

monsters, what were the rest of us who had committed similar atrocities against Vietnamese but not at that large a scale; also monsters?

It is difficult to chronicle when each of us changed. Some of us began our slow metamorphoses in the midst of war, others when the immediacy of death and fear were behind us and the questions of what we had done could no longer be avoided. Each had changed in his own time and for his own reasons.

By the time My Lai was disclosed we had already formed Vietnam Veterans Against the War. My Lai sparked us to counter the singularity it was claimed to be — and that only a few "bad apples" were responsible, which continues to be the mantra for Abu Graib prison and Haditha. We held testimonies based on Bertram Russell's war crimes tribunals held earlier in England, first in December 1970 in Washington, D.C. ("Citizens Inquiry into U.S. War Crimes") and the "Winter Soldier Investigations" in Detroit, Michigan in February 1971. The three days in D.C. involved 40 Vietnam veterans, Detroit had more than 100, but we knew from personal experience that bodycounts were absurd (although the war revolved around them as also in Iraq however much it is denied), the platoon of dissident veterans had grown to company-strength, a small army in its own right of former soldiers finally moving past individual breast-beating confessions to an angry political activist demand for the destruction of the war machine and the corrupt system it symbiotically supported.

We did not lay out the crimes we had committed in the name of America for forgiveness. Our purpose was not to wallow in guilt. That was the best thing that resulted from Detroit: we felt we were worth more than the extent of our guilt. We testified for three days, sitting at long tables shoved against one another, longhairs, liberals and hecklers in front of us, one elderly woman waving an American flag while shrieking that we were cowards, communists and queers.

We told of genocide, psychological and physical, of forced urbanization (removing farmers and their families from their ancestral villages and leaving them to starve in the cities), of wholesale defoliation of jungles and fields, of burning and pillaging hundreds upon hundreds of villages, of indiscriminate bombing with high-fragmentation bombs and fiery napalm, of harassment-and-interdiction artillery fire nearly every night with no particular targets, just shooting up the countryside, and we told of 'free fire zones' where everything that moved was fair game to be killed, no questions asked.

We pieced our individual roles together like parts of a puzzle, stringing the years of the war together, and we built a web of premeditated policy from the highest levels of the U.S. government dedicated to the systematic obliteration of an entire culture through the genocide of war, of economic domination, of propaganda designed to disguise the war's true nature, leaving few alternatives for Vietnamese except death or torture.

We were talking to ourselves and we knew it, but it strengthened the unity between us. We told each other who we were and where we had been.

We were a gathering of freaks who used to be death machines: ex-Marines, soldiers, sailors, pilots; machinegunners, prisoner of war interrogators, past POWs of the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) who had escaped or were released, past prisoners of U.S. military stockades or brigades, helicopter gunners, fighter/bomber pilots, military advisors to the South Vietnamese armed forces, former military intelligence operatives, Agent Orange loaders and deliverers — and infantrymen, the 'grunts' who lived it every moment of every day, subsisting in mud and rain and blistering sun, snipers picking them off singly, ambushes wiping out whole outfits in seconds or hours, these survivors testifying to war crimes alive while so many died or lost pieces of their bodies such as arms and legs to mortars, rockets or landmines and booby traps; and some of those shaggy bearded freaks in Detroit were crippled from the war, stumping along on aluminum legs, holding cigarettes in steel clamps; and among us blacks, Asians, Latinos and American Indians, America's minorities swept up to be out front to kill or die.

But we were masturbating and we knew it. Hardly anyone listened to us, and many of those called us phonies, cowards and traitors. The media ignored us for the most part; what coverage we received was vicarious and ingenuously sensational, generally referring to us as "alleged veterans" although each of us presented our documents of legitimacy. The Pentagon, as it usually does, denied our accusations while attempting to put the double onus of proof and guilt upon us instead of itself.



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The lesson of our testimonies and the slaughter at My Lai which inspired them was that the institution of war and its corollary militarism must be the accused, not a handpicked few of its instruments. The extermination of Vietnamese who died at how many uncounted My Lais (and in Iraq the however many unreported Hadithas) must be blamed upon the great hungry war machine we have built, not upon its lowly lieutenants, sergeants and privates, whose major crimes (aside from murder) are that they were caught at something they were directly or obliquely ordered to do.

The Vietnam War had its beginnings long before the inquisitions of the late 'Middle Ages', down through the extermination of the so-called American Indian, the blacks and Mexicans, through the Hawaiians, the Filipinos, the gunboat suppression of Chinese, the 'Banana Wars' of the Caribbean and Central America, the overtly race war with Japan and later with Korea (and Chinese). The war in Iraq can be said to have the same ancestry, which would include the Vietnam War and the first Gulf War.

The American military, for all its puffed-up pretensions, is American society stripped of its pretenses. Virtually everything leading to the birth and formation of our society, and everything to maintain and expand it, have been drenched in human blood. War takes little imagination, however complex the battle plans and sophisticated the weaponry once it is begun. We are a warlike nation to our very core and self-concept (as well as deceit), heir of Imperial Rome, restlessly savage Vikings, and Nazi Germany.

Just as the war in Vietnam cannot be taken out of the context of all our wars, neither can the massacres at My Lai and Haditha be taken out of context of all such massacres past and present. The guilt also belongs to the most sensitive and most altruistic, such as draft evaders who would not fight in Vietnam because they did not wish to kill or die, or the pacifists who fled the country or went to jail to avoid service in war — either Vietnam then and Iraq now. However moral or humane the intent of these acts, others are forced to fill the vacancies left by the idealistic and just-plain scared; draftees from lesser classes to the combat ranks in Vietnam, National Guards to Iraq.

