
ON POLITICAL BOOKS

Class Warriors

Duty, honor, country. And coffins and grad school.

by James Fallows

People will read this book* for different reasons: soldiers for its military atmosphere, Vietnam veterans for its evocation of the war, perhaps even today's college-age readers for an idea of what America looked and felt like before they were born. It should have a special meaning for journalists. In the years since Atkinson's subjects, the cadets in the West Point class of 1966, graduated from the academy, the journalistic environment in America has changed almost as much as the military system. Atkinson's book is a reminder of one old verity that is often left out of the theorizing about the modern duties of the press. It shows that there can be tremendous power in simply telling a story—establishing characters, making the readers care about them, showing what happens next.

The writers who pioneered the standards and styles for today's nonfiction—David Halberstam, Tom Wolfe, Robert Caro, Gay Talese—have varying approaches and ambitions, but all of them understand that the first step in putting their message across is to get the reader interested in the story. Atkinson's approach is different from any of theirs, and in a way more modest. He concentrates on the story itself—"saga" is probably a better word, considering the scope of this book—without the underlying political argument that connects the anecdotes in *The Best and the Brightest* or *The Reckoning*. But Atkinson is a truly gifted storyteller, and the material he turns up is so rich that it suggests a number of messages on its own.

* *The Long Gray Line*. Rick Atkinson. Houghton Mifflin, \$24.95.

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It's hard to illustrate the narrative power of the book through brief quotations, since its emotional impact is cumulative. As in a good novel, the characters grow more and more interesting as we watch them succeed, fail, mature, and die. In a splenetic, contrarian review for *The New York Times Book Review*, a former Vietnam correspondent named Tom Buckley alleged that this was a shapeless, boring heap of anecdote. I'd be amazed if more than one reader in a thousand agrees. Three pages into the book, Atkinson gives a sample of his skill in setting scenes. His cadets have come back to West Point in 1986 for their 20th reunion. Nearly all of them have left the Army; 30 of their classmates (of the 579 who graduated) have died in Vietnam. They have gathered at the academy gravesite, and then mustered for the traditional procession of graduates across the parade field known as the Plain:

"As the Hellcats' drum and bugle corps played 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home' at a somber tempo, the graduates glided four abreast onto the sun-washed Plain. Led by a member of '22, the long gray line stretched for two hundred yards from oldest to youngest—'39, '56, '61, '66, '71, '76, '81. As they neared the waiting corps of cadets, the grads grew miraculously younger. Silver heads darkened, ebbing hairlines filled in, paunches flattened, stoops straightened, crow's feet pulled taut.

"Ten thousand spectators cheered."

Later, Atkinson shows us one of the characters leaning on a chain-link fence at an air base in California, shortly before departing for Vietnam:

"Less than fifty yards away, baggage handlers loaded a stack of shiny aluminum crates onto the nearest C-141. Jack could see hundreds of the boxes;

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one by one they glided up a black conveyer belt to disappear into the belly of the plane. Ammunition? he wondered. No, that didn't make any sense; they wouldn't ship ammo in aluminum containers. Perhaps they were missile boxes, Sparrows or Shrikes for the Phantoms at Ton Son Nhut. If so, they weren't very heavy; the baggage handlers hoisted the crates onto the belts with ease.

"Suddenly it struck him: coffins. Empty coffins. No-frills, government-issue, aluminum creels for the dead, bound for another load of mothers' sons in the mortuary at Bien Hoa."

Atkinson was lucky, if that term can be applied to what is obviously the result of many years of hard work, in choosing the group he portrays. The cadets in his class, who were juniors in high school when John Kennedy took office, entered the academy during a burst of nationalistic idealism. Douglas MacArthur had given his famous "Duty, Honor, Country" speech at West Point just before their arrival. Americans were not yet dying in Vietnam. The mood still had not completely turned by the time they graduated in 1966. But four years later, when most members of the class had finished their minimum service requirement, a full third of them resigned their commissions. (In the 1950s, about a tenth of each class resigned after four years.) By 1975, when Americans left Vietnam, only a handful of the cadets were still in the service, and the class had lost as high a proportion of its members in combat as the graduates of the late 1930s had in World War II.

Atkinson might have built an even starker historical drama if he had focused on the class not of 1966 but of 1968, which entered the academy while idealism was still high and came out into complete chaos. But it's easy to understand why Atkinson wanted to stay with this set of characters. Two members of the class of 1966 played major roles in the struggle over the Vietnam Veterans memorial in Washington: one helped organize the effort to build it, the other led the "black gash of shame" camp. After graduation, a number of Atkinson's cadets received Ranger training from Charles Beckwith, who in 1980 organized the doomed rescue mission to Iran. One member of the class survived combat in Vietnam, only to die 10 years after graduation in the horrific "poplar tree" episode in Korea. (When American and South Korean soldiers started pruning a tree that was obscuring their view across the De-militarized Zone, North Korean soldiers suddenly appeared and hacked the two Americans to death with axes.) Other characters in the book figured in the West Point cheating scandals, the investigation of the My Lai massacre, even the recent Wedtech racketeering case.

Few novelists or screenwriters writing about war

can resist the temptation to foreshadow. As soon as you hear some poor soldier saying how eager he is to see Mom back in Kansas or how great it will be to leave the war zone, you know he's about to get it. Atkinson resists the temptation. His ability to avoid a sense of foreboding is quite an achievement in itself, since he has seen some of the characters age into their forties—only through their friends' accounts. His even-handedness makes the deaths much more shocking when they occur—as they must have been for classmates and families. You really can't predict which of the young wives are about to be turned into widows and which of the high-spirited young men are about to be mowed down. I can't think of another book that gives a clearer emotional sense of what Vietnam cost.

