

COMMENTARY BY JEFF COLLINS

Ways of War: Reading Frank Harvey's Vietnam Experiences for Emotional Truth in a Digital Age

As an undergrad at Purdue in the late 80s, one of my political science profs assigned part of Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam*, a book my roommate, a naval ROTC midshipman, and I agreed was assigned by someone who was clearly either a communist himself or at least sympathetic to Soviet totalitarianism and, worse, anti-Reagan. Shining in my memory of that book is the dissonance I experienced between its Vietnam story and the ones I'd been learning in my first years of Air Force ROTC classes.

I will never forget a quotation from those ROTC histories describing the Air Force's role in the Inchon invasion of the Korean conflict (we weren't calling it and Vietnam "wars" yet). As I remember it, the textbook worked hard to show the Air Force as integral to the war effort well beyond providing air superiority; among other ground-related acts, airmen "bravely strafed" the enemy retreat across the Yalu river. That phrase tickled me and my Generation X cohorts—we'd joke about "bravely ordering" pizza from Garcia's and "bravely drinking" beer to wash down the terrible but free hot wings at Purdue Pete's bar.

I also remember my internalization of the lessons from Krepinevich's book caused some discomfort during a discussion I had with our ROTC detachment commander, a decorated Vietnam vet. The discomfort stemmed from this: the reasons I thought we lost Vietnam were different than his. Even the word "lost" caused wriggling nonverbal cues of disagreement and nearly-expressed tidbits of anger from the officer—wiggles and tidbits I was eager to get past because he was the colonel and because I planned to date his daughter ASAP, a different tale.

I didn't learn until this year, while reading David Cloud and Greg Jaffe's book *The Fourth Star* about the rise of Petraeus and other four star leaders of the Army, that the author of the Vietnam history book I'd read so long ago was a military teacher at West Point; he was a major who made lieutenant colonel and absolutely nothing beyond. While a few of the West Point thinkers, such as young Captain Petraeus, read and internalized the disruptive lessons of Major Krepinevich's history, the Army and its Reagan-era leaders chose to learn lessons that led to the Weinberger-Powell doctrine: avoid avoid avoid any engagement in which overwhelming force cannot be applied to an enemy and which the American public will not fully support.

I suppose the parallels between the Army leadership's 1980s thinking about Vietnam and what I was experiencing in Air Force thinking about that war weren't much dissimilar. Like the conventional Army, the Air Force heaped most blame for the outcome in Vietnam on journalists' portrayals and politicians' interferences. In this view, proscribed tactics, graduated responses and off limits enemy sanctuaries cemented America's need to bargain for peace rather than achieve decisive victory. Our Air Force's occasionally revised mission statement—To Fly, Fight and Win—brooked no ground for indecisive engagement. Such views were then reinforced by the hapless Saddam Hussein of 1990: conveniently setting up his defenses, tactics and Soviet-made weaponry to provide a perfect arena for our overwhelming high tech arsenal and for getting America singing (or at least humming) Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" and finally putting Vietnam behind us.

Eight years later I was a young captain when I invited my commander from my first duty assignment to talk to my English classes at the Air Force Academy. He was also a Vietnam Vet and was a fighter-pilot good guy—the kind of commander who would tell my visiting mother how impressed he was that I ate vegetables every day and implied I single-handedly kept the Air Force flying: "You musta' done a fine job raising this L-T," he'd tell her.

The day he visited my senior war lit class my students had read *Dien Cai Dau*, Phil Caputo's *In the Forest of the Laughing Elephant*, and some Tim O'Brien, among others. He strode to the front of the room and told my students he was glad I'd invited him to talk about the real, military side of Vietnam. "When I was a cadet, I remember hearing from pilots who'd fought World War II. I hope I don't look as old to you as they did to me. I was studying here about 25 years after their war. And you're here about 25 years after the end of mine." He looked around the class of 15 cadets, his eyes beaming above his handle-bar mustache. "Jeff, turn on the slide projector." I flipped the switch on the 35mm projector, precariously balanced

atop the digital one we usually used. The machine's fan whirred as the carousel clacked a slide into view. The bright projection coated the colonel in jungle green as he moved to flip the light switch, "Wrong slide." I pressed the back-up button. Click-clackety-clack.

"That's me, three years after I'd graduated from here. I was the world's greatest fighter pilot." On the screen is a young lieutenant, mugging for the camera; dressed in a clean flight suit with his helmet under his arm, flight cap tilted to the right with a rakish air—like the swaggering pilots in the black and white World War II films. In the background, a few enlisted men in solid green fatigues recline on toolboxes just inside a shadowy concrete arch.

