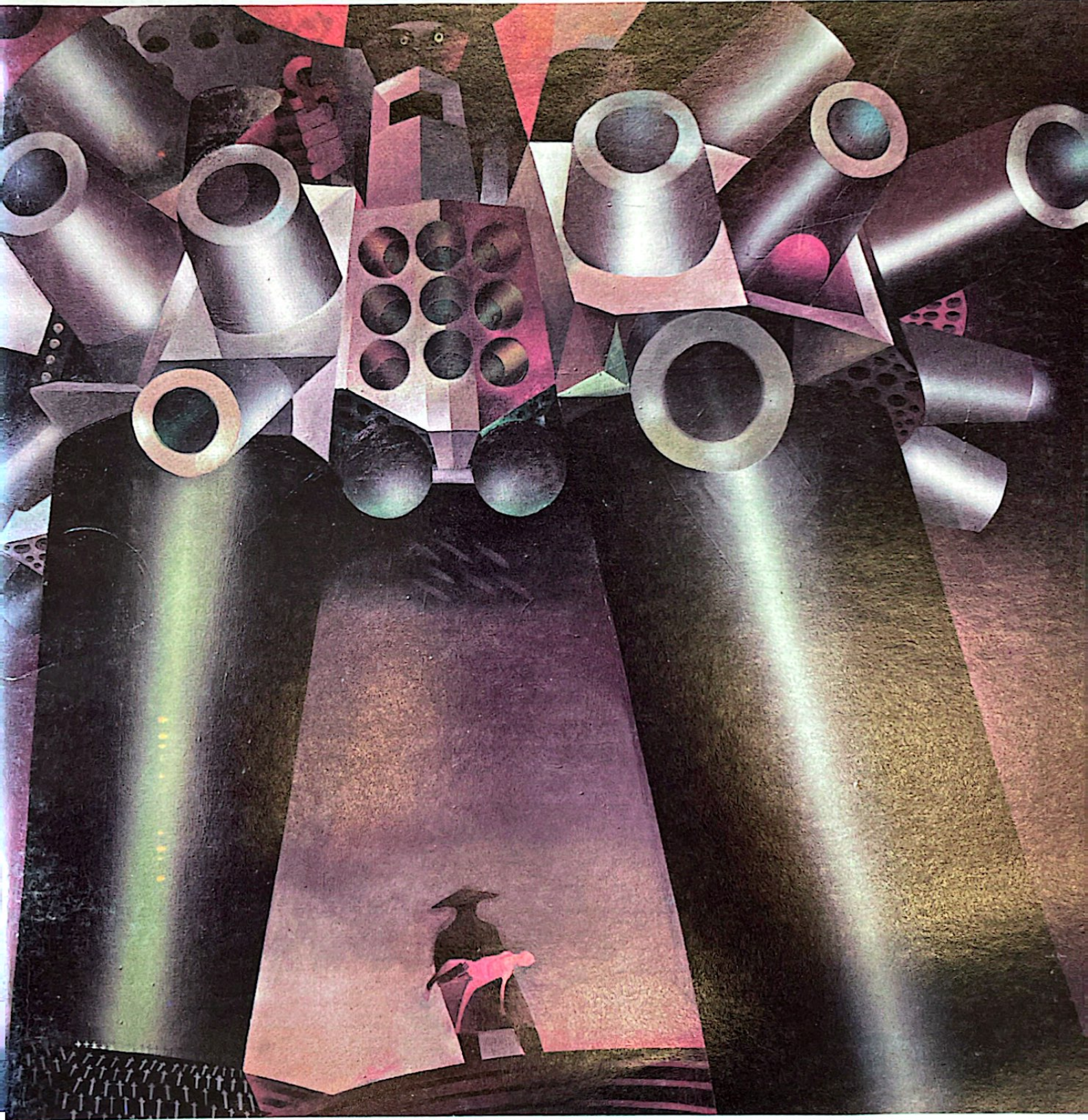


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THE CENTER MAGAZINE



The Vietnam War and American Values

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THE CENTER MAGAZINE

A Publication of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions

Editor — Donald McDonald

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Nineteen years ago, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions began its deliberations here in Santa Barbara. From the start, the Center adopted half a dozen operating principles which, taken altogether, have made its work in public affairs distinctive. Whether that work has also been, on the whole, a positive contribution to the understanding of these public affairs is for others to judge.

But it might be useful to remind ourselves of those practical principles because they are intimately related to the purpose of the Center itself. They are:

- Discovery of the basic issues underlying the burning issues in our society
- A multidisciplinary intellectual approach to these issues
- Reliance on the dialogue as the method of reaching some understanding of the basic issues
- A commitment to norms — i.e., the humanistic and democratic principles and ideals of a just society — as both end and means in the study of public affairs
- A sustained interest in these issues
- Widening the circles of the discussion of these issues

There is no doubt that other institutions — colleges, universities, study centers, institutes of various kinds — have relied on one or several of these operating dicta. But it is not immodest — or inaccurate — to note that the Center has consistently adhered to all of them; and it is the ensemble, rather than any two or three of its elements, that has made the Center's work distinctive.

Looking over the contents of this issue of *The Center Magazine*, it is apparent that the Center continues to be faithful to its original definition of its mission. The articles are concerned with such basic issues as economic planning, government secrecy and bureaucracy, technology, education, and the effect of a war on fundamental American values.

The method of comprehending these issues is still the dialogue; and the dialogues remain multidisciplinary with theologians, journalists, lawyers, philosophers, government civil servants, businessmen, historians, and demographers, all taking part in the Center's dialogues.

The Center also continues its commitment to the values inherent in the purposes of a democratic society; it continues its interest in the issues; and, through its publications, its audio-tape program, and its public convocations, it continues to widen the circles of the discussion of these issues.

No one — least of all, anyone at the Center — claims that the Center's work has, through the years, been uniformly excellent. What can be claimed, however, is that the framework exists within which excellence remains a possibility, and that the structure of that framework has met the tests of time and experience.

— D. MCD.

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THE WAR'S TRANSFORMATION

The inability of the Americans to impose their will on Vietnam had been answered in 1968, yet the leadership of this country had not been able to adjust to that failure. And so the war went on, tearing at this country; a sense of numbness seemed to replace an earlier anger. There was, Americans were finding, no light at the end of the tunnel, only greater darkness.

— DAVID HALBERSTAM

Despite what seemed like the interminable bloodbath of Vietnam, and because of it, the great changes of the war's decade were ones of sensibility, awareness, and attitude, not of institutions.

— MORRIS DICKSTEIN

At the same time [World War I] was relying on inherited myth, it was generating new myth, and that myth is part of the fiber of our lives.

— PAUL FUSSELL

There was an acute awareness at the time the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima that every aspect of human life had been threatened and subjected to pervasive realignment by the power that had been unleashed. Before the nuclear capability was developed, warfare could be kept within some manageable bounds; its catastrophes were always of finite proportions. But the nuclear explosion changed the meaning of war, and, as Robert Lifton has pointed out, it altered perceptions of life.

Lifton noted in *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* and in *Boundaries* that the fundamental sets of patterns by which human life is approached and mediated had undergone radical change. Heretofore, life had been the dominant term, and death had been comprehended by life. Following Hiroshima — that awesome, tragic, and paradoxically catalytic event — a reversal and interchange occurred within the fundamental relationship: death became the commanding term, and life was conceived in terms of death, first, for those directly affected by the war, but gradually for an increasingly larger number of persons.

With this, came changes in the ways human beings understood both themselves and the world in which they live. Human beings had come to conceive life differently. And the ramifications were to be felt in various aspects of their common life. Persons related to persons, and nations to nations, in a different way. Changes came in attitudes toward government, toward leadership, toward the role of the military, toward all forms and reservoirs of power, even to authority itself.

From this point forward, all instruments of power, in degrees never before possible, were approached with suspicion. Power, by definition, carried the threat of destruction, and destruction had the capacity of extinction. Lifton used this interpretation to describe how patterns of personality formation changed from a fixed to a fluid, protean style.

Sensitivities nurtured by such awarenesses called for an urgent and thorough re-examination of everything upon which sustained human life depends.

There was a reassessment of the function of our dominant political, social, and cultural institutions. Serious attention needed to be given to the dynamics of world order, particularly as these had been readdressed by the cataclysmic event of Hiroshima. The function and value of education had to be — and was, in fact — reassessed. Value issues, many of which were assumed to have been settled long ago, were opened to fresh examination. There was deep recognition that the survival of the species required deliberate attention.

Further, given the radical and primary character of the change that had occurred, no assurance could be given that the new strategies would prove successful. Indeed, strategy itself became a subject of critical attention. It was as if the forces that had been unleashed were too powerful to be tamed and were threatening to run their own courses, being challenged, as Thomas Merton said, only by “an alternative way of being.” Along the way, there would be an accumulation of wondrous scientific advances which, too, would make the prospect of all-out destruction more immediate and imminent.

And it was not simply Hiroshima; it was also the Jewish Holocaust. The two events became fused in Western consciousness. Regarding this coupling, Ron Rosenbaum writes in “The Subterranean World of the Bomb” (*Harper's*, March, 1978):

“When early strategists began to talk about the totality of nuclear war, they used phrases like ‘the death of consciousness’ on the planet. [Henry] Kissinger used the only slightly more modest phrase ‘an end to history.’ Without consciousness not only is there no history, there is no sorrow, no pain, no remorse. No one is missing or missed. There is nothing to feel bad about because nothing exists to feel. A death so total becomes almost communal. The Holocaust of the European Jews left behind millions to feel horror, bitterness, and loss. When people began applying the word ‘holocaust’ to nuclear war they meant a holocaust with no survivors, or one in which, to use the well-known phrase, ‘the survivors would envy the dead.’ Even now when a much-disputed scientific report argues the probability for long-term post-holocaust survival, at least in the southern hemisphere, one does not, if one is an American, think of surviving a total nuclear war. One thinks of dying in a flash before there’s time to feel the pain. Could that be the attraction, if that word may be used, of nuclear war? Is there some Keatsian element ‘half in love with easeful death’ in our fantasies of the end?”

