

reassuring picture, but one not likely to change until the Congress and the media quit being patsies for a system that, in the words of one information officer, "is not tuned to coughing up sensitive information."

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FIELDS OF FIRE. By James Webb. (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1978, 344 pp., \$9.95.) Member \$8.95.

reviewed by Maj Terrence P. Murray

James Webb's novel, *Fields of Fire*, is a two-fisted indictment of the Vietnam War which spares only those combatants who experienced the dust and death of the battlefield. All others—politicians, protestors, an aloof society, even military men who participated from behind desks or in air-conditioned cockpits above the battlefield—are taken under fire in a fast-paced relentless attack, woven around a memorable cast of characters. It is fiction based on fact and alive with the emotion and tension of combat, presented in a realistic and stirring series of encounters of one Marine rifle company and accentuated by vivid descriptions of the sights, sounds and smells of war.

Webb follows a Marine rifle platoon (primarily one squad) through combat during a six-month period. The action moves along quickly in a series of vignettes dealing with the enemy contacts made by Company D. His characters are carefully drawn, and while any man who experienced the war will see familiar types, none of his players are stereotyped. They are vibrantly alive, and in one way or another, all have become society's victims.

Webb makes it clear that, in his opinion, too often the recruiting pool was inequitably constituted by the less advantaged classes: the misdirected youths from broken homes, the Black and Spanish Americans to whom opportunities were more limited and the poor who couldn't afford college. "There was a recruiting station at the wasteland's edge," he writes. "It fed on creatures

from the run-down rowhouses. They were vital sustenance." The "best we have," as Webb calls the war's recruits, were force fed through a discriminating pipeline which filtered the more privileged from the ranks of future combatants.

If the novel has a major weakness, it is more philosophical than technical or structural in that the author does not give equal voice to those who opposed the war. But that is a matter of viewpoint and is clearly the writer's prerogative.

In Vietnam the young recruits were drawn together to fight the country's war, yet, ironically, they became society's outcasts because of the war's unpopularity. Disenfranchised, forgotten, unappreciated is the refrain of the more cerebral members of the story's cast. "We been abandoned, lieutenant. We been kicked off the edge of the goddamn cliff...And back home it's too complicated, so they forgot about it..." remarks an 11-year staff sergeant who's leaving the Corps.

It is difficult not to support Webb's premise that Vietnam became a war fought at personal levels. Lacking the commitment and support of the nation, the infantryman waged his own seemingly purposeless struggle to survive: "Vietnam had done something to us all, even to the Corps...there was no great effort for anything anymore, only thousands, no, millions of isolated, individual wars."

The novel captures the conflicting emotions men feel towards war. Often unclear as to why they go (to war), nevertheless, men are compelled by some perceived vestige of meaning or value, no matter how peripherally justified. Before departing for the war zone, Webb's platoon commander, Hodges, reflects: "There was no thought in his life that spanned beyond what he was about to do in Vietnam. He would fight his war, force his body through the lightless conduit, and worry about what was on the other side when he returned."

Like military men of the past and present, the author wrestles with ethical issues throughout the work. The dialogue of characters becomes a moral debate about war itself, but more than that, about personal responsibility, recognition of authority, commitment and accountability.

Amidst the fear and hysteria of battle and the controversy about na-

tional service that Webb conveys, he also finds a trace, at least, of goodness in war. Like so many writers before him, he describes poignantly the brother-love relationships nurtured by the extreme emotion of battle. His sympathetic characters, despite their sometimes ignoble backgrounds, achieve a lofty dignity because of their instinctive adaptability to harsh conditions, their readiness to sacrifice for their comrades and their willingness to answer the country's calling, despite the obvious indifference back home.

For some, the war filled a void in their lives that no other human experience ever would. Webb's bold, young platoon sergeant muses:

Beyond the terror that was today, there was a fullness that no other thing in the remainder of his life would ever equal. That, beyond doubt, the rest of his life would be spent remembering those agonizing months, revering their fullness... what would always have been the greatest, the most important experience of his life, had almost past [sic].

Webb's criticism of the then reigning political administration and of senior officers who directed the war is stinging and all-encompassing. He also finally blasts the intellectuals who criticized from afar, those who fought their battles in their own academic minds or in the streets of American cities or on the campuses of the country's universities, but never on the soil of Vietnam. His argument is not against dissent itself, but against that which is twisted to serve selfish motives. Civil disobedience is one thing, he reminds, but ignoring the law, "the whole structure that binds our society," by running off to Canada is "self-interest, cloaked with morality."

Fields of Fire is lively fiction based upon the experience of a man who tasted combat and recalls it with intimate clarity. The story evokes strong images of men at war and poses questions of great political and moral importance, questions that need to be addressed before this nation ventures into war again.

† *The author of Fields of Fire is a 1968 Annapolis graduate and former Marine officer, who at the time he retired because of wounds sustained in 1969, was one of the Marine Corps' most highly decorated officers. He commanded a rifle platoon and company in 1st Battalion, 5th Marines.*