

## On Breaking the Cycle of War

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Nearly one year ago I stood in this hall and as best I could, told 800 students how I came to be a conscientious objector during America's War in Vietnam. I had never told that story before and I am forever in Walter's debt for providing me the opportunity. Now, despite some misgivings about repeating myself, I'm about to tell that same story to you, because though it may be the same story, you are not the same class, and because I've been encouraged to believe from the generous response I received last year that you, born in the years when that war and opposition to that war raged at its height, want to hear that story.

I want to begin as I did last year: by telling you how much I admire and appreciate your being here. Even if this course were the easiest one in the catalog, no one could think that he or she could take a course entitled "The Impact of the Vietnam War" and have a pleasant time. I want to believe you're here because at some level you sense that America's war in Vietnam exposed and tested our values as a people and as individuals. Alone among the nations of the earth, the United States of America is established on ideas and values rather than lineage or geography, and therefore as young Americans you have a stake in knowing what those values are and what their consequences are.

Maybe you've already noticed that the War in Vietnam doesn't seem to be going away, for us as a nation and for many of us as individuals. The veterans' Agent Orange lawsuit, the dedication and recent rededication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the uproar over a movie like "Rambo: First Blood", all have their origins in that war. I know that many of you have been moved by the testimony of Vietnam veterans you've heard here. After a brief silence, Vietnam veterans in the 1980's have been organizing themselves, publishing books, coming to terms privately and publicly with their role in the War. In dealing with their personal post traumatic stress, they have helped the

nation face its own. I too have been drawn to and moved by the veterans' reports of courage and brotherhood, senseless violence and emotional desolation, whether experienced in Vietnam or back home, and I thought for years that the veterans' stories were the most important ones, that compared with such stories, my own experiences protesting the war in Vietnam were insignificant.

But I changed my mind because of you, young people who know the war only through the words of others. Three years ago as a radio journalist, I covered a conference at the University of Southern California called "Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War." After listening to three days of the most intense testimony about every aspect of that war, I went out to sample student opinion. I found a young man, 18, studying for a chemistry test and asked him if he knew what was going on inside the auditorium. "It's a conference on Vietnam," he said, "but it doesn't have much to do with me." "Are you registered for the draft," I asked him. "Yeah," he said. "Do you think you would have gone to Vietnam if drafted," I asked. "Well, I think the war was a mistake," he said, "that we never should have gone but, well, if I were called, I would serve my country."

I think I would have said something similar at his age, and many of you might answer the same, but notice how abstract our reply would be. We'd say "I would serve my country," --something we all want to do-- rather than "I will go to Vietnam and kill people, some of whom are trying to kill me and some of whom are not, some of whom are soldiers, and some of whom are not." Our language would be abstract because we wouldn't know any better. I think before you are asked to make such a decision, you should know its consequences and its alternatives. Fortunately for your generation, Vietnam veterans stand ready to tell you the consequences. I'm here to describe at least one alternative. At a time when articles are being written by men my age who avoided the draft and now wish they'd gone to Vietnam, I think it important that you hear the story of at

at least one person who refused to go and who would make the same decision again, important that you hear of another way to serve your country.

A college classmate of mine, John Del Vecchio, has written a carefully detailed novel called The Thirteenth Valley. In it, he describes a campaign he actually participated in in Vietnam, having researched it from perspectives unavailable when he was involved in it: those of the American strategists and of the Vietnamese enemy, for instance. I am reading that book with great interest, but I have noticed with dismay that though the novel is 646 pages long, Del Vecchio devotes exactly two paragraphs on page two to describing how he came to be in the military and in Vietnam in the first place. I think he left out the most important part. Perhaps if we have more novels that describe the snare of assumptions and decisions that lead young men to go to war, we might have less need for novels that detail the death and destruction of war itself.

