

2012

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Review

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume XIV, No. 12 (2012)

10 December 2012

Version 2.0*

Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
Roundtable Web/Production Editor: George Fujii

Introduction by Michael J. Allen

*[*This copy includes an updated version of the author's response, which was omitted due to a production error].*

Meredith H. Lair. *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War.*

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3481-7 (cloth, \$34.95).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-12.pdf>

Contents

Introduction by Michael J. Allen, Northwestern University	2
Review by Jessica Elkind, San Francisco State University	8
Review by David Kieran, Visiting Assistant Professor of American Studies at Franklin and Marshall College.....	12
Review by Richard A. Ruth, U.S. Naval Academy.....	15
Author's Response by Meredith H. Lair, George Mason University.....	21

Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

Introduction by Michael J. Allen, Northwestern University

In a notoriously crowded field, Meredith H. Lair has written an impressively original history of the American War in Vietnam. Her new book, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War*, eschews the usual concerns of Vietnam War historiography—politics, diplomacy, and combat—to focus on consumer culture, which she argues was the most striking but seldom-studied feature of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. “Combat was infrequent in Vietnam,” she writes, “but consumerism was universal” (146). It was also, she maintains, an important contributing factor to the U.S. defeat there, limiting American combat forces to a fraction of U.S. personnel in Vietnam and sapping American unity, morale, and sense of purpose even as it overheated the South Vietnamese economy, corrupted Southern society and politics, and supplied enemy forces with American contraband. Equally debilitating, it caused an unbridgeable chasm of experience between those on the war’s lethal front lines—the vast majority of whom were Vietnamese joined by the ten to twenty percent of American GIs who saw combat on a regular basis—and the overwhelming majority of Americans ‘in the rear with the gear,’ a place of relative comfort and safety that kept most Americans, including those in Vietnam, from ever really knowing the war or taking meaningful part in it, then or now. Contrary to American memory of the war with its relentless focus on American suffering, Lair contends that most Americans in Vietnam were strangely unharmed by their nation’s disastrous policy there, making the war more the rule than the exception in the nation’s recent history.

A half-century later, Americans are more insulated from war than ever, which may explain why they go to war so often, why they wage war so absentmindedly, if fixedly, and why they regard war and warriors with such ambivalence. In Vietnam and since, Lair writes, ever fewer Americans, including those in uniform, have had any direct experience with war’s most basic realities of deprivation and death. Instead they fought their increasingly frequent and extended wars by push-button, powerpoint, and remote control, cocooned inside a global archipelago of military bases where “cold beer and clean sheets, not foxholes and firefights were often the norm” (247). As the line between wartime and peacetime blurred, to invoke Mary Dudziak’s recent analysis, so did the difference between homeland and war zone, with American military garrisons coming to resemble a cross between an office park and shopping mall even as American office parks and shopping malls—not to mention airports and schools—increasingly came to look and feel like armed garrisons.¹ As the anthropologist Catherine Lutz has explored in her work on U.S. military bases, and journalists like Rajiv Chandrasekaran have shown in dispatches from the war on terror, there is little difference between Baghdad’s green zone and Tampa’s MacDill Air Force Base, where CENTCOM commanders oversee the nation’s multiple wars in the Middle East in real time, just as it is not easy to tell Afghanistan’s Bagram Airfield from Creech Air Force Base outside Las Vegas, where pilots fly drone aircraft half a world away using satellite

¹ Mary L. Dudziak, *Wartime: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

imagery and live two-way communication with Americans on the scene.² At any and all these places uniformed Americans stare into screens showing military-aged “militants” who live and die at their discretion, surrounded by the same brand goods, empty calories, and pop culture one would find on any college campus, where students of roughly the same age simulate such mediated warfare on their dorm room computers.

When viewed in this light what is most strange about American war-making is its ordinariness. Americans, most scholars included, have traditionally thought of war as exceptional, not normal. And even for those of us who have come to see permanent war as the nation’s default foreign policy—the ‘new normal’—it remains difficult to shed inherited notions of war as a violent rupture with everyday life, at least for those charged with waging it. Thus it can be hard to recognize suburban commuters as soldiers, just as it is difficult to reconcile America’s ubiquitous consumer electronics with its capacity for killing, or to square “the order and abundance” of its military “with traditional ideas about war,” reputedly a realm of fog and self-sacrifice (3).

Yet American warfare is nothing if not orderly and abundant, and, according to Lair, its abundance “first appeared in Vietnam,” which in her telling seems more a surreal consumer’s emporium than the bloody quagmire Americans typically imagine (4). Lair’s portrait of the “war zone wonderland” (182,) Americans created in Vietnam, awash in consumer goods and mass culture with a frisson of sex and violence, resembles nothing so much as contemporary America carried to its logical extremes, which is precisely her point. Americans waged war in Vietnam and after, Lair suggests, not out of necessity or at great self-sacrifice, but from an overweening and self-serving abundance that “made it easier to go to war, again and again and again” than to refrain from doing so, and not just for politicians but for the well-provisioned men and women in the U.S. military (247). According to this view, U.S. intervention in Vietnam was no great mystery or exception; it was the logical, even inevitable, extension and expression of an abundantly armed nation. It is Americans’ reluctance to confront this truth, Lair contends, that led them, historians included, to avert their eyes from the self-indulgence everywhere on display in American wars. By calling our attention to it, Lair challenges her readers to reflect more clearly and critically upon their proclivity for war.

For her reviewers and, I suspect, for most of her readers, this is a bold and bracing agenda that, when coupled with Lair’s careful archival research and flair for colorful details and clever turns of phrase, will be a welcome addition to the best literature on American soldiering in Vietnam and over the past century more generally. All three reviewers applaud Lair’s “fascinating and original book” for its deep research and provocative

² Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American 20th Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle Against U.S. Military Posts* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Jessica Vander Velde, “CENTCOM Unveils New \$75M Headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base,” *Tampa Bay Times*, 29 November 2011; David Zucchino, “Drone Pilots Have a Front-Row Seat On War, From Half A World Away,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 2010; Elisabeth Bumiller, “We Have Met the Enemy and He is Powerpoint,” *New York Times*, 26 April 2010.

analysis, with Richard Ruth hailing it as “one of the most important—and satisfying—recent histories of the Vietnam War.” In particular they welcome its attention to what David Kieran calls the “long-known but surprisingly under-investigated reality of the war in Vietnam: that the vast majority of Americans who served there did not do so in a combat capacity,” and its unavoidable challenge to the prevailing image of American veterans of the war as victims of fierce combat and misdirected domestic criticism. If American soldiers in Vietnam were discontented, Ruth and Kieran note, it had less to do with hardship and danger than with serving in a war so radically at odds with their expectations, which helps to explain Lair’s findings that morale was actually lower among rear echelon troops than it was among combat infantrymen.