In many respects “Hiroshima” created “Vietnam.” The revised understanding of the implications of warfare affected the way the Vietnam war was perceived, interpreted, portrayed, and fought. Because the stakes were conceived differently, the war itself was regulated by a new agenda. Winning and losing could not mean what they meant before; neither could be determined on the basis of the acquisition of territory, the winning of battles, the killing of enemy soldiers, the bombing of enemy establishments, the plundering of enemy strongholds. For the battles that were waged were motivated by other kinds of interest, and were assessed by new criteria. The battlefield itself was the arena wherein other sorts of conflict were finding dramatic expression. The issue was not simply physical combat, nor could differences of opinion be restricted to matters of military strategy.

Vietnam became both the scene and the testing ground for a more comprehensive adjustment of human priorities. Some of the sensitivities nurtured in response to Hiroshima and the Jewish Holocaust could not find, simultaneously, enunciation and challenge until Vietnam. By the time of Vietnam, Hiroshima’s realignments had become self-conscious and had come to influence strategy. This made it impossible to judge the outcome of the war in traditional terms. The threat of destruction of infinite proportions was the regulative polar term by which all finite events were given a corresponding place.

Signs of this larger transposition appear in American religious sensitivities. It is no longer necessary to demonstrate that the past years have seen a phenomenal growth of interest in spiritual religion in the West. Yoga, transcendental meditation, transpersonal psychology, psychic awareness, mind-expanding experience, the attraction of Eastern gurus are examples. No less significant is the development of a simpler, less conflicted, attitude and response to life — an orientation that is being nurtured in the West, in part, through the influence of Asian religious currents. All of this has become a fact of modern religious, social, cultural, and psychological life.

But the linkage between this religious transformation and Vietnam has not been examined thoroughly. The linkage is direct, profound, and multilayered. Vietnam gave occasion to Asian religious sensitivities. The latter were one set of self-consistent religious and attitudinal options to which the West had been made susceptible by the gnawing, self-developing experience of Hiroshima.

In making this suggestion, I am not invoking any simpleminded influence theory. I do not mean that

those Westerners who went to Vietnam were exposed to Asia simply by being there, then returned, bringing their treasures back with them. Some of this happened, of course. But the linkage is more specific. Vietnam was fought in the Occident as well as in the Orient, and the terms were as much mental, psychological, and spiritual as they were geographical and military. Vietnam stimulated Asian religious sensitivities in the West because it was an event that could not be adequately or satisfactorily comprehended in the most prominent and/or standard Western ideational terms.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Protestant theologian who met his death on the gallows in a Nazi prison in 1945, would have understood the connections. In words not wholly comprehensible from his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he suggests that the occurrence of two full-scale world wars in Christian Europe in less than half a century is a judgment of the severest kind against the Christian religion. Bonhoeffer perceived that there was something intrinsic to the spirit of Western religion which allows and perhaps encourages such conflict. He was pointing to a dispositional factor. It is not to overlook the prominent injunctions to love one's enemies and to turn the other cheek, refusing to respond in kind when one is despised, harmed, or wrongfully used. Nor is it to minimize Christianity's emphasis upon love, peace, brotherhood, harmony, and gentleness — qualities that are vividly exemplified in the lives of St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and many other persons both well- and lesser-known.

But it is to recognize that the religions entrenched in Western culture are father religions primarily. And it is to add that father religions characteristically are, to use David Bakan's words, religions of agency. They encourage one to set things in motion, to be an effective doer, to work for a particular cause or objective. Only with great reluctance will they accept things as they are. Indeed, they work to make things better. They are instrumental. They channel and regulate power. They seek goals not yet achieved.

This kind of aggressive, anti-passive mood or disposition in religions of agency finds it fitting that there be an ultimate victory. It encourages the promotion of strategies through which good will redress, eliminate, or conquer evil. It believes it proper that right should vanquish wrong, that justice should be effected, even though considerable latitude is provided regarding the means by which this shall occur. All of this belongs to a conviction that life does indeed exhibit a basic propriety, a fundamental har-

mony, a sense of balance and rightness that wishes to be exercised, must be enunciated, and eventually must become visible. Even the great song and cry of the social revolution of the nineteen-sixties, "We Shall Overcome," can be understood in these terms.

Vietnam was a severe challenge to these fundamental convictions, because it provided no clear way in which victory could be conceived or its terms enacted. Right and wrong could not clearly be distinguished. The components of justice could not be easily identified. In religious terms, the event itself did not seem to exhibit a theophanous character, as Paul Tillich would have put it; it was difficult to construe the day-by-day occurrences as visible signs of the working of an invisible divine will. This is because the Vietnam war did not mean what wars had meant before. Previous frameworks of interpretation did not count. Earlier criteria did not register. Former understanding did not fit. What followed was profound mental anguish, deep interior turmoil, massive divisions within the country, political and military leadership unsure of itself, and pervasive readjustments within that ongoing sense of things which Lifton calls the underlying symbolic matrix.



This anguish and ambivalence are reflected in a host of chronicles and interpretations of the war that have appeared in recent weeks and months. In his autobiographical *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo recalls what it felt like to be inspired by John F. Kennedy's memorable inaugural injunction "Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country." Caputo writes:

"This is what I wanted, to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace, I hungered for danger, challenges, and violence.

"I had no clear idea of how to fulfill this peculiar ambition until the day a Marine recruiting team set up a stand in the student union at Loyola University. They were on a talent hunt for officer material and displayed a poster of a trim lieutenant who had one of those athletic, slightly cruel-looking faces considered handsome in the military. He looked like a cross between an All-American halfback and a Nazi tank commander. Clear and resolute, his blue eyes seemed to stare at me in challenge. JOIN THE MARINES, read the slogan above his white cap. BE A LEADER OF MEN. . . .



"I rummaged through the propaganda material, picking out one pamphlet whose cover listed every battle the Marines had fought, from Trenton to Inchon. Reading down that list, I had one of those rare flashes of insight: the heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary. The country was at peace then, but the early sixties were years of almost constant tension and crisis; if a conflict did break out, the Marines would be certain to fight in it and I could be there with them. Actually *there*. Not watching it on a movie or TV screen, not reading about it in a book but *there*, living out a fantasy. Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest. The recruiters started giving me the usual sales pitch, but I hardly needed to be persuaded. I decided to enlist."

At the end of the three-year enlistment period, after Caputo had been to Vietnam and in the midst of

Vietnam, he feels different:

"I came home from the war with the curious feeling that I had grown older than my father, who was then fifty-one. It was as if a lifetime of experience had been compressed into a year and a half. A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust. Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses — a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people."

Caputo's aspirations had been altered:

"I was left with none of the optimism and ambition a young American is supposed to have, only a desire to catch up on sixteen months of missed sleep and an old man's conviction that the future would hold no further surprises, good or bad.

"I hoped there would be no more surprises. I had survived enough ambushes and doubted my capacity to endure many more physical and emotional shocks.

I had all the symptoms of *combat veteranitis*: an inability to concentrate, a childlike fear of darkness, a tendency to tire easily, chronic nightmares, an intolerance of loud noises — especially doors slamming and cars backfiring — and alternating moods of depression and rage that came over me for no apparent reason. Recovery has been less than total.”

Summing it up, Caputo writes:

“Beyond adding a few more corpses to the weekly body count, none of the encounters achieved anything; none will ever appear in military histories or be studied by cadets at West Point. Still, they changed us and taught us, the men who fought in them; in those obscure skirmishes we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. Most of all, we learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. Everyone loses that illusion eventually, but in civilian life it is lost in installments over the years. We lost it all at once and, in the span of months, passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age. The knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on man’s existence, severed us from our youth as irrevocably as a surgeon’s scissors had once severed us from the womb. And yet, few of us were past twenty-five. We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads.”

The disillusion was thorough, and it was experienced not only among those who participated in the war directly, but by the people at home, those who watched the war, night after night, on television. Peter Tauber catches the sense of the general mood in his novel, *The Last Best Hope*:

“All over, a dreary mood had settled in. No lever could be found to move the world. The war had become, for many at home, the source of fruitless contention; for others, a new idiom of entertainment: in the evenings they could turn a dial and ‘watch the war.’ To some it existed solely because it was on every channel. If not palpable, it was nonetheless undeniable. People had begun to chant that ‘things were in the saddle,’ and to feel that their lives were at the mercy of forces, great or infinitesimal, beyond their control: overwhelming vectors, insuperable momentum, genetic and historical.”

Vietnam was not the traditional war. There was

to be no victory, no conquering of the forces of evil by the forces of good, no basis on which heroic aspirations could be sustained or even recognized.



Gradually, there came a shift, an adjustment, perhaps, to the inevitable. In Morris Dickstein’s words, it became apparent that there had been “an overreaching.” And with this gradual acknowledgment came a series of attempts to effect a disengagement, a relinquishing of involvement, a persistent and growing criticism of “clear-cut military victory” objectives, and profound individual and corporate soul-searching.

