

***Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War.* Edited by Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013. Softcover: 334pp.**

*Four Decades On* is an especially apt title for this book of reflections edited by Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini. It is forty years since the last US combat troops departed South Vietnam. In that interval, the memoirs of participants have dominated the discourse on the “Vietnam experience” or, from the perspective of the Vietnamese, the “American experience”. The generals and colonels have passed on and the young men and women who played bit roles in this most tragic of wars are now in their late sixties and seventies. Fittingly, as the torch of scholarship is passed from participants to a younger generation, this volume begins and ends with contributions by two who were there.

Ngo Vinh Long was in the early 1970s a Harvard graduate student and unofficial spokesman for the disparate elements that collectively made up a “third force” in South Vietnam, neither Communists nor supporters of the Thieu regime. Long argues that Thieu’s harsh repression of his nationalist critics as the Americans were leaving destroyed all hope of a negotiated and pluralist end to the conflict. In Long’s memoir, the US government is cast at best as Thieu’s feckless enabler, at worst as blindly indifferent to the fate of those non-Communists who sought reconciliation with Hanoi. Ironically, while accepting the general accuracy of Long’s detailed account, it remains very hard to believe that under any circumstances a pluralistic “government of national concord” was in Vietnam’s future. We know too well how the Vietnamese Communist Party exploited and then destroyed or marginalized its nationalist rivals first while consolidating power in the north and again — as recounted, for example, by Huy Duc in his remarkable *Ben Thang Cuoc* and *Giai Phong* — in the south after 1975.

H. Bruce Franklin, a US Air Force officer during the Second Indochina War, turns a withering eye on the popular myth of US prisoners languishing in Hanoi’s dungeons long after its victory in the south. He makes a strong case that this durable fantasy delayed the Paris Accords and later posed a substantial obstacle to the re-establishment of relations between the United States and reunified Vietnam. Franklin is less convincing when he accuses Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, Senator John Kerry, the State Department, the Department of Defense, etc., of pandering to

the Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) lobby. Franklin is self-serving when he complains that a 1991 Senate committee “refused to permit [his] testimony about how the POW/MIA issue was created and used by the [US] government to legitimize hostilities against Viet Nam from 1969 on”. In fact the “Rambo syndrome” became a potent right wing issue, one that mainstream Washington sought for years to dodge, domesticate and defuse — an objective that was only achieved by enlisting Hanoi’s cooperation in a high profile search effort.

Essays by Walter Hixson and Alexander Bloom address the impact of “Vietnam” on postwar America. In a measured way, Bloom recounts post-1975 efforts by Americans to understand what “went wrong”. He traces the general collapse of belief in the fundamental decency of the US political system and, he says, in the notion “that the people of the world await a chance to replicate the American experience”. True enough, but if that is so, why has Washington blundered into disastrous interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq? Bloom does not say, but Hixson does. He finds the answer in the “successful cultural project” of repackaging “Vietnam” as a noble venture undone by poor strategy, liberal reportage and antiwar radicals.

The balance of *Four Decades On* features the work of a new generation of Vietnam scholars, three anthropologists, three professors of English literature and a historian. It is a mixed bag.

Scott Laderman takes on “the brief but sordid history of the US-Vietnamese ‘catfish wars’”. He provides a revealing story of the depths to which US producers will go to thwart foreigners’ efforts to market a cheaper and, some contend, better tasting frozen catfish fillet to American consumers.

Heonik Kwon, Christina Schwenkel and Diane Niblack Fox are cultural anthropologists who have conducted field work in Vietnam in the *doi moi* era, *i.e.*, after Vietnam opened up circa 1990 to Western markets and a smattering of academic inquiry. Kwon’s essay aims at disentangling both in the United States and Vietnam the “contradictory identities” of the war as an element of Cold War history and as a post-colonial conflict. A lot of the sort of theory that is obligatory in PhD theses is inflicted on the reader before Kwon presents fascinating material on how former Viet Cong soldiers, now community leaders in villages near Danang, have taken the lead in reviving rituals that honour villagers who fell while fighting for the losing side equally with the “revolutionary martyrs”. From Hanoi’s perspective, that is still a highly subversive idea, yet one that is so in tune with Vietnamese communal tradition that the regime evidently has chosen not to obstruct it at the local level.

Schwenkel also addresses the ways in which ordinary Vietnamese address the problem of the vast population of “wandering souls”, i.e., unidentified and unconsecrated war dead. Her research — the product of visits to a large cemetery for “revolutionary martyrs” and a neglected cemetery housing South Vietnamese Army personnel, both near Ho Chi Minh City, and to the Khe Sanh battlefield in central Vietnam — reinforces and extends Kwon’s efforts: there is a powerful cultural impulse to ignore the artificial dichotomy ordained by the party-state in favour of rituals that embrace and propitiate *all* these unsettled spirits, “transform[ing] traumas into dynamic topographies of recovery, ... of reconciliatory gestures that hold the promise of a less divisive and more integrated future”.

Fox takes on the challenge of explaining the different realities embedded in the controversies over the impact of dioxin contaminants in defoliants on human health. “If telling a human story risks confusion, leaving the story of Agent Orange to science and politics risks diminishing our understanding and our humanity”, Fox begins, and proceeds to summarize a great deal of data with objectivity uncommon in discussion of this vexed subject.

Charles Waugh asks, with particular reference to the controversy over bauxite mining in Vietnam’s central highlands, if after years of environmental degradation in the name of economic development, the pendulum may at last be swinging back towards traditional notions of balance among man, the spirit world and nature in a constructed but sustainable environment.

Finally, *Forty Years On* contains essays that take on the legacy of the Vietnam War in literature (Viet Thanh Nguyen) and Vietnamese cinema (Miriam Lam). Both, and particularly Viet’s contribution on how authors’ compassion and cosmopolitanism is leading to a more nuanced perspective on the war, contain more structuralist jargon than this reviewer likes. Nevertheless, Lam provides a well-crafted summary of the historical development of movie making in Vietnam, ending by considering the problem of producing films that appeal to a globalizing, increasingly sophisticated audience yet honour (or at least give lip service to) the party-state’s “rhetoric of its postsocialist economic needs”.

In summary, there are a lot of good bits in *Forty Years On*, though overall it is a rather uneven read. But those seriously interested in plumbing where Vietnam is headed or where the United States has been will want to have it on a handy bookshelf.

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