

# Federation Reports

## The Journal of the State Humanities Councils

National Federation of State Humanities Councils

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# The State Councils and "Issues of Peace and War"?

This issue of *Federation Reports* is one part of the Federation's "Common Theme" project, which was started at the 1982 annual meeting of the Federation. The Board of Directors was authorized to select a theme of scholarly interest and public interest, one on which councils could base Requests for Proposals and other forms of program development. The "humanities and issues of peace and war" was selected. The ultimate effect of these activities and the body of knowledge in the public humanities they produce will, we believe, serve to focus attention on the contributions of the humanities to the thematic topic and on what can be accomplished by concerted program development efforts.

It should be noted that the topical articles in this issue involve reflections on peace as much as about analyses, history, and critique of war and political conflict. The councils do, however, support projects on a wide range of such topics, as the summaries of projects included below suggests.

Interest in peace and war as a field for public humanities activities will no doubt continue, especially as we grow out of the confusion that insists peace must be dull and void of productive conflict. Some, however, might say we are interested in these matters because humans are by nature combative animals. Philosopher Michael Scriven once wondered whether the "unparalleled viciousness" of the "tree shrews that are our ancestors" accounted for the "short-fused hostility toward others of our own species" that might one day do us in. (*Primary Philosophy*; McGraw Hill, 1966, p. 178) Talk like this makes us anxious, and anxiety can be energizing. But we are also motivated by curiosity: Is that true? What could it mean? With that question we are back in one or another of the fields of the humanities.

-- JPS

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Azduk hands down subversive yet wise rulings for the good of the community. Neither are remotely saintly. Grusha agrees to marry a stranger, just to acquire papers to aid her in her plight. Azduk is not above accepting bribes and grovels for mercy when the new regime assumes power. Though the setting is grim, the principal characters show a kind of knack, a certain grace as well as courage, that propels them to work for justice and for life.

The play ends with the traditional wedding feast of comedy. Goodness and light have, temporarily at least, banished evil and darkness. The inventiveness, the salty optimism and resilience of the characters, together with the liberating reversal of norms where bitter disputes are resolved by debate and non-violence triumphs, make the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* a masterpiece of comic peace literature. As the singer in the play reminds us, "Fearful is the seductive power of goodness." (p. 46).

It is a mistake to exaggerate the power of literature in the search for peace. It cannot take the place of direct social and political action. On the other hand, it would be equally wrong to underestimate the power of literature and of art in general. Literature gives us both longer historical views and immediate human beings closer up. Art can help end our sense of futility and isolation, isolation both from each other and from our past and future. Literature can inspire us with images and examples of how we can choose, in Albert Camus' words, to become "neither victims nor executioners." Literature can foster peace, as it helps us to re-enter a living past to believe in and work for a living future. □

For Additional Reading:

- Camus, Albert. *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*. (Chicago: World Without War Publications, 1972.)  
Dougall, Lucy. *War and Peace in Literature*. (Chicago: World Without War Publications, 1982.)  
Galtung, Johan. "Peace Research: Past Experiences and Future Perspectives," in *Peace Research for Peace Action*. New Delhi: A.K. Bose, 1971.

## The Vietnam War and Current Cultural Memory

Walter H. Capps

### Revelations at a Conference

I became interested in studying the impact of the Vietnam War in 1977, two years after the hostilities ceased, when I was given some responsibility for programming within The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. We were concerned about liberalism, as an intellectual tradition and as the philosophical support for many of the social, political, economic and cultural impulses that had come to characterize life in post World War II America. We recognized that the Vietnam War -- a liberal's war -- had done much, at least implicitly, to alter liberals' conception of the strengths and weaknesses of liberalism. But we were not confident that we knew exactly how and why.

So we organized a conference on "the impact of the Vietnam War upon liberal ideology," and invited a number of notable scholars, researchers, and writers who had already made names for themselves on this subject. To give our discussion the appropriate balance, we sought out well-positioned Vietnam veterans. We recognized, of course, that our discussion would have been suspect had it been conducted in the absence of participants in the combat. But this was in 1977, before the various Vietnam veterans associations had gathered much organizational momentum. I sought out Frederick Downs, who had written a book called *The Killing Zone*, and who was then working on Vietnam veterans' re-adjustment problems for the Veterans Administration in Washington. I also discovered Shad Meshad, the co-founder of the Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program, who, at that time, was combing the Los Angeles beach areas and the caves in the coastal mountains for confused, distraught, and alienated veterans who had not been able to find their way back home. Meshad and Downs agreed to come to our scholars' discussion of the impact of the war. But each let me know in advance that he wasn't sure he could keep his composure.

The meeting progressed, as such colloquia normally do, with a series of presentations and some organized responses, followed by general discussion. We took coffee breaks at the appropriate times. All of our audio-recording equipment was working flawlessly; we were certain we would have good material to publish in *The Center Magazine*. I recall thinking that we had laid the groundwork well. We were experiencing exciting exchanges of insights and ideas, and the participants seemed fully engaged.

