

To Walter —
In appreciation for this
Opportunity C.S.

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OBSERVATIONS

"The Impact of Vietnam" gave title to a conference held at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, over the period from mid-afternoon, Thursday, 5 April, through the noon meal, Saturday, 7 April 1979. This is a personal (undoubtedly idiosyncratic) appraisal by an observer (known for his pretense at world historical perspective) -- which stance (sitting outside the microphoned circle of participation) by the rules of the Center meant he could not have spoken officially had he wished to or even had he been provoked towards crying out. He could instead only watch intently the various participants (especially those movements and facial expressions which the recording equipment had no means of discerning) and listen keenly (even with something of anticipation as sessions revealed more of each participant) for those overtones and undertones and nuances (which will be more striking to any for whom the tapes give re-earring) of irritation and arrogance and pain and humor and rare meeting of mind which took place in the chemistry of this laboratory of democracy (well, at least, of the articulate, not exclusively elitist, but not yet "grass-roots" members of that "revolution of rising expectations"). (That this appraisal comes from the advantage of the only one who sat still throughout every moment of the formal sessions should not go without mention, and can be verified by your own awareness that since I drink little I retreat seldom; nor had I, having no official status within this structure or its proceedings, need of moving about to greet important presence or to care for personal or technical developments!)

I will not belabor this review with much effort to recall its contents in terms of the many special jargons now in vogue among the several experts of that ill-defined, seldom historically grounded, discipline which purports to know the "contemporary," though I heard many awkward efforts at and strained uses of that common language which separates us from the English. But I cannot pass by at least one item of this vocabulary which in at least two forms seemed all so necessary -- though in my ears all so redundant -- to reiterate with high frequency: "salient" or "salience" (the applying of which seemed required to assure those who might begin to doubt on substantive grounds that its user did in fact know how to select what really did "stand out from the rest"!)

The officially prepared inventory of participants included eight from the Center plus three others of its Board Members, and I think at one point or the other in varying degrees of attendance and involvement, all, except perhaps one, of these did sit behind the placard which designated their respective chairs -- which by their status was less frequently observed to become "musical" as was required for the other "guest" participants who shifted with respect to session from commentator to presenter and back again. Twenty-three names had been scheduled for this latter group, but there were notables who never arrived in any sense to claim their "place at the table."

As appropriate to California all sessions began, though seldom ended, late relative to appointed hour, and were interspersed with unscheduled "breaks" which always stretched beyond their announced duration, and which, like the termination of sessions, often had the knack of being called at exactly the moment when some "excited" level of participation seemed imminent or had in fact been reached (the image of "critical mass" in a nuclear reactor is undoubtedly not inappropriately recalled for a Center whose originating genius lay, among others, with the staturesque figure of Robert Maynard Hutchins, whose campus in those secretive days of the first atomic pile was precisely saved by the keen sensitivity to such detail of the self-sacrificing Enrico Fermi!). I shall observe later in conclusion my understanding of the significance of this sense or use of time.

Following the formalities of opening by Center President (a usual participant, but who on this occasion had "concerns" which took him away from the table) and the passing of direction to her of the Board who had responsibility for its auspices, the first session was opened under the aegis of Walter Capps (religious studies, UCSB), whose conference, on several occasions, this affair was announced to be. This initiating session made up uniquely in the conference structure by a single presentation -- not quite a "key note address," just "A Viewpoint about the War" -- put before the group a protagonist of some substance in the person of Guenther Lewy (political science, UMass), who summarized in particular fashion the aspects of the content, plus that which led to his writing, of America in Vietnam, and gave some responses to the critics and criticism which this work has elicited. It was as though an intentional irritant (or irritator) was designed to set the mood for the subsequent sessions (and the bristling was self-evident among those who bided their chance to give critique). The data gained by Lewy came to him as "executive historian" with access to all but "top-secret" files (some four percent by his estimation, and even many of these were seen, though, in the mentality of bureaucracy, not permitted for official citation). The rigorous methodology of his logi-

