Timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the removal of the last American combat troops from Vietnam in March 1973, George Black’s narrative tour-de-force, *The Long Reckoning: A Story of War, Peace, and Redemption in Vietnam*, is a deeply researched and moving story of the American War in Vietnam and its environmental and personal consequences as they have emerged over the past five decades. These legacies include literal tons of unexploded ordinance (UXO) and heaps of scrap metal; the lingering impact of the twenty million gallons of Agent Orange and the rainbow of other toxic chemical herbicides US forces dropped on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; veterans’ and civilians’ experiences with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); and the potent public narrative about Americans who were listed as prisoners of war or missing in action (POW/MIA) by the United States. It is also a story about the efforts of American veterans and aid workers, Vietnamese citizens, and scientists from Vietnam, the US, and Canada, and the organizations they created together such as Project RENEW and the War Legacies Project to address and, where possible, rectify some of the lasting consequences of the American War through memorialization, educational programming, UXO removal, chemical “hot spot” mapping and remediation, the distribution of prosthetic devices, healthcare, economic assistance, and formal and informal political maneuvering and diplomacy.

Black is a well-established and esteemed writer and journalist. A former foreign editor at *The Nation*, Black has written books on topics as varied as China, India, Yellowstone National Park, and the United States’ Good Neighbor Policy. He has been working on this project for what seems to have been the better part of a decade; portions of this story were published previously in outlets including the *New York Times* and *The Nation*.

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1 Black uses March 1973 rather than the capture of Saigon by North Vietnamese troops in April 1975, which is often the date used by scholars and laypeople to mark the official end of the American War in Vietnam.

2 Black relates that “more than 20 million gallons of herbicides [were] deployed; one sixth of the land area of South Vietnam sprayed; [and] anything from 2.1 million to 4.8 million people exposed” (286).

3 For more on Project RENEW, which provides risk education in support of explosive ordnance removal, see [https://landmines.org.vn/](https://landmines.org.vn/). On the War Legacies Project see [https://www.warlegacies.org/](https://www.warlegacies.org/).


Black writes that *The Long Reckoning* “is a story of a war and its aftermath, but above all it’s a story about people” and how they dealt with the legacies of the war, particularly the herbicide compound Agent Orange, which was the centerpiece of the American defoliation campaign (395). Intended to clear the tree canopy above the Ho Chi Minh trail in order to offer American bombs a clearer target and later to destroy Vietnamese food crops, Agent Orange produced TCDD (Tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin), “the most toxic of the dioxins.”\(^6\) It was so toxic that Matthew Meselson, a Harvard molecular geneticist, once said that “an evil genius could not devise a toxin with more evil properties” (156). For many years the herbicide, which was produced for the US military by corporations including Dow Chemical and Monsanto, was a political “third rail” in the US and in postwar political and economic negotiations between the US and Vietnam (395). While the US government ultimately gave American veterans “the benefit of the doubt,” passing the Agent Orange Act in 1991 to recognize and compensate Vietnam veterans for harms associated with exposure to the substance, it dismissed Vietnamese claims of harm as “unfounded propaganda,” fearing that dioxin “was a codeword for reparations” (282, 197). All the while, in Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia, Black writes, “the uptake of dioxin” was continuing (258).

While there is no formal introduction to the book, there is a prologue that introduces readers to Kieu, a Vietnamese woman who grew up in the midst of the fighting and later gave birth to three children. Her firstborn was a healthy boy. Her second, a daughter named Phuc, was born with “only three fingers on one hand and dragged one thin leg behind her when she learned to walk” (11). She was plagued by severe headaches. Kieu’s third child was a son who “didn’t understand things well, and…never learned to speak properly” (11). He died suddenly at age ten. What was the cause of these maladies? Were they related to the chemicals the Americans sprayed on the fields next to Kieu’s village? Or something her husband, Thao, who fought for the People’s Army, had been exposed to during the war? While Kieu’s story is her own, Black explains, there “are thousands like her” (7).

One day, Black writes, four Americans visited Kieu’s village. They were in Vietnam “to see the places where they had served their country, and to honor their foreign comrades” (12). And they wanted to know whether there was anything they could do to help Kieu and her neighbors. In Black’s capable hands, the stakes of the story are immediately apparent. The lives of these American veterans and Vietnamese people like Kieu, Thao, and Phuc are irrevocably linked. These Americans are no saviors, but rather they are men whose politics “ran the gamut from far left to far right” and who sought redemption by returning to a place that deeply shaped them, by offering their “moral authority, their usually modest checkbooks, and their sweat equity” to the Vietnamese who were working to address the lingering harms from the American War (214, 279).

