Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement by Adam Garfinkle
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mismanagement from Washington, the collapse of public confidence in the war effort – but it has seldom been told so well or so thoroughly in so concise a manner. One finishes the two books in the hope that McNamara might read Herring’s account and begin to understand the war he managed so disastrously for his nation.

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The best, and the oddest, thing about Adam Garfinkle’s new book is its title, invoking Edgar Allan Poe. He chose it ‘not to … imply murder, or to preach about the power of a guilty conscience’, but ‘only to suggest that some things from the past that are literally dead and buried are not as inert in our lives as we sometimes think’ (p. ix). Few readers will disagree with the author’s observation that the issues raised by the United States’s war against Vietnam continue to disturb the conscience of the country. None the less, the book is about murder and guilt, though not all will agree with Garfinkle about the identity of victim and murderer.

For the object of Garfinkle’s ire is not the presidents who involved the country in bloodletting, but rather the anti-war movement which opposed them. Indeed, Garfinkle insists that the anti-war movement not only failed to end that unpopular conflict, but actually prolonged it. It is past time, he lectures, for movement activists to abandon romanticizing their youthful protests and face the error of their judgements and their actions.

The basic thesis is that US public opinion would have opposed the war earlier and more massively had the anti-war movement not aroused so much hostility by its militant behaviour. One fundamental problem with this proposition is the way Garfinkle separates ‘public opinion’ from the anti-war movement. In a manner reminiscent of US government definitions of the National Liberation Front as somehow not South Vietnamese, Garfinkle reads anti-war protestors out of the American body politic. Whatever percentages about public opinion Gallup may have gathered over the years (and the poll evidence is subject to interpretation), the fact remains that hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens took to the streets in unprecedented opposition to an ongoing war. Yet for Garfinkle, the protestors did not constitute a legitimate public.

He mounts this argument by means of a series of counter-factual assertions. One chain of propositions states that the radicalization of the anti-war movement dampened the impulse of Democratic Party members ‘to betray their party leadership and their president even though the impulse to do so grew as time passed’ (p. 18). Had these impulses been allowed free rein, what happened inside the party in 1968 could have happened earlier: ‘Had that been the case, Lyndon Johnson’s...
decision to reverse course in March 1968 might have come before the majority of American combat casualties were suffered' (p. 19). Had that been the case, perhaps Johnson would not have had to resign his presidency, and the Nixon presidency might never have been. Ergo by 'giving the administration more time to fail, as it were, [the anti-war movement] contributed at least something to the conditions under which American soldiers were being killed by the thousands each and every year' (p. 19). This is a sequence of suppositions by whose rules those who protest government policies are guilty of the consequence of those policies should they fail to protest them in a manner designed to win favour with particular political partisans. A daunting mandate for the future.

Perhaps the gravest weakness of Garfinkle's book is that he seeks to judge the anti-war movement by asking the question, was the war winnable? If the answer is no, then the anti-war movement, in its moderate phases, saved American lives. If the answer is yes, and the war winnable, 'then a hypothetically effective antiwar movement was the agent of unnecessary catastrophe in Vietnam, and worse, mocked the purpose for which more than 58,000 American soldiers died' (pp. 26-7). But the protests were not about winning the war; they were about fighting it at all. To have won in Vietnam would not have given the deaths of 58,000 Americans purpose; it would only have meant they died in the prosecution of a successful, rather than an unsuccessful, but still fundamentally immoral war.

However tendentious his arguments (and the book covers a lot of ground – the counterculture, 'political correctness', post-modernist criticisms, the Gulf War, the religious roots of the United States's 'adversary culture') – Garfinkle's invigorating pugnacity keeps one reading. He is not always wrong; his strictures against the more militant actions of the anti-war movement are shared by many movement veterans, as is his conviction that the anti-war movement did not end the war. (The Vietnamese must be accorded the first responsibility, whatever subsidiary role the anti-war movement may have played in constraining presidential options.) And he grants to the 'cultural critique' of the 1960s an ongoing resonance beyond nostalgia: 'The reason so many remain fascinated with these difficult and even embarrassing times is that the deeper issues that gave rise to the revolt are still with us' (p. 297).

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A half century ago, George Kennan advised the US secretary of state, Dean Acheson, that nuclear weapons could serve no positive national purpose; their only use was to prevent nuclear attack by another country. Kennan feared that if