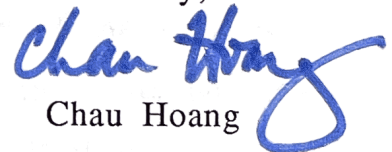


June 4, 1992

Professor Capps:

When I was initially asked to write a course evaluation of RS 155, I was not only flattered but enthusiastic to express my concerns regarding the biases embodied in the literature and lectures. However, this project was not as simple to complete as I had originally intended it to be. I discovered that in criticizing others of their partiality, I too, was guilty of my own prejudices. On a positive note though, I came to the realization that everything must be viewed within context. I refer specifically to the veterans who had every legitimate right to say the things they said within the context of their experiences. My only grievance then, rests with the hope that my critique will result in the inclusion of more Vietnamese literature and speakers on the syllabus in the upcoming future. I must apologize beforehand that, at times, I may be standing on my soap box denouncing the cultural insensitivity of the speakers and authors. To my dismay, I am unable to express, as eloquently as I would prefer, my desire to promote a more balanced presentation of the "Impact of the Vietnam War". Once again, I thank you for granting me this opportunity to hopefully make a difference.

Sincerely,



Chau Hoang

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Course Evaluation of RS 155

By
Chau Hoang

Judging by the nine hundred students who continually register for Religious Studies 155 each year, the Vietnam War undoubtedly remains a provocative and moreover, unresolved issue in the American conscience. The subject appears to be even more compelling among my generation who constantly feel the indirect effects of the Vietnam War from our mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors, etc. We come from a unique vantage point whereby we neither feel hostility nor resentment, but rather burning curiosity. It is this sense of consuming interest and probing inquiry that prompts many students to explore the controversial issue in greater depth. RS 155 is one of the only, if not the only, UCSB course that provides a means to satisfy our curiosity. Sadly and perhaps even frighteningly, the true impact of the Vietnam War goes largely unrecognized or unaddressed in college academia. How are we, as a nation, as a people, suppose to prevent the reoccurrence of another "Vietnam" if we do not become educated? As the credo forewarns: "Those who do not learn from the past, are condemned to repeat it."

It is safe to assume that an overwhelming majority of the students enrolled in RS 155 are wholly ignorant on the topic and therefore, take the course in search of answers to their questions. However, if they are constantly presented with one perspective, students will have a natural tendency to perceive that single point of view as the "correct" interpretation of the Vietnam War. In this air of vulnerability in the classroom, the guest lecturers are often dangerously regarded as

professional educators. With this title of "teacher" comes authority. Since students mistake these speakers as omniscient experts in the area, their authority and legitimacy is rarely questioned. This is where the real danger lies. These non-professional teachers espouse a "self-defined" history which may not always be entirely factual in an objective sense. This is by no means undermining their importance or their knowledge, but their layman status does pose a dilemma with respect to their impartiality. In order to remedy this problem, it would be wise to advise students that the guest lecturers are not conventional teachers, but rather individuals who are merely sharing their personal experiences which may neglect to take into account historical context. With this contention, students will be consciously or unconsciously aware of the possibility of a biased presentation and thus, listen with open-minded skepticism rather than blind obedience.

I stress this distinction between professional and non-professional educators as a disclaimer against any misleading comments statements made by the speakers. The value of the veterans cannot be praised enough, however, their candor can sometimes degenerate into controversy. Like it or not, the speakers have a profound influence on their audience and must therefore be held accountable for their actions. Every possible precaution must be made to prevent any form of institutionalized bias and prejudice at a learning institution of this caliber. My concerns are not unfounded as there were several lecturers who made comments that can easily interpreted as ethnocentric and to some extent, covertly racist.

As a World War II veteran, a former senator, and a staunch war protestor, George McGovern is one of the foremost authorities on the Vietnam War. He helped adequately answer the burning question: How

did such an initially popular war become so unpopular? His critical analysis of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and assessment of President Johnson's foreign policy reinforced his credibility as an expert on the subject. However, I was very disappointed when Mr. McGovern maintained that the United States lost to a "primitive Third World country". Public figures in a position of power of his magnitude should refrain from making such seemingly ethnocentric characterizations. We should always exercise caution in labeling any nation as "backward", for such generalizations only breed prejudice and ignorance. How can all people be treated with mutual respect and dignity if they are not considered to be equal?

Larry Evans on the other hand, was not your traditional authority figure. As a veteran though, he does have a certain level of legitimacy as an "expert" on the Vietnam War via his experiences as a pilot. Larry should be given an immense amount of credit for attempting to understand the distrust the Vietnamese had towards American soldiers within the context of their long history of foreign domination. But, he also made somewhat sarcastic remarks on the inferiority, by *Western* standards, of Vietnamese hotel and dining accommodations that were offensive and inappropriate. As the U.S. has already mistakenly learned, unfounded characterizations and false assumptions can have very costly ramifications.

