

The Vietnam War Is Not Over*

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Millions of Americans visit Vietnam each year. Many go for business reasons. Many go for tourism. Former soldiers go to revisit where they fought, hoping to heal their scars and those they inflicted. I have not gone. I will not go.

Wars do not end with the cessation of hostilities. The recent shoving of the Serbian Minister at the memorial service for Srebrenica twenty years after the killings or the controversy over the Confederate battle flag 150 years after the end of the American Civil War are only two examples. Individual and collective memories are never easy to pin down. When I asked my friends in Moscow in the early 1990s how they viewed the period 1917-1989, making an allusion to how Germans perceived the period 1932-1945, they took me downtown to Red Square to show me the line outside Lenin's tomb.

The past is officially visited in many ways, in memorial services and reburials, and also in various truth commissions that try to establish justice for those who were wronged. By their very existence and judgment, truth commissions try to bring some form of 'closure' so that the people can 'go forward' from the past. The commissions are supposed to heal old wounds, to remove or cover over the scars of the past.

There has been no truth commission for Vietnam. 58,307 names are engraved in cold stone on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. There is no memorial for the two million Vietnamese who died in the conflict.

The very language of healing and closure denies the intertwining of the past, present and future. To heal is to finalize a process, as if a successful plastic surgeon can erase the scar tissue from a wound. Notions of closure and healing transpose biological processes to psychological ones and imply that a wound can heal or be definitively corrected. Healing, closure, and moving on imply a linear progression of time; an event happened, trauma took place, and then somehow the event and trauma are overcome, subdued, or even forgotten.

I do not live in linear time. The past is always with me. Past, present and future are constantly intermingled in circular time. The undeclared Vietnam War had (has?) no formal ending, no formal peace treaty. For me it has never ended.

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Wars are the most striking forms of disruption; massive death and destruction represent the ultimate source of painful memory. For those directly involved, how to come to terms with the memory of what they saw, what they did? Even for those indirectly involved, how to begin the process of healing and closure after the battles have stopped? There is direct damage; there is collateral damage. Agent Orange dropped on Vietnam still pollutes. Children deformed by its effects live with its physical manifestations. My generation of Americans, those who fought and those who didn't, still remember, each in our own way.

Why has there been no truth commission about the Vietnam War? Why is there no truth commission in Russia today about the Communist era? The controversy over Stalin's memorial is the tip of an iceberg. The very establishment of a truth commission may take years after a conflict has taken place. The moment has to be right for the healing process to begin. No one wants to rub in salt where it can only cause more pain. The wound is still open.

They say a war is over when children go back to school, when parents feel safe to let their kids go back into the streets, to live a normal life. What does a teacher tell young children when they go back to school about what happened? I have never spoken to my children about the Vietnam War itself. Will it be better with my grandchildren? I'm not sure. Will they even ask me?

There has been no truth commission in the United States about the Vietnam War which has been unofficially over since 1975. 40 years after the fall of Saigon there has been no truth commission, no compensation for the damages wrought, no official judgments, no closure. The wound is still too raw. For many who were involved, it is still too early to speak. For many who were not involved, it no longer seems relevant. Peace has been made, the US trades with Vietnam; American tourists go there. The US Secretary of State John Kerry, himself a Vietnam War veteran, went to Hanoi in August 2015 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

But not me.

This is the first time I have put my thoughts down on paper about a period that was defining for me and my generation. Why? As a dear friend who was physically and psychologically wounded in Vietnam commented; "Nothing good happened over there. Why hang it out?" From another perspective, when asked about the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, a 29-year-old tech entrepreneur in Ho Chi Minh City replied: "Forty years ago? Who cares?"¹

Why now? Is this unusual? The major debate about National Socialism took place in Germany in the 1980s, more than 35 years after the end of World War II. Children asked their grandparents what they had done, not their parents. Japan has yet to have a major debate about its activities during the Second World War. Vague statements by leading officials remain guarded even today.

