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An interview with CHRISTIAN APPY

CHRISTIAN APPY is best known for his two books dealing with the Vietnam war, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (Penguin, 2004), and *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993). His work on *Patriots*, which he calls "the most challenging and rewarding work of my life," took him throughout Vietnam and the United States, talking to more than 350 people about their memories of that long and bitterly divisive war. The result is an oral history that stretches from the summer of 1945, when Americans first parachuted into northern Vietnam, to April 30, 1975, when the last U.S. helicopter flew off the roof of the American Embassy annex in Saigon. He spoke to the ISR's JOE ALLEN.

Joe Allen, a member of Teamsters Local 705 in Chicago, is author of a three-part ISR series on the history of the Vietnam War that can be found at www.isreview.org.

YOUR BOOK *Working-Class War* documents the overwhelmingly working-class nature of the American military during the Vietnam War. What motivated you to write it?

PART OF the motivation came from growing up in Westport, Connecticut—a wealthy, white suburb where I didn't know a single person who fought in Vietnam. The class inequality was obvious, but in the 1960s I was only vaguely aware of it. I turned eighteen in 1973, the year the draft ended, and even if I had been a few years older the odds are that I could have found a way to avoid service. Not only were there student deferments for college students, but every one of the many exemptions from the draft was easier to secure if you were privileged and well-connected. Even medical exemptions, which in theory should have gone in greater proportion to poor men who had less access to decent medical care, tended to be given to men who showed up at the induction center with a letter from their family doctor attesting to a physical problem. The rest were rubber-stamped, especially as the draft quotas went up in the mid-sixties.

By the time I got to graduate school in 1979, I became very curious about the slightly older men I had never run into growing up—the guys who had grown up in working-class neighborhoods like Dorchester, Massachusetts (where I lived in the 1980s) and who went right from high school into the military and off to Vietnam. I intuitively believed they could not only teach me an enormous amount about American society but that I would learn a lot more about the Vietnam War from them than from any number of books about decision-making in Washington. It was a good intuition.

THERE IS much discussion in the press about the class and racial bias of the current "volunteer" army, and some hinting that a draft is the solution to this problem. Yet, the same complaint about the class and racial composition of the army was made about the draft during the Vietnam era. What do you think accounts for this historical disconnect?

OUR PUBLIC memory preserves very few of the hard truths about the Vietnam War years. Remember what George Bush Sr. said after the Persian Gulf War in 1991? He said, "The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula." There is a kind of desperate lunacy to his willful amnesia and unfortunately he is not alone. The current Bush won't tolerate any words about the Vietnam War and in one press conference he even said that to compare the current war with Vietnam would strengthen our enemy. So we forget about the inequalities of the Vietnam-era draft, just as we forget about the military policies that made the killing of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese civilians inevitable. That said, it is possible to have a draft system that does not discriminate by class or race. We started to move toward that with the lottery system late in the Vietnam War but it began too late to have much impact on the class composition of the military in Vietnam.

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But will they bring back a draft? It is certainly possible. After all, this is an administration that has demonstrated little concern about public opinion except to do anything possible to manipulate it to its own ends with all sorts of misinformation. But I think they understand that there is no conceivable misinformation campaign that could put a positive spin on the reimposition of a draft, and the public outcry would be enormous. So thus far they have hung on by creating a kind of secret draft. There is the poverty draft that grabs men with few economic alternatives, the back-door draft that reenlists men by fiat after their contractual terms of service have expired, and the mercenary draft—the reliance on tens of thousands of private contractors to do the kind of things previously done by military personnel.

MOST HISTORIES of the Vietnam War downplay or ignore the breakdown of the military and GI movement as a factor in bringing the war to an end. Why do you think most mainstream historians do this?

MOST HISTORIANS, like most people, are very much the products of their times and the kinds of questions we ask and sources we trust are very much influenced by the dominant assumptions and values of our age. Even many of us who try to resist or look beyond the prevailing ideology still feel its undertow and are pulled by it to one degree or another.

Without question the public memory of the years since the 1970s has been quite profoundly conservative and antiwar activism of all kinds has been pretty much forgotten when it hasn't been demonized. The memory of antiwar activism among American soldiers in and after Vietnam almost vanished for two decades. There are some signs of a recovered memory of antiwar vets in a number of recent books and documentaries. Even John Kerry's candidacy helped in a small way to open the door a crack on that history. As reticent as he was to talk in depth about his antiwar activism, you might take a look at the documentary *Going Upriver*. It is, of course, a kind of campaign film designed to celebrate Kerry (made by one of his friends), but what impressed me about it was how much great footage it includes of antiwar veterans testifying against the war—images American students have not seen for thirty years unless they happened to catch a few glimpses in Hollywood movies like *Coming Home* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. I think another generation of scholars and activists will dig deep into this history and come up with surprising results. That's the great thing about history. So far no one has figured out a way to destroy it completely, try as they might.

WHAT BROAD similarities do you see between the Vietnam War and the current occupation of Iraq, especially as it applies to the rank and file of the military today? Is this another working-class war?

