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Bringing the War Home to the "Holler"

Teaching Vietnam for "Core" and Country

"Why Vietnam?" remains a personally resonant question for those of us who served. It was the title of an early propaganda tract justifying America's involvement and of a short government-produced film widely shown on military bases in the mid-sixties. Some thirty years later, the question still resonates in the war's "other theater," the college campus, where the larger cultural contest that was Vietnam is still being waged. For some time, state legislatures and school administrators, responding to the mood of the country and to our current economic pressures, have been pushing for greater accountability among faculty and for the sort of career-oriented curricula so many of today's relentlessly pragmatic students favor. Accordingly, those of us who slog through the rice paddies of the mind, teaching courses in Vietnam and American culture, need to be prepared to formulate new answers to old questions lest we are accused, to borrow a phrase from President Nixon, of merely having a "backward-seeking obsession" with Vietnam that does neither us nor our students any good.

Those of us who served carry an added burden. For us at least, the popular suspicion is that teaching courses on the war is largely an exercise in self-indulgence. A friend of mine is fond of remarking, whenever the subject of my "scholarship" comes up, "Some guys never came home—you know what I

mean?" In the Thomas Wolfe sense, of course, he is certainly right. Those of us who went to Vietnam can never "go home again" to the America we left. Like many others in the sixties, I woke up from the American dream to an American nightmare as an enlisted Marine in Vietnam (I was 20 when I returned from the war). Through chance and circumstance rather than merit, I further found myself serving in the Marine Corps' Combined Action Program, living and working in a village with Vietnamese Popular Force soldiers. To put it the way Conrad's Marlow does in *Heart of Darkness*, that village was for me the "farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience"; over everything in my subsequent life, it has continued "to throw a kind of light" (32). Since that time, like many of us who have moved on to academe, I've been on an academic and personal odyssey to come to terms with that experience and to understand how and why our country got us locked in dubious battle in a place like Vietnam. Lately I have had to ask whether uniting my avocation and vocation in this manner serves any legitimate academic end, particularly at Glenville State College, the place I have lately been bringing the war home to.

Glenville State is an open-admission, four-year branch campus of the West Virginia State College System. The college has grown since its inception in 1872 as a "normal school" to a state teachers' college and finally to a baccalaureate institution with strong programs in teacher education and a limited number of non-teaching academic and professional majors. The setting is relatively unspoiled; yet, as with so much of Appalachia, the formidable geography alone serves to isolate the region economically and culturally as well as physically. The "holler" of my title is local slang for "hollow," which refers to one of the isolated, small natural depressions between steep mountain ridges in which many Appala-

chian people live. Poverty is widespread and opportunities are limited. The economic problems, moreover, are certainly exacerbated by a traditional Appalachian culture that encourages banding together in extended families and discourages venturing out of state. First-generation and older, nontraditional students predominate among Glenville's student body. Most students commute rather than live on campus.

All these factors, coupled with the college's own historical focus, can make education for education's sake a hard sell at Glenville. To compound the problem, the West Virginia State System faces the same sort of legislative skepticism and pressure for reform as other systems of public higher education nationwide. West Virginia's Senate Bill 547, passed in 1995, mandates the inclusion of ethics, citizenship, and technology across the curriculum, and it clearly implies a responsibility to prepare students to compete in a global economy and to live in a multicultural society.

Against this backdrop, in the spring of 1997, Glenville finally began a reexamination of its core curriculum, the first such review in nearly 19 years. As a first step in this process, the faculty at large was invited to take part in a faculty seminar series entitled, "Why What I Teach Is Important to Undergraduates." My contribution attempted to show skeptical colleagues from other disciplines why such a seemingly self-serving and narrow special topics course as my "Vietnam in Fact, Fiction, and Film" deserved a place at the heart of our core.

Three times at Glenville State College I have taught an interdisciplinary, multimedia Vietnam course I first designed and taught at the US Naval Academy. To fall back on an old cliché, a humanities offering should deepen the student's insight into the human condition and increase his or her awareness of, and appreciation

for, those accomplishments and endeavors that are distinctly human. Exposure to our culture permits us to become more fully human, and higher education is in the business of transmitting and preserving cultural accomplishment. If traditional literary survey courses make sense as an integral part of any university's core curriculum, it is because such courses serve to introduce students to a broad span of our literary and cultural history. Can a course on Vietnam War literature and arts accomplish these goals?

