Books

Home From the War — Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims Nor Executioners by Robert Jay Lifton
(Simon and Schuster; 478 pp.; $8.95)

Paul Starr

It is a striking reflection of the modern temper that some of the most popular and often most interesting interpretations of historical experiences have come from psychiatric, and especially psychoanalytically oriented, observers. At once personal and scientific, they appear to satisfy both the thirst for introspection and the hope of rational understanding.

Among the more highly regarded psychiatric observers is Robert Jay Lifton, who for some years has been exploring problems of guilt, survival and symbolic immortality that he first raised in a book on survivors of Hiroshima. Particularly in view of his experience in the Far East and his involvement in the antinuclear movement, it was a natural development for Lifton to turn his attention to Vietnam, and he has now written a large volume on Vietnam veterans, the "prophetic survivors," to use his term, of yet another American holocaust. This is a large work, not merely in length, but in intentions as well. Lifton means to tell us not only of the veterans' experience but also about the problem of "death and the continuity of life" and the possibility for cultural rebirth and redemption in the world today. It is a committed book (he calls it advocacy research), and in a field that too often lacks passion, this is to be welcomed.

Lifton's thesis is that veterans have returned from Vietnam ridden with death guilt, which has in turn im-

In answer to prospective doubts that his sources might be unrepresentative, Lifton quotes at one point an antinuclear veteran who states: "I hear a lot of people say, 'We know Vietnam veterans and they don't feel the way you do.' My immediate reaction to that is, 'Wait and see. If they are lucky, they will. If they are lucky, they will open up.'" At which point Lifton adds: "The likelihood is that relatively few of the three million Vietnam veterans will be able to open up in the way he means."

The implication is that if the vast majority of veterans show no signs of death guilt and insist they don't feel guilty about anything they did in Vietnam, then it is merely because they are not "able" to open up. What might seem to an innocent observer as a genuine difference in viewpoint and sensibility is, in fact, only a matter of repression and denial, or "psychic numbing." For, Lifton tells us, death guilt "at whatever level of consciousness" is the fundamental psychological legacy of the war. There may be no evidence for that, whatever it means, but no matter—it is true nonetheless.

But why, one might ask, is death guilt the fundamental legacy of this particular war? If, as Lifton suggests, it is encounters with death that evoke guilt, then the nature of the Vietnam war might have minimized guilt rather than increased it. Never has the proportion of soldiers directly involved in combat been so low—only 14 per cent, as against 40 per cent in World War II. Americans rarely if ever saw the faces of enemy soldiers. They inflicted casualties primarily through air and artillery strikes, and suffered them disproportionately from land mines and booby traps. Pentagon statistics indicate that 80 per cent of the ground engagements were initiated by the other side, suggesting that Americans were usually hit by surprise, and much of the fighting was at night. If anything, this "particular war" maximized the psychological distance between killer and killed, survivor and casualty. This is a point Lifton touches on late in the book when discussing the air war in Laos.
and the electronic battlefield. "To call forth guilt and to achieve an animating relationship to it," he observes, "requires a concerted effort to reconnect the act and idea of killing." Exactly. Which is why, since most men have no urge to make that effort, one doubts that guilt is this particular war's fundamental emotional legacy.

Lifton also apparently sees no important distinction between survival in Hiroshima, which meant outliving friends, family and other innocent and familiar persons, and survival in Vietnam, which for combat soldiers meant a struggle to stay alive among an alien and hostile people, many of whom, for whatever reasons, were trying to kill them. In some respects, surviving the death of fellow soldiers resembles the Hiroshima model, but one must remember that in Vietnam men were rotated in and out of units in staggered fashion so that personal bonds were somewhat vitiated. Unlike Hiroshima, where bonds were intimate, and even unlike the American army in World War II, where soldiers fought "for the duration" in a unit that acquired a strong identity, soldiers in Vietnam spent no more than one year in a combat unit that, moreover, was continually changing in composition.

It is, of course, unremarkable that a psychiatrist for whom guilt has been a professional—may, "psychohistorical"—obsession should find a group of subjects who reflect his viewpoint and attribute to a much larger number the same concern. Nor is it remarkable that a progressive audience, seeing the war as an atrocity, should find the portrait of guilt-ridden veterans highly credible. But whether this portrait bears any resemblance to veterans outside of the VVAV—an exceptional group of men who are, for Vietnam veterans, disproportionately middle-class and college-going—is another question. I don't think it does. My own impression from interviews is that veterans generally do not feel ashamed of what they did, that they believe they were much more sinned against than sinning, and that they feel overwhelmingly that people who were not in Vietnam have no right to judge them, that such judgments are a luxury of those who stayed at home and are irrelevant to the situations they confronted. On the other hand, many do feel they were used, sent to fight for no good reason and left cold when it was all over, despised for things most of them never wanted to do in the first place and never did in the second.

