Democratic Communiqué

Volume 17 | Issue 1 Article 5

3-1-2001

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5

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Review by: Sheila Hobson

Peter McGregor, lecturer in media and social studies at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, Australia, begins the concluding chapter in his book of retrospective essays, *Cultural Battles: The Meaning of the Viet Nam* – USA War, by quoting from Sweet Honey in the Rock's "I Remember, I Believe."

> "I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down
> I don't know how my father stood his ground
> I don't know how my people survived slavery
> I do remember, that's why I believe."

This idea of memory serving as witness to the horrors of the past is the dominant theme of activist-academic McGregor's interesting and often passionate collection of essays. *Cultural* Battles offers a welcomed, personal non-US view of the war from 1976 through 1997.

McGregor in 1967 at 20 faced the possibility of conscription, but escaped the draft when his birthday was not

chosen in the national lottery. McGregor began his anti-war education by joining the humanitarian aid group, Australian Committee of Responsibility for the Children of Viet Nam. By the '70s he had "evolved to an anarchist position, under the influence of Socialisme ou Barbarie, Solidarity (UK) and the Self Management Group (Brisbane)...." (The first essay in the book is a Self Management Group leaflet handed out at a May Day Public Meeting Sydney 1976 to commemorate one year since the defeat of the USA in Viet Nam.)

By 1988 as a result of his involvement in the 1987 Viet Nam vet-organized national conference held at Macquarie University, McGregor was part of a delegation of mostly Australian vets to Viet Nam. Chapter Two is an historicized account of that journey. It is out of this personal evolution that this book of essays, which offers a revealing glimpse of Australian events and viewpoints, grew.

These essays, which have appeared previously in other publications (mostly in Australia) span from 1976 through 1997, address the continued reality that

> Because the war was so controversial and because it seemed the West was defeated, battles for the war's ideological meaning and status have continued - escalated? - long after the fighting ended in 1975.

In addition McGregor says that the project of this work recognizes that:

> Knowledge, providing understanding - sorting out the politics of the war and exposing the deceptions - is a prerequisite to any meaningful reconciliation, and the corresponding compensation that remains overdue to the peoples of Viet Nam - of Indochina in general - to their societies and cultures.

Hence in Chapter Two McGregor raises the question if the so-called conciliation after the war wasn't (isn't?) more a case of retribution as he points out that past and continued

suffering of the Vietnamese people is a direct responsibility of the US and its allies, including Australia termed a "junior partner." Therefore, he queries "...should countries like the US and Australia practice retribution or reconciliation towards their victims?"

Until there is acknowledgment that the Western, US-led intervention was unjustified, "they are unlikely to accept the responsibility to help rebuild from the 'blood and rubble' they inflicted. To heal the scars of 25 million bomb craters, of 17,000 killed since the war ended by unexploded bombs, of tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians 'Missing in Action'...."

He points out that US lack of commitment to reconstruction is reflected in the fact that it has yet to pay the $3.25 billion promised in the January 1973 Paris Peace Agreement. (But then too if the UN is to serve as an example, the US is not one to pay its "bills" or to honor its financial commitments unless its "will be done.")

Chapter Three critically accounts the reactions and consequences in Australia to filmmaker Kennedy Miller's TV miniseries, Vietnam. The series used the lives and experiences of the four-member Godard family from 1964 to 1972 to invoke the wider experiences of the nation during this period from the introduction of conscription, the Menzies' government commitment of combat troops to the Whitlam government, the end of conscription and Australia's commitment to the war.

McGregor frames his discussion of "Vietnam" in the media theory of Fisk and Harley's "Reading Television," (1978) and their notion of "the bardic storytelling function" of TV. Its three aspects being according to McGregor: "to articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus of reality about the nature of reality; to implicate the individual members of the culture into its dominant value system; and to celebrate, explain, interpret and justify the doings of the culture's individual representatives in the world out there."

