

Trout, Steven. *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire: War, Remembrance, and an America Tragedy*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020. xiv + 240 pages. Hardcover, \$ 50.00. Paperback, \$ 19.95.

Memories make up key parts of our identity, even when those memories are myths. Individuals and nations alike carefully construct and embrace aspects of the past and seek to make that past relevant to both present and future. In modern American memory, no issue has shaped national and political culture, or the lives of more individuals than the Vietnam War. Its skeletons linger in the closets of households as well as in the halls of our military and political officials. A professor of English and the co-director of the Center for the Study of War and Memory at the University of Alabama, Steven Trout has written an engaging and compassionate narrative that powerfully captures Vietnam as both a personal and a national tragedy.

Trout brings a unique perspective to his topic: while much has been written about Maya Lin's more famous memorial to the Vietnam War on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., this book tells the story of the far less well-known Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire in New Mexico from the time of its conception by a single family in the late 1960s to its present place in American wartime remembrance. This is a human-interest story as well as a story about the creation of a stunning architectural accomplishment at 8,500 feet that became a pilgrimage site for veterans and peace activists. At the center of Trout's narrative are the Westphalls and the tragedy that befell the family after the oldest son David died in Vietnam in 1968. The first part of the book is a family history, of sorts, that introduces the reader to the parents Victor and Jeanne, as well as David. The final two thirds of the book explores Victor's attempt to come to terms with his David's death and how he, now aided by his youngest son Walter, pursues the construction of a memorial to his dead son and to peace overall.

Based on extensive research into the Westphalls, Trout's account effortlessly shifts between the human cost, including the impact on the family finances and the marriage, and the larger evolving national debates about Vietnam. In the process, he discusses the practical and financial challenges associated with the creation of what eventually became America's first national memorial to the Vietnam War. Folded into this compelling narrative are a series of overlapping and often compelling stories about shifting Veterans groups, government debates, and the Westphalls' view of why, where, and especially how Americans ought to engage the memory of the war.

The fact that Trout is not a historian proves to be both a weakness and a strength. He tells a straightforward micro-history of the Westphall family; it is refreshing that the book does not get bogged down in historiographical debates. This allows the personal to shine through and Victor in particular emerges powerfully as World War II veteran, a peace activist, and a grieving father who never finds a way out of the emotional maze caused by David's death. Trout is at his best when he focuses on this humanity.

The book is less convincing when Trout attempts to grapple with the Vietnam War and the Cold War as events or their role in American society. These parts are often under researched and show little familiarity with the extensive body of scholarship. One unfortunate consequence of this lacking contextual anchor is that these parts, including the entire chapter devoted to David's experience and death in Vietnam feels descriptive rather than engaging or analytical. For example, when Trout finally describes David's dramatic death in a Vietcong ambush, the incident leaves little impression on the reader. More problematically, Trout's lack of familiarity with the period leaves him prone to superficial assessments and conclusions. He several times mentions that in contrast to his father, David was a believer in the Cold War and a conservative hawk. Trout

unfortunately seems unaware that liberals waged Cold War with just as much ferocity as did conservatives. People's views of Vietnam and the threat of Communism were more complex than they emerge here. If Trout had explored the depths of this complexity, it might have served as a platform for him to engage the distinction between a son committed to the war and father dedicated to global peace ideals. Apart from a sentence or two about the obvious irony of a peace memorial built to glorify a Cold Warrior who craved confrontations with the enemy, the bigger issues of this father-son disconnect is left unsatisfyingly unexplored. Had Trout zoomed out and explored at greater length the significance of the two men's different views of the war, he could have contributed importantly to the still underdeveloped historiography about soldiers' patriotism and political convictions and how this often clash with the ways Americans have chosen to remember the war.

Trout is on much firmer ground in the second half of the book. Less bogged down by historical complexities and an exhaustive historiography, his pen sharpens as his arguments return to the human and emotional side of things. Once he moves people and political culture into focus, he carefully dissects Victor and Walter's personal stories and all the harrowing challenges they faced while constructing and financing the memorial and its upkeep. Their story about the attempts to secure funding and their fight with the powers in Washington over formal recognition for the memorial is a tour de force of the painful challenges this family experienced as it tried to construct a permanent place of commemoration for American Vietnam War veterans.

Overall, Steven Trout has written a compelling book that nicely complements the scholarship on myth, memory, war. Perhaps President George H.W. Bush was right when in the aftermath of the First Gulf War, he insisted that the United States had kicked the Vietnam

Syndrome. Perhaps. However, Trout's account is a reminder that emotionally, culturally, and at a human level, the ghost of Vietnam is with us still.

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