I can't remember exactly when the War in Vietnam finally attracted my full attention. I remember a few snapshots from the early years: a Buddhist monk protesting against the South Vietnamese government, seated in the lotus position and burning like a torch; the overthrow and assassination of premier Ngo Dinh Diem three weeks before President Kennedy was assassinated, the alleged attack on U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. But all of these events were far removed from my life in eastern Pennsylvania. I was supposed to register at my local selective service board when I turned 18--September 26, 1964--but I forgot. Didn't go for three weeks. It was no big deal. I never considered not registering and they didn't think my being late meant anything. That wouldn't be true later.

My family were middle-of-the-road Republicans. I favored Nixon over Kennedy in the 1960 election and found good things to say about Barry Goldwater four years later. My junior year in high school, I applied to become a candidate to West Point, the U.S. Military Academy, and took and passed all the necessary

tests. I changed my mind before the selection was made, because the only degree offered at West Point was a bachelor's in science and I didn't want to limit my options. I already had an inkling that West Point might be confining in other ways, but I don't remember having any moral objection to entering the military. As it was, I never had to decide: my congressman named me only as first alternate.

My father had gone to war in 1941 trusting that what his government was telling him about his war was true. That trust between the American government and its people was one of the earliest casualties of the Vietnam war. Polls taken in 1979 showed that most Americans saw Vietnam veterans as "suckers." Well, if they were suckers, so was I, because in those days I expected to hear the truth from our government. I won't take time to document the lies here. If you care enough to know--and you shouldn't take my word for this--you can read how the Tonkin Gulf incident in 1964 was exaggerated and distorted to gain President Johnson popular and Congressional support for the war, you can read the Pentagon Papers, the study commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1967 and finished in 1968, which documents the deception and self-deception of the men who planned the war and sold it to the American people. And you can read about the domestic counter-intelligence program--COINTELPRO--which spied on thousands of Americans simply because they disagreed with government policies and which disrupted peace demonstrations by planting agents who urged demonstrators to violent actions.

I cannot tell you with words alone what it does to you to be lied to by your government day after day. But let me try to capture some of the feeling of that time by reading sections from a poem by Robert Bly called "The Teethmother, Naked at Last."

The ministers lie, the professors lie, the television lies, the  
priests lie....  
These lies mean that the country wants to die.  
Lie after lie starts out into the prairie grass,  
like enormous caravans of Conestoga wagons....

And a long desire for death flows out, guiding the enormous caravans  
from beneath,  
stringing together the vague and foolish words.  
It is a desire to eat death,  
to gobble it down,  
to rush on it like a cobra with mouth open  
It's a desire to take death inside,  
to feel it burning inside, pushing out velvety hairs,  
like a clothes brush in the intestines--  
This is the thrill that leads the President on to lie

Now the Chief Executive enters; the press conference begins:  
First the President lies about the date the Appalachian Mountains rose.  
Then he lies about the population of Chicago, then he lies about the  
weight of the adult eagle, then about the acreage of the Everglades

He lies about the number of fish taken every year in the Arctic, he  
has private information about which city is the capital of  
Wyoming, he lies about the birthplace of Attila the Hun.

He lies about the composition of the amniotic fluid, and he insists  
that Luther was never a German, and that only the Protestants  
sold indulgences,

That Pope Leo X wanted to reform the church, but the "liberal  
elements" prevented him,  
that the Peasants' War was fomented by Italians from the North.

And the Attorney General lies about the time the sun sets.

Once the initial trust was violated, I began to pay more and more attention  
to other accounts about Vietnam. But finally they too were stories from far  
away, so there was a limit to the trust I could put in them as well. Perhaps  
many of you feel this way about conflicting accounts coming today from Central  
America. Yet what seemed indisputable to me was the enormous destruction being  
visited upon the people of North and South Vietnam. Finally, regardless of  
whether Vietnam were two countries or one, or whether Ho Chi Minh was a  
communist aggressor or a popular nationalist, I felt that that destruction was  
incompatible with any proper American objective. Later, during the Tet  
Offensive of 1968, an American artillery officer said of the village of Ben Tre,  
"we had to destroy it in order to save it." That phrase became so famous  
because it crystallized what many of us felt about the war. If we were killing

Southern Vietnamese and destroying South Vietnam in the name of freedom, what and who would be left to be free?

