



OLD WARS NEVER DIE

"We cannot ever again allow ourselves to be misinformed, manipulated and misled into disastrous foreign adventures. In Viet Nam we finally have reached the end of the tunnel — and there is no light there."

— Walter Cronkite, CBS Evening News, April 29, 1975

On the day the war ended I telephoned a friend who had shared a small part of it with me. He was angry and bitter. The wrong side had won the war and its victory made a mockery of the deaths of fifty-eight thousand Americans, he said; some of them had been our friends. I argued that millions more Southeast Asians had been killed and that finally after a generation of incessant war the survivors could get on with their histories in relative peace. I did not anticipate the boat people from Viet Nam, the wars with China or the murders of two-thirds of the people of Cambodia by its new leaders.

My friend and I have not spoken since that last day in April fifteen years ago. The North Vietnamese Army had just marched into Saigon that day and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. For them thirty years of civil war were over. They had also fought and defeated two Western powers that had hoped to dominate them. My friend and I had been only briefly involved. We had spent not much more than a year in Viet Nam and our friendship had not lasted beyond it. We thought our experience there would bind us for life but our separate opinions about it made us enemies instead. He supported the war. I was against it. He thought I was a traitor of the worst sort, that I had betrayed the men we had fought alongside, especially those who died or were crippled from wounds.

We had been Marines, adolescent gods of thunder who crawled the earth in pursuit of death. We were anachronisms, infantry in the nuclear age, and though we killed with modern weapons we warred no differently than the ancients who hurled spears. We were parts of a machine, each of us reduced to a specific function in a common mush, hammered and smashed around like a piece of rock until it takes the shape of a weapon.

From the beginning it seemed as if we had done nothing else in our lives but kill and die under a hot sun or in mud and rain. We attacked and smashed small villages with rifles, artillery and bombs. We fought through sudden wildly violent ambushes and were constantly plagued by snipers and by land-mines and booby traps. We exacted savage revenge for every death or wound. We murdered the vulnerable because we seldom could find or identify the phantoms who shot at us or blew our bodies apart with concealed explosives. In the villages we beat peasants or allowed our Vietnamese allies to torture them. We tied old men and boys to trees and set our dogs at them. We attached electrical wires to their genitals or nostrils and cranked the switches. We threw them out of helicopters.

We were murderous armed children who sympathized with nothing except our chances for survival. We wished for nothing more than to leave Viet Nam, although it has never left us. Everything that happened to us there was beyond reason or moral consideration. A

kaleidoscope of terrible sounds and bleeding flesh bound by distant voices on military radios and by helicopters that flew in food, ammunition and replacements in exchange for the wounded and dead they removed like disposable rubbish. Artillery rounds and jet bombers shrieked over our heads and annihilated villages, paddies and jungles and left us alone with torn or burnt bodies of humans and animals strewn in fields or among the ruins of homes. Helicopters carried us like deadly viruses to remote mountains and valleys whose only contacts with modern civilization were the bombs and napalm dropped by jets that proceeded us. We hacked through jungles, walked through oceans of wet rice fields, crawled and ran toward burning villages shooting rifles and machineguns at everyone in them. Everywhere we went we destroyed almost everything.

We had come several thousand miles, several hundred thousand of us, generally ignorant of why we should. Officers with charts and pointers explained that western civilization demanded our presence in Viet Nam: here we would stop godless communism. We fought because the Vietnamese asked for our help, the officers said; then contradicted themselves by warning that we would lose our lives by trusting a single Vietnamese. Old grandmothers planted mines and booby traps. Children sold soft drinks with shards of broken glass and sometimes blew themselves up with explosives in a crowd of American soldiers. Young women became whores and artfully concealed razor blades in their vaginas. Farmers and their sons were Viet Cong at night. We of the lesser ranks understood the riddle but most of us did not care. It was implicit that even the lowliest of us represented a superior civilization, and as had the French who had been there before us, our attitude toward the Vietnamese was that they were inferior to us.

Finally back home I was tormented by what I had experienced in Viet Nam. At some point in the war I could not accept any longer the brutal racism, the hatred and contempt of Americans toward Vietnamese. I had never seen a people so determined to survive with so little to recommend it. They fought relentlessly against foreign invaders, and no matter how well we deceived ourselves about the war, the Vietnamese were not deceived. Though I never quite accepted their cause I learned to respect the uncompromising way in which they fought for it. The indiscriminate war we made against them made their success inevitable.

I became involved in the American antiwar movement as an early member of the Viet Nam Veterans Against the War. I wrote articles, gave speeches and took part in rallies and demonstrations all over the country. I was gassed, maced, clubbed and arrested, which seemed a form of retribution for my part in Viet Nam. I threw my war medals at the capitol

building in Washington, D.C., in April 1971 with one thousand other Viet Nam veterans, and a week later was one of twenty veterans who dumped a hundred pounds of fresh chickenshit on the front steps of the Pentagon. We might have used explosives. Our message was that Frankenstein's monster had brought the war home.

I was often called a traitor in the manner that my friend had accused me. My feelings were the opposite. I felt that I had betrayed the ideals of my country when I fought in Viet Nam. At home I was obsessed with unearthing the rot that underlay history; the agreed upon fictions that create cultural and racial myths and sanction conquest and empire. Viet Nam removed my trust in government, and I learned to regard patriotism as a narrow and cynical appeal for prejudice, injustice and murder.

We learn from history that we learn nothing from it, George Bernard Shaw said. Viet Nam was a cynical war of attrition designed by men who knew little of history but thought they could impose their will upon it simply because it was their will to do so. The United States replaced the French in Viet Nam in exactly the manner that led to their defeat, but our arrogance was that we were Americans and we confidently committed the same errors as if we could reverse them by the force of who we were.

We razed Vietnamese culture and slaughtered its people as if it was our historical right. We imposed a hated government and enforced its control with our bombers and battalions. We dropped more bombs on Viet Nam than during all of World War II and poisoned its fields and population with herbicides sprayed from the air. We invented the bodycount as an index and declared that every peasant we killed was an enemy which was proven by their deaths. We removed hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese from their farms and villages to prevent them from assisting the guerrillas we were never able to destroy and abandoned them to filthy, overcrowded refugee camps or to beg and starve in the cities. We hired death squads to liquidate political opposition and participated in the heroin trade to pay mercenaries.

At one point, although the killing did not stop, the Viet Nam War was officially declared over. The last American soldiers came home. One of them wrote on a wall at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport: "Will the last American to leave please turn out the light at the end of the tunnel." There never was a light, only a long dark tunnel into which millions disappeared, among them almost sixty thousand dead Americans. Of the 300-thousand American wounded, thousands returned home without legs, arms or genitals. Thousands more were paralyzed, physically and psychologically. The wounded overflowed U.S. military hospitals in Asia and Europe, the most critically injured even-