

No Discharge from That War

The Vietnamization of America

by Walter A. McDougall

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All in all, a good year for war buffs, said humorist Tom Lehrer of 1964–65, noting, respectively, the hundredth, twentieth, and fiftieth anniversaries of the end of the Civil War and World War II, and the beginning of World War I. In 1994–95, we have been binging on the fiftieth anniversaries of World War II victories, from D-Day to V-J Day; the twenty-fifth anniversaries of the first moon landing and Woodstock Festival; and the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon.

Twenty-five years ago this month, I was standing knee-deep in muddy water at a particularly nasty jungle base in South Vietnam. When the waters continued to rise, we were ordered to empty all our sandbags, slog all our gear to the helicopter pad, and wait to be evacuated. Only, the choppers didn't come—and didn't come. The sun was going down. We were drenched and covered with filth. We had dismantled our defenses and packed up our weapons. We were naked if the enemy chose to attack. Few twenty-two-year-olds ever know despair, but we were all very near it when the choppers finally roared through the rain to rescue us, just as darkness fell.

Darkness. Never have I experienced such utter blackness, and utter silence, as in the jungle on a moonless night. It made going to the latrine an adventure, especially since, as often was the case on dark nights, the enemy was up and about, somewhere, out there.

I would never have guessed that a quarter of a century must pass before I talked about Vietnam, in public or in private, or that it would finally happen at a women's prep school in suburban Philadelphia. But I think it is high time for me and all veterans, and all Americans of my generation, to take stock of the fact that that war still sputters inside of us—that there is no discharge from that war. All soldiers expect to get a discharge from the military sooner or later—preferably an honorable discharge—and then get on with their lives. But

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something about Vietnam does not let go. Do I still have dreams about Vietnam, like so many other soldiers? Yes, occasionally. But mine are not flashbacks of combat, scary or violent. I simply dream that I'm still in Vietnam, long after I was supposed to go home; because of some bureaucratic army screw-up, my orders haven't come through. Or that I did go home, but somehow the war is still going on after ten, twenty years, and I get called up from the reserves and sent back! In other words, my deep-down fear is simply that there's no discharge from that war.

In how many ways is that true of America as a whole? In how many ways were our national politics, society, and culture permanently changed by Vietnam? Historians speak of Lyndon Johnson Americanizing the war, and of Richard Nixon's later strategy of Vietnamizing the war. But in the end, it was America itself that underwent Vietnamization. Later on, I want to summarize some of the ways I think that occurred. But first, I'm going to do something that I've never done before. I'm going to tell a few war stories.

Soldiers need some reassurance before going off to war. We got none.

I first knew something was wrong with the Vietnam War by about 1966 or 1967—by the simple fact that the United States had not won. When LBJ escalated U.S. involvement in 1964–65, my freshman year in college, we all assumed that the war, or

conflict, or police action (or whatever the government chose to call it) would be over long before we graduated. By the time our senior year arrived in 1967–68, it was clear that it wouldn't be over, and that we were going to be caught up. It was not a political thing for most of us; the protest movement did not hit sleepy Amherst College until after my time. Indeed, what bothered me was not American *motives* in Vietnam, not the fact that we were there, but the fact that we weren't winning. Nor did I consider dodging the draft. When deferments for graduate students were abolished, I resigned myself to serving in the army after college, and I even had the naive idea that whether I ended up supporting or opposing the war, my voice would count for something because I had really been there. Moreover, by enlisting instead of waiting to be drafted, I could choose my branch and thus avoid getting stuck in the infantry. In any case, the enlistment was only for two years. I never dreamed that there would be no discharge from that war.

“Vietnam orientation” training deepened my sense that something was wrong. First, we sat in a huge auditorium to listen, not to some would-be George Patton psyching us up in front of a giant flag, but to a pot-bellied old Southern sergeant, who cried, “Awright, you mens, listen up. Y'all will now git oree-en-tated to Vit-nam with this letcher on the struck-shoor of Con-foosh-ian societies, which is sorta like th' Army chain o' command!” Next, we toured a model strategic hamlet, which we were assured was V.C.-proof. We were told what to do in an ambush—don't duck for cover, charge into their guns!—and then were warned about booby traps like the razor-sharp punji stakes, not to mention a menagerie of poisonous snakes, scorpions, and spiders sufficient to daunt a toxicologist. There were no pep talks, no positive reinforcements, which

by then even smug college graduates like myself were thirsting for. After all, a soldier needs some reassurance before going off to war. We got none.

