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In one sense, it is difficult to pinpoint a single historical argument in Tom Engelhardt’s The End of Victory Culture. Ostensibly, Engelhardt’s purpose is to expose the “victory culture” of the US propagated by media and industries, particularly those that are geared towards children, and victory culture’s decline from the Vietnam War to the present. However, Engelhardt did not entirely convince me of this—but instead raised a whole host of interesting questions worthy of further pursuit. Certainly, this is the gift and privilege of a journalist, who is free to take us ambling down the country roads of the last 50 years of American culture, interspersed with personal narrative and political history. The frame of the new edition, infused with sentiment about the events following September 11, notes the disconnect between our cultural growth coming out of the Vietnam War, and the American government’s insistence on a bizarrely outdated approach to “victory.” The original book, published in 1995, perhaps was inspired by a similar sense of urgency following the first Gulf War. Ultimately, the book poses some very powerful questions about how American war, dominance and victory is, and should be, perceived.

Engelhardt’s personal recollections, while brief, prove to be a compelling aspect of the book. Particularly interesting is his admission of youthful pleasure at imagining a future nuclear war in which the Chinese Communists conquer America (8). My sense is that Engelhardt is far from alone in this particular pleasure. While lacking the tactical elements of Engelhardt’s scenario, I often pondered the aftermath of nuclear war as a child with a perverse enjoyment. Given the number of stories and cinematic recreations of nuclear apocalypse, I suspect that not all of these projects came from a “cautionary” intent. Engelhardt juxtaposes this fantasy of defeat with the assertion that the children of the early cold war were the “last generation to celebrate the national war story,” portrayed as “proof of American triumph (9).” Throughout this chapter (War Story: Triumphalist Despair) run the themes of uncomplicated good and evil, and more complex realities. While most of this narrative deals with the United States’ uncomplicatedly good role in World War II, and the disturbing conclusion to the war that suggested we were dangerously close to self-annihilation.

Some of this more complex reality comes across even in Engelhardt’s depiction of other clear conflicts. Alongside children playing GIs versus Nazis or “Japs,” there were children playing cowboys and Indians with much ambiguity about the good and evil roles. Engelhardt uses anecdotal evidence in his chapter “War Games”—as will I. First, I wish that Engelhardt had written more than a footnote about gender in this type of play (72). He does admit that girls did play roles in these games in both traditional and non-traditional roles. However, there appears to be an avenue for oral history in what he calls a “largely unrecorded” area: I have heard many recollections of playing war games from women (in their 50s and 60s), and interestingly, some recollect their parents telling them that they ought to root for the Indians in western films.

At any rate, the first few chapters set up the master American narrative of dominance. Engelhardt begins with the narratives about settlement of America and victories over Native American tribes. In these early histories, the conquest was an unqualified right of the Europeans, and a success (22). Later in the book (316-317), Engelhardt revisits the narrative, via a 1953 cowboy-and-Indian film, and notes his son’s confused reaction to the picture. He attributes this to a major change in culture, and our perception of the “other.” While I believe that, in 2007, he attributes this change not only to the major disillusionment with the master narrative of victory over lesser people caused by the
Vietnam War, but also to the cultural developments of the 1990s, including moral ambiguity in films.

The narrative of white American victory over another culture was not limited to Indians, or to opponents in World War II—but extended to Black Americans and other minority cultures, even within America. Engelhardt does approach some of the ways in which this master narrative was disrupted, culturally, prior to the Vietnam War, but he indicates that these attempts were disguised (he cites Gentleman’s Agreement as an example, 33). Most of Engelhardt’s fine cinematic analysis is dedicated to the more simplistic stories of American victory. A particularly strong point of the book is the cataloging of victorious themes depicted in movies about World War II (see pages 48-49, for example).