He told us about a particular early morning mission in which they were supposed to midair refuel from a tanker on their way to take out a heavily defended bridge. One of my cadets, steeped in post-Gulf War air war theory, asked him why they didn't use bombers to take out a strategic target like a bridge. "Didn't you risk a lot more fighters to get the same payload to the target?"

"Yes. It probably wasted gas and airplanes and people. Not just the fighters, but also tankers had to be up and recon birds... It's a good question, why we did it like that." He went on to remind us John Warden hadn't yet written books about "concentric circles of military power" and they hadn't "re-discovered" Sun Tsu's ancient wisdom about the application of force. Besides, he said, the politicians wouldn't have tolerated additional commitments of strategic bombers and North Vietnam's heavy defenses made fighters a better choice. He clackety-clacked through stories, going on to talk about "kill zones" and how he'd have to decide whether someone was running because he was a scared civilian or a Viet Cong to be strafed. "We fighters were just one more way of delivering munitions and attriting the enemy forces." The cadets nodded their understanding. They knew of Secretary McNamara and his body-counting Pentagon.

The colonel looked at the faces of my students, pausing long enough for the whir of the fan to become noticeable. "You know, I think I remember why I thought those World War II pilots were old coots, talking about 'feathering their props' and fire bombing whole cities to 'break the enemy's spirit.' We were preparing to go to Vietnam. We were going to fly our jets and fight our war the modern way. We looked at those guys kind of like you're looking at me..." He smiled and continued with his war story, talking of the decisions he made and the missions he flew and the love affair that developed between himself and his war machinery. My attention drifted as I pondered what my students were thinking, what they were making of

these stories. “Jeff?” I quickly press the projector button, realizing he’d asked twice. Some students were looking at me, smiling.

Fast forward to the post-Kosovo, post-9/11, post-Abu Ghraib world—nearly two decades after our nation “got past” Vietnam via the Gulf War. Militarily- and politically-costly stalls in southwest Asia helped the Army discover a pressing need for a surge of new ideas about how to win counterinsurgencies (COIN). The type of thinking about the lessons of Vietnam the readers of Krepinevich had clung to were suddenly in ascendance and integrated into a new Army COIN manual, authored by General Petraeus (published in 2006). I was at Petraeus’s speech at the Al Faw palace in Baghdad when he took over from General Casey: the COINdinistas wrested command of the operation that day and even the band at the ceremony—wearing cavalry hats like you’d see in 1960s westerns and like Robert Duvall wore when he praised the smell of napalm in the morning—played brighter and trumpeted louder after Petraeus’s speech that day.

I didn’t detect the same shift in the Air Force at the time. The general officers who bought the “shock and awe” weaponry and concerned themselves with making TV commercials about the Air Force’s executive agency of the cyber domain seemed busy re-fighting 1947 battles of Key West to ensure it would be airmen who would control key decisions about unmanned aerial vehicles and their employment.

But new leadership reframes thinking. Today some of my students are trained, while in college, to fly remotely piloted vehicles (see Branum). These young men and women, like my commander flying over kill zones in Vietnam, will wrap themselves in high technology to face quick decisions of life-and-death consequence after commissioning. In a few years they’ll be like Captains “Mike” and “Dan,” remote vehicle pilots shown in a PBS *Frontline* episode titled “Digital Nation.” In the film we learn about such pilots following a suspected terrorist in Asia on mile-high cameras, watching while the fellow plays soccer with kids and attends a meeting of bad guys that, presumably, the captain sitting near Las Vegas breaks up with a hellfire missile. It’s hard to define the feelings you’d suffer after killing someone you’ve watched for hours or maybe days prior playing with his kids, drinking coffee and doing the usual stuff people do. This goes beyond the snap decision of a fighter pilot, deciding whether or not to strafe a fleeing male in a kill zone. Captain “Dan” assures the camera (and himself) of his confidence in the intelligence apparatus beyond his own eyes. Armed service members (other than snipers and special forces) have not routinely known similar stresses since perhaps the American civil war when neighbors in border-state regions had to choose sides and would find themselves sometimes fighting one another. But my sense is that

even then the weaponry of the day, although requiring closer range, allowed more depersonalized trigger-pulls. Aiming at a firing line of blue or gray uniforms that might contain a former neighbor and that is, probably, preparing to fire back at you seems different in fundamental ways than putting a thermobaric weapon into the midst of a meeting at which a soccer-playing alleged terrorist (and known father) sits. It's also tough to know how commuting home at the end of that day to your loving family for a chicken dinner would feel.

