

Unquiet Americans

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Wall Street Journal

March 10, 2005; Page D8

I once wrote a comic novel about the Vietnam War. It was dissed by the critics -- just like the war, come to think of it. "Not while men are dying, Mr. Ford!" one reviewer scolded me.

OK. Is 38 years long enough? Let's hope so, because otherwise we'll miss a very fine story. What I tried to do in 1967 Phillip Jennings has now accomplished with madcap grace in "Nam-a-Rama" (Forge, 332 pages, \$24.95).

His plot is set in motion -- a bit lamely, I'm afraid -- by a president who greatly resembles Lyndon Johnson. At this point, we probably know too much about LBJ for wild satirical riffs: For all his faults, he didn't launch the Vietnam War at a pizza party. Still, the novel's early scenes set the tone -- and a refreshingly irreverent one it is. "Nam-a-Rama" soon takes flight, its plot veering wildly, darkly and amusingly as we follow the exploits of the narrator, Almost Capt. Jack Armstrong, and his mad buddy, Almost Capt. Gearheardt.

Armstrong, as it happens, is assigned as air officer to a Marine infantry company in Vietnam, calling in bombs and shells to keep the grunts from being overrun. For a chapter or two, we're persuaded that ground combat -- with its death, fear, heroism, profanity and stink -- is a weird joke played upon humans by the immortals above. God, in Mr. Jennings's telling, wears a cashmere sweater and loud pants and is in a hurry to get on with his golf game.

Portraying the absurdity and grotesque oddity of war, Mr. Jennings rivals his hero, Joseph Heller, to whose World War II novel "Nam-a-Rama" clearly pays tribute. (Like Heller, Mr. Jennings mines his personal experience -- he was a U.S. Marine and Air America helicopter pilot in Southeast Asia.) The story eventually moves from battle to back channels: At the behest of President Larry Bob, the two almost-captains go to Hanoi to strike a deal with Ho Chi Minh, or perhaps to kill him. They might even accomplish their mission -- whatever it is -- were it not for Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who has been studying "Catch-22" in the belief that it represents America's strategic guide for the Vietnam War.

"Nam-a-Rama" culminates -- as real life often does -- in a confusion of motives, misdeeds and unintended consequences. But all to wonderful comedic effect. Then, at the last, Mr. Jennings limns his japes with a tribute to the men who fought in Vietnam, especially to the Marines, in words so beautiful that they brought tears to my eyes. Rarely does a novelist storm the emotional ramparts so decisively.

As if to offset the sublime nuttiness of "Nam-a-Rama," the journalist Seymour Topping offers "Fatal Crossroads" (Eastbridge, 275 pages, \$24.95), a novel with a serious proposition: If only the wise Franklin Roosevelt had lived another year, he would have

barred the French from reoccupying their former colony and Vietnam would have been governed from the get-go by that saintly nationalist, Ho Chi Minh. To be sure, a bit of blood might have been shed, thanks to killers like Vo Nguyen Giap. (A bloodthirsty Giap, undermining the more amicable Ho, is a notion advanced by Mr. Jennings as well.) But at least the blood wouldn't have been American.

It is true that the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner to the CIA, helped Ho proclaim the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in August 1945. And it is possible that, if Harry Truman had followed the advice of his OSS agents rather than the urgings of Britain and France, we would have avoided our long and dispiriting involvement in Vietnam. But it's not as obvious as Mr. Topping wants us to believe. The patriot driven into the enemy's camp by clumsy American diplomacy is a staple of a certain world view: Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro and even Mao himself -- the logic goes -- would have been our buddies if only we'd let them. "Yes," as Ernest Hemingway wrote in another connection. "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

"Fatal Crossroads" comes highly recommended by Walter Cronkite and Neal Sheehan, among others, but I could not find the virtues they profess to see ("masterful...vivid...haunting"). Mr. Topping has written a polemic dressed up as a romance -- never an easy trick to pull off. I commend "Fatal Crossroads" to those who want to have their worst fears about American diplomacy confirmed in the course of a tri-national love story involving an American commando, a French spy and a Vietnamese guerrilla. To the rest, I suggest going instead to Mr. Jennings's over-the-top satire on the war that actually took place. "Nam-a-Rama" is indeed masterful, vivid and haunting -- and it's funny, too.

Mr. Ford's Vietnam novel, "Incident at Muc Wa," was filmed as "Go Tell the Spartans," starring Burt Lancaster.