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New and Notable

"The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience" by Walter H. Capps. (Beacon, $6.95). Anyone concerned that we may be sliding mindlessly into a net of hopeless political and military entanglements in Central America should examine this book-length essay by University of California religion professor Walter Capps. The "Armageddon mentality" that he says characterized the war faction during the Vietnam period has become the reigning ideology of the present administration and its right-wing supporters.

"A primary characteristic of the Armageddon mentality," he says, "is the eagerness to divide the world into sharp contrasts: right vs. wrong, truth vs. error . . . light vs. dark . . . in the most rigorous fashion possible. The mechanism that enforces this way of thought is the fusion of the contrast between American and anti-American with a revised Manichaean mythology about the fundamental and pervasive conflict between God and the Devil." Politically this translates into policies of national assertion that fly in the face of our perceived ideals.

In contrast a large number of Americans, including, one supposes, many of those disturbed about the course of events in El Salvador and Nicaragua, perceive an underlying harmony to the universe which leads them to pursue an "inward-looking politics of compassionate reform."

For most of the post-World War II period, the advocates of these incompatible agendas "have been at such severe odds that it has been as if there were two United States of America, competing with each other for supremacy and the allegiance of the citizenry . . . The trauma of Vietnam was the projection of this fundamental quarrel onto the battlefield; what became most visible during the war was American in conflict with American — the dark night within the nation's soul. The war remains unfinished because the quarrel has not been resolved."

Capps tries to sort through this conflict, to find a healing middle ground between "Utopian aspirations" and "cataclysmic expectations." He quotes approvingly a passage from Morris Dickstein's "Gates of Eden": "In Vietnam we lost not only a war and a subcontinent; we also lost our pervasive confidence that American arms and American aims were linked somehow to justice and morality, not merely to the quest for power. America was defeated militarily, but the 'idea' of America, the cherished myth of America, received an even more shattering blow."

Capps concludes that the restoration of a compelling idea of America can only follow the healing of the American conscience.