The Vietnam War has been called "the living room war," the argument being that because television was able to bring the war into every American living room, it finally turned Americans against the war. One of the "lessons" that governments have learned from Vietnam is that they should keep the press away from the warzone, lest their people hear uncensored reports and see unpleasant images of war. Britain in the Falklands, the U.S. in Grenada, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, all have learned this lesson. But this cynical lesson obscures the fundamental truth at its core: the more of war we see, the more hateful it is. Oh, I know war has its attractions. I acknowledge how alluring the intensity of combat can be and I acknowledge how any man or woman might find those days the most exciting, the most authentic of one's life. I understand that craving. But those who can tell you this are the survivors of war, not its ultimate victims. I do not want others to die just so I can feel more intensely alive. We need to know more about war's real effects, not less, so we're moved to prevent them rather than lament them.

While men and women were losing their lives in Vietnam, I was only losing my illusions: illusions about what my government was capable of, illusions about what my fellow human beings were capable of. There are more grievous losses, of course, and I know that many Vietnam veterans lost illusions too, and much else besides. But finally, the vision of my country I lost during the Vietnam War is a real loss too and a cause for real anguish. Everything I read and heard about the war continually violated my deepest patriotism, my pride in what this country stood for in the world, until as an American, I couldn't stand to be a part of my country's war anymore.

I know that books are tired of us.  
I know they are chaining the Bible to chairs.  
Books don't want to remain in the same room with us anymore.

New Testaments are escaping...dressed as women...they go off after dark.  
And Plato! Plato...Plato wants to go backwards....  
He wants to hurry back up the river of time, so he can end as some  
blob of sea flesh rotting on an Australian beach.

Why are they dying? I have written this so many times.  
They are dying because the President has opened a Bible again.  
They are dying because gold deposits have been found among the  
Shoshoni Indians.  
They are dying because money follows intellect!  
And intellect is like a fan opening in the wind--

The Marines think that unless they die the rivers will not move.  
They are dying so that the mountain shadows will continue to fall east  
in the afternoon,  
so that the beetle can move along the ground near the fallen twigs.

But if one of those children came near that we have set on fire,  
came toward you like a gray barn, walking,  
you would howl like a wind tunnel in a hurricane,  
you would tear at your shirt with blue hands,  
you would drive over your own child's wagon trying to back up,  
the pupils of your eyes would go wild--

If a child came by burning, you would dance on a lawn,  
trying to leap into the air, digging into your cheeks,  
you would ram your head against the wall of your bedroom  
like a bull penned too long in his moody pen--

If one of those children came toward me with both hands  
in the air, fire rising along both elbows,  
I would suddenly go back to my animal brain,  
I would drop on all fours, screaming,  
my vocal chords would turn blue, so would yours,  
it would be two days before I could play with my own children again.

"I can understand the anguish of the younger generation," Henry Kissinger  
told an interviewer in 1969. "They lack models, they have no heroes, they see  
no great purposes in the world. But conscientious objection is destructive of  
society....Conscientious objection must be reserved only for the greatest moral  
issues, and Vietnam is not of this magnitude." Kissinger could not be more  
mistaken. It was only by actively opposing the war and choosing to be a con-  
scientious objector that I was able to find role models I could admire, to  
discover a new group of heroes to replace John Wayne, and to join my small  
individual efforts to one of the great purposes of this or any other time--peace.

