



A SKETCH BY EDOUARD REQUIN OF "THE BIG 4" AT VERSAILLES, 1919:
CLEMENCEAU OF FRANCE, WILSON OF THE U.S., LLOYD GEORGE OF ENGLAND & ORLANDO OF ITALY

world would soon be engulfed in a war more horrible than the war just ended, and the United States would not only be sucked into the next war but in all probability would bear the brunt of it.

Wilson might have quoted Seneca:

"We are mad, not only individually, but nationally. We check manslaughter and isolated murders; but what of war and the much vaunted crime of slaughtering whole peoples?"

What Wilson did say was, "We of all peoples in the world ought to be able to understand the questions of this Treaty...for we are made up of all the peoples in the world. Dare we reject it and break the heart of the world?"

Wilson believed the U.S. had an inescapable moral obligation to bear its share of the responsibility for world peace, and he was certain that a great majority of Americans favored the League of Nations. To that end, balked by the Senate which he spurned, he took the Treaty to the people. In September 1919 he made a whistlestop campaign across the continent to save the covenant. He covered 8000 miles and made 36 prepared speeches and numerous impromptu talks from the back of his Presidential train in less than a month. He aroused tremendous enthusiasm in the West on his whirlwind tour --- a huge reception in Seattle along with a review of the Pacific fleet; in Portland he spoke to thousands after a automobile trip along the Columbia River Gorge Highway (during which a news reporter was killed in a traffic accident). Cars were parked along the road and he was cheered all along the route.

The tragedy is that his exhausting appeal to the voters was a disaster. The people could not vote for the Treaty. Only

the Senate had the power to accept or reject it. Wilson should have stayed in Washington and worked it out with the Senators. Instead, in Pueblo, Colorado, he suffered a minor seizure and the rest of the trip was canceled. Back in Washington a few days later he collapsed from a stroke that incapacitated him and eventually resulted in his death five years later.

On November 19, 1919, the Treaty was rejected by the Senate. Another try the following March was also defeated.

The League of Nations was officially born January 10, 1920, though the Assembly met for the first time in Geneva, Switzerland on November 15, a year after the United States declined to become a member. The League foundered from the start and was never able to curb powerful aggressors or to protect its weaker members. It was never a well balanced supranational league and proved unable to enforce its decisions or deal with the economic problems that led to worldwide depression in the 1930s. By the time World War 2 began in 1939, the League had lost all prestige and influence.

The League of Nations was crippled from the start by the defection of the United States, which broke the coalition of Allied power that might have kept the peace. Instead, the other nations responded to parochial fears and avarice and hardened their revenge against Germany. France in particular was stunned by the U.S. rejection of the Treaty, and having already been attacked twice by Germany in the previous half century, enacted extremely cruel measures against its ancient enemy, which included a disastrous invasion of the Ruhr in 1923. The impossible burden of reparations on Germany economically unsettled Europe for more than a decade and contributed to the

Great Depression and also helped prepare for the rise of Adolf Hitler (which curtailed the reparations). Lloyd George blamed the failure to keep the peace on the Allied powers, who did not fulfill the intentions of the Treaty of Versailles and probably never had any intention of doing so.

The U.S. role in the League's failure should not be exaggerated --- yet World War 1 had transferred the wealth of Europe to the USA and its real power was just beginning.

A contrary notion about the long term effect of the U.S. failure to join the League of Nations was reflected by Tim Baker who wrote in *American Heritage* that it was one of the "most overrated events" of the 20th century. Baker wrote that reversal of this decision, despite "popular mythology" would not have prevented World War 2. "Joining the League would not *per se* have prodded America out of its traditional isolationism. Without a considerably larger Army and Navy, the United States could not have done much to deter the expansionism of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. There is little to indicate that joining the League would have altered the American people's traditional sense of their historical role, and the immense problems of the Great Depression would have turned even the most worldly administration inward. And even if the United States had been ready, willing, and able to confront the Axis powers, it is doubtful that Great Britain or France would have countenanced any such American attempt to lead in Europe. In the 1930s both nations were still world powers, and the politics and technology of the time would have made any effort to bypass them all but impossible."

