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On Teaching Today's Students about the Vietnam War

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It is altogether appropriate to consider the merits of a university-level academic course on "The Impact of the Vietnam War" within a more comprehensive discussion of the problems of advocacy within humanities programs. From a political perspective, the Vietnam War is the most divisive event in recent American history. Some suggest that the recent war will be for the twentieth century what the Civil War was for the nineteenth — the most divisive but decisive event of the century: the event most responsible for shaping a developing sense of American collective identity. Thus, any assessment of the impact of the event promises to be filled with controversy, for a primary objective of such an assessment is to come to terms with the controversy itself. In these regards, the "Impact of Vietnam" course and public humanities projects on sensitive political subjects have much in common and can be mutually instructive.

My qualification to speak and write on the subject is the experience I have had over the past five years, in teaching an undergraduate course on the subject at the University of California, Santa Barbara. We began in 1979 with approximately fifty students. I have offered the course four times since then: each time the course enrollment has doubled. This past winter quarter, approximately 900 were enrolled. No course in our campus's history has drawn more students. I would be surprised if any course has provoked more interest.

Origins of the Course

We had several built-in advantages from the start. First, our campus carries a resilient memory of the situation that prevailed in 1970. Anti-war protests sparked class boycotts and riots that resulted in series of confrontations between students and police, the burning of the Bank of America in the campus community of Isla Vista, and the death of a student as well as of a campus employee. Those of us who were present at the time continue to reflect on the meaning of that outpouring of emotion and violence. An academic course on "The Impact of the Vietnam War" can employ that living memory as a key point of orientation. The story signifies that the war in Southeast Asia was not an isolated event. Rather, some of its key dynamics were present in the dynamics of events close to home. We cannot pretend to understand either without the other.

Second, the Vietnam War is a particular problem for the mindset that tends to prevail on university campuses. In many respects, at least at the outset, it was a liberals' war. The marked increase in American involvement came during the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Robert McNamara was secretary of defense. And, American involvement in Vietnam, at least at the outset, vied with the Great Society and with civil rights for the support of a populace committed to progressive incentives. The academic community, in my judgment, has not fully come to terms with the occurrence of the Vietnam War. Simply to call it a mistake that the United States was there at all is to fail to recognize the tensions that are implicit in the American sense of commitment and destiny and that have been forged through more than 200 years of debate and enactment. On the other hand, to judge the American mistake in the Vietnam War to be the strangulation of military objectives by the political and psychological confusion that prevailed at home is to miss the spiritual force of the resistance that, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has substantially redefined the meaning of warfare within a nuclear age. We recognize that these are fundamental issues that surface in virtually all of the other issues that we reckon to be fundamental in our time.

Third, I had the advantage of having spent consid-

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erable time with the returning veterans of the Vietnam War. Through my exposure to them, I was taught a perspective on the war and its meaning (or lack of meaning) that would have been impossible for me to acquire from any other source. The veterans, most of whom spent their twelve or thirteen months in Vietnam while they were nineteen years of age and most of whom were back in the states (though they called it "the world") within seventy-two hours of leaving the fields of battle, had not yet received a homecoming. Their first was the one they organized in November 1982 in Washington, when they dedicated the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. But this came after the nation had welcomed, with exuberance, the fifty-two returned hostages from Iran, indeed, more than seven years after the war had ended. When I learned of their stories, and all of the trauma they continued to experience, I found myself captivated. I began inviting them to sit in on the class and then, eventually, to tell the stories they wished to relate to those who belong to the next generation.

Aims of the Course

The course itself has been organized to meet several objectives. We have tried, first, to retell the story of the war. We spend a bit of time on the history of the Vietnamese people, while concentrating on the situation in Vietnam during World War II, that is, during the time of the Japanese occupation. We point out that on September 2, 1945, when Ho Chi Minh's forces (working cooperatively with the Americans) declared that the nation had been secured, there was a great celebration in Hanoi. While a United States Army band played "The Star-Spangled Banner," Ho Chi Minh quoted the words of the American Declaration of Independence, thus associating his achievement with the success of the American revolution against colonization by foreign forces. We trace the developments from 1945 to 1964, that is, to the fateful Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in the U.S. Congress, and then we work our way through the history of battles that occurred. To make certain that we are telling the story the way it ought to be told, I invite a professor of military science, trained at West Point,

Vietnam in Remission Based on Texas Project

"Understanding Vietnam," a symposium at the Institute for the Humanities at Salado in October, 1982, supported in part by the Texas Committee for the Humanities, brought together 159 people — teachers, counselors, politicians, physicians, veterans, business people, homemakers, and journalists, among others — for three days and two nights of discussion and reflection about the Vietnam war. In her report of the meeting, Lynda E. Boose, assistant professor of English at the University of Texas, wrote

> The decision of these Americans to attend a Vietnam symposium provoked considerable anxiety. There were those who feared that the program somehow or other would be a distortion of reality or, worse, a whitewash of the past presidential administration. Others felt that the discussion might get too emotional and confrontational, and some indicated that they feared that the symposium would provoke old memories, would unleash feelings of anger and resentment.

Boose analyzed responses to questionnaires that had been completed by over one-third of the symposiasts and, in concluding her report of the meeting, said that the questionnaires

> display an unrecognized ambivalence and an unshakeable optimism. On many a single form, despair competes with hope, distrust with loyalty, condemnation with exculpation. The same questionnaire, for instance, that angrily speaks in one section of the government's inexcusable, immoral, and intransigent refusal to listen or learn subsequently betrays a competing wish to believe in the basic morality of that same government and excuses those actions by recharacterizing them as "well-intentioned mistakes."

She finishes by suggesting that

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to give us an official (or semi-official) or authorized government account of those events and proceedings.