My Vietnam course is about how pre-Vietnam American idealism was constructed. I try to get students to see that the Vietnam experience was not just a war, but is an American experience that has become a metaphor for failure and disaster. In class, we start by going back to those "proto-Gringos," as Michael Herr terms them, "who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils" (49). Our Vietnam story may really begin with John Winthrop's famous sermon—the one he supposedly preached to the Massachusetts Bay Company settlers in 1630 aboard ship during the journey to the New World. These particular immigrants' sense of religious mission, their conviction that they had been called to be that biblical "City upon a hill" for all the rest of the world to emulate and follow (71), would soon evolve, or devolve, into America's secular sense of Manifest Destiny.

Most Glenville students have never learned about even the most basic events and myths of the American experience. No wonder they also forget about the Vietnamese, often reacting as if the war in Vietnam happened only to America and Americans. We must remember that our collision with a culture half a world away grew, to paraphrase Tim O'Brien, out of who we were or pretended to be (*Cacciato* 126).

The principal problem with this sort of approach with students, according to recent commentary by critics like Kali Tal, is that Vietnam was no metaphor but rather a "devastating reality" (76). Having experienced that "reality" myself, I am reminded of Horatio's remark to Hamlet: "there needs no ghost come from beyond the grave to tell us this." But I am also aware that Tal and her Literature of Trauma School are making a valid post-structuralist point about the inherent risks of generalizing upon or universalizing individual experience. Any attempt at making cultural or historic sense of a traumatic event quickly loses sight of the individual, inevitably diminishing his or her trauma and even leaving it subject to misappropriation for political purposes that the survivor may or may not countenance (Tal 60-76). I find this concern overstated and am willing to take that risk with my students rather than leave them to wander in a postmodern void lacking any semblance of cause and effect.[1]

In my course, we specifically look for the ways in which the "city upon a hill" and other uniquely American ideas, especially those having to do with our westward expansion, inform Vietnam texts, both coloring perceptions and conditioning responses to an experience that significantly challenged our sense of ourselves as individuals and as a nation. From a cultural standpoint, this sense of personal and national disillusionment, accounting for the particularly bitter tone of so much of the literature, is the most significant and widespread trauma of the war. The present generation of college students will not understand that trauma without first being introduced to the cultural construction of our pre-Vietnam sense of American rectitude and mission.

Two recent studies, Milton J. Bates' *The Wars We Took to Vietnam* and Samuel Hynes' *The Soldiers' Tale,* explore how the supposedly "good" wars we carried in our

heads created our Vietnam expectations, colored our perceptions, and conditioned our responses to actual experience. Attention is once again being paid to the phenomenon Michael Herr long ago observed: "We'd all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult" (209). Hence, Herr's own "mythopathic moment," the light in which he could not help seeing our mindlessly optimistic commanders in Vietnam:

> *Fort Apache*, where Henry Fonda as the new colonel says to John Wayne, the old hand, "We saw some Apache as we neared the Fort," and John Wayne says, "If you saw them, sir, they weren't Apache." But this colonel is obsessed, brave like a maniac, not very bright, a West Point aristo wounded in his career and his pride, posted out to some Arizona shithole with only marginal consolation: he's a professional and this is a war, the only war we've got. So he gives the John Wayne information a pass and he and his command get wiped out. More a war movie than a Western, Nam paradigm . . . . (46)

Even the dean of Vietnam truth-tellers, W. D. Ehrhart, whom both Kali Tal and H. Bruce Franklin have praised for the absolute integrity of his moral witness (Tal 77-114, Franklin ix-xxiii), does not deal in simple, unmediated accounts of his Vietnam trauma. His memoir *Vietnam-Perkasie*, for instance, is clearly informed by a larger point of view than was available to Ehrhart as a young enlisted Marine. As Ehrhart himself readily admits, the exchange between himself and Sergeant Trinh, the Vietnamese translator who quits in disgust at the ugly Americanism he has witnessed (144-149), is largely

a composite scene made up of several Vietnamese he had known and largely reflecting what he had learned of Vietnamese culture after his return from the war (class visit). The tone throughout, moreover, is decidedly self-ironic, particularly in his book's early chapters when he describes the simple faith that led him to enlist (6-10) and later the deluded vision of himself as liberator that prompted him to wave inanely to the people upon his arrival in country (21). The construction of that innocent idealism, as well as his subsequent disillusionment, is a theme running through all three of Ehrhart's published memoirs and much of his poetry. To feel his pain or "trauma" on its own terms, or even to understand it, requires an informed view of the America Ehrhart thought he was growing up in; that vision, in turn, requires the sort of sense-making effort that Tal and others have lately begun to disparage.[2]

