

Introduction

I have been thinking about the Vietnam War for as long as I have worked within the University of California. The day in August 1964 that my wife and I arrived in Santa Barbara so that I could begin my teaching career was the day that the United States Senate agreed to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. I probably paid little attention to this event at the time; but as the war protests commenced during the next year on California college and university campuses, ^{it was impossible} there was no way ^{significantly} not to be affected by what was transpiring. From that initial day in 1964, the primary locus of my involvement in the war has been the campus, specifically in my involvement with students and faculty members. It was never my intention to undertake anything formal or programmatic in this respect. At first, at least, I recall walking past the students and faculty who were holding a silent vigil, protesting the war, at noon, by the entrance to the library, each Monday of the school year. I was hardly drawn in very deeply when several of my students sought my counsel regarding the many troubling questions concerning the draft, enlistment, conscientious objection, alternative service, and the like. Yes, we did spend many hours discussing these issues, and on two or three occasions I accompanied my students when they were forced to explain their attitudes and convictions to members of draft boards. Certainly I was present to the situation, and I was monitoring events with increasing care and interest, but it was not my role to lead protest marches or to address public student gatherings.

This changed for me, however, when I met several individuals

who had served in Vietnam, but were reluctant to talk about it. I recall thinking that theirs was a portion of the event to which I had had no previous access. I recall listening carefully to the accounts they provided, being touched and moved by what they told me, and recognizing that now I had been captivated by a mode of engagement that was both authoritative and relentless.

The more I learned from the returning veterans, the more I studied other sources. Within a short while I found myself preparing a proposal to submit to my University's course-approval committee to enable me to offer an undergraduate course on "The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Culture." The proposal got the attention of the committee, but, given ^{its mild & unpretentious quality,} ~~who I was,~~ no member of the committee anticipated that the undertaking would be problematic or controversial. In fact, the first question asked of me was whether I would be willing to teach this course in addition to the courses regularly assigned to me. I answered in the affirmative, of course, fully expecting to teach the course to a small group of students, probably in a seminar setting, and probably ^{for only} only once or twice. The second request made of me was to explain why the course should be offered in Religious Studies (the academic field in which I hold professorial standing). The truthful answer was that the course is located there because I am located there, but I added some notions about the morality of war and peace, the relationship between the Vietnam War and collective senses of destiny, purpose, responsibility, and the like, trying my hardest to draw upon whatever seemed appropriate from the growing numbers of books and essays on "American civil religion." I passed the test, and began offering the

course to less than forty undergraduates, the first time. And that was in 1979. Since then the enrollment has grown rapidly. In fact, since 1983, the class has regularly enrolled 900 students each time it has been offered. It has been estimated that close to 10,000 UCSB students have taken the course since its inception in 1979.

The book is not about the course. The course is the primary vehicle for inquiry into the subject. But this is not what this book is about. Rather, the book is a more thoughtful and extensive answer to the question about why an inquiry into the Vietnam War qualifies as an examination of the subject of religion. At first, the religious studies identification of the course (and, also, of its subject) was a kind of convenience. The course had to be located somewhere. It was a course I had proposed, and I teach in the field of religious studies. Why not, then, place it there? But as I have become more familiar with the subject I have come to recognize that religious studies is precisely where the inquiry belongs, for the Vietnam War is about religion.

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By now there have been hundreds of books and thousands of published essays on the Vietnam War. Anyone with a desire to add to the list must have a clear reason for doing so, and must have an idea or an approach to the subject that has not been stated before.

I come to the subject from the position of a teacher of an undergraduate college course on the subject, from which distinctive vantage point I have observed the topic increase in its power to invite recognition and elicit interpretation. While this vantage point does indeed give me some distinctiveness among writers on the war, I approach the challenge not simply as one who has worked to make the subject accessible to students, and, thus, to the next generation. In addition, I have learned that it is via such routes that an interpreter catches the meaning of the event. That is, the ^{events of} Vietnam War -- which is a fact and not merely an item for hypothetical speculation -- ^{carry meaning all by themselves} does not ~~mean~~ mean all by itself. Nor can it ^{be} interpreted adequately simply with reference to military hostilities in Southeast Asia, or even to the complicated and still vexing socio-political situation that pertained within the United States from the time of the Gulf of Tonkin incursion in 1964 to the fall of Saigon in 1975. ^{warfare} Though its factuality is indisputable, the Vietnam War is not only history. Indeed, it is not even primarily history. Rather, it registers much more

substantially and profoundly as an event within American consciousness that continues to trouble, perplex, incite and inspire a long series of decisions and actions that have been taken since 1975 and even up to the present time. Here, in my judgment, is where the event ought first to be located, namely, as a powerful and disturbing element in collective American consciousness. I call it powerful because there has been no other event in recent American history that can match its influence. I call it disturbing because, try as we might, we have extreme difficulty in bringing clarity to it or even in filing it away so that we can get onto other more current challenges.