Why is it so difficult to come to terms with the Vietnam War? Discussion flourished during the presidential campaigns of John McCain and John Kerry, but the real issue of why the United States was there and what went wrong have never come to the surface. Why did it take so long for films to come out about Vietnam such as *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now*?

¹ Quoted in Thomas Fuller, "Flush with cash, Vietnamese remake bleak symbol of the past." *International New York Times*. July 22, 2015. p.1. Fuller goes in with this description of the city: "Four decades after the victory of Communist forces, the soul of this city, still known locally as Saigon, seems firmly planted in the present. For the young and increasingly affluent, Saigon is a city that does not want to look back, loves having fun and, perhaps most of all, is voraciously capitalistic." Ibid. The United States has partially lifted its trade embargo on Vietnam; Trade between the two countries is around \$36 billion, up from \$451 million twenty years ago. See Michael B. Gordon, "Rights are key to ties, U.S. tells Vietnam." *International New York Times*. August 8-9. p. 5.

Why has it taken me so long to write this?

In the 1960s, my generation found themselves sent overseas to fight the Evil Empire to make the world safe for democracy. Full of President Kennedy's optimism about doing something for one's country, filled with visions of World War II and Korean War heroism and plenty of Grade B movies with John Wayne to fuel those visions, some went off to fight. The War Memorial in Washington D.C. is the distinguishing symbol of the War in the United States. 58,307 names engraved in cold stone. 2 million Vietnamese nowhere engraved in stone, but engraved somewhere nonetheless.

I could have been one of those names.

My senior year at university in 1968 was spent deciding what to do about the War, what I and my classmates would do about compulsory military service. It became an obsession. I organized a discussion group that met once a week with different members of faculty to discuss the pros and cons of the War and what we should do about potentially serving. Gradually the group got smaller as people stopped talking and started making decisions. Leave the country? Conscientious objection? Pretend to be a homosexual? Eat enormous amounts of sugar to show diabetic tendencies? A future famous actor spent two weeks in bed before his army physical to reach that magic number 6'6" to get out of military service. At the last meeting of the group there were only two of us left; my classmate flipped a coin to decide between joining the military and leaving the country. He didn't want to talk anymore. Heads I serve, tails I leave the country.

How many remember the War Boards, those silly exams we took in order to see which of us was intelligent enough to be allowed to stay in school to avoid military service? How many remember that the Boards were declared biased and undemocratic and the lottery that took place based on birthdays? I sat before a television in a communal university room watching the lottery holding in my hand an acceptance letter to a prestigious graduate school and a scholarship check to allow me to attend. An innocuous official pulling balls out of a drum, reading the date inscribed on a piece of paper inside each ball. The early numbers were sure to get drafted; six weeks later in the rice paddies. An arbitrary exercise that turned out to be a defining moment for a generation.

In retrospect, I was like Odysseus or Job waiting for the gods to decide my fate except that there was no personification of the powers that be; no offerings were made to curry favour with those who were deciding our destiny. We were just drinking simple beer waiting passively for our futures to be decided. No Homer has eternalized our story; there is no wife, son and dog to welcome us home like for Odysseus, no omnipotent God to reward us as he did for Job. It was all so cold, so bureaucratic.

My birthday came up number 10. The check would never be used. The graduate studies would take place 20 years later at another institution of higher learning.

A moment in time. A birthday: August 17, 1946. A number: 10. What did it mean then? What does it mean now?

The election campaign between Bob Dole and Bill Clinton in 1996 brought back many of these memories. Clinton had to justify his behavior in avoiding the draft in the 1960s just as Dole constantly referred to his distinguished military record during World War II. Clinton's birthday is only two days after mine; his number came up over 300. He was free. He went to Oxford; I went to other places; one year teaching in the South Bronx; three years teaching in the Community Control District in Harlem as a form of alternative service. I am from the Bronx, but those four years introduced me to a world I had never seen before, an experience that would change me in ways I still don't fully comprehend. Behind the glib 1960s rhetoric of revolution and saving the world, there were people, children, in my own city

who were hungry, who had no heating, who came to school with rat bites on their faces; and no one seemed to care.