Throughout the 394 page narrative, Black introduces a constellation of individuals. Some, such as prominent American veterans, Senators John Kerry and John McCain, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, provide useful touchpoints for those who are familiar with American histories of the war. But Black foregrounds the experiences of Vietnamese and Americans whose lives were indelibly marked by the war and its legacies but whose names may be new to many readers. At the center are two American veterans: Georgia-born Chuck Searcy, who served as a military analyst during the war and returned to Vietnam in 1995, and Manus Campbell, a native of New Jersey who went to Vietnam as a grunt right after his high school graduation and first returned in 2007, grappling with PTSD after having taken part in largely unrenowned yet horrific fighting in the A Shau Valley of central Vietnam.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Black writes that the Battle on Hill 674, which Campbell took part in, “did nothing to inflect the course of the war. It was shattering, life-defining for those who were there, but it merited no more than a footnote in the official histories” (85).
The book is divided into three roughly chronological sections: War, Peace, and Redemption. Although Black follows Searcy and Campbell back to the United States and discusses the antifascist protests and the emergence and legacy of the POW/MIA movement, along with American scientists and veterans’ political and moral fight for recognition and compensation resulting from exposure to Agent Orange, the majority of the story takes place along the spidery Ho Chi Minh Trail on the border between Laos and Vietnam’s Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces, where “all the worst legacies of the war were concentrated” (37). In the decades since US combat troops left, the Trail became a road and, Black argues, functions as “a kind of museum, a living archive of the war, in which its remnants and relics had been absorbed into the fabric of everyday life” (369).

Like Searcy and Campbell, many of the individuals Black introduces are still actively working to rectify the consequences of the American War. They include longtime aid worker and powerbroker Adelaide “Lady” Borton; the Ford Foundation’s former representative in Vietnam, Charles Bailey; Jacqui Chagnon and Susan Hammond of the War Legacies Project, Hien Ngo (Ngo Xuan Hien) of Project RENEW, and Phu Nguyen (Nguyen Thanh Phu) of Project RENEW and the Mine Action Visitor Center in Quang Tri.

Black opens his valuable “Essay on Sources” with an estimate that “thirty thousand books have been written about the French and American wars in Vietnam” (401). His sources include what seems to be a meaningful selection from this group, including texts by American and Vietnamese authors. He also draws from declassified documents and government reports, journal articles, narrative fiction, poetry, memoirs, and interviews with subjects in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and the United States and weaves these sources together with his own observations from his time in Southeast Asia. Not only does The Long Reckoning synthesize much of what has been written about the American War in Vietnam over the past five decades, it makes much of it feel new because of his commitment to foregrounding the experiences of individuals such as Kieu and Manus Campbell and demonstrating in painstaking detail how their lives have been impacted by, and in turn how they have impacted the legacy of, the American War.

At the beginning of this literature review, Black notes that “for the benefit of academic readers and those interested in exploring the subject more deeply, a comprehensive bibliography and additional notes, including on significant Vietnamese sources, are available on my website.” (401). However, when this reviewer visited the website in August and again in September 2023, there was no bibliography or additional notes to be found.

The otherwise excellent literature review is a boon to scholars and more casual readers alike. It includes books written on the French War (also known as the First Indochina War), singling out Fredrik Logevall’s Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam as particularly noteworthy; biographies of North Vietnam’s revolutionary leader, Ho Chi Minh; what Black calls “classic early studies of the American War,” meaning books that published “before the mid-1990s” (402). It lists accounts of the war by US officials, and histories concerned with why the Americans lost the war and later why the Vietnamese won (403). Black has drawn on books about the internal politics of the Vietnam Workers’ Party and Vietnam-China and Vietnam-Soviet relations, journalists’ accounts, published fiction, People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) fighters, scholarship on the Tet Offensive and other battles and battlegrounds, as well as on the US Special Forces. To write about the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Black relied more heavily on Vietnamese sources, citing the “astonishingly little” English-language scholarship (409). He points also to limited source material on the US war in Laos.

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11 One English-language source he cites is John Prados, The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999). However, Black notes, Prados does not discuss the defoliation campaign. A Vietnamese source that Black points to is Dang Phong, Five Ho Chi Minh Trails (Hanoi: The Giao, 2016).
the defoliation campaign and ecological impact of herbicides, the POW/MIA controversy, the postwar period in Vietnam and normalization of US-Vietnam relations.12

Black’s heart-rending descriptions of deformed fetuses and birth defects are striking, and they bear more than a passing resemblance to experiences of Marshallese communities affected by the extensive American nuclear testing that occurred in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958.13 These similarities and the connective tissue of American imperialism and US militarism suggest a possible avenue for future scholarship on the environmental and embodied legacies of the harms caused by American weapons of war during the second half of the twentieth century as well as the ongoing efforts by individual scientists, aid workers, veterans, community leaders, and policymakers to address them.

After five decades, many of the wounds stemming from the American War in Vietnam remain imperfectly healed, even as some of them have faded. As Black shows readers, “the truth of all wars is that they never really end; they cast a long shadow and have a long reckoning” (120). Many of the American and Vietnamese veterans and their families, scientists, aid workers, and writers whom Black introduces remain deeply engaged in this reckoning. It is due to their sweat equity and moral authority—along with geopolitical and economic expedients—that progress has been made regarding the removal of UXO, the cleaning and containment of contaminated soil at dioxin hot spots such as the Bien Hoa Air Base, and the identification of and redress given to those harmed by exposure to dioxins in water, soil, and breast milk. As Black’s discussion of the slowness of US bureaucracy and the complex situations in neighboring Laos and Cambodia demonstrates, however, the reckoning remains ongoing and, given the number of wars the United States has fought since Vietnam, it is far from singular.

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13 See, for example, Holly Barker, Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2004).