McGregor challenges what he thinks is the series' major weakness, historical accuracy "... in this attempt to build a politics of national reconciliation around the metaphor

Democratic Communique, Vol. 17, 2021, Iss. 1
of nation as family." He as well examines and responds to some of Australian theorist Stuart Cunningham's views on the Kennedy Miller work that hold that "some representations are inherently more valid than others" and that in its bardic function the Kennedy Miller TV history "implies no one political or ideological position but a multiplication or historicisation of them."

In an updated afterthought McGregor opines that compared to US Viet Nam films of the time (1987) the Kennedy Miller film "was a much more adequate historical reconstruction."

Chapter Four, "English Language News in Vietnam", is a 1991 report on the Vietnam News Agency (VNA) in Hanoi and the expansion of its English-language publications, most notably *Vietnam Weekly* and *Vietnam News*, which report both national news of the Indochina region as well as international news. The weekly has since become a cultural and news review magazine. One current section, A Matter of Conscience, features US GIs who protested or resisted while in the military.

"Four Hours in My Lai," Chapter Five, reports on the UK documentary and its "reconstruction of the massacre by the USA Army's Charlie Company of all the habitants of My Lai village in (South) Vietnam over four hours on March 1968....The video's technique of giving multiple points-or view allows a plausible and complex, but compelling coherent, overview to emerge...."

The multiple points-of-view include those GIs who refused Calley's orders, and those like helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson who rescued Vietnamese civilians and ordered his crew to turn their weapons on US GIs should they attempt to harm those civilians. In an update McGregor notes that Thompson and two of his crew were only recognized for their act of conscience in 1998 at a ceremony commemorating My Lai at the Washington Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Chapter Six, "The Military and the Media," traces the decidedly Dr. Strangelove doings of an April, 1991 international conference, Defence & Media in Time of a Limited Conflict, held in Brisbane under the auspices of Queensland University

of Technology (QUT).

The true agenda of the conference which "...was allegedly concerned with the rejection within western nations, of any limitations - in times of war - upon the freedom of the press in their duty to inform the public, & in turn upon the public's right to know...." is revealed. McGregor states:

> However, this was merely a smokescreen for the conferences' actual and ominous emphasis upon how to control and censor information - via the news media - as a means of selling (Western) public on wars that otherwise may be hard to justify....

In other words, it was a case of the now familiar and specious cant that an uncensored media undermined the Western war efforts. But not surprisingly, the established Australian press (not unlike the vast majority of the established Western press) was (and continues to be) more ally than foe to the military (especially the US military) during its reporting of the Viet Nam war.

> The empirical record shows that the mainstream news media - in the USA, Australia, etc. - during the Vietnam war (as during the Gulf War), were overwhelmingly and consistently supportive of western intervention.

In a later essay, "The Viet Nam/USA War & the Australian Media," McGregor explores in further detail the "shared rhetoric" of the Australian and US press in their support of the war. In this essay he retraces some of the discussion generated by Chomsky and Herman in their 1979 work, *The Political Economy of Human Rights.*

In addition, he reiterates the Australians press's support of US war policy (especially in the early years of the war - the 60s) in its parroting of US State Department and Pentagon papers and sources. Notably, placing the issue in a nutshell, McGregor quotes Australian scholar R. Triffin from his *The War the Media Lost* (1990):

> The debates about an oppositional press are greatly overdrawn in America, but in Australia it would be lubricious even to raise the issue. The Australian news media lost the war of trying to cover Vietnam. The political irresponsibility of being a junior ally combined with the majority of the Australian press's wholehearted support for the government produced an acquiescent, unquestioning media, which failed to challenge the assumptions which led to tragedy & failure.

As McGregor implies, the Western hegemonic twins are the military and the established media. And as he points out later the Australian press freely quoted verbatim from the Pentagon Papers often without attribution, thus continuing to pass on the big lies (i.e., the domino theory) that lead to the bloody continuation of the war long beyond its "logical" conclusion.