The shift was enunciated in the music, particularly in the songs sung by Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, and, most especially, by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Lennon’s “i don’t wanna be a soldier mamma, i don’t wanna die/ i don’t wanna be a sailor mama, i don’t wanna fly/ well, i don’t wanna be a failure mama, i don’t wanna cry/ well, i don’t wanna be a soldier mama, i don’t wanna die/ oh no oh no oh no oh no”; and his “Imagine” (“imagine there’s no countries/ it isn’t hard to do/ nothing to kill or die for/ and no religion too/ imagine all the people/ living life in peace”) said it well.

What happened in the music was also portrayed in the poetry, through the writings of Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, and many others.

It was in evidence in the temper of the new publications. It could be felt in the churches, too, particularly in shifts in liturgical style. It was implicit in the accelerated extinction of institutions that had been established on a prior set of conditions and assumptions. This was Vietnam, a war that served as a challenge to a sense of rightful expectation. It was an event that had become an occasion for a thorough reassessment and eventual redressing of human sensitivities.

As the war progressed, it became apparent that what was occurring was, as Peter Tauber said, “contrary to American faith.” Michael Herr, in his book *Dispatches*, reflects the confusion and ambivalence in his description of religious life in Vietnam during the war:

“Prayers in the Delta, prayers in the Highlands, prayers in the Marine bunkers of the ‘frontier’ facing the DMZ, and for every prayer there was a counter-

prayer — it was hard to see who had the edge. In Da Lat the emperor's mother sprinkled rice in her hair so the birds could fly around her and feed while she said her morning prayers. In wood-paneled, air-conditioned chapels in Saigon, MAVC padres would fire one up to sweet muscular Jesus, blessing ammo dumps and 105's and officers' clubs. The best-armed patrols in history went out after services to feed smoke to people whose priests could let themselves burn down to consecrated ash on street corners. Deep in the alleys you could hear small Buddhist chimes ringing for peace, *hoa bien*; smell incense in the middle of the thickest Asian street funk; see groups of ARVN with their families waiting for transport huddled around a burning prayer strip. Sermonettes came over Armed Forces Radio every couple of hours, once I heard a chaplain from the 9th Division starting up, 'Oh Gawd, help us learn to live with Thee in a more dynamic way in these perilous times, that we may better serve Thee in the struggle against Thine enemies. . . . Holy war . . . would hold the coonskin to the wall while we nailed it up, and another whose detachment would see the blood run out of ten generations, if that was how long it took for the wheel to go around.'

Tauber adds this observation:

"To many it was hard to believe. And so it was not believed. It was not so much a heroic refusal as it was romantic. For belief itself was the greatest agony. What was held as true was disappointing: what was hoped for seemed impossible. Cherished values trembled. Dear faiths brought the most painful and paradoxical returns: the best intentions in the world murdered and maimed and ruined.

"So the faithful, the hopeful, had few good choices then: acceptance, withdrawal, rejection, or revolt. They chose the romantic course.

"To no use."



The experience of Vietnam was such that it fostered many of the same insights that are taught in Asian religious traditions, particularly in Buddhism. In suggesting this, we are drawing upon a consensus that Eastern and Western religious traditions can be distinguished from each other regarding the meaning of success and failure, winning and/or losing, and the like. Ivan Morris, in his brilliant book, *The Nobility of Failure*, an analysis of the concept of

heroism in Japanese thought, handles the distinction this way:

"The Judeo-Christian approach is based on the comforting idea that, so long as a man keeps faith, God will be on his side and he, or at least his cause, will eventually triumph. Thus, a hero like Roland, though defeated in battle, is never abandoned by God and succeeds in contributing to the Christian victory over the Saracens.

"This basically optimistic outlook has been especially conspicuous in the most Western of all major Western countries, the United States of America, whose tradition has always tended to extrude any tragic sense of life and, often against cogent evidence to the contrary, to put its trust in the essential goodness of mankind, or at least that part of mankind which is fortunate enough to reside within its boundaries. 'I know America,' a recent President was fond of saying, 'and the heart of America is good.' The statement is not without a certain irony when one recalls the identity of its author; yet the sentiment reflects an underlying assumption that has been widely and confidently accepted. Americans, of course, are no strangers to despair; yet it comes not from any philosophical awareness of man's existential limitations but from disappointment that follows excessive hope in the possibility of compassing worldly happiness."

By contrast, Morris describes an attitude toward life that has been expressed in Japanese culture and is typical of the Buddhist orientation:

"At the opposite end of the spectrum are the Japanese, who since ancient times have tended to resign themselves to the idea that the world and the human condition are *not* essentially benign. For all the country's vigor and ebullience, there is a deep strain of natural pessimism, a sense that ultimately things are against us and that, however hard we may strive, we are involved in a losing game. Sooner or later each individual is doomed to fail; for, even if he may overcome the multifarious hurdles set by a harsh society, he will finally be defeated by the natural powers of age, illness, and death. Human life . . . is full of sad vicissitudes, fleeting, impermanent like the seasons. Helplessness and failure are built into human enterprises."

Morris says that "this underlying pessimism" — which also recognizes a wonderful beauty and poi-



gnancy in “the pathos of things” — is supported by Mahayana Buddhist religion.

The linkages between this orientation and the lessons of Vietnam are subtle and indirect. Through the frustrations of the Vietnam experience came a strong need to make sense of things without recourse to the fundamentally optimistic happiness- and success-dominated outlook of the West. James Dittes, a Yale University psychologist, refers to this as the search for the grammar of “positive disengagement.” This, in turn, directed attention to sources of individual and corporate authority that counseled repression and extinction, rather than cultivation, of the acquisitive, regressive, agential posture. For one of the lessons of the Vietnam experience was that conflict derives from human acquisitive impulses, which conflict can never be resolved by the satisfaction of desire, because satisfactions simply stimulate additional desires. What is required, instead, is abolition, negation, repression, a quenching of appetite, and a deepened empathy with what Morris calls “the pathos of worldly misfortune.”

The resolution of Vietnam, even in military and political terms, required the development of an alternative strategy, a set of moves by which the dominant expectation would be held up to self-scrutiny and the natural propensity for winning and for victory would be dissolved or redirected. Gradually, but in a visibly stumbling manner, the nation’s leaders came to see this. But they could not find the language. They offered grand hyperbole about the demonic character of the enemy. The analogues they offered were inexact. They were seeking the language of disengagement, indeed “positive disengagement” (or a kind of withdrawal that had positive connotations). But it was a difficult language, concept, and grammar to locate.

Describing President Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization — a word and a program that comes as close to disengagement as political and cultural realities allow — David Halberstam writes in *The Best and the Brightest*:

“. . . it would be Vietnamization, we would pull

back American troops, probably to 250,000 by 1970, and perhaps to as few as 75,000 by 1972. There would be fewer and fewer Americans on the ground. . . . So, he was dealing with war without really coming to terms with it; it was the compromise of a by now embattled President who knew he had to get American troops out but who still believed in their essential mission. So now he sought peace with honor. 'What President Nixon means by peace,' wrote Don Oberdorfer in the *Washington Post*, 'is what other people mean by victory.'

Victory or success or peace involved envisioning the war in a radically nontraditional way.



Hiroshima was precursor, for it created the compulsion thoroughly to revise the implications of warfare. But Hiroshima was more than this; it also brought, with remarkable force, the awareness of the imminence of the end to consciousness. And the response has been apocalyptic. Two of the potential outcomes are Armageddon or Eden.

Morris Dickstein places the chain of developments in a larger sequential pattern. In his analysis of contemporary American culture, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*, Dickstein provides the following chronicle:

"The fifties were a great period for home and family, for getting and spending, for cultivating one's garden. All that is reflected in its writing. But its spokesmen also called it an Age of Anxiety; behind its material growth hovers a quiet despair, whose symbols are the Bomb and the still-vivid death camps, and a fear of Armageddon. . . . But this anxiety is metaphysical and hermetic, closed in upon itself. . . .

"The spirit of the sixties witnessed the transformation of utopian religion into the terms of secular humanism. . . . So the sixties translated the Edenic impulse once again into political terms . . . starting with the civil-rights movement, which was propelled by the millennial spirit of Southern black religion. . . .

"The culture of the fifties was European in its irony and sophistication. It put its faith in what is called 'the tragic sense of life,' a fateful determinism that affirmed the obduracy of man's nature and his surroundings. But for the culture of the sixties the watchword was *liberation*: the shackles of tradition and circumstance were to be thrown off, society was to be molded to the shape of human possibility.

"By the early seventies . . . time had once again revealed to us the illusion and even dangers of 'paradise now,' and had disclosed virtues we had slighted. . . ."

Then, with particular reference to Vietnam, Dickstein continues:

"I needn't apply such subtle reasoning to the collapse of our client state in Vietnam to show that it too belonged among the unfinished business of the sixties. In Vietnam we lost not only a war and a subcontinent; we also lost our pervasive confidence that American arms and American aims were linked somehow to justice and morality, not merely to the quest for power. America was defeated militarily, but the 'idea' of America, the cherished myth of America, received an even more shattering blow."

The chronicle Dickstein weaves carries compelling theological force. The awareness of the imminence of the end time (explicit in the Hiroshima aftermath) translated simultaneously into both threat and opportunity. The event transposes heaven and hell, as Ernst Bloch said, into "real possibilities." From the one side, there is a well-founded fear of cataclysmic annihilation of the human race. But the same conditions, from the same analysis, can also stimulate a "paradise now" campaign. Both readings — indeed the composite reading — are in keeping with a Christian interpretation of the meaning of history. All of it can be incorporated within the dominant American religious framework. For all of it there are precedents and analogues. It is Armageddon or it is Eden. All of it makes sense in these terms; all of it, that is, until Vietnam. The experience of Vietnam breaks the interpretive framework; it is a profound "category error," a severe challenge to the mythological sequence.