No wonder they locked us up in a warehouse at the Oakland Army Base for forty-eight hours before our departure. Our morale was so bad they feared we would go AWOL. Outside the Oakland base, protesters from Berkeley alternately appealed to us as victims of the military-industrial complex and damned us as “baby-killers.” Nor did it help morale that soldiers flew over to Vietnam on chartered commercial jets, complete with stewardesses and pop music: “I’m Leavin’ on a Jet Plane.” They locked us up again when we refueled in Honolulu (which I could well understand), but not at Wake Island. Presumably we had by then reached a point of no return.

That something was wrong struck me again at the terminal of the Philippines’s historic Clark Air Base, graced with a giant mural of Douglas MacArthur. I stepped out onto the tarmac and for the first time smelled the distinctive damp odor of Asia and gazed at the tropical forest ringing the horizon. Something did not feel right, and then I knew what: it was the American flag which seemed out of place. And not for any political reason. It was just disorienting to spy the Stars and Stripes in that alien land.

Something else struck me as wrong when we landed in Vietnam and were bused to the giant base at Long Binh—this time because nothing seemed alien at all! What we saw from the bus was a veritable prefabricated American town stretching for miles, with newly paved four-lane highways and permanent, multistory buildings. It was as if the army itself knew that victory would not be coming anytime soon. But stranger still was the relative absence of Vietnamese. I was in Vietnam, but all I saw were Americans, except for the hooch-girls trucked in each morning to work in the laundries and mess halls. The only other contact I would have with the inhabitants were the occasional messages the North Vietnamese sent, by rockets and mortars, to remind us that we were on somebody else’s turf.

After a week, I was assigned by chance as a replacement to an artillery battery of the New Hampshire National Guard that had been called up after the Tet Offensive in 1968. Some of the guardsmen had challenged their call-up in court on the grounds that no war had been declared. One of those who did—an antiwar activist in uniform—was severely wounded by a mortar barrage. The captain commanding our battery, a solid Granite Stater of French-Canadian extraction, was killed while serving as a forward observer.

On my first day with the battery, I knew again that something was wrong. I was learning to use the radios, and after awhile we heard a chatter of Vietnamese on our radio frequency, or “push.” The soldier training me was a genial, small-town fellow about thirty years old, with a family and job back in New Hampshire. He was not any sort of redneck. And yet, when he heard those Vietnamese—South Vietnamese—on the radio, he keyed his mike, gave me a wink, and said, “Ditty mow, gook!” meaning, “Get lost, get off our push.” Obviously it was common practice for Americans (black as well as white) to treat even our Vietnamese allies with rudeness and contempt. It was as if we

owned the air waves, owned the war, and the Vietnamese were either the enemy or just in the way.

I assumed (perhaps wrongly) that “ditty mow” was a corruption of the French *dites moi* (tell me, talk to me). If so, I cannot imagine how it came to mean exactly the opposite: “shut up.” But barracks French, a hangover from the First Indochina War, formed a large part of Vietnam slang, such as “boo-coo” for *beaucoup* (many) and “coo-shay” for *couchez* (going with a prostitute). More slang was based on the radio code for letters of the alphabet—Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, etc. So BS became “Bravo Sierra,” and Viet Cong (VC) became “Victor Charlie,” or just “Charlie,” or—if you were feeling sentimental towards the enemy—“Chuck.” America was “the world,” civilian airliners overhead were “freedom birds.” To be killed was to get “wasted,” to bomb a village was to “waste it.” As for adjectives, everything in Vietnam was either “Number One,” meaning the best, or “Number Ten,” meaning the pits.

What was Number One to many U.S. soldiers was grass, pot, weed. I knew again that something was wrong with this war when a corporal took me into a hooch my first week and offered me a cigarette from a pack of Marlboros—a perfect pack complete with U.S. tax stamp on the bottom. Only it wasn’t tobacco, but prime Laotian marijuana dipped in liquid opium. I was amazed, and asked him what it cost. “Five bucks,” he said. “Five bucks a joint?” I asked. “No, five bucks a pack!” Now, believe it or not, I had never tried pot before. But I tried it then, and I *did* inhale. I remember giggling uncontrollably, for how long I can’t say. Then I passed out, and the next thing I knew it was hours later, almost dusk. The corporal was long gone. I could not remember for some moments who I was, where I was, or where I was supposed to be. That loss of control I experienced so terrified me that, from that day to this, I have never been tempted to touch drugs again. But what terrified me even more was the realization that a significant portion of the U.S. army in Vietnam was constantly stoned. For those who remained addicts when they returned to the States, there would be no discharge from that war.