In the essay, "Rambo Rules: the Viet Nam War, By Other Means, Continues," McGregor discusses how reconciliation has been turned to retribution long after the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement especially through the Nixon-Perot-driven MIA/POW issue (actively advanced from 1969 - 1993). Using the issue of so-called lack of accounting for supposed MIAs/POWS the US was able to continue to prosecute a long-lost war by not paying the promised $3.25 billion for national reconstruction. As an interesting aside: as recently as 1993 the Australian Keating government was still raising the issue of US MIAs with Viet Nam officials, even though McGregor reports that well over 10 years previously Australia has been fully satisfied that no Australian MIAs/POWs remained in Viet Nam. He offers this as yet another example of the Australian complicity in US Viet Nam policy.

(Obviously, the spectre of Viet Nam MIAs/POWs, while not overtly referred to these days, was with us during recent US presidential campaign season in the form of Sen. John McCain.)

The Australian connection in the MIA/POW issue, according to McGregor, was Stephen Morris, a researcher who

in his work widely disseminated a Russian-language document published in April 1993 in the *New York Times* that purported that well over 600 POWs remained in Viet Nam. Among other ramifications, Morris' continued referencing to the document directly resulted in the IMF delay in clearing Viet Nam arrears thus delaying loans to be used for national reconstruction and primary health care.

Oddly enough the document was first spoken of by Boris Yeltsin on NBC in June of 1992, though only days before he had denied any such document. In attempt to make "sense" to this convoluted episode, it should be noted that McGregor reveals that at the writing of the essay Morris who had immigrated to the US in 1976 was a fellow at Harvard's Russian Research Center. In addition, Morris "had been a prominent anti-Communist and supporter of the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom, whose journal QUADRANT, was funded secretly by the CIA."

The essay continues in detail to unweave the web of deception so haphazardly but effectively spun around the emotionally heated MIA/POWs issue and appropriately trotted out from every US administration from Nixon to Clinton to "legitimate economic and political warfare" against Viet Nam. McGregor's concludes:

> That there is no evidence to support that Viet Nam withheld repatriation of MIAs/POWs That in fact the Vietnamese took extraordinary measures to guarantee their accounting and that "The POW/MIA myth became a primary symptom & cause of a dangerous national pathology in the US."

Quite a few of the essays, as mentioned, in McGregor's collection are reviews of documentary films (mainly from the UK and Australia) set around the war. Many of these films attempt with various levels of success to report from a multi-faceted point of view, and especially to bring a Vietnamese perspective to the discussion. One of particular note is: *Long Tan: the Survivors' Account.* In his essay McGregor

recounts the August 1966 battle of Long Tan in Phuoc Tuy province in the south where the ATF (Australian Task Force) was stationed.

McGregor says that this was the turning point for the war/police action for the ATF. It was the first and the last major battle between the ATF and the Viet Cong. The film made by the University of Southern Queensland interviews participants from both sides. McGregor concludes that despite this effort the film remains "one-sided and militaristic and it may contribute more to the regeneration of the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) legend than to an understanding of the Second IndoChina War..."

Despite the obvious heroics of Australian troops the bitter reality is that they, like US troops, upon return had problems claiming benefits and recognition because the Australian government later determined that the Viet Nam war was a "police action," yet another undeclared war whose bitter aftertaste will continue for yet future generations in the West and of course in Viet Nam in particular and Indochina in general.

This essay offers some other perspectives to what most in the West continue to think of as a "purely American show" (my quotes). Lest we forget, Australia committed over 8500 troops to the Viet Nam effort.

Finally, in ending the series of essays in *Cultural Battles*, McGregor casts a broader net to remind us that being witnesses to memory, to the crimes and injustices of war and to humanity's persistent and determined inhumanity to humanity, is a continued project for those who profess to be believers in and memorists to historical justice.

From the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission to the Australian Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody to David Harris' 1996 *Our War: What We Did in Vietnam, & What It Did to Us*, a full reckoning is called for if the past is to be reconciled. McGregor says:

> My collection of essays instances the use of experience and memory to resist the project to cripple the meaning of the war: I do remember, that's why I believe.

This slim but moving volume succeeds in instigating those memories anew. And I too will always remember and therefore continue to believe. La luta continua!

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New York City, 2000

Democratic Communiqué, Vol. 17 [2021], Iss. 1, Art. 5