Although Dan Gisel, the highly decorated Green Beret, made derogatory statements his proclamations were understandable in light of his horrific experiences. Gisel's literal dehumanization of the Vietnamese was targeted more specifically toward the enemy Viet Cong who were directly responsible for the killing of American soldiers. This distinction,

in a sense, made Dan's contentions acceptable. The crucial difference between Dan and his counterparts was his *conscious* awareness that his conclusions may be offensive and apologized beforehand for his prejudices. By contrast, the other guest lecturers unknowingly made ethnocentric remarks. It is this *subconscious* bias that is frightening and unpardonable.

It is this undercurrent of "racism", for lack of a better word, that is terrifying in a classroom environment. The classroom is not wholly immuned from a certain level of "censorship"; guest lecturers must assume responsibility and exercise a modicum of self-restraint and impartiality. Campbell Hall is not an open forum tantamount to Storke Plaza where individuals can arbitrarily voice their unfounded accusations without serious consequences. Excluding a select group of students from discussion has the inescapable effect of quelling the "voice of the stranger". As one student already criticized, no individual should be made to feel like a stranger. Only a truly "free marketplace of ideas" is conducive to a productive learning environment.

Unlike the guest speakers, the course readings provided a more eclectic spectrum of ideas. It is imperative that it be emphasized that all students complete George Herring's "America's Longest War" because it does an excellent job chronicling the history of Vietnam and the origins of the Vietnam War. Without knowing the historical context within which events occurred and decisions were made, any conclusions would be grossly inaccurate. Although this class does deal primarily with the war from the human perspective, to neglect the global political situation would make the true impact of the war incomplete. Captain Hupe's thought provoking lecture on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was also informative as well as interesting. By raising questions regarding the legitimacy of the

Tonkin incident, Captain Hupe aroused skepticism which in turn, encouraged students to actively think instead of passively accept.

"The Unfinished War" was an equally valuable in offering a brief overview of the history and meaning of the Vietnam War. Most importantly, the book emphasized the enduring impact the war still has on modern political and social life. The lack of closure continues to fester away at the American conscience. By warning students against the dangers of a repeat disaster, Walter Capps assumes responsibility for making an aggressive effort to ensure that tomorrow's decision-makers are well learned on the Vietnam War. Only through education is there hope.

Although Philip Caputo's "A Rumor of War" was an intriguing and pertinent book, it was somewhat repetitive in themes, stories, and revelations. The veterans as well as "The Unfinished War" addressed the same issues. This is by no means undermining the importance of Caputo's work, but for practical purposes it is more beneficial to edit the syllabus so as not to overkill a specific topic and hence, bore students. "The Unfinished War" and various selections in "The Vietnam Reader" sufficiently stressed the major points of Caputo's book to satisfy the class' objectives. "A Rumor of War" should however, remain a suggested reading and be praised for its literary value.

Perhaps one of my favorite books was "The Vietnam Reader". Anthologies are always refreshingly enriched with diversity which enables the reader to explore the different perspectives on the socio-economic, political, and cultural spectrum. This diversity of opinions help the reader open his/her mind and intelligently evaluate the wide range of ideas presented. The Reader also provided the only Vietnamese perspectives of the Vietnam War in the entire course. It seems only appropriate and fair

that a class devoted to the Vietnam War should include the point of view of the people who were the most affected by the event. Disappointingly however, there were only two entries from Vietnamese-Americans. This disproportionate balance of perspectives poses serious dangers to the free marketplace of ideas. Even though the class is designed to study the impact of the Vietnam War on American society, the American context can only be understood in conjunction with the Vietnamese context. All too often, the interrelationship between the two nations during the war is neglected or denied altogether. It wasn't American or Vietnamese lives that were lost, but human lives. The importance of "Humans first!" cannot be stressed enough as the fundamental value in achieving a universal multi-culturalism.

Although it is understandable that there is a high demand for veteran speakers at this university, it is of utmost importance to present *all* point of views on any given topic, especially one as controversial as the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, I have not been able to read the selected essays from Hanoi but it may be propitious to include at least a small sampling of this literature into the syllabus next year. Instead of indoctrinating students with one sole interpretation of the Vietnam War, we should be presented with a range of ideas and then permitted to come to our *own* conclusions. One of the fatal mistakes made during the Vietnam War was that politicians as well as citizens readily accepted what they were told by the Government and Administration which ultimately allowed the conflict to escalate to such a devastating magnitude. One of the main course objectives should be to encourage students to always *think* rather than accept as the fundamental precaution against the recurrence of another Vietnam War.