But when it came time for the veterans to speak, the mood changed dramatically. Instead of utilizing discursive language and offering contentions, hypotheses, and theories, the veterans would only speak anecdotally and in first-person narrative form about what they remembered the experience to be. It was as if the canons of interpretation that were being evoked belonged almost entirely to the world of oral tradition. The speakers would tell one story, then another, then another, pausing in between, looking about the room for the group's reassurances, shedding tears here and there, and then continuing. And as they spoke, increasingly, they dropped the polite, careful, scholar's language, and began dropping words and phrases that were descriptive of the experience in which they continued to be immersed. "It doesn't mean nothin'," one of them said. The other talked of being raised to respect John Wayne and Audie Murphy. "In Vietnam," he confided, "all of that went down the tubes."

The other participants in the discussion were moved. Some became angry with the intrusion into what they had assumed would be accepted practice. Others took on the role of counselors, seeking to assist the veterans to understand why they had been victimized by the war syndrome. Others utilized the occasion to illustrate what they had been contending when they had offered their theories, treating the veterans' testimony as supporting examples of the meaning for which they argued.

But the veterans wouldn't stop until they had told about "the homecoming." They wanted everyone to know what it was like to be transposed from the center to the periphery of American social and cultural experience. The experience of homecoming was the shock of recognizing that one had become marginal to a society that could no longer be understood or trusted. After they had said this, their presentations were finished.

### The Growing Sense of a Problem Out There

This was a kind of beginning, during a period of time in which very little was being written or said about the Vietnam War. The country had been saturated with its news for so long -- virtually every night, at dinner time, on television, since August 1964, with the Gulf of Tonkin incident -- that it was necessary to seek relief. But when the enduring post-Vietnam reflection on the war occurred, it came in anecdotal form, in first-person narrative accounts, and it was recounted most authoritatively by persons who had come to know the experience first-hand. It was Frederick Downs writing *The Killing Zone*, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, Gloria Emerson's masterful interpreted collection of first-person accounts in her *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from a Long War*, Al Santoli's collection *Everything We Had*, and, of course, C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*. It was these, coupled with the films that were emerging: *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, and *Apocalypse Now*. All had the same cast. All had the same outline, indeed, so much so that C.D.B. Bryan has contended recently that there is a generic Vietnam Veteran's war story. A similar narrative structure and a consistent, nearly uniform plot pervades all of the examples.

The intention, at least in part, was to shock the American people that the business of the war -- the moral agenda that it invoked -- was unfinished. Never before had Americans been involved in a war from which the combatants needed to be cleansed when returning home. Never before had Americans been involved in a war following which there was no homecoming -- no official welcome home. Never before had Americans been involved in a war in which the outcome was so pervasively ambivalent.

In those years Max Cleland, a quadriplegic veteran and President-Carter-appointed head of the Veterans Administration in Washington, appeared before congressional committees to plead that unless something were done there would be more suicides from the war than combat fatalities. The statistics were staggering: nearly 58,000 deaths and several thousand more listed as missing-in-action; at least 500,000 veterans of the war suffering severe emotional and psychological stress (denominated clinically as post-traumatic stress disorders); 4.2 million



American men and women listed as participants in the war experience from 1964 to 1975, most for no more than 13 months "in country" at an average age of 19.2 years (as compared to 27 years of age, on average, for United States combatants in World War II); between 10,000 and 30,000 women veterans (most of them nurses and medical staff persons) whose experience has still not been adequately documented. As Cleland was talking, Meshad, Bill Mahedy, Art Blank, Jack Smith, Jack Wheeler, Jan Scruggs, David Christian, Linda van de Vanter, Bobby Muller, and others were working, sometimes alone, frequently together, to deal effectively with the pain and disillusionment the veterans were experiencing. They talked of healing, recovery, and the growing national need to welcome the Vietnam Veterans home.

In 1979 the national Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program was established. As a result there are currently some 130 storefront centers across the land, with the prospect that approximately 50 more will be started during 1984 and 1985. In November 1982 there was indeed a national homecoming for Vietnam Veterans, in Washington, combined with the dedication of a national Vietnam Veterans War Memorial. In both instances, the veterans had taken matters into their own hands. They did the necessary organizing. They raised the funds themselves. And they marched in the parade that they themselves had organized, welcoming themselves back home. And their efforts were crowned, in May, 1984, by a national funeral for the Unknown Soldier from the Vietnam War. As a consequence, many now feel that the homecoming is occurring.

#### A Book That Tells the Story

The book that documents this process most effectively and comprehensively is Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (New York: Doubleday, 1984). Ms. MacPherson, a reporter for THE WASHINGTON POST, spent nearly five years writing her book, and spent much of this time in conversation with veterans and with leaders of the Vietnam Veterans' movement. She knows how they feel. She knows what they have been thinking. She got the story right. And most significantly of all, she has moved the discussion about the impact of the war beyond the shock and need-for-healing stages into the mode that sets forth some of the prospects for recovery. *Long Time Passing* is a

documentary, but it is also implicit testimony that the nation can become richer, that is, more morally restitutive and more spiritually resourceful, because of its participation in a collective "dark night of the soul."