I would go to Oxford as a Visiting Scholar twenty years later, a very different person from William Jefferson Clinton.

Some of the thirty who started teaching with me quit and went to Vietnam; they said at least there they could shoot back. During the 2000 election, there were all kinds of stories about George W. Bush and his avoidance of the draft. John Kerry's heroism was mocked in 2004. Donald Trump, who had several deferments, showed disdain for John McCain's war record in the presidential campaign of 2015, 40 years after the end of hostilities. ("He is a war hero because he was captured," Trump said. "I like people that weren't captured.") Were Tony Blair and Bill Clinton aggressive in foreign policy (chicken hawks?) because they never served and have to prove their military worth by sending troops into battle? When I meet people who served in Vietnam they first react that I was a draft dodger. When I explain to them what I did, they back off. I don't have to prove anything; I served and they understand, perhaps realizing that my alternative service was, in its own way, more positive than their military service. No virility check needed, but no one has yet told me that what I did made more sense than what they did. And I'm not waiting.

What is the Vietnam Syndrome? I wonder what is the relation between the Vietnam quagmire and the reluctance of the United States to send troops into battle today. What is the relation between the 58,000 American lives lost in Vietnam and the bombing of Serbia from 15,000 feet, or the retreat from Somalia after several soldiers were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu? Or the use of drones in Iraq and Afghanistan instead of "boots on the ground"? Images of three American soldiers captured on the border of Macedonia and paraded on television have different resonances for those under 30 than for those who saw their contemporaries thrust in front of the cameras in Hanoi. Will Jane Fonda and Richard Falk ever be forgiven for going to Hanoi to try to stop the carnage? "Hanoi Jane" indeed. The United States bombed Serbia at high altitudes, refused to use Apache helicopters in Kosovo, sent "logistical" support to East Timor, and tries to bring the troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan. We believe in humanitarian intervention, but lead from behind in Libya. Supply material to those we favour in a conflict, but no more body bags.

No more body bags.

When I meet an American of my age I feel I know within 30 seconds what he did during that period. And I assume he knows that I did not serve. I try to see what he looked like then as I imagine he tries to see what I was like as well. His hair is (was) short; mine is considerably shorter now. (It took two haircuts in the same day to prepare me for my first job interview in Switzerland.) Was he the one spitting at me when I was protesting? Was he the one the police had to restrain from hitting me? Am I the long-haired freak who tried to stop him from enlisting at the recruiting office? Who was proud of his fellow students who lay on the tarmac at the Air Force base to try to stop the fighters from taking off? Who tried to levitate the Pentagon?

1966, I am on the squash team of my university. We are playing the United States Military Academy at West Point. My parents come up from New York City to watch the match. My mother berates me for not shaving and wearing jeans with holes in them. I try to explain that it is my way of showing total disdain for the military. There are lots of short hairs marching in order, saluting everyone but me.

In the locker room before the match, I announce to our team that the Vietnam War is about to be fought on the court. Years later, I am told, the coach recounted the story to future teams. I went out on the court a man possessed, having also announced to my opponent that I

was going to take out my opposition to the war on the court against him, but not exactly in those words. I won, a man possessed.

I once drove through Germany with my ex-father-in-law who had landed in France on D-Day. We had never talked about his battle experiences during World War II nor had he confided in his daughter. We knew he had served, but his only reminiscences were light banter about getting punished for playing poker on the ship going over. I dared to ask during that trip what he thought when he saw distinguished silver-haired gentlemen driving Mercedes peacefully along the autobahn. After several expletives, he said that he saw tanks instead of Mercedes and young soldiers shooting at him instead of silver-haired gentlemen casually motoring along. Worse, at a family dinner in France in 1983, someone asked, insisted, what he thought of the movie D-Day. He broke down, whimpered like a child, screaming “Butcher shop, butcher shop.” He never said a word after about the incident or his battle experiences.