The international anarchy and repudiation of treaties, acts of aggression and the growth of Fascism that led to World War 2 reinforced the need for an organization better adapted than the failed League to adjust international tensions and disputes. The United Nations was born in the midst of World War 2. Simultaneously, Hitler formed his 'New Order' that was forged by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and their satellites as an anti-democratic/anti-communist bloc; and Japan attempted to consolidate its expanding empire in the war's early years into a 'Co-Prosperity Sphere' in which it claimed "Asia for Asians". The ultimate "total victory" of the Allied powers --- a new 'Big Three' with Soviet Russia replacing Nazi-occupied France --- achieved in large measure through an effective war mobilization of the world's resources, left them in a position to write the new peace treaties.

The preamble to the United Nations Charter, which was adopted in June 1945, a month after Nazi Germany surrendered but while Japan was desperately fighting to avoid defeat, stressed the determination to...

"save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetimes has brought untold sorrow upon mankind."

In August 1945 two atomic bombs were dropped by U.S. bombers on two Japanese cities. One war was over, but almost immediately a quasi-war that would last half a century was beginning. The Cold War and its reckless nuclear arms race between the two main victors of World War 2 sorely tried the effectiveness of the UN. The same narrow interests that doomed American participation in the League of Nations before the war continue to threaten the country's UN commitment.

The United Nations has won the Nobel Peace Prize for 2001, an irony that Woodrow Wilson would have appreciated. The announcement by the Nobel Prize Committee was made during the first week of airstrikes against Afghanistan by a coalition of European and Arabic nations spearheaded by the USA in retaliation for the September 11 terrorist attack.

THE LAST AMERICAN EXILES

"When you're in a war, you're already dead."

~JIM JOSEY, Co-founder of 'Project Return' for returning Vietnam veterans, who shot himself Thanksgiving 1978

One New Year's Day I learned that a friend was in a coma and dying in the Veterans Hospital in Portland (Oregon). His name was Paul F. Cardwell, once a member of the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam, a man whose education, perceptions and deep loyalties toward friends were forged in combat. What he learned from the war and what it made of him could not be contained by the strictures and illusions of the society he returned to and he committed suicide through alcoholism. The day before he died on January 3, 1986 a doctor said that his 33 year old liver resembled one of a man twice his age who drank every day of his life.

When I last saw him the previous year he was seriously undoing several months of alcohol therapy at a veteransdetoxification center in southern Oregon. Friends, also veterans, warned him that he would die if he did not put a cork in the bottle and he acquiesced, allowing them to take him into treatment. They were not in time. His last drunk, the one that hemorrhaged his liver and killed him, was paid for by the government, a first payment for post combat distress, or whatever clinical name is in current use for the horror war imprints upon its participants and victims.

Cardwell was in Vietnam during the last years of the American part of the war, the worst time for soldiers when everyone was certain the war was almost over and none wished to be the last few to die or be permanently crippled.

When he returned to the States, Cardwell drifted to the Oregon coast and lived in Cannon Beach for several years. He worked at odd jobs and lived in odd places, which included trucks, buses, backseats of cars and sleeping bags in the woods or on the beach. He was, in the term disliked by those who fit it, a "Tripwire Vet" --- Though he did not retreat so completely into the wastes or rainforests and barricade himself behind barbed wire and tripflares, inside of himself he lived in a bunker never far from the war whose shells and boobytraps he escaped but which destroyed him nonetheless.

His life after Vietnam took the quality of a bad dream he might have had while he was still there, a nightmare of what his life would be like if he managed to survive the war. Vietnam was the core of his life, as if both his birth and death were outer rings and of less consequence. Vietnam was his excuse for drinking, then it became his purpose, although at the end he might have wished he had chosen differently.

It is said that suicides among Vietnam veterans equal those who were killed in the war, but it is a useless estimate, another body count that cannot be trusted and is meaningless. Everyone who has spent time in combat is drawn ever afterward toward death. The dead live inside the living, haunt them with sorrow and with guilt that they continue to survive, and beckon almost irresistibly for the survivors to rejoin their company.