Having reached an inner decision to oppose an American war, I did not have to look far for models of how to behave without feeling traitorous or disloyal. The country was founded by people who were acting on their consciences, after all, and the first demonstration I participated in could not have been more American. An official from the South Vietnamese embassy came to speak on my campus. A dozen people I knew stood out front with signs that read "Stop the Bombing." I was not one of them. For this, they were surrounded by hundreds of fraternity boys and subjected to hours of water and ink bombs and verbal abuse. The campus police were strangely absent. A rally was organized to support the right of free speech; my first anti-war demonstration was for the First Amendment.

I wrote to my congressmen and received polite replies that we should all support the President. I joined The Committee Against the Crime of Silence and put my name on record at the United Nations as opposing my government's war in Vietnam. I wrote editorials for my college newspaper and I took part in demonstrations. What may be difficult to understand is how it was at the beginning. Looking back now, you tend to see pictures of large demonstrations, mighty throngs of people choking the streets of major cities and chanting slogans. But at the beginning it was different. I and a dozen other students and faculty members would go down to the town square of Easton, Pennsylvania, population 30,000 and stand for one hour in silent witness, protesting the war. The people who passed us were not always friendly; we were reminding them of an unpleasant event far away, and many mistook our opposition to the war as opposition to the country. I handed out leaflets at a Methodist Church and then attended the worship service. Heard myself denounced as a "tool of the Moscow line" by the minister. It was the beginning of my education into the nature and power of authority.

You see, at the beginning, I thought it would be easy. Americans were being lied to by their government. All we had to do was give Americans the truth, tell



them what was really going on in Vietnam, and Americans would rise up and demand that their government stop the war. But I came to see that for many citizens, what was at issue was not truth or falsehood, but obedience or resistance to authority. My parents' generation, the generation of Americans who saw their country as saving the world from Hitler were understandably reluctant to see their country might be fighting an immoral war, and polls show that a majority of Americans did not come to see the Vietnam war as "immoral" until May 1971. In arguments repeated in homes all over the country, my objections to the war were met with the reply "the President knows more than we do. This is a democracy. We have to support the President."

Fortunately for me and for all anti-war protestors, this country was created out of resistance to unjust authority. The Declaration of Independence, after all, tells every American that it is not only his right to rebel against despotism, it is his duty. The tradition of conscientious objection is even older, arriving with the first Quakers in 1635. James Madison, one of the architects of the U.S. Constitution, proposed making objection to war a constitutional right. It was defeated, but so were all proposals for national conscription, even during the War of 1812, even though most of that war was fought on American soil. I can't give you a history of conscientious objection in this country, but I'll remind you those of you who've seen the movie Gandhi, that that great man of peace was influenced by an essay written by the American Henry David Thoreau. Conscientious objection is as American as cherry pie. So you see how fortunate I was. I could oppose American policy in Vietnam secure in the knowledge that I was upholding the finest American ideals. It was not I who was betraying America, it was Lyndon Johnson and his government.

In the spring of 1967 I told my parents that I was planning to become a conscientious objector. I remember that my parents were concerned but not opposed-- mostly I think they were baffled. In a journal that I kept at the time, I noted

particularly my father's silence. I was rejecting the course of action he had taken in World War Two. He could not help me. He could show me how a man does what his government asks of him; he could not show me how to oppose that government. But my father did me a very great kindness: he knew a member of the local draft board from a service organization they belonged to. From that day in 1967 until the board made its decision a year later, my father made a point not to mention my case to his friend. Though I was making a choice he would not have made, he felt I had the right to make my own decision and face its consequences. As a result, he gave me a great gift: the gift of learning who I was and what I valued on my own and for myself. I had friends who were not so lucky.

My claim to conscientious objector status was not based on traditional religious beliefs. In fact, I had been interviewed earlier by my college's alumni magazine as an example of an agnostic. Until 1965, you could only be released from military service if you could demonstrate that your opposition to participation in war was by reason of "religious training or belief." But in 1965 the Supreme Court had ruled that a person could not be denied C.O. status simply because he did not belong to an orthodox religious sect. It was enough, the high Court ruled, if the belief which prompted your objection occupied the same place in your life as the belief in a traditional deity occupied in the life of a believer. The Court's opinion cites several authors that I read in a freshman religious course; one of them is theologian Paul Tillich:

"And if the word [God] has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God."