By this time in the course the students do not have to be told that there are varieties of ways of recounting those same events, depending upon the perspectives and attitudes that the interpreters take. Indeed, by this time, much of the discussion within the course focuses on the dynamics of interpretation — yes, upon hermeneutics (though we make no special effort to champion the word). Students become well acquainted with such questions as: How can series of events be read to signify meaning? How does attitude influence the meaning that events are taken to signify? What counts as reliable support for hypotheses that are formed on controversial topics? How does one gauge the weight of substance and emotion in matters of significant political debate? How does the interpreter differentiate between fact and conviction in trying to evaluate theses with which he or she must deal.

In raising such questions, we are fully conscious of the fact that we are dealing with questions pertaining to the formation of values and ideals. Such values are never formed in isolation, but are always related to facts, events, or occurrences. Thus, an evaluation of the impact of the Vietnam War serves as an effective test case to identify ways in which the American people have attributed priorities to the values we cherish. It also serves to illustrate how such priorities have been defended. And, most of all, it provides vivid testimony that value formation is a highly complicated collective process, within which the American people search their intellectual, religious, and political traditions for substance, direction, and sanction. As the students come to recognize this about the dynamics of value formation, they also come to participate in some of the same intellectual processes on their own. As a consequence, a course on "The Impact of the Vietnam War" has become a course on the process of human understanding. When this is the

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> . . . perhaps the responses from Salado indirectly narrate the story of why America could not honor its Vietnam dead for nearly a decade after the war, but why — on Veterans Day, 1982 — it was finally able to do so. They tell us why this symposium on "Understanding Vietnam" was at once a conference and yet also something else — an undeclared requiem for an undeclared war.

The major papers delivered at the symposium have been collected and published by the Texas A&M University Press as *Vietnam in Remission.* The speakers included historian George C. Herring, General Douglas Kinnard (now chief of military history for the U.S. Army), presidential advisor Walter W. Rostow, psychiatrist Harry A. Wilmer, journalist Philip L. Geyelin, and activist and poet Robert Bly. Lynda Boose's report on the meeting, from which her comments above were taken, is the book's concluding chapter. James Veninga, executive director of the Texas Committee for the Humanities, and Harry A. Wilmer, director of the Salado Institute, co-edited the volume. The title of the book is taken from another report on the meeting, an article by Allen Pusey in the *Dallas Morning News* (November 7, 1982):

> . . . Each [symposium participant] had a singular vision of the Vietnam era. With the coolness of a decade's distance, they rekindled their own images of the era. They made judgments. Not all agreed. But the fire could still be seen, burning in the distance; Vietnam has been in remission, but it has not gone away.

The papers were collected and published because the symposium deserves some form of preservation and because, as editor James Veninga wrote, (quoting Philip Geyelin) " 'we owe it to those who have sacrificed themselves in good faith, believing with good reason in the rightness of their sacrifice,' to try to understand the war in Vietnam."

—JPS

subject, the students testify that the course assists in teaching them just who they are. It is gratifying to me, as instructor, that over 500 of the 900 students who took the course this year volunteered that this was the most significant course they had taken in their four years of college life; most who volunteered this tribute explained that the primary benefit was *self-knowledge*.

Confining Political Contention

In the five years that I have taught the course, not once has anyone raised a concern about violations of protocol regarding political advocacy. Certainly, opinions get expressed, for example, on the propriety of U.S. involvement in Central America, and criticisms are lodged against policies of the current administration in Washington. We make no deliberate effort to quell such comments in advance, though we make it clear that the course has not been designed as a conveyor of partisan political opinion and conviction. The legitimate differences of political opinion regarding the nation's ideals become an important part of the substance of what is studied. Indeed, we all want to learn more about how individuals and nations find their way when the political situation is highly charged and when there is no unanimity regarding short-term or long-range objectives.

The course offers an illustration of how values are transmitted within contexts of highly volatile social and political change. Much of its attractiveness is due to the fact that the students who take it come to recognize that they themselves may acquire some role in resolving or clarifying the plots and subplots of a story that has now become theirs. That role is not simply handed down, prepackaged, from the lectures or class presentations. On the contrary, what the students learn is that the resolution of the plot requires knowledge, insight, perception, and sensitivity beyond that which they have cultivated so far. Their minds and spirits are stretched to the fullest. And the questions that are fundamental to the humanities — about the nature of virtue, the claims that vested national interests make upon justice, the properties of the good society, how far patriotism and the dictates of warfare are trustworthy guides for achieving one's *telos* as a human being — become the questions that dominate discussion.

The students discover the humanities in their own search for clarity and understanding, but the humanities, like the sacred scriptures, cannot be prepackaged either. They do not contain a set of answers to recognized questions, but rather give assistance and direction to intellectual inquiry.

For example, in dealing with questions about whether it is ever right or just to take another person's life, students will be persuaded to think seriously and deeply about what a human being is, of what human life (in its essence) consists, and about the responsibilities individuals have toward each other. These, in my judgment, are the fundamental and permanent subjects of the humanities. Indeed, the responses to such questions, and their continuing reformulation, prompt the books and essays that line the shelves of libraries. Until such questions are recognized to be important — and to be one's own, and those of one's nation — such resources remain on library shelves, and the wisdom of the "founding fathers" (and mothers) possesses no more than museum status.

The moral of the story, for me, is that the questions of most significant political consequence are the very questions that most skillfully and resourcefully elicit the humanities. This insight, I am convinced, lies behind the congressional desire to establish public programs in the humanities. To be sure, we need to give constant attention to the art of treating such questions in something other than partisan political ways, as if the humanities could be placed in the service of politics. Within humanities discussions, partisan political debate is an indication that intellectual inquiry must reach further and probe deeper. If healing should occur in the process, why shouldn't everyone also be the wiser? □