My 1991 doctoral thesis and later publication, *An Ethic of Responsibility in International Relations*, begins with this story in the Introduction:

In July 1967, when I was walking down a street in Paris, a young Frenchman, overhearing my conversation with a friend, asked if I were American. I replied yes with no hesitation, at which point he spat in my face and said, ‘Dirty American it’s you who make the war in Vietnam.’ I had been an ardent protester against the war, but this possibility did not seem to impress him; he never asked. For him all Americans were responsible for the war. Two years later, sitting on the terrace of a lovely restaurant in Normandy, sipping wine with my wife, I was once again asked if I were American. Although my previous experience caused a slight hesitation, this Frenchman seemed unaggressive, the atmosphere that summer afternoon was relaxed and subdued; I responded in the affirmative. The gentleman turned abruptly and shouted: ‘Waiter, champagne for the American. I have not forgotten how they saved us twenty-five years ago.’ That I was obviously too young to have taken part in those events – although my father-in-law had landed near the restaurant on D day – did not seem to impress him. For him all Americans were responsible for the liberation of France. It has been over twenty years since these two incidents, but in many ways this book is an attempt to understand what the two Frenchmen meant.

Five years of research, five years of trying to understand responsibility, five years of trying to understand collective responsibility, but finally, five years of trying to understand how I was responsible for Vietnam.

1985, late at night, a reunion with my closest high school friend outside a brownstone in Brooklyn. After several beers, we are easily reminiscing in his car about this and that. Light conversation between people who are catching up on old times after years out of touch. Suddenly we go back to the late sixties. The tone changes in his voice. We are no longer in Brooklyn; he is telling his story and we are both right there. He was in the Army, basic training, ready to be sent to Vietnam. The last day before, the last drill with sticks as bayonets, and he lost it. He starts telling me about dropping to his knees refusing to move, turning turtle, screaming that he wouldn’t budge, wouldn’t go, then his experiences in an Army prison during the War; he really loses it. He starts to weep, to rock to and fro in my arms. He was not one of the 58,000 names on the wall, but something died, and it took him until 1985 to tell anyone the story.

1987, late at night, another reunion, but this one is with wine in midtown Manhattan and not in front of a brownstone in Brooklyn. A good friend from university, an early member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a leader of major protests against the War, he had arrived at the elegant restaurant in his stretch limousine. Our talk centered on

investments, private schools for his kids, his house on Long Island, condominium on Fifth Avenue. Nothing said about the 60s. Nothing said about Vietnam.

2015, I attend my first organized high school reunion. Lots of people I hadn't seen for 50 years. We're all getting older. Some are no longer with us. No one talked about Vietnam. No one talked about what he had done during that period. Lots of idle chatter; kids, grandchildren, retirement, etc. Vietnam was the ghost in the room.

As I said, something died, I am not sure what it is. There are different kinds of silences; there are different kinds of deaths. Apolitical Wall Street excesses by my generation also speak of the 60s. They are about denial, of shots in Dallas, Memphis and Los Angeles. Of people who don't want to be hurt again. There are, after all, myriad ways of "dropping out," of not remembering. Former classmates lose themselves in the stock market, make cartoons in Hollywood with George Lukas, but to me it all seems virtual. They are successful professionally but it all appears to be an escape from what we all lived through with Vietnam. They have "moved on," but I cannot accept that they have had closure.

1968, the night the number 10 is picked in the lottery. I call my father to tell him I will not go. We start on strategies and their ethical implications. I cannot be a conscientious objector; they ask a stupid question about protecting your mother if she were attacked. I am from the Bronx; no way would I not defend her. I am not a pacifist. Leave the country? Not really; I have notions of service and obligation.