*a spirited
lecture
in Ameri
collection
classroom*

Thus I have been interested in the means through which interpretation of the event occurs, which are the means through which the event works its influences upon consciousness. And here too the discovery is not what might have been expected. For the meaning of the event resists simple analytic assessment, and does not easily yield to theoretical speculation. Rather the event has encouraged a series of ritual processes during the course of which meaning becomes discernible as such meaning is created and enacted. The most compelling example of this kind is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., on whose black granite slabs the names of the 58,175 American war dead are inscribed. As thousands of witnesses to its power and function attest, the Memorial possesses the ability to evoke the meaning of the war from those who become participants in the workings of the symbol. Participants/observers have been startled to realize that they did not know what they should think about the war until they discovered how they felt about

the war. And this discovery was not made until they found themselves under the power of the Memorial's symbology. There they also discovered that the very act of journeying to the Memorial, where this action took place, is an integral portion of pilgrimage, which, in turn, possesses its own ritual elements. The meaning of the event is not restricted to the event itself but is discovered in contact with and response to the symbols that both inform and reflect national and individual consciousness.

The truth is that the longer I teach our class on the Vietnam War, the more cognizant I become that this academic undertaking also serves as a vehicle to help create and enact the meaning of the war. For the class is not properly described as the occasion through which information about the meaning of the war is disseminated, as if such meaning had already been packaged and then only needed to be delivered. Rather the class serves as another but related ritual occasion wherein and whereby such meaning is discovered, but certainly by persons who are willing to dedicate themselves to the participatory interpretive process.

The Memorial and the class are only two of the several compelling examples that can be cited through which the Vietnam War attains enunciative meaning. The autobiographical writings of the veterans, the series of films on the subject, the songs and poems that have been written, and the shapes that post-war lives have taken are all instances of the same interpretive

process. So too the journeys that Vietnam War veterans have embarked upon to other countries -- principally to the Soviet Union and to Vietnam, to make peace with real or alleged former enemies -- qualify in the same way. None of this would have happened had there been no Vietnam War with which it was necessary to come to terms. But the important point is that the journeys, the autobiographical portrayals, the films, poems, and shapes that post-warrior lives assume are descriptive of the interpretive process. They are the instruments, vehicles, and tangible symbols through which the event gains meaning, and apart from which the event simply stands as occasion and catalyst for meaning.

But these are not the only or, by now, even the chief examples that one could cite. It is also apparent that the most recent American war -- the war in the Persian Gulf, most often referred to as Desert Storm -- is also of Vietnam War origin. That is, it is a key vehicle in the post-event interpretive ritual process. The wish that such a war would, as President George Bush said, "put the Vietnam Syndrome behind us" is confirmation of this connection. Thus, from the point of view we are advancing, and from the American perspective, in terms of the meaning that Desert Storm has acquired, the military incursion was more about Vietnam than about the Middle East. We suggest this not to be inflammatory but simply to cite prominent instances of ritual action from which the meaning of the war could be extrapolated. From the perspective of our national leadership, the Vietnam War now means something

different by virtue of the successor war, which thesis must be saying that the Persian Gulf War stands as the ritual occasion through which the Vietnam War now means what it was not allowed to mean before. Our intention is to address each of these subjects in the chapters that follow.

There is a second reason for still another commentary on the Vietnam War, and this pertains to the revised and/or more specific definitions that have recently been given to key terms. The Minnesota essayist and poet, Robert Bly, for example, has defined the task of the warrior not first of all as one who engages in acts of terror, torture or killing, but as "the keeper of the boundaries." The distinguished scholar in Native American Studies, Paula Gunn Allen, an astute commentator on cultural differences, has provided vivid testimony concerning the necessary role that warriors play among native tribes. For Allen fighting and killing are secondary to the protections that warriorship afford the society, and, of course, are means through which the warrior proves, forms, and defines himself. Phyllis Scaife, a highly regarded cultural historian, has a new and provocative study of the human body in terms of which the role of soldiers is assessed. Such current thinking may affect the ways in which former combatants may come to feel about their military involvement, and may accelerate the process of coming to terms with the war. That is to say, there may be additional and more elastic ritual processes through which the Vietnam War acquires meaning than those that have been brought prominently to light so far.

The third stimulant to a fresh approach to the impact of the Vietnam War is my own direct involvement in such pilgrimages and ritual healing process in which veterans have participated. I was with the second group of American veterans who traveled to the Soviet Union to meet their counterparts from the War in Afghanistan in November and December 1988. I also had the privilege of being among the first American educators to visit Vietnam in January 1991, to meet with Vietnamese educators, writers, and prominent intellectuals. In both instances I found myself visiting a country, and a group of people, who at one time had been regarded as enemies of the United States. Both journies belong to the category of what certain individuals find it appropriate or necessary to do when coming to terms with difficult and painful hostilities.

A fourth reason for writing the book concerns the involvement of Senator J. Robert Kerrey in the University of California, Santa Barbara class. Kerrey, then Governor of Nebraska, was invited to associate himself with the class in 1984, and has been a guest lecturer in each succeeding year. In 1987, before running for the United States Senate, he was appointed co-teacher of the class, and has continued his involvement even when running for the presidency. On occasion he has credited this connection with helping him to come to terms with the war. Without question, some of his most provocative comments on the subject, and his most astute analyses, have come in the forms of the lectures he has delivered on the subject to undergraduate students. I