THE CULTURES and histories of Vietnam and Iraq are quite different in many ways. One key difference is that Iraq as a nation was cobbled together by European imperialism and the divisions it contains remain very powerful. Vietnam, by contrast, has struggled for two millennia to establish its national identity through its resistance to foreign domination—first the Chinese, beginning in 40 BCE and continuing through the American War. As a result Vietnam had a much more cohesive history of nationalism. It's also true that the much beleaguered American occupation came after the rapid overthrow of a despised dictator—Saddam Hussein—and the United States confronts a still diverse and in some ways disorganized uprising.

In Vietnam, the United States confronted an extremely well-organized revolution led by Ho Chi Minh, a man revered by many Vietnamese, North and South, as the most important figure of modern Vietnamese history. Vietnam also received great support from the Soviet Union and China. The Iraqi insurgency—especially the suicide bombers—is supported increasingly by foreigners but not yet by the wealth and power of any major states.

That said, many political and military comparisons are quite striking. In Iraq, Bush faced an international credibility gap even before the war began with millions gathering in the streets here and abroad in an effort to preempt a "preemptive war." Looking back, it's really amazing how every one of the Bush administration's prewar claims had already been deeply undermined by people who really looked into it. Even the phony claim about uranium cakes coming from Niger had been discredited by alternative news sources before March 2003. During the Vietnam War the credibility gap didn't open up to such a degree until the Tet Offensive of 1968!

In many ways the questions raised about Iraq feel like the Vietnam War in hyperspeed. Just a few months after the "Mission Accomplished" speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* in May 2003, even the major media began using the "Q" word—quagmire—a word completely redolent of Vietnam War memory. Whenever you hear someone call upon Bush to articulate an "exit strategy"—and now we're hearing the call from some conservative Republicans—the memory of Vietnam's endless failure pops up like a poltergeist.

With the Abu Ghraib revelations and others like it, another Vietnam connection entered public consciousness—the possibility that the U.S. had embarked on a foreign mission that was not only mistaken, based on phony claims, and ineffectual, but fundamentally unjust and even criminal. The claim that the U.S. was committing war crimes in Vietnam had circulated widely in antiwar circles as early as the mid-sixties, but it became a much broader issue with the revelation of the My Lai massacre in the fall of 1969. In 1971, the *New York Times* ran a headline (of a Neil Sheehan review of antiwar books) that went, “Should the United States Hold War Crimes Trials?” I used to read that title to students and ask who the *Times* meant might be tried. They would say things like “Ho Chi Minh,” or “former Nazis,” but it always took a few minutes before it would dawn on someone that the article was referring to people like Nixon, Johnson, and William Westmoreland.

But in some ways I think the war has settled into a weird place in public consciousness. There is growing disillusionment but other stories more frequently supplant it. I’m not sure where we are in terms of thinking about the morality of the U.S. war. Maybe we need to remember all the powerful forces that resisted withdrawal from Vietnam. Even after many powerful people had concluded that the war was unwinnable, and not a threat to U.S. security, Nixon and many others argued that a rapid U.S. withdrawal would lead to chaos, a profound blow to U.S. “credibility,” and even a “bloodbath” to be caused by a communist takeover. We hear this already in Iraq and it will only grow more powerful in the months ahead, never mind the chaos and bloodbath we’ve already created.

As for whether or not this is another working-class war, I think it is pretty obvious that it is. But one of the important differences is that the military in Iraq includes a lot of older married people, men and women, many with deep roots in American communities. The Vietnam draft plucked young single men out of adolescence. They were deeply missed but most of them didn’t leave behind wives and children. LBJ decided not to mobilize the reserves (except for a small contingent) on the grounds that he wanted to keep the war as politically invisible as possible and understood that taking Reserve units pulled whole groups of men out of well established communities whereas draftees came one at a time from all over the place. As a result, we may see a level of resistance within the military soon reach a level it did not reach in Vietnam until the early seventies—once again a speeding up of the whole move from credibility gap to massive resistance.

GENERAL WILLIAM Westmoreland recently passed away. What policies did he implement that had the most effect in producing GI opposition to the war on the ground in Vietnam?

WHEN I think of Westmoreland I always think of Dennis Deal, a man I interviewed for my book *Patriots*. Deal was a young American lieutenant who led a platoon into some of the fiercest fighting of the war—the 1965 battle in the Ia Drang Valley. A movie starring Mel Gibson was made about it a few years ago that only begins to suggest its significance. Anyway, Deal told me the details of these horrifying firefights and how they rescued a lost platoon of American soldiers. The few survivors were so traumatized they literally could not get up off the ground when their American comrades arrived to take them away. It took a long time to assure them that the fight had ended and they were safe enough to get up and walk away. Deal told me that the experience of Vietnam had made him “extremely conservative, extremely right wing.”

Maybe so, but the more he talked the more he expressed his bitterness that the suffering of his unit and other Americans in the Ia Drang had been billed by Westmoreland and other commanders as a great U.S. victory. He said, “The generals who were running the show tried to cover up the fact that we all felt we’d been beaten. We vowed never to forget the people who denigrated this battle by calling our casualties light to moderate. That enraged us. Westmoreland would have sacrificed you in a minute. He didn’t care what kind of danger he sent you into.”

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