My Vietnam course does not privilege the testimony of those who served in combat roles, or even those who speak from firsthand personal experience. I believe I have managed to rationalize my professional focus in the same way that our leading Vietnam writer, Tim O'Brien, rationalizes his. When asked why he keeps writing about Vietnam, O'Brien typically answers that a writer has to "play the hand that life deals him" (class visit). Vietnam, to be sure, is the hand that life dealt me, but I believe I can justify bringing that war home to Glenville in much more universal terms. I wholeheartedly subscribe, for instance, to the point of view that informs O'Brien's first-person Vietnam memoir, *If I Die in A Combat Zone*:

> Now, war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery *is*.

> Dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are dreamers, drill sergeants are boors. Some men thought the war was proper and others didn't and most didn't care. Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme? (31)

"Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there?" O'Brien asks. His answer: "I think not. He can tell war stories" (32). As I have had to reassure colleagues and administrators at Glenville, I am neither telling nor simply entertaining war stories in my class—or if I am, they are informed by a larger perspective. Like Ehrhart, anything of larger significance that I've learned about the war, aside from the essentially ineffable experience of witnessing death, I've learned since coming home. I teach my Vietnam course not as a foot soldier caught up in the confusing immediacy of events but as a scholar who has examined the war within a much larger frame of reference than was available to me when I was facing combat.

Obviously, in defending my course on humanistic grounds, I am signaling my disagreement with the post-structuralists who are busy asserting that there is no such thing as the "human condition." Taking their cue from French theorists, the literary ideologues, of course, push this position to rhetorical extremes, arguing that all of human experience is ideologically constructed and that there are, for all intents and purposes, no aspects of human life that transcend politics. That may be so, but in defense of all of us who stubbornly teach the humanities, I must suggest that for the average undergraduate the commonplaces of literary theme are new. Moreover, if there is no such thing as the "human condition," can there be such a thing as human rights? The poststruc-

turalist impulse, taken to its logical conclusion, renders all standards of human conduct purely provisional and relative and makes moral judgment impossible. Although I am personally skeptical that literature in general and war literature in particular can ever serve any truly ameliorative end—such as ensuring that there will be "no more Vietnams"—I do believe we all have a vested interest in defining certain values and standards of behavior that make life less painful than it has to be. Otherwise, what is the point in sharing the experience of Vietnam, on a personal or collective level, with our students?

This is not merely an academic issue here in West Virginia, where the legislature has acted on its old-fashioned, simplistic faith in our ability to make better people of the students who pass through our state colleges and universities. As I mentioned, we are laboring under a Senate bill that requires us to address ethical issues across the curriculum and to broaden our students' cultural horizons. We have been charged with preparing students to compete effectively in a global economy and to live harmoniously in a multicultural world. My course and courses like it are ideally suited to serving both ends.

Viet Nam is a country with a history and culture of its own. While our involvement may have been the outgrowth of American popular culture—especially of our egocentric view of ourselves and of the rest of the world—it is important to remind students at every turn that the Vietnam War was not just something that happened to Americans. We lost over 58,000 people. The Vietnamese lost some 2,000,000. I remind my students that the Vietnamese national mythos, unlike our own by the 1960s, held the power throughout the war to motivate and inspire the Vietnamese to great sacrifice and relentless effort. To quote Philip Caputo, not only were we no longer the "redeemer nation," but we had become those "bullying redcoats" against whom we had once con-

ceived such a great moral outrage (88). My course strives to bring students face to face with another culture that did not see the world in our terms and which held differing values and a differing view of history—a provocative lesson in multiculturalism and globalism.