But if military service in Vietnam failed to conform to popular visions of war, it proved paradigmatic in terms of the emerging consumerist models of military service that defined the All-Volunteer Force.³ All reviewers praise Lair’s book for painting the American experience in Vietnam as typical of longer, broader trends rather than seeing it as something unusual or consigned to the benighted past. While her reviewers recognize that Lair’s frank assessments of American extravagance in Vietnam and since will upset, even outrage, some readers who will rightly see in it an implicit and at times explicit critique of American motives and actions there, they praise her handling of individual service and collective guilt. “Her book does not dishonor anyone’s service,” Ruth reassures, it “only sharpens the extraordinary experience of combat veterans whose tours of duty were spent outside the relative safety and comfort of these well protected and well stocked bases.” Similarly, Kieran finds that Lair’s “recuperation of the full spectrum of veterans’ experiences” enables “a more complete history of the war and a more accurate recognition of veterans.” All of which is to say that while Lair’s evidence and analysis are tough, she does not deny or disdain the possibility of honorable service in America’s war in Vietnam, nor does she explicitly condemn that war or successive American wars as immoral or imperial, however much her conclusions may point in that direction. Thus Lair’s book will likely find its place among that handful of classic critical commentaries on American soldiers in Vietnam that instructors regularly turn to when teaching the subject, including Christian Appy’s unrivaled *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, the brilliant fiction of Tim O’Brien, and Jonathan Schell’s essential reporting.⁴

But even as her reviewers praise the originality of Lair’s study, the depth of her research, and the wit of her voice, Kieran and Jessica Elkind both wish that the author “had expanded her argument a bit more in some areas,” reflecting her work’s unusual potential and, I sense, a certain impatience with her unwillingness or inability to articulate its full implications and importance, perhaps for fear of giving offense. Elkind voices

³ Beth Bailey, *America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴ Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990); Jonathan Schell, *The Real War: The Classic Reporting on the Vietnam War With A New Essay* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

disappointment that Lair focuses so narrowly on “internal factors” in the U.S. military without devoting more attention to “the diplomatic, political, and cultural atmosphere” in which it operated, and wonders how the Vietnamese engaged in and understood American consumerism all around them. Lair often presents the Vietnamese as stoic foils to her well-fed Americans—“Charlie don’t get too much USO,” she quotes *Apocalypse Now* approvingly; “his idea of great R&R was cold rice and a little rat meat” (143)—yet we know from David Hunt that a rising consumer culture was an important contributing cause to the Vietnamese revolution, from Mark Bradley that exposure to that culture was one of the main cleavages within Vietnamese society that divided North from South, and from even cursory attention to Marxist-Leninist thought that material interests were centrally important for all combatants, making it problematic to treat consumerism as if it mattered only for Americans, even if they did revel in it to a remarkable degree.⁵ In addition to this critique Kieran calls for more attention to race and gender, particularly the way that women and minorities excluded from full participation in the consumer culture Lair describes emerged as critics of the war. Here one might also wish for more attention to the fact that no matter how good GIs had it relative to the spartan ideals of popular lore or the mythic past, many still rightly saw themselves as falling further behind more fortunate sons who pursued college degrees or entered careers in an age of declining blue collar work and rising inflation. The bases soldiers served on in Vietnam may have been more abundantly supplied than ever, but the economy they returned to was far less desirous of their labor than the post-World War II economy to which their fathers returned, and this undoubtedly cheapened the value of their service in their own eyes and the eyes of others, no matter how comfortable that service may have been.

Such comparative historical perspective may be what is missing most from Lair’s account, which pays little attention to American military history before the 1960s. Contrary to her claims, there was nothing especially new about Americans fighting in the way she describes. In World War II, only 800,000 Americans saw regular combat in a military of 16.3 million people.⁶ Then, as now, Americans waged war with machines, not men, at least not their own men. Then as now they profited by doing so, though never so widely as they believed.⁷ Policy and profit were inextricably linked, and not just for the powerful but for citizens and soldiers.⁸ Lair’s work shows that this linkage was reinforced through the

⁵ David Hunt, *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959-1968* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Gerald Linderman, *The World Within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1.

⁷ David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 615-68.

⁸ Robert B. Westbrook, *Why We Fought: Forging American Obligations in World War II* (Washington: Smithsonian University Press, 2004); James Sparrow, *The Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

everyday practices of the Cold War military, and she smartly points out ways in which those patterns have redounded to today, as her reviewers note. But the conditions she finds in Vietnam were more changes of degree than of kind.

This is not to say that they were insignificant. Few things are new in history, and even recurrent patterns reveal something unique about a given time and place. What I found most striking about Lair's account was not the bounty of Vietnam era soldiers that so impressed the author—even the most pampered rear echelon troops enjoyed few comforts not readily available to college students and faculty then or now—but how social provisions that were once so taken for granted as to be invisible now appear rare and noteworthy. For if today's soldiers are, in most respects, strikingly ordinary, they are extraordinary in one sense: they are among the few working people in the United States to still enjoy state-guaranteed economic security. That this fact is remarkable has less to do with changes in the military than with changes in the nation it served. The U.S. military has long been armed with abundance. But the nation that armed it is no longer so abundant toward the working people it sends to war, not unless and until they become its 'servicemen and women.' Indeed, right about the time the Vietnam War ended, the U.S. economy began shedding the jobs workers relied on, American businessmen and politicians launched a relentless assault on their unions, and the U.S. military became the only remaining large employer in the United States that still valued the labor and dignity of working Americans and rewarded them accordingly. Surely this is among the reasons that the All-Volunteer Force continues to attract recruits sufficient to wage the nation's multiple and interminable wars. But its success in that regard is more indicative of the poverty and inequality outside the U.S. military than it is of abundance within it.

Participants:

Meredith Lair is an Associate Professor in the Department of History & Art History at George Mason University, where she teaches classes on the Vietnam War and war in American society. In addition to *Armed with Abundance*, she recently published "The Education Center at The Wall and the Rewriting of History in the Winter 2012 issue of *The Public Historian*. She is currently working on a second edition of *The Vietnam Reader* for Routledge and a new research project about legacies of the Vietnam War and the construction of American veteranhood. She received her PhD in History from Penn State.

Michael J. Allen is Associate Professor of History at Northwestern University. He is author of *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (UNC, 2009), which examined the political legacies of American defeat in Vietnam through the close study of the POW/MIA movement, and he is currently at work on a book titled *The Confidence of Crisis: Confronting the Imperial Presidency, 1968-1992*, which treats the rise and fall of antiwar activism in American practical politics.

Jessica Elkind received her Ph.D. from UCLA and is an Assistant Professor of history at San Francisco State University. She is currently working on a book on U.S. nation-building projects and the role of American aid workers in South Vietnam from 1955-1965.

David Kieran is Visiting Assistant Professor of American Studies at Franklin and Marshall College and the co-founder of the War and Peace Studies Caucus of the American Studies Association. He is completing his manuscript, *"Sundered by a Memory:" Foreign Policy, Militarism, and the Vietnamization of American Memory*, which is under advance contract with the *Culture, Politics, and the Cold War Series* at the University of Massachusetts Press.

Richard A. Ruth teaches Southeast Asian history at the U.S. Naval Academy. He is the author of *In Buddha's Company: Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War*.

