
WHAT WE DID IN VIETNAM

OUR

WAR

AND WHAT IT DID TO US

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.
ISBN 0-8129-2576-9

Random House website address: <http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

98765432

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of people helped me sort through the thoughts and remembrances upon which this book is built, either through their own work or in conversation or both. I wish to thank them all: Kathy Robbins, Kate Paley, John Sullivan, Lacey Fosburgh, Sophie Harris, Peter Schwartz, Nancy Ramsey, Rusty Schweikart, Rick Baum, Sim Van der Ryn, Ruth Friend, Franz Schurman, Andrew Lam, John Keker, Jonas Honnick, Jack McCloskey, Neil Reichline, Layton Borkan, Patrick Hallinan, Susan Sward, Loren Hallinan, Bill Bertain, Fred Branfman, Fred Goff, Rodney Gage, Kit Bricca, Joe Maizlish, Ray Correo, Ron Kovic, Scott Camil, Elaine Harris, Nguyen Thai, Thich Hai Thong, and the Data Center.

I owe a special acknowledgment to my editor, Steve Wasserman, whose craft and insight were invaluable and without whom this book would never have been written.

OUR WAR

LIKE A LOT of us, I took the war personally in those days.

And I still do. I lived molded to the war's shape for so long that, indeed, my person has retained the war's bend in ways both petty and profound. I was a boy when it began and a man when it finally came to an end. It echoes in me to this day: when pacing nervously, I walk a nine-foot oval, as though I were still confined in my cell in maximum security; when I attend a black-tie affair, there is still part of me that looks around the room and flinches, convinced that if these people had any idea who I really am, I would be sent packing; when the Pledge of Allegiance is recited, I still take a deep breath and ask myself if I really want to repeat it along with everybody else.

I remember the war as someone it obsessed and imprisoned. And, while it no longer preys on my mind, it is still a subject about which I find it difficult to summon disinterest or distance. I have never known the war at arm's length. I remember it on my skin and in my bones; I remember it as a weight in the pit of my stomach and I remember it as a pain in my chest, late at night and alone.

Much has passed under my personal bridge since the war ended, and, as I have weathered further episodes of loss and helplessness, my heart has opened enough to reexamine long-standing wounds. Now fifty years old, I have come to yearn for something far more than remembrance.

What I seek is a Reckoning.

I first experienced the posture I have in mind in an intensive-care ward some three years ago, when Lacey, my wife of nineteen years, hopelessly comatose, was removed from artificial life supports. Then I held her as she died, a casualty of a desperate failed struggle with breast cancer. I knew her better than anyone, and I could tell from the calm in her heart as she passed that while she'd waited in unconsciousness, attached to a breathing machine, she had somehow taken responsibility for her life and prepared herself to leave it. I had read fictional and religious descriptions of such reckonings, in which lives are revisited in a summary accounting, and Lacey's last moments seemed to confirm them.

Reckoning has been a word full of meaning for me ever since. Coming to terms with ourselves is what we do when we reckon, and reckon with our war is what we must do: stand outside our fears, revisit what we did so many years ago, and clear our souls of this perpetual shadow.

Our reckoning is not to be engaged in lightly or with less than the whole of our selves. At the very least, I expect that taking a good look at the war will be a painful and demanding process. Hard things need to be said, often in hard ways. And, as raw as my memory of the war is, I still do not come easily to that task. I am not a hard man. Quite the contrary. I am usually eager to get along, am reluctant to express personal disapproval, and tend to swallow my complaints in the normal course of life. I like to please and put people at ease. But there are subjects about which there is no easiness, and this war is one of them. I cannot avoid its ugliness, nor do I think such avoidance useful.

So also with my anger. Some of it, too, is unavoidable, even necessary, though again I am not, on the whole, an angry man. Few have ever seen my temper, and while I make a point of speaking my mind, I mostly shy from enlarging confrontations, and in this instance I worry that my surviving outrage will sound bitter so many years after the fact. But I am outraged still. And I mean to say things that bother me deeply and that I know will disturb others, as unfortunate as

that disturbance may be. And I hope others will do likewise until we finally run out of things to say.

Last Thanksgiving I was back in Fresno, California, where I grew up, at my mom's house. I told her that I was writing, once again, about the war. She said she hoped that the country could put all that stuff that happened over Vietnam behind us now, that we needed to move on. I told her that was not exactly what I had in mind.

We need to face up to it first. For me, this is not just about us and not just about now. It is an engagement in the sacred human ritual of studying our own tracks, an attempt at the consecration of those who have gone before through the contemplation of how and why their lives were spent. If healing what the war left behind is possible, I look for such healing in this therapy of honest self-examination and informed acceptance. I also find such a process the most fundamental form of respect. It obliges us to value one another's passing and refuse to spend lives without an accounting. So now, so much later, it is finally time to account.