Further, as I try to get students to appreciate, Vietnam challenges not just our own sense of ourselves; it also calls the entire Western narrative into question in ways that even the most rabid canon revisionists might approve. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* sets forth the essential paradigm of imperialism. As Conrad amply demonstrates, whenever one culture believes it has the manifest destiny to "save" or "civilize" another, confusion of purpose, conflicting agendas, duplicity, and naked opportunism inevitably result. As I tell my classes, the worst come running. Furthermore, as Graham Greene demonstrates through his immortal Alden Pyle, an American innocent abroad, people armored in their good intentions can do even more damage than the opportunists (31-32). Vietnam texts validate Conrad's paradigm. They show students how, far from being unique and immune from the lessons of history, America slipped into a very old pattern, one as old as Belgium and the "Belgian Congo," and as old as ancient Rome and Great Britain before that.

One of the most commonly deserved stereotypes under which academics suffer is perhaps that of the aging professor who is continuing to teach his or her dissertation. My own dissertation, admittedly, was on the moral vision of selected Vietnam novels. At the time I was writing, that vision was distinctly existential. As a nation, we did not have a clear sense of purpose. We did not understand the culture we were aiming to destroy. We could not tell friend from foe. The tactics seemed aimless and absurd. As a consequence, survival became the moral touchstone. The ethic in so many Vietnam War novels is that expressed by Larry Heinemann in *Close*

Quarters: "You cover me and I'll cover you and we'll all go home" (329).

This, in fact, perfectly describes the moral vision of much of the literature. That vision posits no higher values, imperatives, rules, or ideals beyond enhancing one's chances for survival. The Vietnamese are excluded, viewed as but another part of a hostile, threatening, and absurd environment. Officers and NCOs are often likewise excluded from this existential moral economy. Enlightened self-interest in Vietnam fiction extends only to the immediate group, usually one's own platoon or squad, and the members approve only those choices likely to enhance their chances for mutual survival. In even the most critically acclaimed Vietnam novel, O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, therefore, the moral center is the platoon's decision to "frag" their own lieutenant. Within the world of that novel, we are asked to consider seriously the relativistic proposition that, under the circumstances, the fragging may have been the lesser of the evils.

Most of us who served, if we are honest with ourselves and with our students, will admit that such an ethic was very much a part of the war. But again, I am no longer a foot soldier locked in that limited perspective. Along with many other critics, I have begun to wonder if that sort of critical moral posturing is not finally self-indulgent, self-serving, and sentimental.

I have lately begun to use in class a work of nonfiction, Daniel Lang's essay "Casualties of War" (the basis for a film of the same title). "Casualties of War" began as a remarkable journalistic account of how an American long-range reconnaissance patrol decided to kidnap, rape, and murder a Vietnamese girl and how a lone member of the patrol had the moral courage to resist and eventually to bring the others to justice. As this soldier in Lang's article says:

> We all figured we might be dead in the next minute, so what difference did it make what we did? But the longer I was over there, the more I became convinced that it was the other way around that counted—that *because* we might not be around much longer, we had to take extra care how we behaved. (135-136)

The one thing I try to get students to think about, above all else, is whether there are not certain core values of Western civilization that we must uphold, even *in extremis*, if we would remain human. I cannot think of a better context in which to pose that question than through Vietnam War literature. ❑

Notes

1. This is not to denigrate Ms. Tal or her work, which I very much admire and consider to be an important addition to the field. I wrote my own Vietnam memoir, "Tiger Papa Three," published in *Marine Corps Gazette* in 1988, essentially to counter what I then considered to be very much a politicized misappropriation of the Combined Action experience as I knew it. Still, I believe that a responsible course in the American experience in Vietnam should strive to strike a reasonable balance between what I have elsewhere termed the poles of sense-making and sensibility. Otherwise, as Ms. Tal insists, we are obligated to give over all standards of normative universality (3) and to treat each survivor's account as inviolate. That leaves us with no way to gauge the integrity of the individual voice; and in my experience, not all Vietnam testimony is created equal.

2. Tal, in all fairness, insists that the experience of trauma cannot be communicated, begging the question of how a literature so conceived and so dedicated even deserves the name. Tal resolves the paradox in the contemporary post-structural fashion by viewing literature strictly in terms of power politics. Bearing witness, as she puts it, "is an aggressive act" (7). By both aggressively bearing witness to traumatic experiences and reminding those outside the community of survivors of their essential exclusion, survivors supposedly protect their trauma from being misappropriated and turned toward political ends they may not endorse. See Tal, pp. 1-22.

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