Lifton's interpretation is a romantic vision of the army of lower and working-class soldiers returned from Vietnam. He has, in effect, recreated the hero in modern dress—no longer the hero of courage but the hero of pain and insight, the prophetic survivor. The irony is that while Lifton is ostensibly taking us into the dark reaches of human nature that others have avoided for fear of confronting death, he actually takes us on the optimist's tour. In his eyes, men are sensitive, they are deeply hurt by the brutality they inflict on others, they are burdened mightily with real sins and sins imagined. But the tragedy is that such sensitivity is rare, men must struggle to sustain it, and the more common pattern is to blunt one's sensitivity on the wheel of routine and go on living until the passing of years, each with new tragedies and new sins, draws a veil over the past.

The essentially sentimental character of Lifton's thesis becomes much more apparent when he turns to larger themes. He is forever confusing the analytical with the inspirational mode, what exists with what he wishes were true, the moral and metaphorical realms with the social and psychological world. He says, for example, that "all Americans are survivors of the Vietnam holocaust and are faced with the task of recognizing and bringing significance to their death immersion." But Americans, perhaps regrettably, perhaps not, are no more immersed in the deaths of Vietnamese than they are in the recent and equally atrocious deaths of millions of Pakistanis and Ugandans. At times Lifton waxes grandiloquent on the rising tide of sensitivity, as when he writes of "a worldwide ethical impulse toward feeling the pain of abused people everywhere . . . an increasing breakdown of the old forms of social equilibrium within which victimizing patterns and manageable forms of guilt (or of avoidance of guilt) could be maintained . . . " The problem here, I think, is that when Lifton identifies phenomena like "worldwide ethical impulses" he is not so much analyzing things that exist as trying to inspire things that do not.

The paradox is that such inspirational literature should come weighted down with some of the most cumbersome jargon this side of the military-industrial complex. Consider the following sentence: "These survivors, as I was able to generalize from my Hiroshima work, have to do with anxiety in relationship to an indelible death imprint, death guilt inseparable from that imprint, various forms of prolonged psychic numbing, profound suspicion of the counterfeit (or of 'counterfeit nurturance') and an overall inability to give significant inner form - to formulate - one's war-linked death immersion."

Beneath this grand theoretical edifice small things are ignored. We learn very little, for example, of the veterans' social background or early life histories, and no individual veteran is ever described at any length. The massacre at My Lai is taken as the paradigmatic experience of the war (the second chapter is entitled: "America's New Survivors: The Image of My Lai"). The varied experiences of Vietnam, the ambivalences and contradictions in men's views, the other aspects of their lives are all passed through a rather thick moral and theoretical filter. I have no trouble with the idea of advocacy research. However, moral values and theoretical preconceptions have dominated Lifton's work, not only in his choice of intellectual concerns, which is admirable, but also in the way he thinks through those concerns, which is not.
The Institutional Imperative
by Robert N. Kharasch
(Charterhouse; 258 pp.; $7.95)

Implementation
by Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron B. Wildavsky
(University of California Press; 182 pp.; $7.50)

Robert Lekachman

These quite different ways of looking at American public administration arrive at strikingly similar conclusions about the quality of government action (low) and the prospects of substantial improvement (dim). Kharasch’s subtitle, How to Understand the United States Government and Other Bulky Objects, suggests the archeus of his approach. After the fashion of Parkinson’s laws and Peter’s equally popular principle, Kharasch buttresses the institutional imperative to survive forever and ever with Three Axioms of Institutional Action, Five Attributes of the same, a Law of Attributed Importance, a Theorem of Irrelevancy of Attributes and so on. One might be annoyed by the gimmickry, except that the author, a Washington lawyer experienced in practice before regulatory agencies, has a substantial, though not entirely original, point to make and some grisly tales to illustrate it.

Kharasch’s central proposition, reminiscent of Galbraith’s argument that a technocrature of experts runs large corporations in its own interest, is that whatever a Washington agency says it is doing, its real objective is institutional survival. The spread of drug abuse, for example, serves not as an argument for terminating or at least reorganizing the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, but as a case for enlarging its budget. Institutionally, nothing succeeds better than fifty years of failure. As for success: The March of Dimes did not self-destruct thirty seconds or thirty months after the manufacture of the Salk vaccine.

The pervasive aspiration of institutions to immortality possesses critically important implications in the realm of individual conduct. For the good apparatchik, personal success becomes indistinguishable from the financial health and public reputation of his organization. Acting out of raison de bureau as out of old-fashioned raison d’état, an otherwise honorable individual will lie, falsify reports and conceal damaging information. Presumably few of the hundreds of Equity Funding employees enmeshed in its gaudy frauds personally profited, except in the form of job security and occasional promotions. None of the Air Force officers who burned orders and faked reports made a dollar.