Review by Jessica Elkind, San Francisco State University

In a classic Vietnam War story, American soldiers patrolling the jungle find themselves caught in an ambush staged by an unseen, unheard enemy. These men have spent days or weeks trudging through the tropical humidity of Vietnam and subsisting on C rations. For these soldiers, the enemy could be anywhere and could strike anytime. Meredith Lair's fascinating and original book, *Armed with Abundance*, turns this narrative on its head. By focusing on non-combat soldiers, her book fundamentally challenges the conventional image of American veterans of the Vietnam War as warriors who experienced deprivation, danger, and near-constant fear. Instead, as Lair convincingly demonstrates, the vast majority of American military personnel lived in material comfort and relative safety, especially those serving in support capacities and stationed on rearward bases. For many soldiers and sailors in Vietnam, the worst hardships they endured arose from nagging boredom and a profound disappointment in the gulf between their expectations of what the war would be like and the reality of their experiences.

Lair argues that during the Vietnam War, political and military officials tried to make the lives of American soldiers as easy as possible by providing them with access to creature comforts and reminders of home. They did so in order to raise morale among the troops serving in Vietnam as well as to attract new recruits in the United States (U.S.) In fact, the military leadership saw the very outcome of the conflict in Vietnam as hinging on warzone abundance, so they did everything in their power to ensure that the troops lived, ate, played, and shopped as if they were not actually at war. If American soldiers were well fed and were housed in comfortable bases, they would not complain about their living conditions and might even encourage friends and relatives at home to enlist. If they had ample opportunities to shop in American post exchanges (P.X.) and participate in recreational activities on U.S. bases, they would not need to relieve their boredom by causing trouble in Vietnam's towns and cities. And if they enjoyed a generally higher standard of living than they did at home, these soldiers would not object to the violence they were supporting or the aims of the U.S. military occupation in Vietnam. However, though the soldiers may have enjoyed all this abundance, the strategy pursued by military officials did not successfully address the basic problems of chronically low morale among the troops and lack of a clear understanding of why they were in Vietnam. As Lair explains in her introduction, "consumer goods and corporeal satisfaction were poor substitutes for a just and winnable cause" (7). And as she writes later in book, "military authorities softened the war experience but failed to infuse it with meaning" (106).

Lair also explains why the story of non-combat soldiers in Vietnam has been largely forgotten or ignored. As she shows, upon their return to the U.S., the veterans closed ranks and presented themselves as a homogenous group of beleaguered soldiers who had all risked their lives and eschewed the modern American lifestyle in the fight against communism. The wartime experiences of desk clerks or cooks on rearward bases became conflated with those of grunts on the front lines or pilots flying dangerous rescue missions. Personal accounts and histories of the war advanced this narrative, focusing on sacrifice and danger as opposed to abundance and comfort. The stereotype of Vietnam veterans

served several important functions, argues Lair. First, it preserved the popular ideal of American military personnel as citizen-soldiers fighting to uphold their values and beliefs rather than professional warriors fighting for a paycheck and amenities. Perhaps more importantly, the emphasis on sacrifice and combat seemed to justify American behavior during the war and to “clarify who deserve[d] to win” (5). Stories about the austerity and self-denial of soldiers legitimized the political goals of the war, cast the veterans as heroes, and helped assuage Americans’ guilt about the horrors their country had unleashed upon the Vietnamese. However, as Lair explains, “when abundance is understood to permeate a war zone—enough food, ammunition, and creature comforts to stay in the fight forever—the violence suddenly appears less restrained, the charity seems less ennobling, and the men who mete out both appear, somehow, less heroic” (21). When considered in this light, it is hardly surprising that few veterans, observers, or scholars have ever focused on the material excesses of the war in Vietnam.

Lair writes in a clear and engaging style, and her book is well organized. Her sources are varied and extensive. Lair relies heavily on diaries and books written by soldiers, especially rear-echelon personnel. She also makes use of U.S. government and military documents, as well as military newspapers, including unofficial or underground papers published by some units. Many sections of *Armed with Abundance* provide statistics and figures, for example the number of swimming pools built in Vietnam, the types and numbers of consumer goods bought by soldiers each year, or the volume of building materials shipped from the U.S. Lair’s inclusion of these statistics mirrors military and government officials’ penchant for using quantitative data to measure their success in the Vietnam War.

In her introductory chapter, Lair explains the importance of considering non-combat soldiers, whose role and experiences have largely been ignored by scholars as well as in popular representations of the war. According to Lair, somewhere between 75 and 90% of all military personnel in Vietnam served in non-combat positions. The different estimates depend not only on varying definitions of what activities constituted combat but also on the area of the country in which the troops were stationed, the time period considered, and their service branch. Lair’s next chapter deals with the tension between grunts and military personnel stationed on reward bases or serving in support roles. The disdain that many combat soldiers held for these men and women is evident in their nickname for them—REMFs (rear-echelon mother fuckers). Lair explains some of strategies that the military brass employed to smooth over these tensions, most of which failed.

Subsequent chapters explore the physical living quarters and conditions of non-combat soldiers, especially the large bases constructed throughout the country; the diverse array of recreational, educational, and entertainment opportunities provided to the soldiers by the military; the rampant consumerism among American troops in Vietnam; and the carnival atmosphere of the war itself that allowed the soldiers to escape their ordinary lives and cope with the poverty, despair, and death all around them. In her chapter on military bases in Vietnam, Lair describes the massive infrastructure projects of the U.S. government. She depicts non-combat soldiers as shrewd laborers who “subtly negotiated better terms of employment” for themselves (68). These improved terms included more military and civilian supplies than the troops could ever hope to use and sophisticated logistics systems

to deliver those supplies to far-flung parts of the country. The U.S. military and private contractors constructed elaborate bases, which functioned as mini-cities. Most American troops, including those stationed on remote bases, enjoyed hot meals, fresh produce, and treats such as ice cream. Their living quarters often contained radios, mini-fridges, and coffee makers. Lair's chapter on recreation programs in Vietnam details the "war on boredom" launched by military authorities to help occupy non-combat soldiers during their free time. Through R & R (usually an abbreviation for rest and relaxation) programs within Vietnam and outside of the country, American troops had the opportunity to play tourists. Athletic programs, swimming pools, craft rooms, libraries, educational venues, U.S.O. shows and other performances, and open mess clubs--which were basically bars located on the bases and subsidized by the military--offered further diversion and distraction. In addition to recreational opportunities, the military provided numerous opportunities for the troops to shop. Lair describes the P.X. system in great detail and reveals how soldiers bought necessities as well as luxury items, such as cameras and electronics. She argues that consumerism among soldiers in Vietnam served as a counterweight to Vietnamese poverty and "seemed to affirm the superiority of American culture" (148). Finally, Lair's chapter on "war zone wonderland" explores how many American troops used the physical and psychological distance from their "normal" lives to engage in behavior—from drug use and sex to gambling and selling consumer goods on the black market—that would be deemed taboo or illegal at home. She also demonstrates the lengths to which many non-combat troops went in order to legitimize their experiences in Vietnam, usually by misrepresenting their service or exaggerating their role in combat operations.

