

WHAT WE LEARNED IN VIETNAM

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I waited over a decade to make my trek to the wall. Like many Vietnam vets, I was both drawn to and afraid of the journey. As I stepped down the path that chill spring day almost five years ago, sorrow and pain consumed me. I began to weep. Not like a baby, but in quiet, racking, uncontrollable sobs.

I spent 1968 in Vietnam in all-volunteer, small-unit combat: four months as an aeroscout door-gunner, and the remainder in Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, as a point man and then as a team leader. These were generally conceded to be among the army's more dangerous undertakings. Despite my foolish, youthful pursuit of harm's way, however, I never saw one of my buddies die. Still, I could not stop crying.

Why, I wondered as I sniffled before all those names, so few of whom I knew, does standing here evoke such deep, awful sorrow?

Maybe it's silly, but I've come to think that those tears were about innocence, about who I used to think I would become. Vietnam changed all that, for me and a lot of people. My tears were for that first day in the Nam when I had to face the truth: The war was not what our leaders claimed. We were not fighting it in the way or for the purposes they told us we would be. Vietnam was a bloodbath, a wall-to-wall atrocity. My Lai proved it to most.

"What was happening there," My Lai veteran Harry Stanley once said, describing the village when he arrived and the massacre that followed, "is not what they said was happening there." The same must be said about the entire war. Hardly anything the U.S. government said about it proved to be true.

Almost every Vietnam combat veteran and an enormous number of those who never got closer to the fight than the evening news suffered through a similar epiphany sometime during the war. That part of Vietnam's legacy — the gap between the word and the experience — continues to reverberate through our culture in a way the young must find difficult to understand.

Three recent books, all focusing on parts of America's journey from Vietnam to the present, help bridge that gap. Collectively, they cover America's intervention in Vietnam, from our innocence during the first days of John F. Kennedy's presidency, to our sadder, deflowered present selves. Are we wiser? In some ways, yes. In some ways, no.

Veteran war correspondent William Prochnau's *Once Upon A Distant War* zeroes in on perhaps the most pervasive and damaging legacy of Vietnam: the low and relentless political art of public deceit. *Our War*, written by the era's most famous draft resister, David Harris, calls for a national reckoning with our conduct there, pouring out a dreadful roll call of the lies and crimes of the time. Fred Turner's *Echoes of Combat* takes America to the psychoanalytical couch, explaining how and why our society has failed to face that reckoning — and how we have fooled ourselves into thinking that we have.

I recommend them all. Ironically, Harris' and Turner's cases are both made most powerfully by that part of the legacy of Vietnam they do not address: the replication of the crimes of Vietnam in Central America. They are not alone. Most Americans are blind, deaf and dumb to that legacy of Vietnam and what we have become because of it.

How we obtain and filter the information that forms our world-view and how that information is manipulated in public discourse to empower some and disembowel others are themes that run through all three works. If nothing else, Vietnam taught us a great deal about the power of information and its manipulation. Political and military leaders learned those lessons far better than the rest of us. Men and women who daily ply the tricks of the liar's trade at public expense have become a fixture of the culture. "Everything became spin," Harris correctly observes. "Prevarication was soon endemic to the political process, as addicting as it was useful, and most of America's top shelf has been strung out ever since."

In *Once Upon a Distant War*, Prochnau describes the genesis of that dangerous, anti-democratic legacy. By concentrating on a crucial 30-month period in Saigon early in the war, Prochnau dissects not one, but two wars: America's growing role in the shooting war in Vietnam and the U.S. government's similarly expanding press war with the handful of American reporters in Saigon who were trying to report the facts as they saw them. In many ways, this is a good old-fashioned war story, one that is both true and telling.

Prochnau begins by detailing JFK's march into the quagmire, covering it through the eyes and writings of reporters David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Charles Mohr, Malcolm Brown, Homer Bigart, Peter Arnett and Horst Faas, among others. Except for Bigart, who already had his, all made their professional bones in Vietnam between January 20, 1961 — JFK's inauguration — and the November 1, 1963, coup that toppled South Vietnam's dictatorial president of nine years, Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem and his evil brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, master of the South Vietnamese secret police, were murdered the next day, barely three weeks before JFK's own assassination. By then, the die was cast.