We were known as the Jungle Battery, a special artillery unit of six howitzers—three 105 millimeters and three of our 155s. We spent half our time in base camp and half our time in the boonies in tiny fire-support bases bulldozed out of the jungle by combat engineers. We fired in support of a half-dozen or so Special Forces, the Green Berets, who served as the officers for a battalion of Cambodian mercenaries. Their mission was to go on reconnaissance sweeps in search of enemy strongholds. In fact, I heard President Nixon declare on the radio that we had no mercenaries in South Vietnam at the very time my life depended on them. But they also had good reason to volunteer. For these were ethnic Cambodians who happened to live inside South Vietnam, and Vietnamese consider Cambodians racial inferiors. So rather than get drafted and mistreated in a Vietnamese army—North or South—they preferred signing up with the Green Berets. Still, we felt sorry for them. The Cambods refused army chow and instead received bags of rice and live chickens which they strangled and cooked on the perimeter. They also picked through our garbage, never bathed, and never cleaned up their own refuse.

Most disturbing was the fact that the Cambods refused to protect themselves. Some Green Berets thought they were lazy because they would throw away their packs and flak jackets while on patrol, and couldn't be bothered to fill sandbags or dig trenches. But their habits were partly cultural. One Cambod who knew some English told us he did not bother to dig in because his Buddha would protect him. (They all wore wooden Buddha charms on strings around their necks, and when there was incoming fire, they would put their Buddhas in their mouths.) "Wait a minute," asked a GI, "what about your buddy last week who got wasted? His Buddha didn't protect him!" "Oh," said the Cambod, "His Buddha Number Ten Buddha. *My* Buddha Number One Buddha." These troops were all that stood between us artillerymen and the enemy-infested jungle.

I was lucky. My tour was relatively quiet, proving the dictum that war is 95 percent boredom punctuated by 5 percent terror. But I did get a dose of the latter. It happened at a remote location perhaps a hundred yards in diameter, called Fire-Support Base Ann. There the Special Forces got their wish: they bumped into a whole regiment of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars. Our Cambods got badly chewed up, and when the survivors limped in to the base, the Green Berets told us to prepare for a fight because the base was bound to be attacked after dark. The first rounds landed, and the siren sounded at about 10 P.M.

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My shift, one officer and five men, was off duty and thus trapped in our sleeping bunker, which consisted of a metal culvert layered with sand bags. There was barely room inside for the six canvas cots, so the setting was claustrophobic beyond words. We could do nothing but put on our helmets and flak jackets and sit, while explosions blasted all around us. Worst of all was the noise, the screeching whine of rockets that flew so fast and burned so hot that they could melt their way through two layers of sandbags and kill everyone inside by sheer concussion.

The violence without and our silence within were terrifying. I don't know what the other men did to contain their fear, but I was moved for the first time in my adult life to pray. But I was not brought up religious, and the only prayer that came to me was one I had learned in my Latin and music classes: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis, et dona nobis pacem.* "O, Lamb of God . . . grant us Thy peace."

Then the world turned yellow, and we were deafened by the loudest crack of all. I may have blacked out momentarily, but then I remember looking into the faces of the others—something we had all avoided until then—and sharing the realization that we were still alive. Then someone broke the silence with some good old army cursing: "Blank! Those blankety-blanking blankety-blanks almost blew our blanking blank away." The next morning, two of the guys set to digging, like ghouls, in search of the nosecone of that rocket. They found their souvenir at the bottom of a hole about eighteen inches deep, just six inches from the edge of our culvert, and exactly on the other side of the wall from where I was sitting.

When the shelling stopped, we feared a ground attack. And the enemy did probe our perimeter. So the Cambods and our artillerymen fired off every round they had until an air force jet arrived to drop napalm outside our perimeter. We received a trickle of new ammunition the next day but fully expected a big attack come nightfall, an attack that was bound to overrun us. It sounds melodramatic now, but I sat down that day to write letters to family and friends, just in case.