Most of us walk around most of the time with the only the vaguest notion of what our values and beliefs are. One of the reasons I miss being around college students is that you are very often testing the values and beliefs you've

inherited from your family against new sets of values and beliefs espoused by your schoolmates and teachers. As a result, what we now call "identity crises" are common in late adolescents. Like you in the 1980s. Like me in the 1960s. Well, the war in Vietnam and the draft of men to fight that war added a terrible urgency and mortal consequences to such identity crises. Hundreds of thousands of young men had to ask themselves what values they were willing to suffer and die for, at an age where they are just learning to think for themselves about such matters. For many, the consequences of their choices were harsh and lasting. One way or another, those of us who had to make a choice revealed the authority we were willing to obey, be it the authority of family, religion, public opinion or country. To use Tillich's standard, in choosing we learned what we took seriously without reservation, we learned the nature of the God we worshipped. Some of us found out that our gods were lifeless idols. Some of us found out that our gods were very much alive.

I knew I objected to the War in Vietnam. What I had to discover was the ultimate source of that objection and describe it for myself and for the five ordinary American that comprised draft board #90 in Allentown, Pennsylvania in the space provided on Special Form 150. The first question on that form was "Do you believe in a Supreme Being? There were two boxes: yes/no. Second question: Describe the nature of your belief which is the basis of your claim and state whether or not your belief in a Supreme Being involves duties which to you are superior to those arising from any human relation. Here is part of what I wrote:

I affirm that love and justice are the essence of a Supreme Being that every human being is divine in that he has love and justice within him to some degree. I sincerely believe that the principles of love and justice with which men have constructed their gods and their governments reside in each man. I affirm the divinity of every human being. The more a man demonstrates these two divine attributes in his daily living, the more divine he himself will become.

Because I believe that from man all awareness and order comes, because I believe that each man is a divine being striving to become more divine, and because I believe that divinity manifests itself only through the love and justice of human relationships, I believe that human relationships are the highest relationships. Therefore there are no duties which to me are superior to those arising from human relations.

I made a point to get letters of support not only from people who agreed with my position but those who disagreed as well, including the Dean and President of my college, who surely didn't appreciate the trouble I was causing them but who could confirm that I was sincere. I was lucky, of course. Lucky to have heard of conscientious objection, no doubt thanks to the influence of Quakers and small peace churches in the section of Pennsylvania where I grew up. Lucky to have witnessed Martin Luther King lead black people in civil disobedience to gain basic American rights. Lucky to live at a time when lower middle class kids like me were able to go to college in unprecedented numbers, and once there, lucky to read authors like Thoreau and Albert Camus and have the time to reflect on what it might mean to be a conscientious objector to war. Lucky to grow up in a town where Dave Hawk lived. Hawk was several years older than me, president of his senior class, a good student, and an all-American diver. In late 1967 he refused his deferment as a divinity student and was reclassified 1-A. No one in my conservative hometown could doubt that Dave Hawk was anything less than all-American. If a young man like Hawk opposed the war... It took time for the town--and the country--to finish that thought.

As I worked on my c.o. form in early 1968, the government indicted Dr. Benjamin Spock and four others on a single count of conspiracy to "counsel, aid, and abet young men to violate the draft laws." Three weeks later a U.S. intelligence ship, the USS Pueblo, and a crew of 83 Americans was captured by North Korea. The next week the Tet Offensive brought an end of American optimism about the Vietnam war. In March peace candidate Eugene McCarthy nearly

defeated President Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy for president. I filed for c.o. status on the first day of spring, 1968. No one knew it, but several hundred old men, women and children had just been massacred by American soldiers at My Lai. Two weeks later Lyndon Johnson announced he would not run for office. Four days later North Vietnam agreed to peace talks. We had a brief moment of hope. The very next day Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis and 37 people died in the five days of riots that followed. Three weeks later, while students occupied the President's Office at Columbia University, at a small demonstration on my campus, a young man had his head grazed by a pellet shot from a local fraternity house. I graduated in late May. A week later, my fiancée and I went to New York City to look for an apartment. That night Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles.

