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Book review: Cultural Battles: The Meaning of the Viet Nam-USA War

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McGREGOR, Peter (1998)

Cultural Battles: The Meaning of the Viet Nam - USA War.

SCAM Publications, Melbourne.

ISBN 0-9585549-0-0 pp 214 rrp: \$12 + \$3 postage from Visions of Freedom, PO Box 13, Enmore, NSW, 2042.

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Peter McGregor's collection of essays on the Viet Nam - USA War (1955-75) and its aftermath is enlightening and moving. It is also annoying and repetitive as one's assumptions about the conflict are continually challenged. Why USA War, you ask? Wasn't Australia there too? Yes, it was, but only as a junior partner. The death toll tells part of the story: about 500 Australians killed, 58,000 Americans, but Vietnamese north and south, civilian and military, somewhere between 1.5 million and 3 million. Why Viet Nam? Because that's the way the locals spell it.

McGregor's viewpoint is that of one who joined the Australian Committee of Responsibility for Children of Vietnam and later became involved in the anti-war movement. He has not attempted to rewrite the essays, to weld them into a consistent narrative, other than to add "Afterthoughts" at the end of some of the 15 chapters. The illustrations by Joanna Trainor are a powerful addition to the text.

The essays are arranged in date order, 1976 to 1977, then a conclusion: "War crimes and reconciliation". McGregor concludes that Viet Nam won the war but lost the peace. It was never paid the compensation of \$US 3.25 billion, promised by the USA as part of the Paris Peace Agreement. The post-war US embargo/boycott was a huge hurdle to overcome, also the unexploded bombs, mines, chemical defoliates, maimed citizens, land which could not be brought back into production. McGregor does not say this, but the system of government, systemic corruption and greater curbs than in the west on free speech, have contributed to the less-than-glowing example of Viet Nam to the rest of the underdeveloped world.

Chapter 6, "The Military and the Media", and 12, "The Viet Nam-US War and the Australian Media", make bitter reading for journalists. We could have done more to expose the lies, McGregor feels. We accepted censorship and indulged in self-censorship: "Mainstream news media (as during the 1991 Gulf War) were overwhelmingly and consistently supportive of Western

intervention." Far from stabbing the military in the back, our media "significantly undermined the content and substance of formally democratic societies" (p. 74).

Vietnamese people have a culture of forgiveness; they want to put the past behind them. Better understanding of what really happened will aid reconciliation and this book is just what is needed. A more open system of government, which is gradually evolving in Viet Nam, will help too, as will more cultural exchanges. Western journalists are made welcome - as long as they don't write too many critical and negative reports.

Footnote:

All Viet media are state-owned. Viet editors have been instructed to expose corruption as part of the government's campaign against social evils linked to the new market economy, but not to look too far up the tree. Nguyen Hoang Linh, editor of the business newspaper Doanh Nghiep, was arrested on October 8 1997 on charges of violating the laws relating to national secrets. His series of articles alleged that customs officials had been involved in corruption during the purchase of four patrol boats. "Local journalists said his arrest was intended to warn other editors that there were limits to coverage of official corruption, especially when the allegations involve the security forces." - Far Eastern Economic Review, Oct. 23, 1997. Check out another website also on this: <http://www.vinsight.org/1997news/1020.htm> ■