I was on duty that night, waiting nervously in the control bunker for trouble to start. As usual, we had a transistor radio tuned to the armed forces station: soul music for the blacks, country and western for the rednecks, and top 40 hits for the rest of us. It was about 9 P.M. when a news announcer broke into the music with a report too good to be true. News flash from Hanoi: "Ho Chi Minh, the leader of North Vietnam, is dead. And to mourn his passing, the Communists have declared a forty-eight-hour cease fire effective immediately. To repeat. . . ." So there would be no attack that night, and ever since, I've had a warm spot in my heart for old Uncle Ho. At least he knew when to die.

By the time the war resumed, we were not only resupplied but reinforced by the 1st Air Cavalry Division. Colonels and generals descended on our little base, and a fleet of helicopters arrived carrying U.S. soldiers. By day they would search for that NVA regiment. By night the B-52s would bomb to smithereens all suspected enemy locations. We couldn't sleep for the thunder of the bombs. Then one night while I was on duty, a rumor sped around the camp: a squad of the 1st Air Cav had been *forgotten*, left out in the jungle by the helicopters, and already B-52s were blasting their location. It was the worst screw-up imaginable, and needless to say, as soon as morning broke, choppers took off in search of the abandoned squad. They reached the pick-up point of the night before, hoping that someone might still be alive. And there they were—there they *all* were, waving their hands. Perhaps they were lucky. Maybe the bombs had fallen a quarter mile away, or maybe they had found cover at the bottom of craters left by the B-52s. But the conclusion I drew was that something very serious was wrong with this war: that all the firepower in our arsenal could never extinguish a guerilla force spread out over hundreds of square miles of jungle, a force expert in the digging of underground tunnels and bunkers, and always free to run to the neutral sanctuaries of Laos and Cambodia. From that day on, I ceased to think of our own artillery as mighty weapons of attack and instead thought of them only as defensive weapons that might help spare our own lives until our year was up.

Until our year was up. . . . Nothing so illustrates the poor judgment and craven leadership of the Johnson administration and the top army generals as their policy of limiting the Vietnam tour of duty to one year (six months for officers). No army in history has ever been sent into battle with the promise that it would be sent home in 365 days, whether or not the war had been won. That is no way to motivate soldiers to fight fiercely and win. That is the way to motivate soldiers to take no risks, invest no emotional capital in the cause for which they're supposedly fighting, and, indeed, resent the fact that they have to be there even for one day! The short-timer syndrome was doubly

defeating. First, it meant that as soon as soldiers began to become real veterans, battle-hardened and wise, they were sent home and replaced by another batch of rookies. Second, it meant that the closer any soldier got to his DEROS (date of expected return from overseas), the more risk-averse he became. I saw men get so agoraphobic toward the end of their time that they did not want to walk from the bunker to the mess tent for fear the enemy might choose that moment to lob in a mortar round. And with good reason. A truck carrying six members of our sister battery was en route to Long Binh when it struck a mine. All six were killed one day before their year was up.

My year was up in February 1970. I made it to Long Binh safely, only to come down with a temperature of 104° and miss my freedom bird. The doctors slapped me into the malaria ward and proceeded to draw blood from me six times a day for eight days, testing for the malaria they were certain was there until my arm looked like that of a heroin junkie. I took ice-cold showers when the fever was up, read J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* when the fever was down, and wondered why there was no discharge from this war. On the ninth day, a new doctor looked at my chart and said, "Son, I don't know what's wrong with you, but I'm gonna shoot you up with tetracycline and see what happens." Sixteen hours later, I was cured and on my way home.

Only, home was as lonely as 'Nam, perhaps more so. In graduate school, among my old friends, even among family, my status as a Vietnam veteran was a source of embarrassment to them and to me, as if my presence were a judgment upon the hawks who made me go and the doves who ducked having to go. It was as if Vietnam veterans were both morally superior *and* morally inferior to everyone else, at the same time.

Our catharsis was supposed to occur at the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982. I happened to be in Washington, D.C., doing research, so I put on my old army jacket and marched with the New Hampshire contingent. All the way down Constitution Avenue I choked back my tears. All I wanted was to cry until all the grief and frustration were gone. But I was alone, and in public, so I choked back the tears enough to turn to the sparse crowds that lined the parade and try to shout "Thank you."

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In what ways has America itself been Vietnamized? The subject could fill a large book, or several. Instead, let me propose a list of the more important ways in which the United States was profoundly altered by the Vietnam War. I attach no value judgments to them. I leave it to you to ponder whether these effects have been good, bad, ugly, or just ironic.