cal, legalistic presentation, though with considerable more calm of person than evident in his portending antagonists, commanded respect by his peers and could seldom be faulted (save by those questions of the nature of evidence itself, or more precisely by the absence of that final piece of the puzzle) inspite of vigorous assault (by others against whom the same species of criticism could be applied with equal astuteness). Lewy's interpretative perspective, which baldly stated there was no legal nor moral cause for guilt to be attached to our conduct of the war (albeit much stupidity of military operation not inappropriate both to war itself, and, as he commented privately around a later luncheon table, to the peculiar sense in which in our participatory democracy even the military hierarchical structure, like the political executive branch in general, is shut up by that chain of command down below the level of decision), in varying degrees infuriated a great majority of those about the table, and led to that sequence of responses whereby the observer was made aware of those (and much substance of their own presentations) which we were to encounter in subsequent sessions. Dinner hour intervened.

Two "veterans' perspectives on the war" constituted the evening session. Frederick Downs (VA management officer), freelancing under the book title The Killing Zone (memoirs on those experiences as platoon lieutenant which ultimately removed his own left arm), struck notes of freshness by his gentle lack of anger, by his forthrightness of concern and compassion, by his humor of human anecdote (told in and out of session), and even by his residual naivete of Indiana farm background. In spite of increasing sophistication and articulation, accrued over these ten years since his disablement, he still could not see the fault in the ideal America his boyhood church and school had given him, whereof came that patriotism he had served -- though he knew, and knows increasingly, the ideal was never and is not now realized in American history. We sensed with him the bitter struggle required in the field of such a one as he at that lowest level of leadership both to do the job assigned in an uncivil war and yet to maintain in his own men and self some vestige of civility. We also sensed with him, and, moving on to the second, equally fractured veteran, with Shad Meshad (veterans resocialization unit chief), the incomprehensible problem faced by the returnee of this Vietnam affair who confronted the hostility rather than the praise of the homefront, often including their own families, friends, and neighbors. This latter presenter took us on to the continuing issues of non-rehabilitation, not lessened by the agonizing factor of the social stratification of the group who had had to fight the war -- the poor, the minorities, the already disadvantaged. The refrain of

them both could be expressed best in the terms of the second: "the return to America was the Vietnam veterans' 'Vietnam'" (and this translation of event to symbol status went not unnoticed by speakers in subsequent sessions). Their appeal was to consider the human individual who had fought from the stigmata with which his fighting, presumably for America, certainly at the command of America, had come to mark him especially in America. By adjournment the matter of the conference had been shifted to lay with its mood, and best one could say was that was (and might remain) ambiguous.

Conference Day Two had three sessions: one before lunch, two more before cocktails. The morning session set on a "panel" of four, which in progressing in sequence and time showed some sensitivity by those who followed to those who had preceded, and some varying degrees of having "heard" the presentations of the previous day, yet still entailed a kind of formal performance not unlike the academic gathering wherein one is constrained to read the paper already written. The common topic was "How did 'Vietnam' change things," and, I suppose, given the assignment long in advance and taken up in the isolation of one's study, each proceeded to make definitions of each of the ingredients which such a topic, as well as the general conference theme, might suggest.

Barton Bernstein (history, Stanford) analyzed (in political science fashion) the potential for neo-isolationism as response to cynicism, doubt, and guilt, and took another opportunity for critical rejection of the neo-conservatism of Guenther Lewy's alternative. Richard Flacks (sociology, UCSB) synthesized the rise of privatism, with its neo-narcissistic overtones. Cynthia Frey (NEH, but here unofficially as former protestor) sought the "cultural web" as larger dimension (and did so with greater sensitive acumen to the conference itself than the otherwise male-dominated table), perceiving the war as the publicity agent for change which had already been occurring. Stanley Rothman (government, Smith) narrated (in historian's fashion) the long development of an American intellectual elite, seeing ultimately the war as the catalyst which finalized the split off and split up of this intellectual community. Various other statements came from round the table, reinforcing or revamping or revising or reassessing these presentations, though a consensus might have been nearly in some agreement that the new sense of America lies in an individuation (apparently not a return to old "rugged individualism") related by as yet unclearly defined linkages to the demand for, even the intervention in, the decision making processes. The session terminated, abruptly for lunch, just as a spark of controversy flared -- unrelated explicitly, though perhaps not ultimately, to the perceptions of the 'Vietnam' matter, by the incidental

implications in the historical narration of the association of American intelligentsia with immigration of Eastern European Jews. That side issue seethed during the interim but did not rear again in formal session. (One needs here in particular to listen to the tapes to identify actually the triggering elements; one might also note thereafter who became absent from the conference!)