In his *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell writes that the military leadership did not know how to proceed in World War I until writers had learned how to depict it. The same phenomenon is evident in the Vietnam situation. Until now there has been no easy way to place it, or refer it, or locate it, or make sense of it because it has not yet been portrayed. That creative work is now beginning to occur. The struggles it is equipping mankind to face are ones that continue to occur after the formal military hostilities have ceased.

In more than one sense, the war is over, but Vietnam continues to live and have influence in human self-awareness. Tracy Kidder, writing in the *March*,

1978, *Atlantic Monthly*, describes his feelings upon coming home from the war:

"I remember flying home from Vietnam on the so-called 'freedom bird.' It was a Flying Tiger Lines commercial jet. On board, some of the jubilant G.I.s pinched the stewardesses because they had round eyes. The boy in the seat beside me slept with a grin on his face. We flew so far, first to Japan and then to Travis Air Force Base, and life seemed to be proceeding so normally at home, that I thought the war had vanished. But last winter, when I traveled around to find some of the men who had gone as boys to Vietnam, the war did not seem to have ended after all. In fact, it seemed obvious that no war ends until all the people who have participated in it have died or lost their memories."

This time the dominant perceptual work is being done by the journalists, war correspondents, those within the media, and by the servicemen themselves. By a curious twist, and by multilayered cultural ironies, the language of response includes a lexicon that has developed within Asian religious settings and, to a significant degree, in the West, within monasticism.

The implications with respect to religion are profound. What seems most significant in this respect is that the West is facing West again, but this time (and for the first time) from the East. This has led to profound changes within the monasteries. And with a new fascination with monastic life has come an intense interest in rediscovering and reinterpreting the mystical literature of the West. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Suso, Richard Rolle, Jan van Ruysbroeck, and especially the women, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Simone Weil, and a host of other mystical writers are coming into greater prominence.

Book series are being launched. New academic courses in Western mystical literature are being conceived and offered on college and university campuses. The history of religion in the West is being reconstructed. Monastic communities are striving to renew ties and bonds with the religious situation of the twelfth century; the proponents of this effort regard much of the intervening history as being demonstrably off-course.

With all of this has come an increasing irritation with the dominance of the problem-solving approach to human life. Visible in the wake is a new mood, a more delicate nuancing, a kind of mediation between

person and world, an orientation in which the distinction between subject and object is softened, or transcended, in favor of a "sensorium of communion," to paraphrase Edmund Spenser, between self and nature.



Where will it lead? What are the ramifications? Can such metamorphoses ever succeed in the West? Can the West really face itself in this manner? Can it make the necessary adjustments without denying, destroying, or violating that which makes it the West? And can the new mood ever assume sustained social, cultural, and institutional force? It may be too early to tell.

But we can be sure that part of the current mood and consciousness received its impetus from the unsettling character of the Vietnam experience. We can be certain, too, that the aftermath includes profound dangers and threats to the vitality of our common life, as well as adventures. Some of the responses already expressed, even in the religious sphere, focus on dangers and threats. Others exhibit an almost Petrarchan what-a-world-I-see-dawning enthusiasm, the promise of the recovery and/or disclosure, in Dickstein's words, of "virtues we had slighted." The logic of such promise has been expressed in E. F. Schumacher's observation in his last book, *A Guide for the Perplexed*:

"All through school and university I had been given maps of life and knowledge on which there was hardly a trace of many of the things that I most cared about and that seemed to me to be of the greatest possible importance to the conduct of my life. I remembered that for many years my perplexity had been complete; and no interpreter had come along to help me. It remained complete until I ceased to suspect the sanity of my perception and began, instead, to suspect the soundness of my maps."

For my part, I prefer to move cautiously, suspend judgment until we have come to know the disposition better. But the early evidence shows that the transformations we seek to identify have greater bearing upon the vitality of our common life than anyone has yet fathomed.

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A LIMITED REVULSION

It is Walter Capps' thesis that the bombing of Hiroshima — "that awesome, tragic, and paradoxically catalytic event" — stimulated a new apocalyptic age. He sees Hiroshima as precursor to Vietnam, and concludes that the psychological linkage has produced a profound alteration of American consciousness — a basic adjustment of human priorities:

"By the time of Vietnam, Hiroshima's realignments had become self-conscious. They gave a nontraditional cast to the war itself. They made it impossible to judge the outcome of the war in traditional terms. The threat of destruction of infinite proportions was the regulative polar term by which all finite events were given a corresponding place.

"Signs of this larger transposition appear in American religious sensitivities. It is no longer necessary to demonstrate that the past years have seen a phenomenal growth of interest in spiritual religion in the West. Yoga, transcendental meditation, transpersonal psychology, psychic awareness, mind-expanding experience, the attraction of Eastern gurus are examples. No less significant is the development of a simpler, less conflicted, attitude and response to life — an orientation that is being nurtured in the West, in part, through the influence of Asian religious currents. All of this has become a fact of modern religious, social, cultural, and psychological life."

Capps may very well be right as far as the upper

Harry Ashmore is an Associate of the Center.

reaches of the religious community are concerned. Langdon Gilkey began the 1977 John Nuveen Lecture at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago with a ringing assertion: "The encounter and slow interpenetration of the spirituality of the West and that of the East constitutes the major intellectual and religious event of our era." Gilkey testifies that his personal encounter with Buddhism raised new presuppositions, and therefore new questions, for a theologian conditioned by Western Christian precepts. The result was that "demonic aspects of our tradition, long thought relatively innocent, are revealed in their true light." He elaborated: "Now, to our horror, we have found that this virtuous, if unwilling, Christian grounding or begetting of science and technology has been revealed . . . to be but one massive vice, destructive like all vice of both nature and ourselves."

Revelations of such an order, whether systematically grounded in Asian religious thought or uncritically adopted by the Eastern-flavored cults that have flourished in recent years, fit the prevailing disillusionment of the American intellectual community with what is regarded as the excessive materialism of the traditional culture. They provide a rationale for the politicized radicals who want to tear up the system by its roots, and for the spiritual refugees who seek fulfillment by dropping out of the competition for goods and status.

When Capps speaks of an effective alteration of the American consciousness he implies that Oriental concepts are having an effect beyond the formal

bounds of religious thought — that is, upon the attitudes of the great majority of citizens who encounter them, if at all, only through the caricatures cast up by pop culture. I do not find any significant traces of such influence among members of my generation. It is conspicuously absent among those who had personal exposure to Eastern culture in the Pacific Theater of World War II, the Japanese occupation, and the “police action” in Korea; and my impression is that this also applies to most of those who actually fought in Vietnam. Combat experience may have given these veterans respect for the courage, tenacity, and military skills of their Asian adversaries, but they hardly found them imbued with the gentle, nature-oriented, self-negation that impresses Western visitors to Asian monasteries.

My own brief encounters with contemporary Asian culture leave me with the impression that the impact of modernity upon religious sensibilities is as pervasive there as here. The religiously sanctioned dispositions of Western thought directly challenged by the Eastern tradition are those Capps identifies as agential: “They encourage one to set things in motion, to be an effective doer, to work for a particular cause or objective. Only with great reluctance will they accept things as they are. Instead, they work to make things better. They are instrumental. They channel and regulate power. They seek goals that are not yet achieved. This kind of aggressive, anti-passive mood or disposition in religions of agency finds it fitting that there be an ultimate victory.” This seems to me to provide a quite precise description of the disposition that currently motivates the People’s Republic of China. And if it is argued that the Chinese have been conditioned by long experience with Western imperialism, including the contemporary Marxist overlay, it also seems to apply with equal precision to Imperial Japan. The greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere was an empire created by conquest, and with singular disregard for human life, by a largely isolated feudal society that had not yet known subjugation by the West.

Capps does not argue that “those Westerners who went to Vietnam were exposed to Asia simply by being there.” But he does contend that theirs was a unique experience, one that drastically disrupted the American’s inherited idea of himself — “an event that could not be adequately or satisfactorily comprehended in the most prominent and/or standard Western ideational terms.”

Vietnam was, it is true, a war that could not be won — and long before it was over it was so per-

ceived by those who were fighting it. But that is hardly unique in Western history; most of the European nations that provide our cultural heritage have known defeat, or military stalemate — as did the regular officers and reservists who came to Vietnam from another theater of unresolved Asian conflict, Korea. Nor does it follow that our young nation’s traditional success in its military adventures abroad had deprived all Americans of the tragic sense. Arnold Toynbee, recalling Victorian England’s great exercise in *hubris*, the Diamond Jubilee, wrote:

“I remember the atmosphere. It was: well, here we are on the top of the world, and we have arrived at this peak to stay there — forever! There is, of course, a thing called history, but history is something unpleasant that happens to other people. We are comfortably outside all that. I am sure, if I had been a small boy in New York in 1897, I should have felt the same. Of course, if I had been a small boy in 1897 in the Southern part of the United States, I should not have felt the same; I should then have known from my parents that history had happened to my people in my part of the world.”

Capps quotes at length from Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* to establish the disillusionment of those who went off to Vietnam inspired by Jack Kennedy’s call to do what they could for their country, seeking, as Caputo put it, “a chance to live heroically.” They came back, having “in the span of months, passed from boyhood through manhood to premature middle age. The knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on a man’s existence, severed us from our youth as irrevocably as a surgeon’s scissors had once severed us from the womb. . . . We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads.”