It felt as though the country were having a nervous breakdown.

I did not know what I would do if the draft board refused my claim to c.o. status. I did know I would not enter the armed forces. I felt I was prepared to go to prison rather than flee to Canada, but fortunately I never had to find out. On June 14, Flag Day, my draft board informed me that I had been classified "1-0" (conscientious objector).

Three days later I began working for the New York City Department of Social Services and was given a caseload of families in central Harlem. My draft board informed me that they did not expect to receive any call for draftees until the fall, which meant I could sit it out and possibly not be called. Instead I volunteered for two years' alternate service. When I was called for my physical examination, I informed my draft board that I would not appear, which meant I would be passed automatically. All around me, young men going to war and to prison and I did not want to avoid service. I remember telling people at the time that 20 years in the future, if my children asked what I had done during

the Vietnam War, I did not want to tell them that I had gotten out on a technicality. My son will soon be old enough to ask, and if he does, he will learn that his father is one of 170,000 men who were granted conscientious objector status during the Vietnam War and one of 96,000 who completed the two years' alternative service. I do not know how that decision will look in 1988, but I am hardly the first person who's had to make a wager with the future, not knowing whether history will condemn or vindicate his actions. None can escape placing that bet.

The war continued despite my conscientious objection, of course, and with it, the dying and the anguish. In still another effort to dissociate myself from the war, in August 1969 I joined with others who were refusing to pay the federal tax on their telephone bills, because that tax had been levied to pay for the war. For the next three years, my wife or I would periodically have our paychecks seized and be forced to ransom them from the federal government. We did this because we knew that a long chain of people led from our phone bill to the war and we wanted those who were part of that chain to understand why we were refusing to be part of that chain.

There is a figure who haunted me then: Adolf Eichmann. He was a Nazi who helped coordinate the trains that carried Jews to the death camps during World War Two. He fled to Argentina after the war but in 1961 the Israeli secret police located and kidnapped him to Israel to stand trial. He was tried in Jerusalem for his role in the murder of thousands of Jews, even though, he protested, he had never personally killed a Jew. A political theorist named Hannah Arendt covered the trial for the New Yorker magazine and later wrote a book, a book I recommend that you all read, entitled Eichmann in Jerusalem. The book explores the question of how six million people could be systematically killed by other human beings. What we learn tells us something about the nature of evil. What we learn is that something as abominable as the Holocaust is not accomplished by villains--there are not enough villains in the world to perform such

horrors. No, the terrible news of that book is that crimes of this magnitude are only possible when ordinary men and women do what they're told. The full title of Arendt's book is Eichmann in Jerusalem: A study of the Banality of Evil. What Arendt found at the heart of Eichmann's deeds was--nothing. In Arendt's words, he was "thoughtless," he literally had no thoughts of his own that mattered, rather he acted in accordance with the thoughts of others.

Eichmann, like many of the Nazis who were tried by the Allies and executed at Nuremburg after World War II, defended himself by saying that he was simply following orders. But at the trial at Nuremburg, the Allied judges ruled that the fact that a person acted under the orders of his government or of a superior did not relieve him of responsibility, provided a moral choice was possible. All along the chain of command that led from Hitler to the death camps were ordinary people like Eichmann who were just following orders. I am not equating the War in Vietnam, destructive of life as it was, with the Nazi Holocaust, but I came to see that Americans, too, could be content to follow orders, unaware of the devastating impact their seemingly harmless actions here at home had on others far away. This discovery disturbed me then; it disturbs me still.