Among soldiers there are those more excessively brutal and those more compassionate than the average, although each is capable of both, however negative the theater for their acts

and feelings. For the more brutal, whatever the origin of brutality, war is relief for hatreds and fears: racial bigotry and ignorance so finely honed by society. But for the compassionate, whatever the accident of compassion, war is agony, especially wars like Iraq and Vietnam where the masses of people are indistinguishable from combatants (and might also be combatants as well).

The sensitive soldier begins to realize he/she is fighting a people in their own homeland, who resist what he/she represents. He (or she) might think of themselves as counterparts to stormtroopers of every age who violently invade, on whatever rationale, the homelands of other peoples. The sorely tried compassion, even if genuine, is at the least suspect to his/her victims and to him/her self, and at most, spiritually wretched because he or she will most likely not throw down their rifles and go against all they have known, no matter how piercingly they see through the hypocrisy he and she have been indoctrinated to believe since birth, for, after all, it is all each knows and can return to.

In wars such as Iraq and Vietnam, where every single Iraqi and Vietnamese is (or was) the "enemy" and a threat to the existence of soldiers sent to "liberate" them from dictators or ideologies, the savagery rapidly escalates between opposing combatants until the only recognized law of war is to kill before being killed.

A young Army Lieutenant, leader of the platoon that slaughtered the citizens of My Lai, was held primarily responsible. His name was William Calley. He was a small man for a country to hold accountable for its war crimes. And that was what the My Lai trial was really about. If Calley was to be found guilty of the murder of a lesser amount of civilians (reduced from 500 claimed by My Lai survivors to 102), he would be the only guilty party, not the rest of us for whom his punishment absolves us of any guilt. And if he were absolved, we would all be absolved, soldiers and citizens alike.

And Calley, certainly no Dreyfus for he was indistinguishable from his government's purpose, claimed in his defense that the murdered innocents at My Lai were those he was told to kill, that he had been told by senior officers they were "Viet Cong sympathizers," and so must die to validate the deceit of American manifest destiny.

He was found guilty but not severely punished. He was no Jesus either.

DO DEAD SOLDIERS HAVE SOULS?

The war in Iraq is as much about democracy as it is about oil and empire simply because the soldiers who are fighting the war believe it is, however manipulated and deceived they are into that belief.

The same can be said about any war. The U.S. Civil War was about slavery because that was the essential reason the soldiers on both sides fought it, for and against. World War 1 was to put an end to war because the soldiers who endured the worst hell on earth — which they created for themselves — slaughtered each other by the millions for that fervent hope (which might have been a not so subjective basis for the fierce obliteration). World War 2 is eulogized as history's most titanic struggle between freedom ("democracy") and totalitarianism ("fascism"); each claimed history on its side — the Germans, however conscripted, believed in the rightness of a thousand year Reich despite their detestation of Nazism; and the Japanese despised white colonial rule in Asia although theirs was as arrogantly cruel.

The wars in Korea and Vietnam were more subjective than their predecessors, so-called "brushfire wars" to promote or prevent the spread of Cold War ideologies and to skirt nuclear obliteration while simultaneously risking it. As a result, both wars were inconclusive; yet at the heart of each, the combatants fought for beliefs latently instilled in them or fiercely demanded of them.

So Iraq. The grunts on the ground most likely cling to a tenacious faith that they have liberated the Iraqi people from a monstrous dictator and now defend against a resurrection of his regime. At the very least they hope their great personal risks are for the exalted principles that are claimed, that their leaders are literally keeping the faith with them. Yet every day the Americans and their allies face equal tenacity by a hardcore resistance determined to oust the invaders whom they regard as infidel imperialists as pernicious as the earlier medieval Christian crusaders of the previous millennium.

Soldiers have been lied to throughout history. They have always been coerced in one manner or another to commit and suffer humanity's most hideous acts, generally in the names of its most sanctified beliefs. That has not changed: the Americans

who are fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan are as deceived as to the underlying purposes of the war as were their predecessors of wars immemorial, and the rewards for such guileless intrepidity are as always unequal and usually disproportionate to the fervid sacrifice for them.

The only purpose for armies is the destruction of other human beings. Soldiering is big business, the first order of every empire as it has been since ancient times, but soldiers are themselves little more than expendable pawns, readily discarded.

Without soldiers there would be no wars. No Caesars, no Napoleons, no Hitlers. Soldiers kill, rape, pillage, burn, and if they are unlucky, stupid or badly led, they die.

Support for the soldiers acts contrarily as a relentless goad that pushes troops into irreversible horror at the same time the cheering warcries crush any who would conscientiously object. The soldiers feel compelled to carry out what they perceive as public mandate, and in the belief that any personal doubts would be met with disapproval, they do their duty at whatever cost.

Yet the soldiers we are exhorted to uncritically support can be turned against us, ordered to suppress dissent and round up political activists. In times like these such repressive use of soldiers could have wide support.

Quite a few people think dissent is improper once a war has started and refuse to believe it is more necessary than ever — their point is that dissent succors an enemy and betrays American troops fighting the war.

The war parties always attempt to capture patriotism as their own, and portray dissent against their wars as sedition and disloyalty. But dissent is the true act of patriotism and a more sensible way to support the troops that dispatching them into horror.

As realized by the Vietnam War, dissent is the only way to stop questionable wars. Dissenters are not responsible for the misuse of the lives of the soldiers. The people who start wars are.

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