Among the more interesting aspects of Lair's book are the scattered passages in which she compares the experiences of American troops with those of North Vietnamese or National Liberation Front (N.L.F.) fighters. Particularly revealing is her brief discussion at the end of her recreation chapter of how the morale issue affected North Vietnamese and N.L.F. soldiers (144). As Lair correctly points out, for Vietnamese on both sides of the battle lines, the conflict was as much about independence and the nature of their society as geopolitics. And the authoritarian governments of both North and South Vietnam squashed dissent and so did not have to contend with the same types of morale problems as the United States. Lair could have explored this issue--the differences in how the military leadership of the U.S., South Vietnam, and North Vietnam (not to mention the southern leaders of the N.L.F.) dealt with recruitment and retention, as well as flagging morale—in more detail. Doing so might have provided a starker contrast between the Americans and Vietnamese and bolstered her argument about the uniqueness of how the U.S. went to war in Vietnam.

She also might have considered more fully the relations between the American military and its South Vietnamese allies. Except for the occasional mention of how soldiers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were generally denied the abundance and wealth enjoyed by their American counterparts, Lair basically leaves the South Vietnamese soldiers out of her story. Did the ARVN, which received a significant amount of material, technical, and logistical support from the U.S. government, try to replicate the American model for its own troops? How did the disparity between the material conditions of American and South Vietnamese soldiers affect their relationships, on and off the battlefield?

These suggestions about topics that Lair might have developed further point to my primary, if relatively minor, critique of her book—that it would have benefited from more context about the diplomatic, political, and cultural atmosphere in which American military leaders as well as their troops were operating. Given their access to American products and their relative material comfort, the men and women whom Lair describes could have been practically anywhere in the world. Living and working within the confines of their rearward bases—or at least returning to those bases after providing support to troops in forward positions—these soldiers seemed to be completely disconnected from the world and war all around them. And that is part of Lair’s point. But her discussion depends almost entirely on internal factors, such as the tensions between combat and non-combat personnel and the negotiations between military brass and the soldiers. Surely, external factors also mattered and helped shape U.S. military policies and practices in Vietnam. By overlooking how the interests of American Congressional figures funding the war, the demands of the U.S. government, or pressure from South Vietnamese military and political leaders influenced American military decision-making, Lair seems to leave out a key piece of the story. I do not mean to dwell on the book that Lair did not write, merely to suggest that there might be additional explanations for some of the phenomena she describes. In many ways, *Armed with Abundance* tells the reader more about the transformations in the U.S. military in particular and American culture in general than it does about U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Ultimately, *Armed with Abundance* is a social and cultural history of the U.S. military during the Vietnam era. Lair convincingly demonstrates how many of the features characteristic of the contemporary American military—the massive overseas bases insulated from the fighting all around them, the opportunities for consumption and high degree of material comfort available to soldiers serving outside of the U.S., and the privatization of American warfare itself—had their start in Vietnam. She draws explicit comparisons between the experiences of non-combat soldiers in the Vietnam and the Iraq War. In fact, *Armed with Abundance* begins with a story about a U.S. Army journalist in Iraq, who refused to partake of the elaborate dessert bar at his base’s dining facility out of a principled stand that he had done nothing to deserve cake. The book ends with an epilogue that describes how the wartime abundance, comfort, and consumption that characterized the Vietnam War have reappeared during every subsequent American military conflict.

Armed with Abundance contributes significantly to scholarship on the Vietnam War and especially on transformations in the U.S. military since the mid-twentieth century. Lair’s arguments are provocative and persuasive. She challenges readers to reconsider their assumptions about how the U.S. wages war and about the experiences of Vietnam veterans. Her book, especially the chapters on entertainment and consumerism among U.S. soldiers, will be a valuable addition to the reading I assign in my courses on the American involvement in Vietnam. Although the experiences of veterans of that war cannot be reduced to a singular tale, most Americans in Vietnam did share access to material goods, entertainment, and a basic level of comfort. Lair does not argue that the war involved no sacrifice or that the tens of thousands of Americans killed or wounded in Vietnam were insignificant, but that there was, quite literally, a lot more to the story.

Review by David Kieran, Visiting Assistant Professor of American Studies at Franklin and Marshall College

Meredith Lair's important book emerges from her willingness to seriously interrogate a long-known but surprisingly under-investigated reality of the war in Vietnam: that the vast majority of Americans who served there did not do so in a combat capacity. Acknowledging this gives rise to the two related questions that are critical to the study of the war and its legacy: What experiences *did* define these service members' deployments, and what does the answer to this question and its elision from remembrances of the war, reveal about how the United States waged – and wages – war and imagines the nature of its global military presence? The result of Lair's inquiry is a deeply researched and compellingly written book that significantly contributes to scholarship on the Vietnam War, its legacy, and the study of contemporary military culture.

Lair's central contention is that most American servicemen passed their deployments in comparable ease on military bases in the south of Vietnam, working quotidian support jobs in which "monotony and frustration were often the greatest occupational hazards" (82; 30). This frustration stemmed from somewhat contradictory impulses as soldiers simultaneously resented their service in an increasingly unpopular and unwinnable war and found that serving in support roles did not fulfill their Cold War expectations of military service (89; 104-05). Lair shows that the military, anxious to address these problems, provided soldiers with ample leisure activities and creature comforts; her catalogues of these efforts – from the baking of "7,000 doughnuts each day" in Da Nang to "eighty-one basketball courts, sixty-four volleyball courts, [and] twelve swimming pools" at Long Binh – are astounding (78; 33).

Yet Lair does more than tally American extravagance. Noting that "what was new in Vietnam was all the *stuff*," she posits Vietnam as a transitional moment when domestic practices of consumption fundamentally reshaped American militarism (223). Freshly examining familiar records, Lair demonstrates that the United States' approach to war in Vietnam – and thus by extension the experience of both Americans and Vietnamese who endured it – was deeply informed by Cold-War consumer culture. Multiple forces shaped this culture's development, and Lair illustrates how military leaders and donut-eating, basketball-playing GIs were nearly equal partners in creating it and shaping its contours. Military leaders were deeply concerned about declining morale, but servicemen were not simply malcontents to be pacified; they were active participants who wielded economic and structural power in a permissive environment, embraced the opportunities that the military created, and demanded more of them (50-51; 204; 198). As Lair engagingly puts it, for these soldiers "there was no point at which group satisfaction was achieved because, just as in civilian life, there was always some new amenity being enjoyed by some other unit somewhere else: a bowling alley, a pizza oven, American Red Cross girls, or a bowling alley where American Red Cross Girls served pizza" (100). And yet Lair also nicely captures soldiers' ambivalence amid the apparent abandon with which they consumed; support troops were chagrined by their activities, and combat soldiers were at least as jealous as they were contemptuous of the lives lived by their peers in the rear (54; 58).