First out of the box was the professionalization of the armed forces following abolition of the draft. Now, national service, the privilege of bearing arms for one's country, has been a civic principle of democracies since ancient Greece and, in modern times, since the French and American revolutions. Free citizens of a republic—a *res publica* or "public thing"—obligated themselves to share the responsibility of defending and passing on their heritage of freedom to the next generation. But LBJ's decision to order a drafted army into a limited,

undeclared, and unpopular guerilla war in which the security of American democracy was *not* at stake proved to be a capital blunder. So President Nixon, in hopes of defusing antiwar protests, ended the draft and, incidentally, extended the vote to eighteen-year-olds. Ever since then, conservatives and liberals alike have wondered whether this legacy of Vietnam is healthy or not. Today, young Americans—female or male—have no obligation to perform national service—military or civilian. And the United States, like the old monarchies of Europe, now has a professional career military hired by the taxpayers to do our fighting for us. Some experts fear that an unhealthy divergence of civil and military cultures is occurring, or that the military may acquire too much autonomy, especially under a president whose draft evasion undercuts his moral authority as commander in chief.

Secondly, our failure in Vietnam helped to sustain a congressional counterattack on the military prerogatives of the president. All through our history, Capitol Hill and the executive branch have battled for control over foreign policy. But the long national emergency that began with Pearl Harbor and World War II, then continued with the cold war, led to the greatest expansion of executive power since the Civil War. It made Congress profoundly uneasy: Congress was not even asked to declare wars anymore, just to vote the budgets that allowed the president to send forces anywhere on earth for his own reasons. A backlash was bound to come, and it came in the early 1970s, with an unpopular war dragging on, Nixon in the White House, and the Democrats with majorities in Congress. Future historians may well interpret Watergate as, among other things, part of this counterattack against the “imperial presidency” and what Senator J. William Fulbright called “the arrogance of power.” For the attack on Nixon himself was matched by the War Powers Act limiting the right of a president to send U.S. forces overseas; Senator Frank Church’s hearings and the resulting intelligence reforms that reined in the CIA and required a president to consult with congressional committees before approving covert operations; the Jackson-Vanik amendment and other legislative acts signalling the White House that, henceforth, it could not expect to take any major foreign initiatives without congressional input; and lastly, a congressional refusal to vote the money requested by the administration for military assistance to, for instance, Angola and (not least) South Vietnam. That meant that when the final Communist assault was launched, President Ford could not provide air support, or even ammunition, to South Vietnam as promised by Nixon at the time of the 1973 Paris Accords.

Since 1975, the struggle over foreign policy has continued. The Reagan administration recovered some of its freedom of action but also ran afoul of Congress in the Iran/*contra* affair. George Bush barely won congressional support for the war in the Persian Gulf, and Bill Clinton had a rocky road with Congress over his foreign policy even before the Republicans won their majority. Distrust of the executive, a legacy of the Vietnam War era, thus came full circle to vex a president who was anti-Vietnam War himself.

A third, and obvious, legacy is the “Vietnam syndrome,” the reluctance of anyone—Congress, president, public, and media—to intervene in a conflict

that seems to have the potential of becoming “another Vietnam.” Bush declared that victory in the Gulf banished the syndrome forever. His obituary was premature. We still worry whether a Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, or North Korea might turn into an unwinnable quagmire, evidenced in the fact that all secretaries of defense and chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff since the 1970s have endorsed stringent conditions which must be met before U.S. forces should, in their judgment, be sent into battle.

A fourth way in which America was changed derives from the fact that, in Vietnam, the United States fielded the first fully integrated army in its history. Now, we know that Vietnam was traumatic for many blacks who had to serve, especially because of the criticism they received from their own civil rights leaders and radicals like the Black Panthers back home: “Why you fightin’ this honky war? You jus’ a black man sent by the white man to kill the yellow man.” We know, too, that race relations within the army grew strained. But the fact of the matter is that, even though blacks were somewhat overrepresented in combat, more than three-quarters of our Vietnam army was white. And whatever tensions existed, the fact is that the Vietnam War was *the first* occasion in which thousands of whites and blacks were thrown into contact with one another, asked to work with one another, fight for one another, and rely on one another. That is why the Vietnam War was probably a great step forward for racial integration. What is more, Vietnam launched the careers of thousands of successful black officers and NCOs [non-commissioned officers], chief among them Colin Powell. Thousands of other black soldiers went to college under the GI Bill or built careers that their military service opened up for them, for instance in the police forces of America’s cities.

