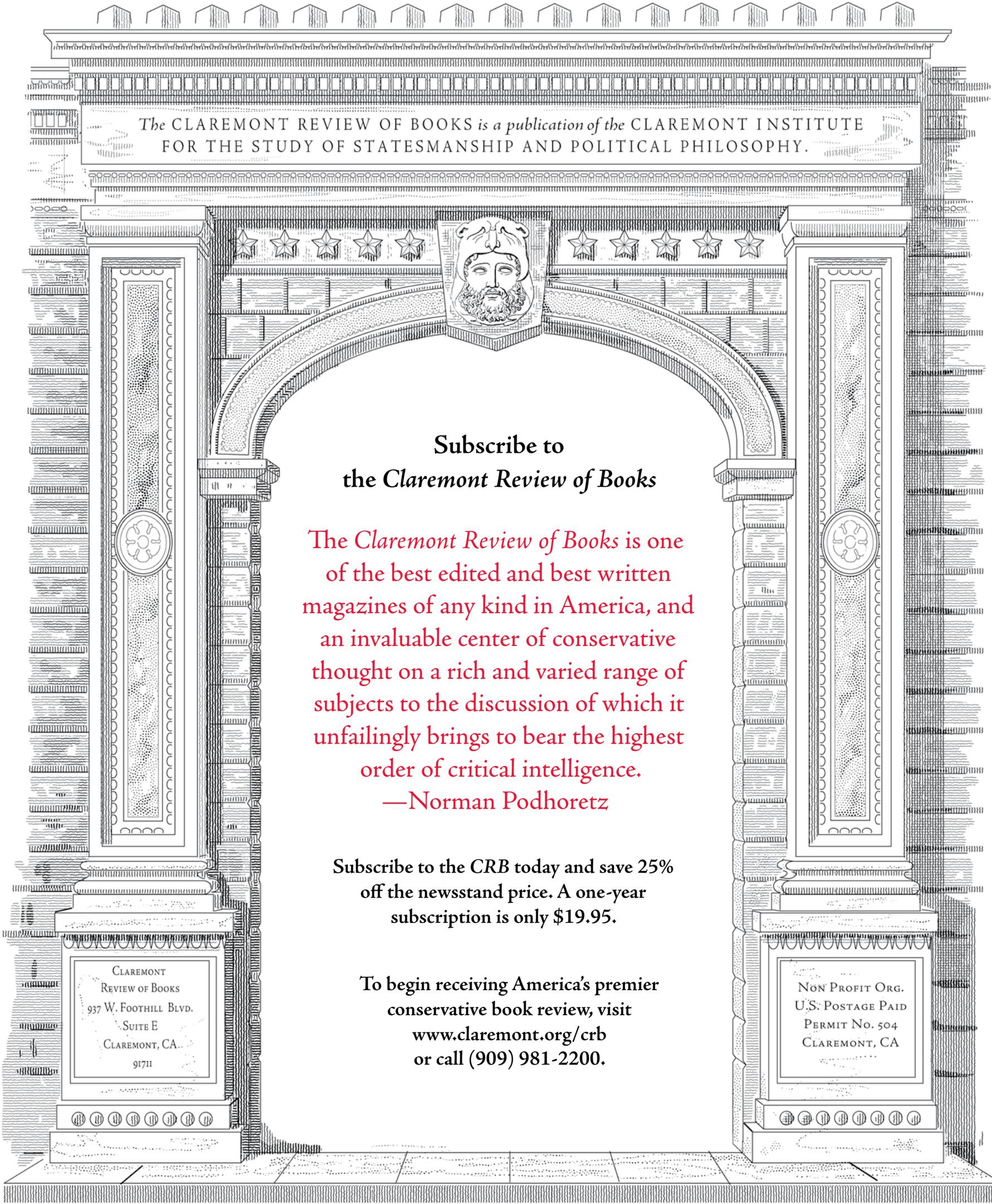
regime had the slightest difficulty integrating itself into a global capitalist economy.) Our later engagements are not as different from Vietnam as we think, and Vietnam does not deviate as widely from the normal American way of war as we used to believe. The lessons our statesmen took from Vietnam involve not *whether* to wage such wars but rather *how* to wage them so as to risk a minimum in casualties and prestige.

REAGAN, AS IT HAPPENS, WAS THE president who absorbed these lessons best. When jihadists killed 299 U.S. and French soldiers with a truck bomb at Beirut airport in 1983, the media and military pressure to widen the U.S. mission there were even greater than those Lyndon Johnson faced after the Pleiku raids of 1964. There are wonderful passages in Richard Reeves's 2006 biography, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination*, about the president's advisers operating under the magnetic pull of escalation. Yet Reagan found the will to remove the troops rather than risk a regional conflict.

It is hard for a nation to learn lessons from a lost war. A lost war requires atonement but it also requires national reconciliation. The former is a matter of remembering, the latter of forgetting. If a country is content to depart the stage of history, as were Germany after World War II, white South Africa after apartheid, and even Russia for a few brief years after the Cold War, there is almost no limit to the honesty it can bring to bear on its past. But countries that plan to exercise power in the future have never behaved as if they had the option of constant self-interrogation. For U.S. political leaders after Vietnam, just as for Charles de Gaulle in France after World War II, reconciliation has meant letting bygones be bygones. Gerald Ford cautioned against “refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned.” Appy is angered by any such attempt to put reconciliation in the place of reckoning.

One man's imperial ambition is another's imperial responsibility. The former always comes dressed as the latter, and only future generations can reliably distinguish the two. Before the U.S. began bombing the Balkans in the 1990s, one of its riskier post-Vietnam ventures, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asked General Colin Powell: “What are you saving this superb military for, if we can't use it?” It is a perennial question. Until American leaders stop asking it, the country will steer clear of the confessional.

Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at the Weekly Standard.



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