The government's lies, as Prochnau skillfully documents, started from the beginning, before spin-doctoring had a name. On December 11, 1961, for instance, hundreds of people, including several reporters, watched the U.S. aircraft carrier *Core* loom into

town on the Saigon River, loaded to its massive gills with helicopters and other materiel that the 1954 Geneva Peace Accords barred the United States from bringing in. U.S. Embassy officials simply pretended that the Core and its load of helicopters weren't there, and succeeded for a while in persuading the correspondents to look the other way. The monstrous ship, so huge it dominated the flat countryside for miles around Saigon, did not exist either officially or in the pages of America's newspapers.

As the buildup mounted and 1,500 American "advisers" began to arrive each month and get shot, the deceptions of the government mounted, as did the number of stories aimed at puncturing them. But back home, with few exceptions, editors and newspaper and television-station owners sided with the government for seven more years.

Like the shooting war, the press war raged from the first day to the last. Prochnau, however, ends his story with Diem's assassination, noting that 5,000 more journalists followed Halberstam, Sheehan and Mohr to ably carry on their battles. In *Our War*, David Harris, who grew famous fighting the war and married Joan Baez, threads another, related story from where Prochnau leaves off. Beginning with his days as a wide-eyed high-school kid who watched JFK work the stump at the tiny Fresno, Calif., airport in 1962, Harris chronicles his evolution from Fresno High football player, class president and wannabe FBI agent to America's best-known draft resister, federal jailbird and, finally, journalist. It is a path many will find familiar. In one way or another, most of us came from Fresno.

Harris recalls the war — the way we fought it and the way he fought it — with a brutal, minimalist precision, revisiting those times with older, wiser eyes and across the distance of two decades. Just the same, his uncompromising, sometimes lyrical recitations of America's sins have the power to make the hair stand up on the back of your head and the knife twist in your soul.

Official lies and deceit are also major themes for Harris, as they must be for everyone who writes honestly about Vietnam. "The lying, of course, was standard operating procedure," he writes. "There was a way things were supposed to be, which they never were, but everybody who had anything official to say said they were anyway, over and over again."

He cites a series of critical propaganda gambits employed by Presidents Johnson and Nixon, from the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to Dean Rusk's 1965 White Paper and Nixon's efforts to suppress the Pentagon Papers. Each is a variation on the earlier JFK-sponsored propaganda campaigns detailed by Prochnau. As Harris makes clear, the art of the Big Lie, legitimized during the press war in Vietnam, not only took root, but has flourished in government ever since.

In *Echoes of Combat*, Fred Turner takes Vietnam's Big Lie for granted: Everyone, he says, saw through it. Most Americans woke up following the Tet Offensive on

January 31, 1968. Tet convinced them that the government was lying about Vietnam. The light at the end of the tunnel, people suddenly realized, was a Viet Cong patrol searching for an honest American politician.

Harris and Turner recite many of the same events as milestones in the awakening of the American consciousness: the Tet Offensive; Saigon Police General Loan's stunning summary execution of an unnamed but unforgettable Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon; Ben Tre, the village a U.S. Army major said we had to destroy to save; the My Lai massacre, news of which ran the second moon landing off the front pages.

Of all the bad news, both writers agree, My Lai was the worst. Our boys in Vietnam were committing the very atrocities our leaders claimed we sent them there to prevent. No one wanted to know that.

But it was true. According to Turner, that profound dashing of our illusions of moral superiority was the crux of it all for vets and civilians alike. The Vietnam experience "capsized some of the most fundamental beliefs" of both groups "about themselves and their world." My Lai is the emblem of their betrayal.

One third of the 1.5 million Americans who saw combat in Vietnam between 1961 and 1975 came home with post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. If their dreadful deeds traumatized the trigger pullers, napalm droppers and village killers, Turner says, they traumatized the folks back home watching the war on network news, too. This is the fulcrum of Turner's analysis.

Consequently, he argues, America and individual Americans slipped into a kind of personal, societal and cultural schizophrenia, our psyches broken in two, one half fixed on the old, comforting, post-World War II myths we grew up with and wanted to believe in, the other fixed on the horrific, chaotic truth about ourselves brought home from Vietnam. Psychologically, we've all been trying to get back to the other side of innocence ever since, he concludes, each of us wishing, in the words of the country song, that we didn't know now what we didn't know then — and searching for a way to deal with the difference.