Armed with Abundance thus offers a complex account of the goods and services that the military provided to eager American troops, how that availability was enabled by and intersected with broader discourses of the historical moment, and how those discourses defined the American military experience in Vietnam. But the book's most important work perhaps lies in its contribution to more fully historicizing the post-war period. Some of these contributions are historiographic; Lair's illustration of how the military's efforts "helped American companies penetrate the lucrative Asian market," for example, draws attention to the war-time roots of the economic relationships central to post-war U.S. policy towards Vietnam (77). More important, though, is the book's challenge to dominant discourses of the war's legacy and both historical and contemporary imaginings of the U.S. military's global presence. Arguing that "it is hard to imagine what the war would have looked like if no 'restraint' had been used," Lair undercuts remembrances of the war as having been insufficiently prosecuted and presents consumer culture as contributing to the war's larger failures by alienating Vietnamese people who, in addition to suffering violence in conventional ways, were the exploited labor – including sexual labor – that both enabled and witnessed this vociferous consumption (142; 136; 79; 241). Lair nicely explicates ordinary servicemen's complicated relationships with these workers, but one wishes for somewhat more discussion of how the U.S. military and its contractors set about recruiting and managing them (205-209). Nonetheless, that the corporate and sexual exploitation of Vietnamese labor was a contributing factor to the war's larger destruction of Vietnam is an important claim that is richly contextualized here.

Also important is Lair's discussion of how the dominant social construction of Vietnam veteran identity has relied upon eliding the culture of consumption and the diversity of soldiers' experiences in favor of a more politically useful and culturally tenable remembrance that emphasizes combat (59-61). Lair deserves credit for compassionately arguing for the recuperation of the full spectrum of veterans' experiences, rightly claiming that doing so would enable both a more complete history of the war and a more accurate recognition of veterans (21).

Lair's assessment of veterans' experiences against the dominant remembrance of the war is central to her broader reconsideration of the nature of the U.S. military's global presence. By emphatically demonstrating the capacity and consequences of American empire, she challenges readers to acknowledge how "bounty's absence in war narratives ensures that the American people continue to think of their country not as a superpower . . . but rather as an exemplar nation that deploys its citizen soldiers only when absolutely necessary" (244). Her comparisons between base culture in Vietnam and Iraq, where "as in Vietnam, military authorities tried to maintain troop morale by closing the gap between stateside and war zone living conditions," illuminate the historical roots of both the military policies and cultural attitudes that dominate American empire's contemporary manifestations (229). These comparisons reveal an important way in which Iraq replicates elements of the Vietnam War, but here as well one wishes for a bit more: do the attitudes of Generation X and millennial consumers precisely mirror those of the Baby Boom generation? And do attitudes towards consumerism differ between the draft and reluctant-enlistee Army of Vietnam and the contemporary All-Volunteer force?

As the few questions that I have posed throughout this review indicate, if there are critiques to be made of *Armed with Abundance*, they are that one sometimes wishes that Lair had expanded her argument a bit more in some areas. This is particularly so with regard to race and gender. To be fair, Lair frames her argument as “fall[ing] almost exclusively on men because the war story that I am seeking to reframe belongs to them” (18). While this reframing is ably accomplished, this focus results in the book’s not interrogating base culture and consumption quite as fully as it might have. I am left wondering how women responded to a male-oriented, hyper-sexualized consumer culture in which American women sometimes figured as another form of sexualized, exploitable labor (135; 129; 171; 184). More discussion of whether and how American women engaged with, enabled, or resisted these power dynamics; whether the military sought to provide educational and recreational opportunities that targeted women; and whether women advocated for them or created alternative spaces would have been illuminating. The same holds true for *Armed with Abundance*’s treatment of race, particularly given the extent of African-American anti-war activism by the end of the war.¹ Lair’s claim that “the desire to relax and consume belonged to everyone” in a Cold War culture marked by racial inequality seems accurate but insufficient, for even if the desires were equal the opportunities may not have been, and the book would have benefitted from more attention to the racial discourses that informed the provision and consumption of leisure and entertainment.

That *Armed with Abundance* does not push some issues as far as I might wish – particularly when the author does not specifically promise that she will take them up – should not detract from the recognition that this nuanced, thoughtful book is an achievement. Meredith Lair offers a more complicated understanding of how the United States military conceptualized fighting the war in Vietnam, how American servicemen experienced it, and how that history informs the production and maintenance of military empire. She also points to important avenues for future research. Scholars of the war’s legacy in Vietnam must grapple with how “base[s] so large that it was impossible to imagine that [they] had never been there” have figured into that nation’s post-war landscape and remembrance and how the wartime labor on and around those bases has shaped post-war lives in Vietnam (73); scholars of U.S. base culture must ask how the legacy of Vietnam shapes the intersection of militarism and consumerism in other countries and in other moments; and scholars interested in the culture of the Iraq War will have to contend with consumption as a key site at which the United States has encountered and grappled with Vietnam’s legacy. For these scholars, and for all of us interested in the Vietnam War and its legacy, Meredith Lair’s book is critical reading.

¹ See, for example, Herman Graham III, *Brothers Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003).

Review by Richard A. Ruth, U.S. Naval Academy

Thalia was the Greek goddess of festivity and luxurious banquets. As one of the three Graces, she possessed the power to bestow unlimited food, music, and gaiety on any gathering of men that honored her name. She was also a Muse – the patron of comedy – whose possession of a grotesque mask allowed her to transform the most somber of souls into an entertaining fool. After reading Meredith H. Lair’s *Armed with Abundance*, I am compelled to recognize Thalia over Ares, the god of war, as the divine architect of most Americans’ adventures in the Vietnam War. Lair demonstrates that far more U.S. servicemen experienced the event as an ironic farce of luxury and opulence than did those who endured it as a grim tragedy of despair and loss. And in doing so Lair has written what is certainly one of the most important – and satisfying – recent histories of the Vietnam War. A ground-breaking work, this meticulously researched and lively study has the power to transform long-held views of what the Vietnam War was for those who experienced it. It also could change the popular image of the “Vietnam vet” in our society. And for these reasons it certain to generate controversy – and maybe even anger – amongst veterans, scholars, and those dedicated to preserving these engrained but inaccurate images.

Meredith Lair presents a history of the war that focuses on life in the rear echelon, the area of operation for more than seventy-five percent of the American servicemen who served in South Vietnam. She argues that the U.S. military (and the Army in particular) used an abundance of morale-boosting perks – from rich food to extensive sports facilities to dazzling shopping opportunities – to insulate military personnel from boredom and deprecation. “The U.S. military could not provide convincing guarantees that the war would be won, that the ends would justify the terrible means,” Lair asserts, “so it tried to make its unhappy charges as comfortable as possible” (92).

Lair undermines the popular image of the “typical” experience in the war by demonstrating that the exploits of a combat infantryman conveyed in countless news stories, memoirs, and films were far from the norm. The line of exhausted grunts slogging through the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta became the dominant symbol of service because it was reproduced repeatedly by foreign correspondents during the war and by Hollywood and commemorative monuments afterward. Lair’s work transforms the image of the typical G.I. in the Vietnam War. He is not the “ascetic citizen-soldier” enduring constant danger and deprecation in a foreign war zone; he is a pampered rear-echelon functionary who wages a daily contest against boredom and silly regulations.