The early afternoon session was devoted to the presentation of, and then much greater question-answer response to, a "statistical analysis of beliefs and attitudes about the war" with the variable of change in such between the earlier and later stages by some 4500 major leaders of America, of whom 53% replied to the 200 ingredients of the questionnaire. This effort was the joint work of James Rosenau (international studies, USC) and Ole Holsti (political science, UCD) -- done on a "shoe string" as they put it (in pitching for follow-up funding).

The later afternoon session, with just a touch of vaudeville routine (however unintentional), allowed Murray Fromson (former CBS TV correspondent) to embellish from first hand field experiences the analytical perspective on the issues of TV reporting made by Lawrence Lichty (communications, UW-Madison). Lichty, by his own admission (and by this observer's confirmation), was doing a rerun (with the audio but without the video portion) of his earlier appearance at the Center (23 October 1978) in which the topic had been the impact of TV coverage on the war and on the impression which America received from that media of the war, and of which he had sought to distinguish the later greater recollection of TV impact from the earlier lesser actuality of TV role.

Both these afternoon sessions by their nature had permitted an easier flow of interation among all the table members, but neither session produced, and perhaps had not been intended to produce, conclusions. One might call them informative, of varying degrees of impressiveness (marked best by the lighter tone and the higher number of absences from the conference table).

Saturday morning had been posted for two sessions before lunch and conference adjournment: the first, a continuation in fourfold panel format of formal (though not unresponsive) presentations under the topic "Vietnam -- Religious Values and Moral Issues"; the second, a reporting on the "findings of the conference" by a panel to be named in course of conference. But with the absence of Jacob Needleman (philosophy, SFState), and the assuming of double role by coordinator Capps, the two sessions in a kind of way, and in perhaps a not unexpected way due to participants and topic, flowed together.

Capps lifted up to prominence the lyrics of the era's music, and intensified focus on the images of the era's film (a few of which had been referred to briefly

by others); Nicholas Piediscalzi (religion, Wright State) showed high sensitivity and appreciation for the variety of more subtle dynamics in the conference; Richard Comstock (religious studies, UCSB) looked at symbol structures with special reference to the disintegration of the old balancing element of a political commonwealth which had been connected to our American humanistic individualism; and Phillip Hammond (sociology of religion, UCSB) identified the intensified reactions of age cohorts in this matter of disintegration of religious values. Some few supplementary statements, often involving personal factors or involvements (including a significant appeal by Fromson for us not to forget the impact of Vietnam upon the Vietnamese), brought the morning through coffeebreak to lunch and adjournment.

My overall impression, not necessarily pejorative, is that much was said, but it was less clear how much was heard. The structure of the conference at the Center (undoubtedly following Center procedures) took dialogue away from the large arena and the blocked out session time, and placed it instead in the small groups, standing with beverage or sitting with meal in the relaxed time whose beginnings and endings were often not anticipated nor rigidly terminated.

It was said that we might well be too close to Vietnam to evaluate its impact, or more precisely put its manifold impacts (if not several qualitative kinds of "Vietnam"). Certainly an observer from the realm of antiquity, or one with a world historical perspective, would be inclined to agree that doing history of the space-time in which one is involved has a different set of assumptions, complications, confusions, and results than that for any other space-time to which none but academic commitments attach. But then, in the same sense, it must be concluded that the significance, if not simply the actuality (or, in the frequent word of the conference, the "reality"), of this conference can hardly be expected to be definable -- from even an observer, let alone a participant, this soon thereafter.