Another interesting segment of the book, from my perspective, was the brief segment (58-62) about the American perception of the Chinese Nationalists (Guomindang, led by Chiang Kai-shek) during and after the war, and of course, after the Communist revolution in China. Engelhardt portrays a nation that quickly and fluidly changed its perspective on the “yellow peril” to a view of Chinese as “handsome,” “democratically-inclined” allies. This makes quite a bit of sense, of course, but is complicated somewhat by the historical literature that was published in the 1990s and beyond about the nature of Chiang’s political power. Parks Coble, for example, (in Facing Japan) portrays an impressive Chiang Kai-shek as a borderline fascist, held back from this development mostly by China’s appeasement policies. It shows just how constructed and malleable American ideas about allies could be—and introduces a healthy dose of skepticism about the ideals at work in American involvement in the war.

One of the biggest strengths of the book is in its discussion of the Vietnam War. He begins with a prologue to the same issues Americans will face in Vietnam—but seen in Korea, during the Korean War (See 62 for not knowing who the enemy is; and 65 for American defections to Communist China). Engelhardt captures the media reactions to the Vietnam War before jadedness has set in, and documents some remarkable reportage (188-191). I might add to these observations Brian Fawcett’s essay in Cambodia: A book for People who Find Television Too Slow, on the reportage of the 1974 Kent State conflict. There is also a fine discussion of My Lai and its aftermath on pages 218-227, and of Daniel Ellsberg’s internal change and persecution on pages 228-234.

I was a little disappointed in Engelhardt’s choice of Vietnam War films to analyze. Rightly, he talks about the most successful films: in the 1970s, films full of “a confusion of political issues and anger (276),” and in the 1980s, cartoonish or “noble grunt” films (278-279). He briefly notes the genre of damaged POW/returned veteran films, explored in greater detail in The Spitting Image. I had noticed a few television (not film!) depictions of well-adjusted Vietnam veterans, notably in Barney Miller and Hill Street Blues, which get ignored by these histories. It is possible that these images are so much in the minority that they are not really worthy of comment.

Also skillfully retold in the book are the ways in which interior threats (such as American Communists) were dealt with—and segues nicely with Marilyn Young’s account of Lyndon Johnson’s and Richard Nixon’s vilification of protestors as somehow foreign-influenced, in The Vietnam Wars).

In a way, the book documents a maturation of a nation. I continue to be skeptical about how much that nation has, in fact matured, though. There is quite a bit more moral ambiguity among the young, which translates to different perspectives on American dominance over other cultures. On the other hand, this moral ambiguity is coupled with a great deal of apathy about what goes on at
the government level, both domestically and internationally. Engelhardt points to a possible cause, I think: increasing satisfaction with fantasy imagery of war, coupled with a reasonably comfortable standard of living for most Americans. The images of war that young people encounter appear to be far more manipulated, and remain only choices (among many).

At each reading, I wonder a little at what cultural developments Engelhardt chose to discuss, and which he ignores. At a certain point, of course, the need for evidence has been saturated, and it comes down to a personal preference. However, I would like to gauge Engelhardt’s reaction to a few cultural moments of which I’m particularly fond, but that didn’t make it into the book. The first is the miniseries (or novel) *Centennial*. This storyline predates *Dances With Wolves* by about fifteen years (I think!), but presents just as much of an Indian-sympathetic narrative. Later, the miniseries/novel deals with racial and ethnic diversity and controversy, dustbowl despair, and the ravaging of the ecological landscape. Obviously the story takes its cue from 1970s interest in both ecology and ethnic roots, but indicates the presence of non-victory-oriented introspection about America, and my sense is that the film was well received.

There are also a slew of films and television show that I think depict images against the grain, for the time in which they were made. I’d also be interested in Engelhardt’s reaction to *Tokyo Joe*, a 1950s film about a flawed character returning to a recovering Japan, and his relationships with Japanese friends from before the war. Finally, I’d like to know his thoughts on the 1973 film *Save the Tiger*, which has a distinctly non-victorious narrative both about (memories of) World War II and 70s American culture in general. In it, in fact, the main character goes through a crisis about the American ideal, and sees only death, not victory, as the result of WWII. The film can probably be interpreted as a disguised critique of the Vietnam War, among other things. But this simplifies what appears to be a really complicated portrait of “the greatest generation” at middle age.