Lair’s study draws a sharp contrast between combat soldiers and support personnel. And although both are now labeled “Vietnam vets” (and bear the assumptions of what that tag implies), there were profound differences between how “grunts” and “REMFs” spent their time in the war theater. The location and occupational assignment of a soldier determined the danger he faced. In fact, so great is the difference that Lair characterizes the relationship between the two as belonging to the same side but serving in “different wars” (23), a contrast encapsulated as the difference between being airborne and being

“chairborne” (24). She does not utterly dismiss the danger posed to all U.S. military personnel serving in a conflict where roadside ambushes, mortars and rocket-propelled grenade attacks, and terrorist strikes on urban facilities exposed all personnel to potential harm; but the daily difficulties of the rear are characterized more by petty harassments and the threat of boredom than by attacks from the PLAF (Viet Cong) or the PAVN (North Vietnamese Army).

Lair highlights the example of the sprawling U.S. Army complex at Long Binh to demonstrate the degree to which these rear-echelon soldiers were isolated from combat and insulated by comfort. Estimated in area to be the size of Cleveland, Ohio, the Long Binh Post was a massive but orderly city of 3,500 buildings, 180 miles of roads, and a regular bus service to ferry about the 60,000 or so Americans stationed there. As the home to U.S. Army Vietnam Headquarters it boasted eighty-one basketball courts, sixty-four volleyball courts, twelve swimming pools, eight softball fields, eight multipurpose courts, six tennis courts, five craft shops, three football fields, three weight rooms, three libraries, three service clubs, two miniature golf courses, a movie theater, a barbecue pit, libraries, stores, and other entertainment and sports facilities. It even built a war museum with dioramas that conjured up Disneyland’s attractions in their campy garishness. Open messes served unlimited quantities of alcohol, and the spas that doubled as brothels sought only the thinnest of veils to conceal their true purpose. Lair depicts life inside this “virtual REMF citadel” as bordering the surreal; she includes fascinating recollections by one soldier, for example, who participated in “lazy ass competitions” to determine who in his unit could work the least. This same soldier got lucky by landing a job as a life guard at the base’s pool, a duty he regularly performed while stoned; he rescued drowning swimmers by yelling “Stand up, stupid!” because the pool’s deepest point was only four feet. He seems to speak for many when he determines that victory in the rear was measured by the degree to which he could remain isolated from the war (43).

In a “war on boredom” soldiers struggled to remain distracted by attending musicals at the Armed Forces Theatre, taking in Bob Hope shows, and earning college credit through correspondence courses offered through the United States Armed Forces Institute. They played tourist by jetting off on well planned holidays to Hong Kong, Sydney, and Honolulu, or by driving down to the Vietnamese resort at Vung Tau. They practiced being soldiers by shooting pop guns at carnival games or playing with apparatuses that simulated a bombing run on an enemy camp. And they drank. A lot. Each soldier was allowed to purchase five cases of beer from the P.X. each month when not drinking in the many Army-operated open messes that sold unlimited amounts of liquor to G.I.s. They devoted enormous amounts of time and energy to diverting their senses from the reality of the war they had come to carry out.

The most fascinating chapter in Lair’s book concerns the wealth of consumer goods sucked up by the soldiers while stationed in South Vietnam. Lair explains this orgy of consumerism within the cultural context of the United States in the decades after World War II. “When these children of plenty – or the hope of plenty – grew up and went off to war against communism in Vietnam,” she writes, “they took their standards and desires with them” (146). The U.S. military, in recognizing that desire, sought to ameliorate the soldiers’

boredom and anxieties by engendering a system of P.X. stores, shopping catalogs, and shipping services available to all soldiers but used primarily by those in support positions. The comparatively high salaries in the war theater combined with the low price of the available high-end goods encouraged many soldiers to pass the time by shopping. “For many G.I.’s, their war experience was made exceptional not by what they carried,” Lair writes with a nod toward Tim O’Brien’s classic novel, “but rather by what they bought” (146). Base Stores, Main Stores, and other P.X. installations allowed rear area soldiers to acquire nearly every food item, magazine, toiletry, and luxury item they desired. In addition to staggering quantities of liquor, soldiers stocked their living quarters with cameras, radios, stereos, televisions, luggage, watches, refrigerators, electric fans, and all varieties of Vietnamese handicraft. They could even buy new cars to await them upon their arrival back in the United States. In my own work, I’ve written about the enormous fascination with consumer goods that gripped many Thai soldiers when they entered the American-built P.X. stores in South Vietnam. I attributed their obsession with accumulating consumer goods to the Thai soldiers’ relative poverty and their inexperience with foreign luxury brands. But Lair’s work reminds me that this spell of conspicuous consumption could be cast with equal power on America’s sons. “Combat was infrequent in Vietnam,” she observes, “but consumerism was universal” (146).

Lair uses a broad array of sources to support her claims. She draws upon a cornucopia of reports from numerous military and government archives, as well official and underground newspapers, American and Vietnamese memoirs, veterans’ fiction, interviews, and photographs. The consistent acknowledgement of absurdity in these disparate sources strengthens the force of Lair’s characterization of life in the rear areas as verging on the ridiculous.

In challenging the image of the Vietnam War veteran does Lair’s work run the risk of inviting disdain for these men? Is her book a condemnation of the majority, a kind of exposé on the servicemen who, by no fault of their own, found themselves dropped into this strange universe of plenty? The answer to these questions is no. Lair does not ridicule or blame the recipients of this opulence. In her account, they come across as willing but bemused subjects of a military system they did not construct, understand, or even condone. Many in the account express guilt for enjoying such comforts while their fellow soldiers in combat units suffer and die. And while Lair does detail some of the opportunists who exploited this abundance for their gain, she makes it clear that nearly all of the soldiers thrust into this world worked to carry out their duties to the degree of professionalism and competence demanded by the system. At times her account presents them as almost victims of a Lotus Land that has rendered them too satisfied to defy, change, or escape.

Although I am certain that some readers will be upset by Lair’s recasting of the Vietnam War experience with the themes of consumerism, entertainment, and absurdity, her book does not dishonor anyone’s service. Instead, her focus on the rear area only sharpens the extraordinary experiences of combat veterans whose tours of duty were spent outside the relative safety and comfort of these well protected and well stocked bases. She includes the tension generated when “the most is given to those who risked the least” (90). She includes the outraged reactions of combat soldiers upon discovering just how plush their rear area

colleagues had it (“They eat hot fucking chow! They eat cold fucking ice cream! [...] *They’re* supposed to be supporting *us!*”) to sharpen this contrast (90-91). She also extends the parameters of the Vietnam War experience to include those men and women in the majority who served outside of infantry units. In a very basic way she demonstrates that these rear area soldiers are as important to America’s Vietnam War story as their colleagues in combat units. In her serious consideration of their challenges, she shows how ingenuity and esprit could flourish in the communities of support personnel who made the combat mission possible. Lair’s study allows that soldiering need not be synonymous with suffering.