But what Ms. MacPherson does not record, and what still needs to be documented, is the impact of the war experience upon the humanities. We know, of course, that the genre of American war films has been transformed by the Vietnam War. John Wayne and Audie Murphy and the film warriors of earlier eras did not have to contend with resolutions of plots that were dictated by the apocalyptic mode of human experience. We recognize, too, that the war experience stimulated a distinctive series of autobiographical accounts, which will have an influence upon autobiography itself as well as adding to our information about the psychological, historical, and cultural roles of those persons Colin Wilson has referred to as "outsiders." In artistic expression, Vietnam has contributed toward a move in the direction of the inverted and the introspective. The "V" shape of the War Memorial -- "V" for Victory, "V" for Vietnam -- is extended horizontally instead of being projected vertically; it is etched in the side of the earth rather than being positioned as aspiring toward heaven. And as one stands before the 58,000 names inscribed in the black granite slabs, one sees one's own image reflected. Michael Herr closes *Dispatches* with these words, "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there." Some day, for certain, someone will write a book about the Vietnam War according to the model of Paul Fussell's provocative book about World War I, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, to document the impact of the event upon prevailing symbolic forms and modes of individual and collective self-consciousness.

There is an important corollary. So far the recovery from the war has not been ruined by the devastations of the wholesale politicization of the creative spirit. The veterans who are leading the way are pointing to some deeply abiding human truths that are encountered in regions lying far beyond worlds made accessible via political dialectics. The humanities, currently affected by the same enervations, will have to learn, or relearn, the codes of access. But when this happens, the story will be further enriched. Myra MacPherson's book supplies evidence that the interpretive process still has a long way to go. It says, too, that the prospect is the increasing maturation of the society and the revitalization of its culture. □

## Citizenship, Intellectual Life, and Morality in War and International Relations: An Interview with Michael Walzer

*Editor's Note.* Michael Walzer of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton is author of the acclaimed *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (Basic Books, 1977). The approach he takes in that book, as indicated by its subtitle, implies that his perspective on the topic of this issue of *FR* will be of use to anyone interested in bringing the issues of peace and war into the public humanities. In this interview with Jay Kaplan, Executive Director of the New York Council for the Humanities, Walzer ranges over a number of issues pertinent to the work of the councils; his views on particular issues are connected parts of a coherent whole. He has also published a book on the theory of distributive justice, *Spheres of Justice* (Basic Books, 1983), and is currently at work on a book about the principles, purposes, and methods of social criticism. In *Exodus and Revolution*, to be published soon, he interprets *Exodus* in light of its uses in defending radical politics and justifying revolutionary activity in western political thought. This is the first in a series of interviews we plan to publish in future issues of *FR*.

**Jay Kaplan:** *Your sense of values and convictions run very deep. Considering your personal commitments and loyalties and your life's career in behalf of those principles, how do you deal with the issue that is now frequently raised about the role of objectivity in scholarship? There have been for many years debates over the possibility of a value-free social science, and within the humanities, the issue has been very frequently raised, most recently about the need for inquiry that steers clear of presentism and focuses instead upon enduring questions. I am wondering how your scholarship has been shaped by your convictions and whether you believe that it is possible or desirable to aspire toward a value-free scholarship.*

**Michael Walzer:** It may be possible to aspire toward a value free social science which would consist largely of an accumulation of statistical information, descriptive theories, hypotheses and tests for hypotheses. Even that kind of work, I suspect, is necessarily guided by the interests of the scholars who are doing it, but one can imagine, at any rate, work of that sort that at least aspires to, even if it never reaches, a perfect objectivity. But that is only a small part of the scholarly enterprise. For those people who work in moral philosophy or political theory or the study of religion or the study of literature, that kind of objectivity is meaningless. We begin from values and seek to defend and elaborate those values. We begin from where we are, but that

is not merely a contemporary orientation. Aristotle, for example, begins from the *polis*; his work has its source in the firm belief that the *polis* was the highest form of political life. He has to give reasons, however; he has to give reasons which he hopes will be persuasive to other people, and in that sense he is not merely engaged in the spinning out of idiosyncratic or parochial theories.

**JK:** *Or of polemics per se.*

**MW:** Or of polemics. But he is not objective in the sense of standing equidistant from the Persian empire and the Athenian city-state and judging them as if he were divinely omniscient and omnipresent. He starts from where he is and that is what we all do. I have always thought it one of the great advantages of my vocation as a political theorist, not really a political scientist, that I can feel free -- as I do -- to write professionally about the issues that concern me most as a citizen. I can be, at the same time, an amateur of politics and make my living from political theory, and the two -- my amateur status and my professional status -- connect in ways that give me at least some sense of a coherent life.

**JK:** *So your political commitments and your intellectual commitments dovetail very nicely.*

**MW:** Right. I think that for people in the humanities that ought to be a general condition. It is hard to imagine any humanistic enterprise that is detached