Combat is an oceanic experience, and Capps suggests that if we are to understand Vietnam we will have to turn to the fiction, poetry, music, and autobiography produced by artists and intellectuals who endured it. Caputo is his primary exhibit, and yet I do not find that his self-conscious eloquence embodies a sentiment essentially different from that of Private W. M. Moss, C.S.A., who wrote to his sisters in Texas from the Virginia front:

“I will come home when my time is out or die, I won’t be run over no longer not to please no officers they have acted the rascal with me. . . . I am so sick of war, that I don’t want to hear it any more till old

Abe's time is out, and then let a man say war to me and I will choke him."

F. Scott Fitzgerald thought his "lost generation" came home from World War I "to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faith in man shaken." James Jones, the pre-eminent novelist of World War II, concluded that the evolution of an effective combat soldier in any epoch required that he be stripped of what Caputo calls the youthful illusion of immortality: "Everything the civilian soldier learned and was taught from the moment of his induction was one more delicate step along this path of the soldier evolving toward acceptance of his death."

Jones' account of his compatriots' return from World War II closely parallels Caputo's in identifying the physical and psychological symptoms of *combat veteranitis*, compounded by the conviction that civilians could never understand them. Jones begins with a compelling question: How did you come back from counting yourself as dead?

"... with the de-evolving, as with the evolving, the first sign of change was the coming of the pain. As the old combat numbness disappeared, and the frozen feet of the soul began to thaw, the pain of the cure became evident. The sick-making thoughts of all the buddies who had died. The awful bad luck of the maimed."



Capps' thesis necessarily lifts both Hiroshima and Vietnam out of historical context — and it is the context, in my view, that deserves consideration. Many Americans no doubt were appalled at the monstrous destruction wrought by the first nuclear bomb fired in anger, but it does not follow that they were opposed to its use. In moral terms, Hiroshima represented no real departure from the decision taken in World War I to extend the battlefield to the enemy's cities — and this was foreshadowed long before when prudent commanders first concluded that it would be cheaper to starve a besieged enemy than to reduce his military forces by head-on assault. At that point chivalry yielded to expediency, and women and children became legitimate targets.

The unprecedented, worldwide deployment of American forces against the Axis powers constituted the first global war — a contest in which military skills were clearly subordinate to the ability to organize productive capacity and deliver men and materiel. The Pacific War, particularly, was a contest of

logistics, so conceived by the Japanese and signaled by their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The airplane obliterated the distances that previously determined military tactics and strategy, and by the end of the war the Germans had in service the unmanned missiles that were to presage another quantum jump in destructive potential. The scientific and technological resources of all the great powers were concentrated on increasing the explosive capacity of their munitions (or finding an equally lethal substitute) and improving the means of delivery. As it happened, the West came out ahead, and I do not believe I am guilty of *hubris* when I observe that I find it difficult to believe that humanity would have been better served had the contest gone the other way — with Germany, Japan, or the Soviet Union first holding exclusive title to nuclear weaponry.

None of the American leaders directly responsible for Hiroshima have ever shown evidence of second thoughts. They were faced with the elementary arithmetic of war: two million combat-ready Japanese troops were in position in the home islands, with adequate supplies for a holding operation; more than nine thousand Kamikaze planes were available for direct support; and in the face of insurmountable odds the Japanese defenders of the most recently reduced links in the island chain had fought with suicidal desperation to avoid surrender. The calculations in the Pentagon, which seem conservative in hindsight, were that American casualties suffered in the forcible occupation of Japan would be at least five times the total loss of life at Hiroshima and Nagasaki — and the casualties for the out-gunned Japanese, including civilians, would have been astronomically higher had they been subjected to a campaign of attrition lasting an estimated two years or more.

There was no widespread criticism of Hiroshima at the time. This could hardly have been expected since the mushroom cloud signified the abrupt end of a grueling war. If there was a surge of wild elation among those who fought under the banners of the Western gods it was not evident where I was then stationed — in the Operations Division of the War Department General Staff, working on plans for the invasion of the most lightly defended of the home islands, Kyushu. (Estimated casualties: sixty-nine thousand out of an initial landing force of 190,000.) All I can recall feeling was a profound sense of reprieve.

There did arise in due course the pervasive apprehension Capps equates with the beginning of a change in American sensibility. A majority of Americans



seemed to share the conviction, which I held and still hold, that the technological breakthrough confirmed at Hiroshima mandated international arms control, if not disarmament. For those of pacifist persuasion this pragmatic conclusion no doubt enjoyed moral reinforcement, but as far as I can see the drive to contain the nuclear threat has been steadily losing effective popular support. We have seen a worldwide resurgence of chauvinism in recent years, and there seems little doubt that the failure of the United States in the role of world policeman has given nations large and small, East and West, additional compulsion to acquire nuclear capacity of their own.



In this historical context, which sees Hiroshima as only another climactic event in the long history of warfare, it is not possible to assign special moral guilt to those who made and delivered the Bomb. I find it even more difficult to attribute the use of the ultimate weapon to an unbridled will to win imbued by Western religious tradition. If one enters this realm of speculation it is plausible to argue that the decision to unveil the Bomb in a drop on an actual target was made mandatory by the spirit of *bushido* — the Japanese tradition which treats surrender as an unpardonable personal disgrace. In the island campaigns the Japanese mounted suicidal defenses when they knew they were cut off from all possible aid, and *bushido* appears also to explain their extraordinary cruelty to prisoners of war of all races — military or civilian — who, according to the code, were dishonored objects of contempt.

The context also casts doubt upon the effort to establish an organic connection between Hiroshima and Vietnam. Indeed, Vietnam has to be seen as an anachronism in the atomic age — perhaps the last full-scale infantry campaign in which any great power will engage, one in which stalemate was guaranteed when the American field command, for expedient political reasons, was denied the use of nuclear weapons. The emotional connection Capps asserts does exist, but it seems to come down to revulsion at the newfangled holocaust at Hiroshima and the old-fashioned brutality of Vietnam — and it seems to be limited almost entirely to the religious and intellectual community.

While it would take a massive act of historical revisionism to isolate the United States as the perpetrator of World War II, the nation emerged from it as the principal power in a world of disintegrating em-

pires, and so became the logical candidate for those who sought a culprit for the latest advance in the art of human destruction. James Jones found that the equation of Hiroshima with mortal sin began in Europe:

“This attitude was first proclaimed by postwar French intellectuals who were trying to work themselves back to some position of power after the failure of their country, and was echoed and picked up by British intellectuals across the channel, and finally was picked up and espoused by American intellectuals also. A sort of mass guilt complex of American liberal thinking was created which, as the United States gravitated to world power and remained there, has never left American liberals.”

This sense of guilt extends naturally to the war in Vietnam, which turned out to be of doubtful utility as well as of dubious morality, and came to entrap a series of American Presidents in swirling currents of domestic political conflict. Here, too, the moral protest began with, and never effectively moved beyond, the intellectual community — centering on the college campuses where, by generational dispensation, were clustered many of those most immediately affected by it.

The most significant impact of Vietnam, then, was not upon those combat soldiers who endured it, but upon the college generation that avoided military service — and upon the establishmentarian elders who came to support their children in defiance of their own ingrained values. There are certainly profound political implications in this apparent undermining of the “civil religion” — the commonly accepted value system that has provided cohesion for Western societies. The debacle in Vietnam was not merely a failure of arms, but of patriotism — and patriotism by definition is a matter of faith.

So, I am in agreement with Capps that there has been a perceptible alteration of American religious sensibilities. What I find unique about the Vietnam experience, however, is that it projected the class distinctions inherent in the military upon a civilian culture that for the first time defaulted on its obligation to distribute the burden of military service. The combat elements of a fighting force necessarily are organized hierarchically, which means that in a civilian army the educated upper classes normally do most of the commanding while the lower classes do most of the fighting. James Jones wrote of his World War II experience as a rifleman: “You might find a Princeton

or a Harvard graduate leading a forward infantry platoon, but it was rare. And you almost never found a Princeton or Harvard grad serving as a private in such a platoon." There was, nevertheless, a sharing of hazard and hardship, with the greatest risk often falling disproportionately upon the officers. The motto of the Infantry School at Fort Benning is "Follow Me," and I often saw it demonstrated in practice in the division in which I served in Europe — as on the day we lost six of our nine battalion commanders in an assault on the German fortifications at Metz.

In the case of Vietnam, the American educated class, for the first time, largely declined to commit its younger generation to personal participation, leaving command to professional officers and semiprofessional reservists. By default, the brunt not only of the

fighting but of the demoralizing routine of rear area service fell upon blacks and poor whites, men devoid of even the minimal affluence and influence required to put them safely beyond the draft. By our traditional standards this must be regarded as a massive injustice. That consideration, I suppose, is of little consequence if one can, as Capps does, see this elitist withdrawal as evidence of "a religious disposition that called for the repression and extinction, rather than the cultivation, of agency," and can share his assumption that the experience of Hiroshima/Vietnam may impress upon the generality of Americans the lessons he ascribes to it:

"The lessons were that conflict derives from human acquisitive impulses, which conflict can never be

Discussion

DONALD McDONALD (*Editor of The Center Magazine and World Issues*): I do not know whether Walter Capps — or anyone else, for that matter — can demonstrate the effect that the Vietnam war has had on the moral sensibilities, religious conscience, and cultural values of the American people. But I think that Harry Ashmore, in the course of raising critical questions about Mr. Capps' central argument, has made a number of statements — especially on the last few pages of his paper — that require critical examination.

He asserts that the "most significant impact of Vietnam" was "upon the college generation that avoided military service and upon the establishmentarian elders who came to support their children in defiance of their own ingrained values."