The living escaped to dwell in a society that perpetrated the war and speeds past remorse and shame, unwilling to admit the genocide it provoked as a matter of policy. The survivors are continually requested to not discuss their experiences with war or death, to virtually excise that part of their lives from their thoughts and psyches as if it were possible or desirable. After awhile it seems that only the dead understand them. It is a grim irony that those who fought so strenuously, so bitterly to survive can find wholeness only in death.

Like most Vietnam veterans, Cardwell hated the homecoming he received, and it seethed within him the rest of his life, embittering him. He was hurt and angry but he went no farther. He was like so many others who became so engrossed in their own pain and bitterness that few moved beyond the narrow gauge of their anguish to attack the cause of their malignancy, which was not the undeserved contempt they received but the war that inspired it. Their pathos is not that so many have been unable to readjust to an unsympathetic society that demands they lobotomize their experience or that so many have destroyed themselves with drugs and alcohol or have committed suicide in such large numbers. Their tragedy is their desperate, almost childlike wish to be taken back into the fold and honored as were their predecessors who fought in wars more accepted by the nation.

The reality of Vietnam's consequences goes beyond the suffering of its soldiers or the Vietnamese with whom they are so intimately linked in terror, shame and death. Vietnam veterans do not represent a lost war so much as they are the nation's conscience in an affair in which the nation refused for too long to act morally against a pervasive and systematic destruction of a people and a culture considered inferior and of merely strategic consideration, and as a result eroded much of its own integrity.

Some of the nation's citizens acted against the immorality but the subsequent embrace by many of the same stances that illuminated the war makes it necessary to question their integrity at the very moment they raised the issues to end the killing. They were the ones who originally condemned returning Vietnam veterans as babykillers, an unforgiving phrase the veterans have not forgiven.

Vietnam veterans have been treated as lepers, shunned personally as being solely responsible for the war in which they were victims as much as their victims. People who have hurt them have never quite gone far enough to see past the shame they have forced the veterans to bear.

Reluctantly, hardly allowed any other choice, the Vietnam veterans acts as a conscience, Christlike figures in the sense that the nation, unable to bear the costs of its acquiescence to murder has been content that its guilt and its crimes be carried by the soldiers it sent to do its dirty work. It has been an intolerable burden for the war's survivors, added to the anguish and scars caused by the war itself, and it has destroyed many of them.

The irony, of course, is the suspicion that the veterans' self-destruction has been a personal flaw of each, not the result of the unbearable cross they have been forced to carry by a faithless nation that judges them as weak for finding it too heavy.

Like so many of his friends who survived the war, Paul Cardwell turned inward, which self-destructed him, but he also denied his lesson to those who might have learned from it because his fear and bitterness they would not listen turned him against them. Ultimately, he denied what he might have offered history, or at least the young who will probably have to learn in the same manner about how human beings, stripped of the thin sneer of civilization, really act toward one another.

Undemeath the spectacle of pageantry and the deceit of patriotism the jarring presence of Vietnam veterans demonstrates with the subtlety of a clenched fist that war is death and horror, that it is murder and depravity, and that it makes sick the souls and minds of its executioners. Vietnam veterans give war a bad name.

Paul Cardwell's name was on the long list of Vietnam war dead years before he died, although it will not be found on the black wall of the Vietnam Memorial. Unlike the nuclear shadows of Hiroshima burnt onto sidewalks and the sides of buildings, his own shrinks into private memories. I did not know him when he was belly-crawling under fire or huddled low in a sandbagged bunker. I remember him later, back home, no longer attired in odious-drab, his flak jacket replaced by one of old leather, a ragged straw hat in place of a steel helmet. I can't think of him without a quart bottle of beer or without his dog Sando who followed him everywhere. His brothers were men who had been a part of the crippling horror, fellow outcasts and misfits he did not have to explain anything to. The war remained in his eyes, and finally, although it might be thought he had escaped, it closed them.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER