

Patriots: the Vietnam War remembered from all sides

by Christian G. Appy

Viking Penguin

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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Forbes Library, Northampton, MA

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SUMMARY:

By bringing together a multitude of perspectives on the Vietnam War and deftly interweaving them with his own history and commentary, Appy has created a comprehensive yet extremely moving account of a still controversial conflict. The author interviewed Viet Cong, South Vietnamese, and American soldiers; civilians from all sides; reporters, journalists, and politicians; even a Playboy Bunny. We are confronted by the human face of war, and the eloquent voices, some detached, many passionate, illustrate clearly why the Vietnam War still generates divisive debate and strong emotions for so many today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The author tells his tale of the war in Vietnam through oral histories rather than using a more traditional narrative form. Explain how this collection of individual viewpoints creates a different kind of picture of the war than would a chronicle of facts and figures.
2. Do you feel you received a balanced accounting of the war in *Patriots*? Why or why not? Is there a greater danger for bias in using personal accounts?
3. The author starts his history of the Vietnam War in the mid 1940s, with the Viet Minh revolution against the French. Other accounts of the war begin with America's involvement. Did you learn anything new from this broader coverage of the war? How and why did the United States get involved in a war that was initially between Vietnam and France?
4. For what reasons, as presented in *Patriots*, did President Johnson lie about the Gulf of Tonkin incident?
5. In what ways did the war uproot South Vietnamese society? Focus particularly on the impact of North Vietnamese and American policies and actions during the war.

6. Why do think Appy included the story by Jo Collins, "Playmate of the Year" (pp. 28-30)?
7. In the story of downed air force pilot Earl Hopper, Jr. (pp. 483-489), his parents maintain that he was alive at least until 1984. Do you agree? Why do you think the Hoppers continue to struggle with the U.S. government and military services to find information about their son?
8. The author describes the Mai Lai massacre as a turning point in American public opinion about the war. The personal accounts of the massacre (pp. 346-353) are gruesome and shocking. Does their inclusion contribute, diminish, or make no difference to the book? What does the massacre say, if anything, about war? Is there a parallel in the Abu Graib prison scandal of the Iraq War? Why or why not?
9. How did the Vietnam War contribute to Watergate and the destruction of the presidency of Richard Nixon? How did his weakened presidency contribute to the end of the Vietnam War?
10. The North Vietnamese had artists attached to the army to help boost the soldiers' morale. The author includes stories by two of them (pp. 186-187 and 190-194). Do you think this would have worked for the American forces? Discuss why or why not?
11. Talk about an interview that had an especially strong impact on you.
12. Since Vietnam, the United States has been involved in the Gulf War and the War for Iraqi Freedom. Discuss similarities and differences between the Vietnam War and these contemporary wars.
13. Discuss the meaning of Duong Tuong's poem in the final story of the book (p. 549). Why do you think the author chose to conclude with this poem?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Reprinted from the author's website: <http://www.chrisappy.com>

While working on his BA in American Studies at Amherst College during the 1970s, Chris was inspired by a wave of new historical work that was exploring the lives of poor and working-class people and a host of other subjects long ignored by conventional scholars. He subsequently wrote an honors thesis on Appalachian coal miners.

Chris continued on to graduate studies at Harvard University, getting a Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization. His dissertation on American combat soldiers in the Vietnam War received the American Studies Association's prize for the year's best dissertation in the field and became the basis for his book *Working-Class War*, which was published by the University of North Carolina Press and has been used in many college and university courses on modern U.S. history.

Chris taught undergraduate History and Literature at Harvard for four years before becoming a member of the History faculty at MIT, where he taught for eight years. In 1999 he left to pursue writing full time.

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 in Saigon.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Vietnam Project: The Oral History Project: <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/oralhistory/index.htm>

Vietnam Passage: Journey from War to Peace (PBS): <http://www.pbs.org/vietnampassage>
Teacher's Guide: <http://www.pbs.org/vietnampassage/Teacher/index.html>

The Vietnam-Era Prisoner-of-War/Missing-in-Action Database:
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pow/powhome.html>

OTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Chris Appy's website: <http://www.chrisappy.com>. Look for additional discussion questions in the “Media” section of this site: <http://www.chrisappy.com/gpage.html1.html>

Lecture on *Patriots* presented by Appy at Boston College: <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/appy>

Appy, Christian G., *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. University of North Carolina Press (February 1, 1993)



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