

Subject: Thank you Richard
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Coming Home: Walter Capps' Vietnam Class Reunion
Panel Presentation by Lois Capps
Saturday April 26, 2008 UCSB Hatlen Theater

Thank you Richard – Professor Hecht – for your introduction and for organizing this reunion of the class, gathering together this panel (and including me in it) and allowing for this discussion.

Thank you also for continuing to teach the class, and to the Department of Religious Studies for sponsoring it – RS 155 “The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Religion and Culture”

Thank you as well to the UCSB reunion team, to Alumni Association Director George Thurlow whose idea it was to include this session as part of your all Gaucho Reunion weekend. This school year marks the 10th anniversary of Walter’s death. I commend and thank the Walter H Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion and Public Life, for including this gathering in the year long schedule of commemorative events. Center Director Clark

Roof and Associate Director Leonard Wallock have done a magnificent job.

Most especially I thank the Vietnam War Veterans and those whose association with the war made you the natural and effective teachers of the class over all the years. And I thank you the former students who played such a powerful role. I look forward to our discussion time to hear what impact, if any, it has had on you in these years since graduating. Since I was never enrolled in the class, nor was I a teacher or presenter it may seem strange that I am included in the panel. But I want you to know how much it means for me to be here with you. This opportunity has encouraged me to reflect on the role or impact the class had on Walter (from my perspective) over the course of the two decades that he taught it – and since.

Of course the influence of you veterans – those here today and the many others over the years – was enormous. You touched him so profoundly and reordered his thinking and his priorities. He cared about you a great deal.

I have developed a thesis, from the vantage point of the person who succeeded Walter in office after his death. I believe that this course, which you all developed together over all the years, was in

itself a major part of what led him to run for office and to become a Member of Congress. I'll explain – but first – a bit of the history of the beginning of the class, revisionist as it is, through my eyes.

Walter and I came to Santa Barbara in 1964 and he became a young assistant professor in the brand new Department of Religious Studies at UCSB. His early years of teaching were profoundly influenced by the strong antiwar sentiment which tore through the very fabric of this country and especially college campuses like UCSB. The bank burned, sheriff deputies were in riot gear, seemingly everywhere. But soon another shadowy story began to emerge –the plight of the returning veteran.

At the same time a think tank had moved from the University of Chicago to a Santa Barbara hillside estate: the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, or the Hutchins Center. Walter was honored to be a Fellow there and came home one day especially moved by a discussion there featuring two Purple Heart decorated Vietnam vets, Fred Downs, a landmine survivor, and Shad Meshad, who began the store front Vet Center movement. Their language was raw and powerful. They said that their stories and others like theirs were not being heard. He listened – and decided to find a way for these stories to be shared and responded to. And thus came to

be the format for RS 155 “The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Religion and Culture.”

Now I’m sure that this was not the first time the “first person narrative” was ever used to portray the content of academic subject matter. But – as I trust some of you will be describing this afternoon – the course was not simply hearing a story being told. There was a relationship which developed, a “welcome home” by the class. That ongoing dialogue exposed some fundamental values. And to the extent that this was an American experience, it led Walter to consider – as the years passed – the role of individual stories in the life of a democracy like ours.

You see, he too was deeply affected by what was going on in Campbell Hall – and the occasional pilgrimages which were made to the Vietnam Memorial. He felt enormously humbled by and privileged to be a part of the healing which can occur in such a setting and the insights which can be gained in that context. And as he observed those in public life around him he could tell which national leaders had been influenced by the powerful stories of individuals such as he had been witness to. He applauded those who were moved to action as a result.

Walter often referenced the philosopher whose thesis was that

democracy is born in conversation. He began to see that the genius of the Founding Fathers was to create a government whose Legislative branch includes the House of Representatives – the people's house – where public policy can be developed based on stories of individuals, of constituents. And so Walter ran for Congress in 1994 and again, successfully, in 1996.

It was with great reluctance that he gave up teaching at UCSB. He extracted a promise that when he retired from Congress he could return. But he took the same enthusiasm, and an ear for the story to our nation's Capitol – along with, I might add, the same corny jokes. I was with him there and I saw the same attentiveness to those around him. They were interesting people with stories to share, not simply Republicans or Democrats. He was in office only 10 and one half months before he died suddenly but he had already established a role as statesman, rising above partisanship and pettiness by being attentive to the variety of stories being told and their underlying themes.

One of the important lessons that came out of RS 155 and that has been reinforced by the Vietnam Veterans of America and others is the falsehood and tragedy of blaming the warrior for the war. And

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that is a real accomplishment on the face of it. But there are other discouraging similarities between the Vietnam veterans and the Iraqi and Afghanistan vets of today. Homelessness and joblessness and addictions continue. And the number of Traumatic Brain Injuries and PTSD not being adequately diagnosed or treated is a real indictment of lessons not learned.

It wasn't until we finally changed leadership in the Congress that we could pass the largest increase in veterans healthcare benefits since the VA began. We need to do more.

It was clearly my legacy from this class and the lessons I learned indirectly from you veterans which made me oppose the War in Iraq right from the beginning. I could not vote to give President Bush the authority to engage in a preemptive unilateral attack on that country. I know Walter would agree. I appreciate the silent vigil given each Sunday at Arlington West by the Veterans for Peace. If you're here from out of town this weekend and have not experienced this poignant tribute to the lives of our military shed in Iraq and Afghanistan I encourage you to stop by tomorrow.

Finally, may I say a word about the challenges facing each of us here today. The "welcome home" does continue, in so many ways. I'm thankful to you Richard and to the Department for

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continuing the Class. And I'm thankful for the Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion and Public Life which exists as not as much a legacy to one professor as a continuation of what happened in RS 155.

W As Walter did, I have also discovered that the common good in the public sphere can be enhanced by the various ways we share our own stories. I'll close with Walter's words spoken as he was making the transition from the classroom to the campaign trail. I'm reading from the tribute to Walter by Thu Pham, once his student, his first campaign volunteer, member of his, and my staff, and dear friend. It is included in the collection of tributes published by the US Congress following his death. Thu quoted a passage from the speech Walter gave when he announced he was running for Congress November 14, 1995.

"You must know that I have been a professor for thirty years and have enjoyed the respect and esteem of thousands of young people. Many of them are wishing that I would not throw myself into politics. They recognize that there are too many pitfalls there, too many opportunities to lose one's respect, and to jettison one's esteem.. I trust I can prove them wrong. I sincerely hope that their respect will be sustained and even increased by what we are trying

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to do. I am out there because I love this country and because I think we have made real progress in recent years. But there is still so much more to do. I would like to help restore the bond of trust between the citizens and their elected representatives in Washington.

The truth is that we are best as a people when we work for the common good, when we exercise regard for those who are the least among us. We are strongest as a people when we are directed by that which unites us rather than giving in to the fears, suspicions, innuendoes, and paranoias that divide us.

So it is entirely up to us to decide what means most to us, and how we are going to give priority to this in our decision and behavior. For when it is all over, the histories about this time will be about us.”

And so it was for Walter. Thank you.