Lair writes sympathetically about the expectations and disappointments of soldiers who had come to South Vietnam to fight but found themselves doing everything there but combat. In one chapter (“This Place Just Isn’t John Wayne: U.S. Military Bases in Vietnam”) Lair describes the difficulty that some rear area soldiers had in reconciling their expectations of war with the reality of their lives amidst industrial-sized ice cream machines, steak dinners, and “hooch maids,” the Vietnamese women hired to clean the barracks, make the beds, and shine the boots (83). Few had expected war to be so insulating – and fattening – that many grew resentful toward the Army for denying them the opportunity to prove themselves as men (106). So conflicted were these soldiers by the disparity between their expectations and the ultimate reality that some were compelled to maintain a fiction of deprivation by writing letters home to their mothers and wives describing hardship generated by inadequate food and supplies (98-99). Complaints about shortages at Long Binh Post – laughable as they seem now – were investigated by the U.S. Army to determine their validity and to reassure worried Stateside observers.

Lair demonstrates a gift for presenting irony with just the right amount of subtlety. In one chapter titled “War Zone Wonderland,” she describes the transported cultural elements that transformed the war into something more strange than tragic for legions encamped inside these isolated bases. Her descriptions of soldiers wiling away hours in front of television sets as reports on the siege at Khe Sanh were interspersed between reruns of *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* add a new level of irony to the phrase “the first television war” (189). This sense of spectatorship that shaped some veterans’ experiences even extended into real life. Lair includes recollections by a veteran who took a break from his sunbathing atop a shipping container to watch helicopter gunships blazing away at a target four miles distant. “It was like sitting at a drive-in theater back home. In wrap-a-round panorama,” he recalls. “The only thing I didn’t have was Myra Faye to put my arm around or popcorn to munch” (186).

One of the great ironies Lair presents is that morale was lower in these luxurious rear areas than it was among soldiers in combat units. Criminal acts, drug use, absenteeism, and hostility toward military authority all were higher among the population of pampered soldiers (95-96). Communist forces – the Viet Cong, NVA, and civilian supporters – maintained high morale despite seemingly grave shortages of food, entertainment, and equipment; their fighting spirit was steadfast where the American’s faltered (142). Is it then dangerous psychologically, as Lair wonders, to facilitate the distinction between civilian and military life while in a war zone? Her study invites questions about the

wisdom of continuing this regime of excess in America's recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reading through her description of the problems endemic to rear units (and absent from combat units), I found myself wondering: Is suffering good for soldiering? Is luxury bad for morale? Of course, the flip side of this approach to rear area life seems equally unwise. Would support soldiers have possessed higher morale without the vast quantities of food, alcohol, entertainment, sex, sports, shopping, tourism, and other distractions made available to them during their tours? Lair concludes her study with a short examination of rear echelon life in American-occupied Iraq, demonstrating that the isolation, indulgence, and entertainment pursued in the rear areas of South Vietnam were reproduced during Operation Iraqi Freedom, with the considerable exceptions of alcohol and prostitution being removed from the menu of distractions.

One aspect of abundance that Lair does not highlight strongly is its manifestation in combat units. Her focus on the rear areas stops her from a consideration of the strategic and economic costs associated with the nearly unlimited supplies of ammunition available to most combat soldiers in South Vietnam. I can easily imagine extending Lair's critique of this culture of abundance to the real warzone; such a study would be valuable to analyze the pros and cons – the advantages and the tragedies – of unlimited bullets, grenades, and other small arms used against a guerrilla force that operated amongst a civilian population.

Lair's book contributes to the growing body of studies that compel scholars and students of the war to reevaluate the dominant beliefs about American conduct in the conflict. Her study stands alongside Jerry Lembcke's *The Spitting Image* and George Lepre's *Fragging* as another groundbreaking examination of an oft mentioned but little studied topic in the war. It is easy to imagine *Armed with Abundance* influencing all future studies of America's conduct in Southeast Asia, especially generalized histories of the war that often give short shrift to the topic of life in the rear. Any of the book's chapters can be assigned to students (especially "Total War on Boredom: The U.S. Military's Recreation Program in Vietnam" and "The Things They Bought: G.I. Consumerism in Vietnam") in a college course on the war to provide a fuller picture of the American approach to war.

Last year, several students in my Vietnam War course objected to the portrayal of American servicemen included in a section of Michèle Ray's wartime memoir *The Two Shores of Hell*. The midshipmen – future U.S. Navy officers – felt insulted by Ray's description of the Americans she met at a base camp in Qui Nhon. The French fashion model-turned-war journalist (and later Viet Cong captive) expressed surprise at how unfit these soldiers appeared to her:

How does it happen that these men who march and exercise are fat, flabby, and often pimply? I myself gained five pounds following the troops. And yet I have never had so much exercise in my life.¹

In their critical analyses of the memoir, my students argued that Ray's account betrayed strains of anti-Americanism evident in some French journalists during the war. At the time,

¹ Michèle Ray, *The Two Shores of Hell* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1968), 153.

I found myself somewhat sympathetic to their analyses; however, after reading Lair's study, which includes descriptions of the efforts U.S. Army officials took to prevent their rear area soldiers from getting fat while in South Vietnam, I realize that the French account may be closer to the truth than my students would have ever imagined.

Author's Response by Meredith H. Lair, George Mason University

I would like to thank Thomas Maddux for putting this roundtable together, and Michael Allen, Jessica Elkind, David Kieran, and Richard Ruth for their thoughtful comments about my work. I have found the experience of reading their feedback both stimulating and humbling. As I was formulating my response, I realized that this roundtable is the literal manifestation of the conversation about the past that published historical research always represents. I feel privileged to take part.

Armed with Abundance is concerned with the noncombat experiences of American soldiers in Vietnam—the experiences of both combat and noncombat troops that fell outside the realm of bloodshed and violence normally associated with war. The book works from the premise that only a small fraction (perhaps 10 to 25 percent) of American soldiers in Vietnam served in combat. This is not an original contribution to knowledge; it is a fact well known to scholars of the Vietnam War and to most of its veterans. But this fact is revelatory to the public at large, which imagines the Vietnam War to have been a landscape of universal suffering and great material sacrifice. My goal in the book was to complicate this typical understanding of the war by redrawing that barren landscape, but this time including all the niggling details—personal refrigerators, maid service in the barracks, nightly floorshows, monotonous office work, military-run ice cream plants, oceans of beer, and so on—that tend to get left out of stories designed to establish the heroism, tragedy, and legitimacy of the American project in Southeast Asia. The plot—the U.S. military occupied a country embroiled in civil war in order to contain the spread of communism—remains the same, but the setting is vastly different, forcing those who imagine it to reconsider the meaning of all that violence committed in the name of freedom. Once the material abundance is restored to the war's landscape, then we must consider a slew of questions: Where did all that stuff come from? What purpose did it serve? How did soldiers interact with it? What did they think of it? What did they think of one another, since the abundance was not evenly distributed? Why did it disappear from the public memory of the war? How did it manifest itself in subsequent conflicts? And what are its implications for understanding who Americans are, what they believe in, and how they fight?