The good news, Turner says, is that the vast majority of us have healed and moved on. It may have taken smoke and mirrors, but we've done it.

First Turner analyzes vets' reactions to their experiences as psychological archetypes, arguing that these horrific traumas and their haunting implications engulfed society at large. Then, in his most interesting contributions, he turns to popular culture, tracing the war's transformation in the American psyche by tracking its evolution in the work of novelists, producers, film-makers and artists. In 1979, presidential candidates Carter and Reagan began to praise vets as heroes instead of baby-killers. And as the views of veterans themselves evolved, America turned a psychological corner.

Central to this evolving perception, Turner suggests, is our understanding of PTSD. We have moved from seeing vets as both victims and executioners to seeing them as victims only. That psychological shape-shifting allows civilians to likewise alter their memories of the wanton brutality of the war, providing them a rational framework within which to forgive our government and ourselves — and to begin to heal as a society.

This cure involves a good bit of self-deception and the voluntary averting of one's gaze — but that's okay, natural and necessary, Turner says. Our comforting revisions of reality in Vietnam are, psychologically, perfectly sound. "Loyalty to the hard facts is not the issue," he argues in conclusion. "To become a basis for individual or national action, our stories don't have to be entirely true — they just have to make sense."

Psychologically this may be true. Politically it is sophistry of the sort to which we have become accustomed. Turner may be right that people are still so frazzled by Vietnam that they can't bear to look the devil in the eye. The problem is, he thinks that's okay. Better a little ignorance and self-deception, he argues, than to "so fear repeating the mistakes" of Vietnam "that we may fail ... to defend our legitimate geopolitical and economic interests overseas. On the other hand, if we completely ignore the horror of the war, we may well re-enact it."

This is Turner's blind spot. We already have. Every picture David Harris paints of torture, murder and massacre in Vietnam and every story Prochnau tells of the government's campaign of deceit and manipulation against the press and the public evokes — with a few exceptions — Reagan's decade of war in Central America. It's like some time-warped mirror-image of Vietnam. The biggest difference between one and the other, besides time and place, are the non-American faces of the trigger pullers in Central America. This time, American soldiers were kept at one remove from the blood-spatter line. The press seldom probed the administrations' lies and denials and almost never broadcast the mayhem live at five.

Twenty years after the Core was made to disappear, as Reagan started revving up the counterinsurgency engines once again, the *New York Times* recalled and then fired reporter Raymond Bonner, essentially for being one of the first two reporters to expose El Mozote, a massacre in El Salvador which should evoke every bit as much shame among Americans as does My Lai. From El Mozote forward, information-management techniques born in the crucible of Vietnam, from little lies to big ones, worked in high gear on behalf of Reagan's Central American campaigns.

Like My Lai, El Mozote was dismissed first as a lie, then as an exaggeration, and finally as an unfortunate anomaly. In truth, as some of Reagan's finest well knew, it was simply the largest of many such atrocities. As with the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations, every time someone asked the Reagan-Bush team about one of these crimes, almost nothing they said turned out to be true.

Harris is right that we need a national reckoning with Vietnam, an American truth commission. But we need the same reckoning with Central America. The sins of the first, with some slight variations, are also sins of the second. Absolution requires the confession of all one's sins.

Neither Harris nor Turner has much to say about Central America, but both are convinced that the moral weight for the crimes of Vietnam fall on all our shoulders. "We are all truly in this together," Harris writes. "In short," Turner agrees, "we must acknowledge that, in part, Robert McNamara is our own creation."

I don't think so.

Sure, in a democracy we are all accountable. But if we are a democracy, then we also ought to be able to hold the people who run the government as accountable for their crimes as they hold us for ours. For Reagan, Bush and McNamara the charge is war crimes, which include murder. That we as a society cannot, will not and don't even want to hold them accountable for these crimes is, I think, the most damning legacy of Vietnam. We are in the hands of criminals and we know it, but we don't know what to do about it.

It's enough to make you cry.