If this is true, then there is little need for Mr. Capps or for the ethician-historians and religious leaders of our society to waste any more of their time on this question. But assertion is one thing; demonstration is quite another. On its face, the "nothing-but" stance of Mr. Ashmore oversimplifies an important and complex issue. In effect, it dismisses the issue rather than facing and coming to terms with it.

I must also question the accuracy of Mr. Ashmore's claim that the parents who supported the antiwar youth did so in defiance of their own values. An alternative reading is that at least some of the older

generation elevated and refined their values, particularly with regard to the morality of war, as a result of their children's antiwar actions. This, indeed, is one of the hypotheses concerning the effect of the Vietnam war on the American people: that we now, at some quite profound level, question, not just the efficacy, but the morality of the military solution to international differences and disputes.

It is clear that Mr. Ashmore deplors the effect that the young had on their elders. He describes it as the "apparent undermining of the 'civil religion' — the commonly accepted value system that has provided cohesion for Western societies. The debacle in Vietnam was not a failure of arms, but of patriotism — and patriotism by definition is a matter of faith."

But I remind Mr. Ashmore of these words from Montesquieu: "Every citizen is obliged to die for his country but not to lie for it." We *are* so obliged, but only if our country is mortally imperiled and only if what our country is doing is not so shameful that we are not also obliged to lie for it. In retrospect — and Mr. Ashmore has as much access to the retrospective reality of the Vietnam war as anyone has — there were many American politicians and government officials who found it necessary, convenient, and self-serving to lie about Vietnam. But the dramatic refusal of the antiwar protesters to lie was not a defeat of patriotism, as Mr. Ashmore would have it. It was a

resolved by the satisfaction of desire, for satisfactions simply stimulate additional desires. What is required instead is negation, abolition, a quenching of appetite. The alternative to agency is 'positive disengagement.' ”

Walter Capps offers us an optimistic reading of our post-World War II experience. Without the theological gloss it seems to me substantially a restatement of the thesis Charles Reich developed in *The Greening of America*, which proclaimed that the campus protest movement of the nineteen-sixties, for which Vietnam provided the centerpiece, demonstrated a revolutionary elevation of the American consciousness. Lord Ritchie-Calder used to contend that the rebellious students represented a generation

“born with Strontium 90 in their bones,” subliminally aware that the traditional limitations on human generosity were giving way to the free spirit of a new world a-coming.

Yet as the now-subdued veterans of student protest advance into middle age it does not seem to me that there is evidence that anything beyond their surface style, and what Abigail McCarthy has called unearned cynicism, has been transmitted to their contemporaries. This comparatively pessimistic view does not necessarily challenge the existence, or the ultimate importance, of an East-West dialectic in the realm of religious thought. But it is, I believe, the contemporary reality against which we must measure the identification of any presumed alteration of sensibility as a precursor of political and social change.

triumph of patriotism. That, I suggest, is — again — a more cogent assessment of both the actions of the antiwar protestors and the meaning of patriotism.

I question, too, the historical accuracy of Mr. Ashmore's limiting the meaning of Vietnam to what he calls the “elitist withdrawal” and the college men who “avoided military service.” Has he forgotten so soon that the massive antiwar demonstrations in Washington, in San Francisco, in Los Angeles' Century City, and in Chicago in the summer of 1968 had virtually as many women as men? Is he going to ignore the impressive outpouring of women in the antiwar movement simply because he cannot explain their presence as a manifestation of “elitist withdrawal” and the avoidance of military service?

Why is it so difficult to accept — if only as a working hypothesis, something to be proved or disproved — that hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of American young people experienced revulsion because of what this country was doing in Vietnam? Isn't it possible that for many young Americans the American Army colonel's statement — “We had to destroy [the village of Ben Suc] in order to save it” — was the ultimate obscenity in a dirty little war?

What about the growing number of Vietnam war veterans who began showing up in the stateside peace demonstrations in the last year or two of the war? And what about the American enlisted men organizing in increasing numbers in antiwar coffeehouse activity near military installations in the United States? How does one account for those phenomena within Mr. Ashmore's nothing-but-elitist-withdrawal explanation?

In his final judgment about the meaning of Vietnam, Mr. Ashmore asserts that the youth of the antiwar period bequeathed to us nothing “beyond their surface style” and an “unearned cynicism.” Again, this seems to me much more an accusation than a considered judgment supported by evidence. An alternative hypothesis is that, whether they bequeathed anything to us or not, many of the young people, in the course of the antiwar movement, learned the meaning of sharing — their hardship as well as their food — and they sacrificed, sometimes tragically, their careers and a fragile, blossoming family life. They lived to see their moral judgment on the Vietnam war vindicated. As a result, many of these young people have a firmer grasp of the meaning of responsible citizenship today than they would have had without that experience. If that is true — and again, I wonder why some of us find it so difficult to entertain it as a possibility — the youth may indeed have bequeathed something of value. The United States may be morally stronger today than it was in 1965, or in 1960.

I would not for a moment argue that the youthful antiwar protestors did not have unmixed motives, or that they did not, on occasion, do things that were at least morally questionable. But what I do suggest is that in any evaluation of the antiwar movement and the Vietnam experience, it is prejudicial and self-defeating to begin by questioning (or, as Mr. Ashmore does, by denying) the good faith of the hundreds of thousands of young men and women who were that movement.

I also suggest the possibility that there is a moment

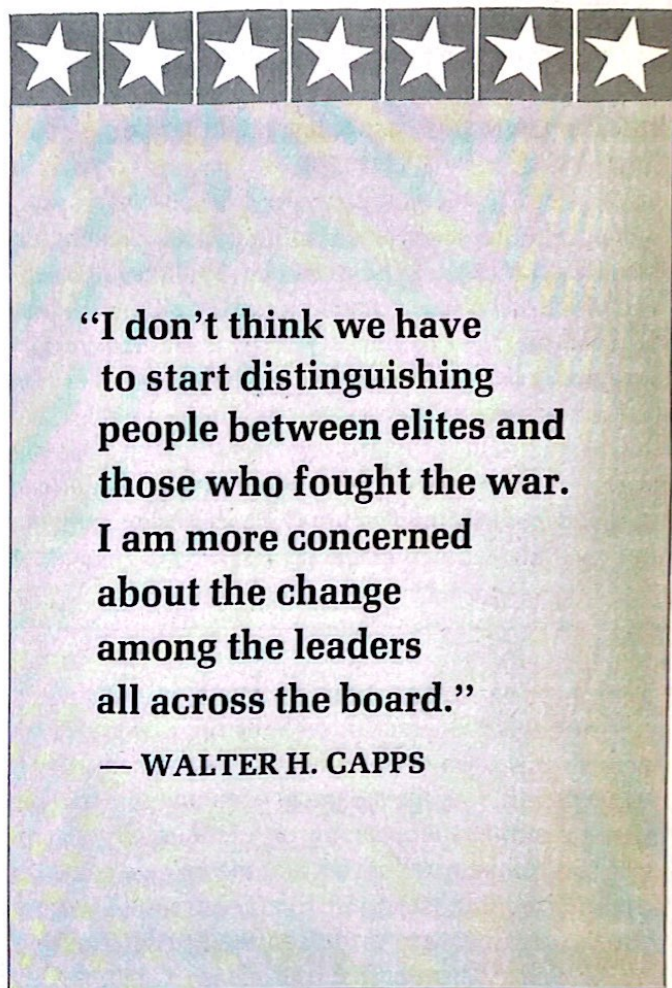
— and that moment may, of course, last for a day, a month, a year, or more — there is a moment in every mass reform or moral protest movement when pettiness and selfishness and greediness and vanity and pride are all put aside in the interest of a noble cause, one whose moral urgency is so overpowering that egoistic indulgence would be beneath contempt. I think the American antiwar movement knew such a moment. I think we are a better nation because it did.

I remain deeply puzzled as to why the starting point of Mr. Ashmore's evaluation of the antiwar movement is the assumption of bad faith on the part of the young people in that movement.

ASHMORE: I think you are reading into my essentially neutral statement the reverse of your own view. Because I am skeptical, you are charging me with writing off the morality of the youthful antiwar generation, which I tried to avoid doing. In that connection, I might indulge in a reminiscence. I recall when Maurice Mitchell first arrived at the University of Denver to take over as chancellor. That was right in the middle of the antiwar protest movement. He asked me to address the student body. I had just returned from North Vietnam, and I was in all the newspapers with my controversy with the State Department about my effort to get the war brought to a close. I remember saying in that speech something I deeply believe. I said it throughout that period. It was that the one thing I would not do was try to pass judgment on anybody who had decided not to participate in this war, because their experience was so totally different from mine. I never faced that moral question. In World War II, everybody went into the service. I don't recall having any reservations about it, nor the question even being raised.

But I have raised the question, as to how many of those who refused military service during the Vietnam war were motivated by the purest of reasons. I assume that some were simply avoiding a difficult and arduous experience for reasons of complete self-interest. I assume that perhaps the typical case was rather a mixed one.

I agree with what I think you were saying, although I may be putting a different construction on it, that that may be one of the aspects of the war experience, or of the failure to serve; it produced a peculiar kind of trauma in that generation, a trauma we have not known before, because we really have had no substantial number of people who have made that conscious decision — be it moral, or whatever — to avoid the call to arms.



“I don't think we have to start distinguishing people between elites and those who fought the war. I am more concerned about the change among the leaders all across the board.”

— WALTER H. CAPPS

McDONALD: I did not say that those who refused to serve experienced, or are experiencing, any trauma. I think the veterans who served in Vietnam and came back underwent a trauma. The literature is beginning to emerge on the emotional effect of their combat experience.