More to the Point

The toll seems especially heavy because of the nature of two of the deaths. Less than a year after graduation, a lieutenant who had been chairman of the West Point Glee Club was leading a patrol through the Mekong Delta. He got stuck in the mud and asked another soldier to pull on the stock of his M-16 to haul him out. The other soldier accidentally grabbed the trigger and shot him to death. He was only the second member of the class of 1966 to die. A few months later, the cadet whom Atkinson describes as the most colorful and fun-loving in the class was trapped with his platoon in a doomed position on the notorious Hill 875. He managed to survive, until U.S. Air Force planes streaked overhead and dropped napalm on him. "Vietnam produced three kinds of casualties," Atkinson says, "the dead, the wounded, and the wounded who, by all medical odds, should have been dead." The most wrenching case in the book is that of a handsome young man who fell into the third category. His wife, when she first encounters him in the hospital, has no idea that the blind, seared, hairless creature beneath a blanket, "hardly more than a pile of bones," is the man she married. Their courage afterwards makes them the book's real heroes.

In a very few cases, the stories Atkinson recounts are suspiciously neat and perfect. This problem is almost inevitable, considering that there are literally thousands of anecdotes in the book, and that three of the book's main figures are (1) a man who received serious head injuries in a car crash, suffering permanent memory loss, (2) another man who, according to Atkinson, tends to see life's events in dramatically highlighted tones of good and evil, and (3) the uproarious character who died on Hill 875, who was the

subject of legends while a cadet and who didn't survive to be interviewed about what really happened. One episode in particular, part of a series of "they spat on my uniform when I came home" cases, is almost certainly not true:

In the early 1970s, a number of class members who had left the Army early entered law school. Inevitably, they ran into antiwar arguments and moralizing from other students. At the University of Michigan, a woman named Claudia, married to a member of West Point '66, "was having lunch with a friend who said, 'I think anybody who went to Vietnam was stupid.' Here we go again, Claudia thought. 'My husband's class had one of the highest death rates in Vietnam of any of the classes from West Point,' she offered. The other woman then cited a study which reported that among the 1,200 students in the Harvard class of 1968, only two dozen went to Vietnam and none were killed.

"Well," Claudia agreed, 'the war has caused terrible divisions, I guess.'

"The other woman smirked, 'Yeah, it tells you who's smarter.'"

This is a potent, bitter scene, but I bet it did not happen this way. To the best of my knowledge, the only such "survey" of Harvard students in Vietnam is one I conducted informally by going through alumni directories. The figures actually concerned the class of 1970, not 1968—and, much more important, the first published mention of them was in these pages late in 1975, several years after the showdown at Michigan is supposed to have taken place.

This is just one long-shot incident I happen to know about first hand. In general it is remarkable how much material Atkinson has amassed and presented—and how clear-eyed he seems about his characters. He has worked with these people for years. He must love and care about them, but he doesn't seem to have idealized any of them, which makes them all the more convincing and important to us. Unlike Halberstam or Caro, Atkinson organizes his stories toward an emotional purpose—this is how

The Worst City Government

In the District, crises are treated like winter colds: Wait 'em out, they usually go away. There's no better example of that remedy than the city's treatment of its ambulance service, which in 1987 made national news for getting lost en route to dying patients, for "rescuing" the wrong people, and for instructing a man who dialed 911 as his mother was dying to "Hey, hey, grow up."

How to save this essential service used by 150,000 residents a year? In 1987, members of Mayor Marion Barry's ambulance advisory committee came up with the obvious answer: Shut the damn thing down. But the mayor himself had a better idea. For \$52,000 he hired a prominent public relations firm to educate the public on when to dial 911. A year later, with the rescue squads as accident-prone as ever, the city council ordered major organizational surgery, and control of the ambulance bureau was shifted from the fire chief to the city administrator. And at the end of 1988, Barry proclaimed the crisis over: D.C. now had a "great

ambulance service"—hovering on the verge of greater. But an internal report leaked to *The Washington Post* this past summer suggests the mayor's emergency procedures were about as curative as a nose job.

Citing lousy training, weak supervision, an obsolete communication system, "sixties-era policies and practices," and a basic "lack of urgency" on the front lines, the draft report calculates that the average ambulance response time in the District remains among the slowest in the nation—with the tardiest responses being to calls from Washington's poorest neighborhoods. Six months after the report was leaked, Barry's men are still mulling its contents.

Meanwhile, the District's bad reputation hurts efforts to hire ambulance paramedics. For years the city has relied overwhelmingly (and anachronistically) on less-skilled emergency medical technicians. But a year and a half ago, city officials promised 100 new paramedics to bring the city's service up to speed. Since that an-

nouncement, fewer than two dozen hires have hit the streets. That gives the District a grand total of 44 paramedics answering those 150,000 yearly calls. Baltimore, with fewer calls, retains three times that number.

And who are these precious paramedics? The District isn't fussy. Three years ago, a task force complained that a background clearance and drug screening were the only tests certified paramedics needed to pass to get hired. Today, the paramedic who slaps a defibrillator on your chest undergoes the same strenuous screening. "You pee in a cup," summarizes one new hire, "and then they call up your neighbors."

—Katherine Boo

The *Monthly* depends on its readers to keep track of the breakdown of big city government. Please send your nominations to:

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