My fellow roundtable participants offer many positive assessments of my work, and for that I am grateful. They also offer substantive critiques, but mostly, they raise questions, which is the most any scholar can hope for—that my work will inspire new avenues of inquiry that other researchers, especially young scholars, will doggedly pursue. For example, David Kieran notes a dearth of engagement with race and gender, or at least women (the book does include a discussion of the war's role in asserting soldiers' masculinity and how material abundance complicated that process). How consumerism manifested itself differently for different constituencies, including women and African Americans, but also different service branches and military ranks, is a fair question, but it is not the question I was interested in. My main task in *Armed with Abundance* was to offer a thick description of the noncombat aspects of the war in order to challenge the dominant narrative I mentioned earlier. Breaking the war down into many small realms of

experience (What was it like for women? What was it like for African Americans? What was it like for African American women? and so on) would have atomized my main argument, which was to assert that service in the Vietnam War, for virtually everyone who served there, was simply not as the public has imagined it.

Kieran also asks a series of questions related to the book's examination of the Vietnam War's legacies in Iraq. Consumerism has changed in the last forty years, deepening its hold on American life and easing cultural distinctions between countries, and members of a professional military surely regard their service differently than do citizen-soldiers compelled to serve by a draft. What role has abundance played in conflicts since Vietnam? The epilogue of *Armed with Abundance* establishes that the infusion of consumerism into the Vietnam war zone was not a one-off, but rather the beginning of a new mode of warfare. But there is more to know about what came after, and I hope that others will join me in trying to figure that out. Richard Ruth takes my questions about material abundance in soldiers' private moments and directs them towards traditional military histories of the war. Here is a book I would love to read: a treatment of how nearly unlimited weaponry affected U.S. counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam. And Jessica Elkind wants to know how "external factors" influenced the creation of this alternative warscape. She cites American and South Vietnamese political figures and military leaders, to which I would add contract firms themselves. James Carter's recent *Inventing Vietnam* is only the beginning of a much needed inquiry into how Vietnam intensified the privatization of American warfare.¹

Kieran, Elkind, and Michael Allen also raise interesting questions about Vietnamese perspectives on the material abundance that sustained the U.S. occupation force. Kieran wants more particulars on labor relations between Vietnamese workers and their American employers, and Elkind wants to know how North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front leaders maintained the morale of their own troops. The book's "scattered passages," in Elkind's words, on the Vietnamese were late additions to my analysis, as I realized that the self-directed nature of American morale initiatives were in stark contrast to the communists' co-optation of Confucian principles that cast the revolution as a morally correct extension of age-old traditions. Allen takes issue with my presentation of "the Vietnamese as stoic foils to [the] well-fed Americans," and I concur in the sense that my depiction of People's Army of Vietnam and National Liberation Front morale—that it was unflagging and might have remained so forever—is simplistic. But *Armed with Abundance* does not, as Allen claims, "treat consumerism as if it only mattered for Americans." In fact, the opposite is true. I argue that American consumerism fueled Vietnamese desires for material abundance. Yet, at the same time, the U.S. military stymied Vietnamese access to consumer goods, and the war's violence upended the Vietnamese economy, impeding the spread of general prosperity. The implications of consumerism for American counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam—and beyond—are profound.

¹ James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Whether *Armed with Abundance* successfully examines the historical context in which the bloom of consumerism spread throughout the Vietnam war zone is a point of contention. Michael Allen finds my discussion of Vietnam veterans' place in the wartime economy to be wanting, writing that "many still rightly saw themselves as falling further behind more fortunate sons who pursued college degrees or entered careers in an age of declining blue collar work and rising inflation." I could not agree more, for the U.S. military's emphasis on consumption to assuage low troop morale was a superficial, short-term strategy that purchased soldiers' compliance with personal electronics and custom-made suits, but that made little provision for their long-term prosperity. Then, "when the suits wore through and the tape decks became obsolete, these young men confronted the same problems they had known before Vietnam—a declining economy, an unsympathetic public—but with the bruises and cynicism of uncelebrated war veterans." (179-80) Allen also argues that "there was nothing especially new about Americans fighting in the way she describes," citing the full flowering of industrialized warfare during World War II. On this, I fundamentally disagree. Yes, soldiers earlier in the century waged war with machines, but they did not enjoy their benefits—percolating coffee, refrigerated beer, oscillating fans, blaring stereos, and flashing cameras—in daily life. The Vietnam War's relatively stable tactical situation, the American occupation force's ample supply of electricity, and easy access to consumer goods in the war zone dramatically altered soldiers' intimate moments, especially compared to their WWII forebears. Americans in World War II were surely armed with abundance, but the abundance was directed towards the enemy. In Vietnam, it was directed towards the self.

These insightful critiques of *Armed with Abundance* are joined by several affirming comments, but one theme in particular is especially meaningful to me. It is reflected in all the scholars' reviews, and it involves recognition of the care and concern I tried to take in writing about Vietnam veterans' lived experience. Kieran writes, "Lair deserves credit for compassionately arguing for the recuperation of the full spectrum of veterans' experience." Elkind closes her piece with acknowledgment of the balance I tried to strike in *Armed with Abundance*: "Lair does not argue that the war involved no sacrifice or that the tens of thousands of Americans killed or wounded in Vietnam were insignificant, but that there was, quite literally, a lot more to the story." Ruth makes a similar claim, and also an accurate prediction: "Although I am certain that some readers will be upset by Lair's recasting of the Vietnam War experience with the themes of consumerism, entertainment, and absurdity, her book does not dishonor anyone's service." Dishonoring veterans' service or undermining the degree of their sacrifice was never my intent, as the very personal preface to the book makes clear. But *Armed with Abundance* has nonetheless been met with hostility.

As Ruth predicted, some Vietnam veterans have taken offense, and I have received a steady stream of feedback that reflects their hurt and anger. There have been positive comments too, though they reflect more grim resignation ("This book is difficult to read, because the truth hurts!!" as an Amazon.com reviewer put it) than any kind of excitement. It is a difficult topic to confront. As I put it in my book's epilogue, "Somehow, when Americans imagine themselves at war, the notion of unlimited bullets and bombs is less disconcerting than the notion of unlimited ice cream, and the prospect of endless suffering is more

affirming than the promise of endless time and plenty.” Why is that? Ruth points out that *Armed with Abundance* “allows that soldiering need not be synonymous with suffering.” It is an interesting choice of words: “allows.” The reaction to *Armed with Abundance* from some quarters suggests that this idea is not allowed, that it is inherently offensive, and that there ought not to be any further discussion of material abundance in war, unless it is to argue that it compromises force readiness. To suggest that it compromises American values, that it undermines the perceived worthiness of an American cause, or that it offers some unsavory comment on the ethics of the American military art, is to some readers beyond the pale. And that, to me, is the very reason we need more studies like it.

Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