In this context, my struggle with how to best prepare my cadets for their future led me to ask John Balaban what he thought about it. Balaban is well known to readers of *WLA* as a Vietnam conscientious objector who served as a university teacher in Vietnam before being wounded and as a celebrated author and decorated translator of Vietnamese poetry. He visited with our English department faculty over a meal prior to an evening lecture for cadets. I asked him what books he thought worthwhile in terms of helping people understand the moral consequences of trigger pulls happening miles from the heat of battle. He thought only for a moment before recommending the slim collection of reporting by Frank Harvey called *Air War: Vietnam*. He went on to develop its context a bit for us, especially referring to an exchange between Harvey and a reviewer named Robert Crichton. It seems Harvey the reporter had been displeased with how Crichton had read Harvey the narrator of the book.

My search for the book in our library was at first confused. The Air Force, it turns out, published a book with an identical title 11 years after Harvey's book came out. My weakening eyesight and some fading call numbers led me to pick up the wrong book. Although I can't be sure of the service's intent in publishing a book of the same title, the introduction seemed to be an argument against what I expected to find in Harvey's book. The introduction by Drew Middleton claims the Air Force book will shed light on "some of the achievements and innovations of American fighting men in Vietnam" and will describe new weapons that were then "in the process of revolutionizing the structures and tactics of armies and air forces" (vii). This, it seemed, would be an argument about the benefits of better integration of technology with people. What my students and I needed was an understanding of some of the emotional truth involved in technologically-mediated killing.

After finding and digesting Harvey's book, I can certainly understand both why Balaban recommended it and why the 1970s Air Force—trying to draw lessons from the war about new doctrines and weapons procurement directions—might not have made it a centerpiece of military education. The chief character in Harvey's book is Harvey. As the book's journalistic narrator, this dynamic character's initial

enthusiasms for the technology of the air war and aviators' actions in war wane as a result of his close exposure to combat and the things he sees men do there.

Crichton, the reviewer I mentioned earlier, contrasts the more gung-ho early Harvey—a reporter so admired and supported by the military he was invited to participate in almost every type of aviation mission during his 55-days of reporting in Vietnam—to the less-enthused Harvey who, later in his reporting, ponders whether some actions should be taken at all, and questions their justification in the name of military expediency. Although in a response letter to the review, Harvey reaffirms his “steadfast loyalty to the guys in military uniforms who are fighting in Vietnam...” (para. 2) he dedicates his book to Major George Weiss whom he describes as, “a top pro, a valued friend, and a man who will no doubt take violent exception to some of the things in this book” (dedication). As you read Harvey’s lively accounting for the military’s public “credibility gap” (38–40) and read his reflective asides on the morality and efficacy of military tactics, you can see why Weiss, the Air Force public affairs handler assigned to mind Harvey, would object to the reports.

Harvey travels from unit to unit across the theater of war; during his journey we see both narrator and the characters he accompanies on flying missions facing personal danger and uncertain moral consequences coolly. A stoic, professionalized acceptance of violence and technical prowess is echoed by several characters Harvey portrays. For example, we meet Lieutenant Commander Fitch in Harvey’s chapter 7 titled “The Death Bringers” (66–76) who assures the reporter, “One or two napalm attacks can change the fighting spirit of a whole [Viet Cong] company” (69). And we meet Colonel Goldsburry, a gum-chewing forward air controller who flies an O-1 Bird Dog observation aircraft and calmly radios artillery gunners to walk high explosive shells into a reported Viet Cong’s house (74) before working with a flight of F-100s fighter pilots to put their napalm and 20mm cannons right on a whole line of village huts (75).

As we read along, Harvey’s narrator becomes less sanguine about the technologies and action than his characters. He reports “feeling queasy” after the napalm/strafing attack and asks Colonel Goldsburry to take him back to the base (75). Harvey then provides a contrasting character to the stoicism seen so far, an unnamed forward air controller who is close to finishing his tour of duty. The controller had been ordered to level a village with artillery fire, but when flying over the village he saw only a bunch of women and children, no Viet Cong; he radioed back to headquarters to get confirmation of his orders. Harvey the reporter remarks to the controller, “You must have seen a lot of people killed.” The controller’s response ends the chapter as

he replies, “No people got killed. Nobody was in the [rice] paddy where I directed the artillery fire” (76).

Such potentially-fruitful fodder for class discussions notwithstanding, as I write this I’ve decided not to assign Harvey’s book to my next class of students. Although there’s no doubt it’s a good, interesting, important read for those of us who are students of war literature—and for those of us struggling to understand the human implications of modern technological warfare—its literary qualities don’t approach an O’Brien, Balaban or Caputo or even other excellent journalistic efforts at capturing wartime truths such as those by Mark Bowden, David Finkel or Dexter Filkins. Instead of assigning Harvey’s book to my students, I am taking it as I took my experience bringing my commander in to class to talk about his war stories: the book has strengthened my ability to help my students prepare for their wars, but once is enough for me. If you have an afternoon, read the whole book; if you don’t, do make time to read chapters 1, 7, 8 and 11. Those chapters remind us that while methods of war change, ways of war change less certainly.

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