That, of course, is no small piece of work. Our experience in Vietnam is a lot for any of us to take on, especially after having spent much of the last two decades avoiding it as best we could. We should not kid ourselves, however. Holding to our denial will never allow us to escape the war. That avoidance means only that,

rather than owning our experience, we will continue to be owned by it.

An extreme example of being owned by our experience is described by the psychiatric diagnosis post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, the Vietnam generation's contribution to the study of mental health. The first patients diagnosed with PTSD were trying to grapple with leftovers from Southeast Asian combat. Their battlefield experience had been much too intense to be assimilated on the spot, so it was deferred and deferred until it began to recur spontaneously, usually at the instigation of familiar scenes or sounds: the whip of helicopter blades, backfires that crack like rounds from an AK-47, Caterpillar tracks that rumble and clank like an armored personnel carrier advancing over the red dirt, hard as concrete during those last weeks before the monsoons began. With that trigger, the patient would return to a firefight outside Chu Lai or a bunker near Magic Mountain or a paddy in the Delta or a ridge near the Rockpile, trapped in an endless repetition of the emotions surrounding the original unresolved trauma.

I never quite understood the power of the phenomenon until I was diagnosed with it myself. My PTSD emerged following Lacey's death. Some eight months after I sat with her body, laid out in a Buddhist wake in the front room of our house, I was overwhelmed by a fog of unfocused anxiety that just

descended and never left. To extricate myself, I spent the next year sorting out all I had gone through over the three years of illness and treatments before her death, allowing myself to feel all the fear and pain that I had held at bay in the interest of supporting her battle. Slowly, my experience became my own again—terror ebbed out of all my internal nooks and crannies; loss, grief, and panic surfaced where I could become acquainted with them face to face; what had happened to me in real time now happened over and over again on replay, letting me accustom myself to all that had gone on, this time at a speed I could live with.

And so it may be for all of us: our body politic clogged with undigested experience, strung up on the very same dilemmas we never dealt with twenty-five years ago, when the killing was still going on. Our disorder is plain to see: having made lying an accepted government function, our government is now overrun with liars; having made our public posture heartless as a matter of policy, we are now unable to bring our heart to public affairs; having made killing a measure of our national efforts, we watch helplessly as killing has become one of our principal cultural currencies; having failed to look our transgressions straight in the face, we have not been straight with one another since; having refused to live up to our values, we are now increasingly without values; having made language into hype, we now have nothing believable to say. I

may just be shell-shocked, but that sounds a lot like PTSD to me.

In truth, that disorder is our nation's running thirty-year metaphor. And our emblem is those poor boys who grew old real quick, came home, and still live with that war every day.

When Lacey and I first set up housekeeping, we lived around the corner from a Veterans Administration hospital that specialized in outpatient psychiatric services. I often crossed paths with the patients at the neighborhood grocery store, where both they and I would stop to buy cigarettes. Occasionally one would bum a smoke off me instead. I got to know Leroy that way. He was at the store a lot. He'd been a Spec 4 with the First Air Cavalry. He liked \$1.50 a quart burgundy and smoked Camels. We got so we would banter whenever we encountered each other, every day more or less the same way.

"What's up, Leroy my man?"

"Same old same old."

"Sing me a few bars," I said.

"Jes' like always," Leroy answered. " 'They's somewhere out there in the trees and we's stuck out here in the middle with no motherfuckin' place to hide.' "

I suspect every American who remembers the war knows just how Leroy felt.

Back when the war was still going on, lots of people I knew went to great lengths to find a political theory

to explain the discrepancy between who America thought it was and who it acted like. And in that search, isms eventually proliferated, turning the issue to ideology rather than behavior, and making the discussion a lot more complicated and a lot less clear. I kept pace for a while—I was once a Stanford honors student in Social Thought and Institutions—but eventually I lost all tolerance for such theories. I have retained only one in the years since.

We Get What We Do, nothing more. Especially when lives are on the line. We do not get what we mean to do: intention is meaningless. Nor do we get what we tell ourselves we do: appearance counts little and rhetoric even less. We get only the getting, never what we have identified to be got. All means are ends in motion, as ends are means in a static state. Acts that fail to embody their object also fail to realize it. I call this the Do Theory. The war taught it to me.

And, while I am unwilling to give the Do Theory the universal subscription of an ideology, I have consulted it in making decisions throughout my life, to largely positive effect. I have also found it has value in sorting the past. Translated into that tense, of course, the theory reads, We Got What We Did, both a cogent explanation and yet another compelling reason to seek out what happened so many years ago deep in the tall grass and reckon with it once and for all.

And, if the Do Theory is accurate, doing so will prove its own reward.