ASHMORE: All right, the trauma of combat is widespread; the veterans' hospitals are full of it, from all the wars we have ever fought. I suggest that the difference in the Vietnam experience may to some extent be due to the fact that the combat veterans felt that they were not supported at home. That certainly would be a factor.

I suggest also that there must be some kind of trauma involved in the people who, for the first time, faced the decision to take it upon themselves to protest in wholesale fashion against the course taken by the government.

I will defend, without any apology, my assertion that the antiwar movement was essentially elitist. It

was concentrated in the college generation and around the college campuses. It never significantly reached out to the mass of people. There were many women in the protest movement, as you point out. Many of them were the mothers of sons who were involved; those women understandably would be deeply emotionally committed to trying to end the war and to keep their children from participating. But if you try to trace this out in terms of its political action and effect it has to be characterized as being essentially elitist. It never spread to blacks, despite the leadership of Martin Luther King.

And you did not mention the point that I make — which is the only deliberate moral judgment I really intended to pass — that is, that the victims of this war were the poor whites and the blacks who did most of the fighting, because the middle-class generation, substantially speaking, avoided participation. I say that is an elitist distinction. I think that is important, leaving aside the difference in view we may have about the effect of the antiwar movement.

I am approaching this in very different terms from Walter Capps'. He is coming at it from the cultural end; I am dealing with it principally in what I think is the political effect of the movement. I am skeptical about the change in sensibility as a result of the movement. I concede the change in values. I don't necessarily condemn the change in values, but I suggest that it raises a serious question that must be faced.

It comes down to this: I doubt that any value system we would agree on could survive withdrawal in the sense of wholesale disengagement. What the times demand is engagement. We need political action, because we are faced with conditions that are unique, changes brought about by technology. That is a basic disagreement I have with Walter Capps. That is what we ought to talk about.

As to the question of fixing moral guilt, I am not particularly concerned with that here. But I would cite again James Jones, who in his last novel makes the point that all of our knowledge of past wars comes principally from historians, novelists, and journalists who are from the upper class and who had the command function. Jones never rose above the rank of corporal, and he was involved in all that tough early fighting in the islands following the attack on Pearl Harbor. He says we do not get any direct reading of wars as to what happens to the uneducated lower classes, those who in all wars, including Vietnam, have done practically all the fighting. Jones says we really don't know much about that side of war because two value systems are involved. The

value system through which, almost without exception, the wartime literature filters is that of the educated upper class which has its own standards.

Now, you made no reference at all to my moral judgment that this was a poor man's war, that only the poor fought it, that the only people who went were people virtually without any influence or affluence, that anybody who was relatively affluent and who had any kind of political connections could avoid the war if he wanted to. We have not had that before; we had a little bit of it in the Civil War. I suggest that this raises a question that has to be faced, and that you haven't faced it.

CAPPS: But what would the question be? I don't think the goal here is to distinguish the rich people from the poor, the elitists from the others. There was a change in attitude. Granted your own premises, there has been a change in the attitude of people you call the elitists toward war. That became most visible among students, because for them there was a concrete issue — to go into the service or not to go; to conform to the military draft or go to Canada. But when James Rosenau was here at the Center recently, he reported his researched evidence that there was general reaction against the Vietnam war, because people did not believe in the war. He found that disbelief among leaders in education, the media, the churches, even among the military leadership. Rosenau reported that only about thirty-seven per cent of the military believed in clear-cut military victory. That shows some kind of change, just keeping it at that level for the moment. The elitists did not act that way in World War II.

I don't think we have to start distinguishing people between elites and those who fought the war. I am more concerned about the change among the leaders all across the board.

MCDONALD: I think Harry Ashmore's point about elites stems from his prior point, which I find insupportable: that is, that the "debacle in Vietnam" was a "failure" of patriotism. Now, certainly if you take that position, then the fact that some people went to Vietnam and some did not have to go, or found a way not to go, does create a moral issue. But if you take a different view, one which says that positively refusing to go to Vietnam and trying to get others to refuse to fight in an immoral war was probably the most patriotic act one could have performed, then the debacle of Vietnam cannot be ascribed to a failure of patriotism.

DONALD R. CRESSEY (*Professor of Sociology, University of California at Santa Barbara; Center Associate*): I wonder whether the Vietnam war is affecting anybody except a very small group of intellectuals or, in Mr. Ashmore's words, elites. Walter Capps has cited the books now coming out about the emotional effects of the Vietnam war on the veterans. There is a kind of intellectualizing of an anti-Vietnam sentiment. The issue that is being avoided, it seems to me, is whether it is possible to trace the effects of the Vietnam war, or Hiroshima, on America. Are we just going to restrict ourselves to discussing those effects on a few college students and professors?

MAURICE MITCHELL (*President of the Center*): There is a further question which ought to be studied carefully: it concerns how the universities and the colleges were used as a mechanism to avoid involvement in the war. One of the sub-elites was the males. If a boy failed out of the University of Denver during the Vietnam war years, he and his father would be in my office almost immediately. The father would say, "Don't you fail my son. You are sending him to die in Vietnam." If a girl failed out, I never met her parents.

Has the Vietnam war eroded the essential character of the university? Did the university, by being a party to the Vietnam deferment, cop out; did the faculty, by being soft enough to give good grades to kids who did not deserve them, so they would not have to go to war; did the bar associations, by giving lawyers better scores on bar examinations, and did the Law School Admission Test boards, by making it easier to get decent L.S.A.T. scores; and did medical schools, by accepting more people into medical studies — did all of this result in a conspiracy precipitated by the war, something which struck at the essential character and integrity of the American system of higher education? Is that still permeating the system? Is that why we are now more conscious of cheating and are apparently able to tolerate it better? If one wants to talk about the effect of the Vietnam war, that is a major issue: it has to do with the moral equilibrium of the country and of one of its most critical institutions.

EDWARD T. LINENTHAL (*Graduate Student in Religious Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara*): We may not be paying enough attention to what Walter Capps keeps talking about — the idea of Hiroshima and Vietnam as symbols, as symbols whose power exists on many different levels.



**"Because of the kind
of war Vietnam was,
the initiatory process was
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there never was a rebirth
[among the combatants]."**

— EDWARD LINENTHAL

As far as understanding the effect of Vietnam on Americans, we do not need to trace that only through the literature or the journalism that is written by a selected group of people, and let it go at that. In every war, including the Vietnam war, people are more influenced by the popular portrayals, whether in music, in film, or in advertising. During World War II, there was a tremendous, powerful perception of the heroic warrior; magazine advertising had a great effect on how the people saw World War II. In the case of Vietnam, it has been easy to trace that war and its effect through television, for example. Many have pointed out that war is no longer framed in art, or in literature, or in poetry. Now war is right there on the television screen. That has had a tremendous effect on how Americans deal with violence. Robert Jay Lifton says it has had a numbing effect on us.

It also seems to me that Vietnam as symbol had an important effect on the idea of the hero in America. There was the emergence of James Bond and of Clint Eastwood. All kinds of different heroic figures emerged, most of them after the powerful symbolic event of the My Lai massacre. Lieutenant William

Calley emerged as the first really anti-hero warrior in America. That was a traumatic event for Americans, for now we were the committers of the kind of atrocities which we had denounced in others for so long.

I haven't read anything in Mr. Ashmore's paper which says that Vietnam was not powerful, that it was not unique. Mr. Ashmore himself has noted the unprecedented moral outrage against the war in Vietnam. Whether the outrage was elitist or not, it was unprecedented in American history.

We might think about the point Mr. Ashmore brought up in his paper, the point about combat initiation. In many wars — at least as they are presented in literature — a man emerges from combat somehow different from what he was before he went in. In the literature of World War I — and I suppose to an extent in the literature of World War II, although I am not as familiar with that literature — the veteran emerges hardened or steeled, often in a good kind of way. The war brought out the virtues of that man. Now, in the Vietnam war, the literature that has emerged so far shows the beginning process of combat initiation, but as Philip Caputo and others are saying, the development of the man does not reach its fulfillment. Because of the kind of war Vietnam was, the initiatory process was stopped in the middle; there never was a rebirth. That, in large part, is what Caputo and others are saying about Vietnam.

Lifton, in his book on Vietnam veterans, says that those who committed the atrocities at My Lai had to invent enemies, because they were kept from fulfilling their combat mission. The atrocities were a result of the frustration of that initiatory process. And when the Vietnam war veterans returned, many of them became another sort of unique symbol of Vietnam, the antiwar warriors, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

ASHMORE: The protest movement in this country, wherever it was situated, certainly had moral elements. I raised the question as to whether it was not in large part also based on nonmoral elements, indeed, on self-interest. I am not limiting that to the generation that stayed in college instead of going to war. I think that is true of the community at large. I do not have the sense that the mounting protest that finally ended the war in Vietnam, that forced Lyndon Johnson to step down from office, was essentially motivated by moral considerations. For Johnson himself, persuasion came from people like Clark Clifford, who said to him that this thing cannot be won, it is costing too much, it is tearing up the country, and

you have to stop. Now, that is a good enough argument, but it doesn't have much to do with the moral concept, with the question of patriotism as defined by Mr. McDonald. It was not a protest against the immorality of the war.

I announce my skepticism that morality was a dominant factor in the war protest. I think the other factors were dominant. Mr. Linenthal mentioned the effect of television. This was the first living-room war, the first war in which civilians sitting at home could have a kind of front-row view, not only of the horror of it, but of the boredom and the waste that came through. I think that had a profound effect, but I don't think anybody yet really knows what that effect was.