But what of the soldiers and airmen who never came home? The POW/MIA issue is a fifth way in which the United States was Vietnamized. Not only do our relations with Vietnam still hang on whether Hanoi has accounted for all of our missing-in-action, but U.S. politics are still shaken by it. Ross Perot destroyed Bush’s presidency primarily because he suspected that Bush, as vice president, had ignored or impeded the campaign on behalf of MIAs. Perot never forgave him. President Clinton normalized our relations with Hanoi but still is vulnerable on the issue for obvious reasons; one of his most formidable Democratic rivals, Senator Bob Kerrey (D., Neb.), is a veteran sharply critical of Clinton’s own handling of the POW/MIA issue.

Which in turn raises the broader question, “What did you do, or not do, in the sixties?” Statistically, non-veterans are a far larger voting bloc than veterans and their families. Only 40 percent of draft-age men served in the military during the Vietnam War. Only a quarter of those served in Vietnam, and only about one-eighth of those who served in Vietnam (about 1 percent of all draft-age men) saw serious combat. Nevertheless, I believe that a sixth measure of the Vietnamization of America is the continued relevance of whether or not a given candidate served in the military, or dodged the draft, or smoked pot, or dabbled in radical politics, or engaged in the more promiscuous activities

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of the sexual revolution. In a sense, the leadership qualifications of my entire generation are at stake, but the verdict is in the hands of voters drawn from every generation. When Bush named Dan Quayle his running mate, he was making a direct appeal to the baby boomers, for Quayle had avoided Vietnam by joining a National Guard unit that did not happen to be called up. And Clinton's own victory would seem to have removed from politics the issue of what-did-you-do-in-the-sixties.

But I am not sure the issue is dead. Should the Clinton administration collapse in part on matters of defense policy and/or "character" issues, then *other* 1960s war protesters may have a difficult time winning widespread support. The political future may well belong to the Kerreys and Powells after all.

How many other profound ways has America been Vietnamized? Our chronic budget deficits began in those years when LBJ opted for big military spending and big social spending, without raising taxes. Democrats and Republicans alike got "hooked" on deficit spending and never kicked the habit. American universities were changed in dozens of ways by Vietnam and the campus protests. Popular culture, once supportive of traditional values and national myths, shifted 180 degrees in the Vietnam era, in everything from Hollywood films to pop music. Just contrast John Wayne and Oliver Stone. The relationship between journalism and government likewise reversed itself. The adversarial, investigative journalism made famous by Watergate grew directly from LBJ's infamous credibility gap when reporters began to suspect that they weren't being told the truth about the Vietnam War. Point to any major institution in American society, and I expect you will find it altered, if not transformed, by that war from which there is no discharge.

But there is another, final Vietnamization of America: the one made by the Vietnamese people themselves, the thousands of refugees and courageous "boat people" who fled the Communists during and after the pitiful fall of Saigon in 1975. Like the returning veterans, the Vietnamese refugees were ignored by the American people; like the veterans, they were an embarrassing reminder of a nightmare we all wanted to forget. But those Vietnamese immigrants quietly went to work for themselves and their families, and for society at large by restoring one blighted urban neighborhood after another. I watched them do it in Oakland, California, and I've seen their children in class, where they are among the brightest and hardest-working students.

In my opinion, the war we fought in Vietnam was not a criminal war. Its motives, far from base, were shockingly altruistic. Never before in history had a great power spent so many lives and so much treasure so far away, with so little at stake for itself. In my opinion, it was the way the war was fought, as opposed to the war itself, that was Homeric, even biblical, in its hubris. And our penance will not cease for some years to come. For there will be no discharge from that war until all who fought against it, and all who fought in it, have suffered what Charles DeGaulle called the shipwreck of old age. The same was true of the Civil War, which continued to cast its shadow over American life until almost the turn of the twentieth century.

America Transformed

But in time, in the twenty-first century, two or three new generations will have taken control of America's future. What great events will shape their consciousness, as Vietnam shaped ours? From what conflicts will those young people never be discharged? All we older folks can do is teach them the lessons we have learned and pray on their behalf, "Lead them not into temptation, put them not to the test," as we were put to a terrible test when barely out of our teens.

