

PROLONGING THE STRESS REACTION

I am not a combat veteran of the Vietnam War. Indeed, my feet have never touched Vietnamese soil. I am part of that episode only to the extent that I witnessed it from at home, and tried to be alert to the ways our society was and has responded. But, though far removed from the military hostilities, I am certain that I, together with millions of Americans, participated fully in the event. Michael Herr said it best in the closing lines of his book Dispatches, "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there."

I am a professional teacher, in the religious studies program in the University of California, Santa Barbara. For the past several years I have also been a fellow, and then director, of the Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions -- the institution Robert Maynard Hutchins founded in 1959, and which, since July 1, 1979, has been operating under UC sponsorship. In both capacities I have been devoting attention to the impact of the Vietnam War upon American self-consciousness. The Center has sponsored a number of dialogue sessions and conferences on this subject. The religious studies department has offered an undergraduate course on the topic, in which some 186 students are currently enrolled. The rationale being invoked to support both ventures is the obvious one: one cannot understand the dynamics of contemporary American society unless one comes to terms with "Vietnam." We are trying our best to do this in the most objective manner possible. Of course, there is no escaping the recognition that the subject with which we have been grappling is neither finished nor closed. It remains a frequent front-page news item, whether employed as a false or accurate paradigm to judge the current escalated U.S. involvement in El Salvador, or as a dramatic contrast to the homecoming of the 52 hostages from Iran.

I didn't know until I became engaged in this inquiry that there are 4.2 million American veterans of Vietnam. Neither did I suspect that the emotional and psychological problems are more acute now, in 1981, than at any time since the veterans returned home. And I certainly had no awareness

of the 91 storefront Vet Centers that have been established to deal with the rehabilitation and resocialization of those who are thus affected.

The day the class visited the oldest of these facilities -- the one created by Shad Meshad and his co-workers on Pacific Avenue in Venice -- was the day of the announcement that all of the Vet Centers were being closed through necessary federal budget cuts. I watched intently as this news was conveyed to a veteran who, just weeks before, had tried to take his life after learning that exposure to a defoliant in Vietnam had produced extensive cancer in his body. I tried to console the wife of a veteran who, through a stream of tears, explained that the weekly rap session for women at the Vet Center was the means through which she was hanging on. I listened as the psychologists themselves -- all veterans of Vietnam -- struggled to discourage the others' despair by outlining certain restorative measures they wished to pursue. But the mood was gloom.

Something so appropriate, well conceived, professionally managed, which had reached more than 35,000 veterans nationwide in its first year (1980) at a cost of less than \$10 million -- why was it being chopped down in its initial flight? To what alternative set of priorities had it been forced to yield?

The painful irony was that the announcement came at a time when the new administration had shown a desire to recognize Vietnam era veterans as heroes. Barely a week before, the president had presented a Medal of Honor award to Roy Benavidez, a 45-year-old retired Army sergeant, for bravery in Vietnam. Seizing the occasion, President Reagan lamented the fact that when the troops returned from Vietnam, "they were greeted by no parades, no bands, no waving of the flag they so nobly served." He offered that "they came home without victory because they had been denied permission to win."

Marching to ambivalent orders in an undeclared war for a cause too abstract to function powerfully, the fighting force carried the burden of the fragmented self-confidence and conflicted resolve of the nation. When they returned, they were blamed by some for not upholding American honor, and held responsible by others for prosecuting a war that was wrong and shameful. Placed as

anomalies within the society, many felt deceived, used, and cheated out of the best months and years of their lives. Today thousands carry permanent physical disabilities. Even more suffer abiding emotional wounds. And those who love them most bear the marks of the same confusion, pain, self-deprecation, and not infrequent rage.

The President has said repeatedly that the lesson of Vietnam is that "never again do we send an active fighting force to a country unless it is for a cause we intend to win." Max Cleland, triple-amputee veteran of Vietnam, and outgoing Veterans Administration head, says it differently: "never again do we send our brothers and sisters into battle unless we are also willing to welcome them home."

Thousands of our forgotten heroes have discovered this welcome, respect, and the **encouragement** to hope anew in the Vet Centers that have been established in neighborhoods across the land. To abolish the program now is not simply to work a further injustice on those who only did what they were asked to do. It is also to interrupt the post-war healing process in which this nation is still momentarily engaged.

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