Finally, to follow up on what Mr. Mitchell said, the reason why I assert the elitist aspect of the war protest movement is that the device for avoiding war was to stay in college. Therefore, most of the people who avoided it were people who could afford to go to college. That makes an almost marked division across that generation between those who did participate in the combat and those who exercised the option — moral or otherwise — to stay out of it.

MCDONALD: Would it have been a better situation, from your standpoint, if every young man had been forced to go to Vietnam?

ASHMORE: No, I am not arguing that: I am simply saying that this created something new in the development of the consciousness of the people of this country. I am agreeing with Walter Capps that it certainly represents a kind of situation, with an element of religious consciousness, different from anything we have known in the past.

MCDONALD: Well, I don't understand. You did not respond to my earlier comment about patriotism. You said the debacle in Vietnam was a failure of patriotism. How did you come to that conclusion?

ASHMORE: I make a more primitive definition of patriotism; I define it as being faith in the fatherland.

MCDONALD: I have always thought patriotism was more a matter of love and devotion than faith.

ASHMORE: Well, devotion too; it's all there —

MCDONALD: — and that patriotism is really not an uncritical faith.

ASHMORE: I say that patriotism has always seemed to be an emotion akin to a religious emotion.

McDONALD: Are you saying, "My country, right or wrong"?

ASHMORE: Yes, sure —

McDONALD: And that if it's wrong, I will go ahead and do whatever my country tells me?

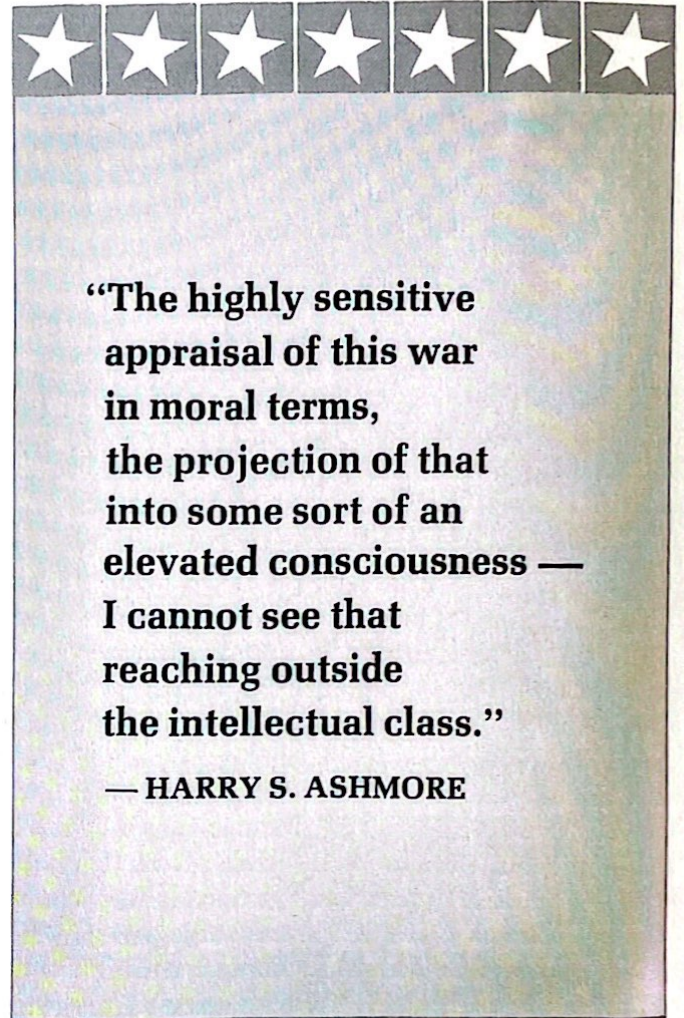
ASHMORE: That is a crude version, but all I am saying is that it seems to me that patriotism does not have to be a simplistic emotional response, as you say. It could be a very reasoned response. But it is a willingness to support the country, even if one has some reservations.

OTIS L. GRAHAM, JR. (*Professor of American History, University of California at Santa Barbara; Center Associate*): Could you say the government and not the country?

ASHMORE: You could, but I would say it is the same thing in this sense: if you bring the government down, of course, you would have a different country. In any case, I think Mr. McDonald is making too much of this. I said Vietnam was a failure of patriotism, not a failure of arms. We could have won that war. The reason we did not win it was because the leadership of the country decided the cost was too high. It could have been won any day, practically by nightfall.

MARY STEWART (*Professor of Religion, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York*): Walter Capps asked whether the Vietnam war could be understood as a war in the traditional sense. If that question is up in the air, it raises the further question of what patriotism consists of in such a context. I marched, I did all the war-protest things, when I was in college. I did it with a firm understanding that, whether you call it faith in the country, or love of the country, or whatever, something deeply patriotic was at stake in resisting the war.

The style of narrative about the First and Second World Wars was generally third-person. The traumatic experience is there in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, things like that. But it becomes a radically autobiographical traumatic experience in things like *MASH*, which was really a film about the Vietnam war, although ostensibly about the Korean war. The autobiographical experience is also found in some contemporary reflections on the Vietnam war.



"The highly sensitive appraisal of this war in moral terms, the projection of that into some sort of an elevated consciousness — I cannot see that reaching outside the intellectual class."

— HARRY S. ASHMORE

A couple of your remarks trouble me as responses to the Vietnam experience. You said that what you felt when World War II was over, after Hiroshima, was not jubilation but a sense of profound reprieve. I wonder if General William Westmoreland felt that way. I don't think that the people who were fighting in Vietnam, no matter where they were in the hierarchy, had that option, the option to experience reprieve.

The other remark that troubled me with respect to patriotism is your mention of the women in the protest movement who were mothers of soldiers. That raises a very problematical ethical issue. When I was canvassing neighborhoods with peace petitions in Syracuse, I remember that at one house there was a woman whose husband had recently come back from Vietnam. She said, "I'd really like to sign that petition, but my husband would kill me if I did." To oppose a war that your husband is fighting in is difficult.

ASHMORE: If you can assume that Vietnam was an unjust war, then the protest was, of course, moral in the highest sense, and patriotic in the highest sense. I am unable to distinguish any wars I know anything about, including the one I was in, in terms of justice. The effort to make World War II a just war sort of appalls me. There is a new book in which somebody is again trying to make the distinction between bombing Dresden, which was "just," and dropping the bomb on Hiroshima, which was "unjust." This is a philosophical exercise that I simply have never been able to follow to a logical conclusion, either way; that is just a confession of my own deficiency.

What I was trying to deal with was what I think Walter Capps was dealing with: it is the impact of all of this experience — individual, internal, external — upon the consciousness of the American people as a whole. This is where I think we would have a rather profound difference of opinion. I think I agree with what Mr. Cressey said. The highly sensitive appraisal of this war in moral terms, the projection of that into some sort of an elevated consciousness — I cannot see that reaching outside the intellectual class. I don't see it reflected in the ordinary society.

If Mr. McDonald wanted me to, I could give him a good deal of evidence of the class distinction in the case of Vietnam. The last supporter of the war in Vietnam of any large political effect was George Meany, who heads up the blue-collar workers of the country. That is of great significance to me. It wasn't just the fact that Meany was a hawk. I think he was reflecting the hard-line view of most of the people who were members of the labor unions in the United States. There was never a war protest there, except by one or two individual union leaders, and they were ineffective. There was no black protest against the war, except Martin Luther King's, and he didn't take the blacks with him. So, there were two different wars. It was a different war as seen from the intellectual community.

WILLIAM GORMAN (*Center Associate*): The extraordinary intellectual confusion about the war did have profound moral effects and will have moral effects — God knows exactly what they will be — even if Mr. Ashmore gives me statistics about how many people in Kansas or Idaho are not thinking about the war. The war has not really gone away, and it is not likely to go away. It is certainly worth estimating — in all

the ways that we know how to estimate— what that war and its effects are.

CAPPS: If I were to criticize my own paper, it is vulnerable on the point that Mr. Cressey raised. That is, I could very well be overrating the effects of the Vietnam war. I don't think that I am, but that would be one of the things I would be worried about.

Second, in an early draft of my paper, I had not taken sufficient account of the responses of the Vietnam veterans. I have since been reading the literature of the veterans, and I find strong corroborating evidence there. I have included an example of this in my paper. I refer to the article by the paraplegic, Tracy Kidder, in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Kidder's experience is not what I expected to find in the veterans' literature on Vietnam. But that is indeed what we are finding — namely, that the soldiers themselves just could not make any sense of the war.

If we get to the question about patriotism, I think what Vietnam means is that patriotism can never again be understood in the simple way it was before. And that is compelling evidence about whether we are overrating the effects of Vietnam. Any discussion of patriotism, from this time forth, will have to be considered in the light of Vietnam.

MITCHELL: It is possible to take a camera and go very close to an object and the image you see will fill the finder. If you step back ten feet — either in time or metaphorically, for our purpose in this discussion, in distance — there is more information in the picture, but there may still not be enough to make a judgment. As you move further back, the image is still there, but the size of the surrounding frame of information and reinforcement — or lack of reinforcement — becomes more apparent. The Vietnam war is still happening to us. There are the people who were in it, and there are the people to whom it is becoming a mythology, because they are growing up and hearing about it. There are those of us whose children were affected by it. For Walter Capps' approach to be useful, there must be more conversation and more time. History must continue to be made and understood.

This is the first dialogue I have been in at the Center where there has been so much heat generated. I respect the heat. I feel it is an indication of the importance of this issue. □