

VIETNAM DAYS: AUSTRALIA AND THE IMPACT OF VIETNAM.
PENGUIN BOOKS

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Edited by Peter Pierce, Jeffrey Grey, Jeff Doyle

Nearly twenty years after Australia left Vietnam, many Australians still feel an ambivalence towards our involvement in the war. For many, in particular the young, their views of the war have been coloured by the American experience - both with respect to the battlefield and to veterans reintegration issues. For them, largely due to the influence of film and television, the Australian experience has been subsumed within the American event.

While it is true that the story of Australian involvement in the Vietnam war can never simply be an Australian story, our involvement had a strong impact on Australians - both the troops and those at home - and far-reaching consequences in Australian political and cultural life. *Vietnam Days: Australia and the impact of Vietnam* is not a history of Australia during the Vietnam years but rather an attempt to chart some of the forms which Australian representations of the war have taken. The book is divided into two sections, each containing three separate but related chapters.

Part 1 sifts through the myths surrounding Australian involvement in the war. Ian McNeill considers the Australian Army's involvement in Vietnam and analyses strategic planning and operational performance against the background of what is now known about the war. He outlines the developments in Australian defence policy at the time that led to involvement in Vietnam and examines the deployment of the Australian task force in Phuoc Tuy province and its role. In particular, McNeill seeks to show that the nature of the task force's involvement on the ground has been badly misunderstood and that the task force, although necessarily under American operational control, maintained a relative independence. He demonstrates that in Phuoc Tuy it carried out its responsibilities successfully, the main one being that of securing and dominating its nominated Tactical Area of Responsibility. He concludes that to make a judgement on the task force's effectiveness based on the fact that the province eventually was lost due to factors beyond the task force's control - is to misunderstand the very nature of Australian involvement. Jeffrey Grey's chapter looks at the Vietnam veteran in the wider context of the Anzac legend. He compares the experiences of the Australian Vietnam veteran with those of veterans of other wars in which Australia has been involved and with those of the American Vietnam veteran. In conclusion, while recognising that, as Italian philosopher Curzio Malaparte has said "a war has no end for those who fought it", he questions the popular perception of the Vietnam veterans as unfairly treated and the basic assumptions about the place of veterans in Australian society.

Jeff Doyle in his chapter takes the discussion a step further, looking at the depiction of the war and veteran in Australian popular culture.

The second section deals with the cultural product of the Vietnam years. Anne Gray considers the official war art programme, and compares it with the programmes undertaken in the two world wars. She also contrasts the artistic product of the official programme with the work of artists back in Australia. Robin Kerster discusses Australian fiction of the war within the context of writings produced by Australians during the previous wars. He notes that, as in past wars in which Australian troops travelled overseas to fight, the theme of travel to exotic and distant destinations is prevalent. He observes that this expectation led paradoxically to feelings of insularity and a narrowness of outlook rather than to a challenge to traditional Australian views of Asia. He also comments on the transformation of the good-hearted colonial larakin of the First World War into the marauding ugly Australian, the Ocker in confrontation with Asia: "a political and sexual chauvinist who is disrespectful of foreign cultures and fundamentally egocentric". Finally he considers the themes of disillusionment, ultimate alienation and cultural disaffection. Peter Pierce compares Australian writings with the much larger and more varied body of American fiction. While finding common themes, such as individual survival, a related tendency to blame their governments for their presence and a cynical view of risk taking that would have been considered heroic in previous wars, he considers that for Australian and American authors the war had a very different meaning. He notes, as does Jeffrey Grey, that for Americans the war brought alive the questions of America's changing role in the world and of a loss of national innocence. Of Australian writers, some merely paid heed to the accepted piety of the Anzac legend and wrote of Vietnam within this context. For others Vietnam raised the painful issues of Australia's dependence and nationhood.

The book successfully presents some of the forms which Australian representations of the Vietnam war have taken and lifts the mists of confusion and myth that have contributed to the Australian general public's widespread ignorance of our involvement in the war. However, the reassessment of the myths, history and culture of the Vietnam days disappointingly is not followed up by a consideration of the impact of the war on Australian nationhood - a theme that looms large in several of the chapters - or of the influence it had on shaping the changes in Australian politics. As the introduction recognises, Australian involvement in Vietnam "marked a watershed in Australian political culture". It led to significant changes in the Australian political landscape: the conservative forces lost their dominance of federal politics; Australian security interests shifted towards greater self-reliance; a re-thinking of Australia's relationship with Asia took place and is evident today in the Government's drive to become part of the Asian region and in its APEC initiative. The issue of Australian dependence has meant the search for new sources of national identity. This has to some extent been satisfied by the adoption of an internationalist attitude. Australia has adopted the role of the good international citizen and has taken the lead on various issues, such as, Cambodia, Antarctica, Disarmament (in particular, in the chemical weapons field) and human rights.

The quest for national re- or self-definition through the embrace of internationalist politics and closer links with "our Asian neighbours" and the changes to the

Australian political landscape are touched on but unfortunately relegated to the Introduction and the Inconclusion (sic). The book concludes that the Australian response to the war is still in a state of confusion - an unhappy mix of old unquestioned myths and an assumption of the American experience. While this is certainly the case and *Vietnam Days* will assist in clearing up some of that confusion it is unlikely that it will be resolved until Australians come to terms with the two major issues that the war raised for our young country: dependence and nationhood/self-definition. Perhaps Australia's attempt to deal with these issues - a process, of course, which is still taking place - and a more detailed discussion of the impact of the war on Australia's political direction could have been dealt with in a Part 3.