I try a letter from an orthopaedic specialist saying that I am not fit for military service. My shoulder has ligament damage such that I cannot throw grenades. Down at Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan, the examining Army doctor asks me to hold my hands behind my back. He touches my shoulder; I faint. "You're going like everyone else," he chortles through his cigar as I struggle to get up.

My father and I find a way for me do some form of unofficial alternative service. One year of teaching in the South Bronx, three years of teaching in Harlem in the experimental IS 201 District, from a philosophy major at Amherst to teaching junior high school and then elementary school. Vocabulary reduced to 200 words; days spent trying to be helpful; rent strikes, Ford Foundation money, community organizing. Greeted every day getting off the subway by the local drug addicts with a cheerful, "A visitor from another planet."

After I started teaching, I received a letter from the Army. They had not received notification from the New York City Board of Education that I was working in an underprivileged neighbourhood, an acceptable unofficial alternative service. I reluctantly called my father, who had a position of some influence. We stormed down to headquarters. A group of young men, waiting for the same letter, were sitting in the waiting room. My father barged into a secretary's office and demanded that the letter be written right then. She did, and we left. I still see those other people waiting outside. What if they had never received the letter? Are their names carved in stone on the Memorial? Was I right to take advantage of my father's position?

About thirty of us were "lucky" to get out of the Army this way. About five of us stayed throughout the time required. Several had mental breakdowns, a few joined the Army. I left the country after my service was over. Never accuse me of being a draft dodger; I served my country. 43 years as an expatriate (ex-patriot?) in Switzerland. Years of speaking only French. How strange when I visit to the United States and the passport control officer says, "Welcome home".

Discussions about Clinton and the military, discussions about George W. Bush's deferments, Trump's dissing of McCain being captured, bring back these memories. Is there no closure? 1997 editorial in a scholarly journal by a classmate who all of a sudden starts

writing about his days in Vietnam. Where does it come from Wally? You are the Pulitzer Prize winning historian. Where does it come from, will it ever stop?

When I think of my decision and those of others I have flashes of anger, perhaps sadness is a better word. With age and distance I have even ventured into writing about the tragic. As for Vietnam, each one did what he thought best at the given moment. But did they think about the future, about history? About the consequences of the War? In my academic training in ethics I was intrigued by the history of Germany and what people thought about Hitler at the time. Were those who served in Vietnam and/or those who didn't protest part of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil"? I remember walking out of the physical exam for the Army, having passed, and saying that one day I would have a son and he would one day ask me what I had done in 1968. 1996, 28 years later, a pleasant evening in Geneva. I receive a call from my son in New York. "Hi, Dad. Guess where I am?" While visiting New York, he was calling from the school in Harlem where I had taught.

What does he understand? I know that all types of American tourists go to Vietnam today. I can't go. The War Memorial is an important visitor's site in Washington. I can't do it. Friends try to take me to movies about Vietnam; I generally walk out in the beginning, sometimes I can't even make it through the titles. I marvel at the American Ambassador in Vietnam who had served there during the War just as I admire Senator John McCain who served over 5 years in a POW camp. They seemed to have turned the page, to "have moved on".

1986. International Conference of the Red Cross. I attend as a journalist and am confronted with the American Admiral Zumwalt who had ordered the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. He lost a son to cancer who had served in Vietnam; his grandchild was born deformed. What does he think about the War? Does he regret what he did? Who in Washington would send him as part of the American delegation to a conference of the Red Cross? Either this is a bad joke or someone in Washington has no sense of history.

1998. I introduce Robert McNamara at a Pugwash Conference. The last time I had seen him in person was in 1966 when I helped prepare a protest at my university against the awarding of his honorary degree. "Sir, what do you mean when you say 'we were wrong, very wrong.'?" He looks deep into my eyes, and then he goes off into an icy intellectual analysis, the same type of rational utilitarianism he used on the assembly line in Detroit and at the Pentagon. There is no emotion, but something tells me he hasn't got it out of his system either.

January 2009, the newly elected President Barack Obama accompanies Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the State Department to introduce two new appointments, George Mitchell as Special Envoy for the Middle East and Richard Holbrooke, Special Envoy for Afghanistan/Pakistan. After the President's introduction, Mitchell reads a prepared statement and then Holbrooke steps forward with no notes. He goes to the front of the platform, looks out at his State Department colleagues, points at someone and says, "John, I hope this time we get it right."

I levitate out of my seat!

Holbrooke is pointing at John Negroponte, his former junior State Department colleague in Vietnam. Get it right? Here is the future Special Envoy to a critical area admitting how wrong the United States was in Vietnam. No journalist writes about the comment; Holbrooke was called the "outstanding diplomat of his generation" by the *Economist*. For what he did in Vietnam?

At a conference in Switzerland years before, Holbrooke approached me. "Young man, do you know who I am?" he questions. "Why is there no red carpet out to welcome me?"

“I know exactly who you are, Holbrooke,” I snarl. “And that is why there is no red carpet out for you.” We have to be separated by other participants as I shout at him that I am from the Bronx and he is from Scarsdale and that we can settle our differences over Vietnam right here and now.

The movie director Oliver Stone left Yale to go to Vietnam. He said that our generation would be made over there. I never thought that fighting in Vietnam was a career opportunity.

And finally, the worst. 1999 in Geneva. Henry Kissinger speaks to a large and distinguished audience of diplomats and international civil servants. I had arranged to have the first question. I spent hours preparing for my introduction of McNamara, trying to be respectful, but letting him know that his apology is not enough, not for the 58,000, not for me, not for the millions of Vietnamese, not for anyone. But what to ask Henry Kissinger? What is there to say? I spent weeks preparing one question. How to be polite in front of that audience while asking what I really wanted to know? “Dr. Kissinger,” I begin, trying to sound respectful, “in your long and distinguished career, is there anything you regret, is there anything that you would have done differently?” He hears my New York accent (he was also brought up in the Bronx), he sees my age. For a moment I am back in the 60s, my hair longer, my voice more strident, screaming that Kissinger and Nixon are war criminals. Did he hear me then? Does he hear me now?

He gives me a look of condescension. He makes it known that the question is misplaced, irrelevant. He has no qualms about any of his actions. “Young man,” he pontificates, “if you mean Vietnam, it was the highlight of my career.” People applaud. I am stunned. At the end of the evening people leave the auditorium in awe of him and his verbal dexterity.

Where is the moral geography? Do I have it wrong? Am I a dinosaur trapped in a time warp like a tar pit? Will Spielberg popularize my predicament with an updated version of Jurassic Park?

For finally that is the question. Is it just a matter of time before my generation loses our particular moral compass to become museum pieces? Has it happened already? I have a dear friend in Australia who fought in and lost a brother in Vietnam. He cannot pronounce Kissinger’s name without cursing. The question is whether closure represents a mature position or a loss of moral geography. Will my friend ever be able to say Kissinger’s name without saying “Fucking Kissinger”? Does anyone care?

In Paris, there is a Monument to the Deported of World War II behind Notre Dame along the Seine. It is rather small, designed to give the impression that the visitor is inside a concentration camp. Whenever I visit Paris, I spend time there. I try to put myself in the place of those who were interned. I try to understand man’s inhumanity to man. I try to understand what it meant to be inside, and what it meant to be outside. How do those who were outside accept and live with the knowledge of what they did and did not do?

When one leaves the Monument, one sees etched in rough stone above the exit “Pardonne, mais n’oublie pas.” Can one do both at the same time? After the recent shootings in Mother Emanuel Church in South Carolina, several members of the victims’ families expressed forgiveness for the assailant. I can only admire their graciousness. I am incapable of forgiving; I will not forget. There is no light at the end of this tunnel.