In November 1969, my wife and I went to Washington, D.C. to join the March Against Death. We joined 40,000 others in subfreezing temperatures and marched with candles from the Washington Memorial to the White House, 40,000 and each with the name of an American killed in Vietnam around our necks. At the end of the march, each of us stood on a small wooden platform and shouted that name at the White House.

#### GLENDON WATERS

All I knew then about Glendon Waters was that he was from Texas. From visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial I know that he was killed in July 1967--about the time I began protesting the war--and that his name is on the Memorial. Why are those names so moving? Why do visitors to

the Memorial reach up and touch the names? Why do I, after 16 years, still remember a name I spoke but once and whose owner I never knew? --Because a name brings the particular person closer, makes it easier to remember that casualty figures contain the final news about a particular human being, a son, a father, a brother, a husband, whose death brought grief to his family. Often we become numb when numbers are recited. We must try hard not to become numb. So Glendon Waters is what I say instead of 58,000 dead. Glendon Waters died in Vietnam.

We have to break the cycle that leads to the deaths of men like Glendon Waters. I believe that means breaking the cycle of unquestioning obedience to authority, as I have suggested. I also believe it means fashioning a new model of what it means to be a man. Women have a role to play in this, for you both complement and reinforce our notions of manhood. Vets I have spoken with often speak bitterly of the example John Wayne set for them. We need other models, and Rambo is not one of them.

Let me make one observation about "Rambo: First Blood." I'll skip over the damage done by reckless suggestions that American MIAs are being kept in large numbers and subhuman conditions by Vietnam, that civilians are agents of betrayal and sellout, or that they employ heartless mercenaries to do their dirty work. The curious thing is that Rambo is not John Wayne revisited and put through weight training. Despite the superhuman strength, perfect marksmanship, and apparent freedom of action, Rambo is fundamentally a victim. Stallone's Rocky and Rambo are heroes who have to endure lots of physical punishment. While I will leave a detailed analysis of Sylvester Stallone's penchant for masochism to psychologists, I have noticed that at some point in his movies, Stallone's heroes come to embody an image Richard Nixon once used to describe America: "a pitiful, helpless giant." Like Nixon, Stallone uses the humiliation --real or imagined--endured by the giant to justify a destructive revenge unleashed later on the torturers.



It's not just Americans who find this stuff appealing, but aggrieved people around the world, who have flocked to Rambo movies in record numbers. I don't quarrel with the fact that Rambo is appealing to people, I just want to point out that this kind of hero appeals to our sense of self-pity, our sense of ourselves as victims, and engages our fantasies of omnipotence only by first stripping us of our human dignity. And there lies a fundamental and curious contradiction: the warlike avenger who appears to be a man of action is actually a man who has very few choices and almost no freedom of action: revenge is a reaction, after all, not an action.

Conscientious objectors and pacifists, on the other hand, are sometimes taken for cowards, not a very positive image of anyone, especially a male. A classic question put to COs during the war was "Wouldn't you resort to violence if someone you loved was in danger?" If you said "yes," it was pointed out to you that by extension the country was in danger and young men were being asked to resort to organized violence to defend it. See how the question tries to narrow your freedom of action to a violent reaction. A moment's reflection tells you there are many actions that could be taken short of killing an assailant. I believe there is a very great difference between the whole range of actions I might take to defend those I love--or perfect strangers, for that matter--in a specific situation, and participation in the organized, authoritarian, and often impersonal violence called war. No one can deny the existence of violence--random and organized--in the modern world, but I believe that in most every case I can conceive of, there are more effective antidotes than the military one. If there's time in the question-and-answer session, ask me about the example of Denmark during World War II.

In any event, in a specific situation the choice of whether to kill or not is yours. In the military, the choice is not yours. During the Vietnam War, there were principled young men who felt that the draft and deferment system were

unjust and who refused to cooperate with it. Many went to prison for their beliefs. I felt that my country had the right to require service of me, but I did not feel it had the right to order me to kill another human being. I reserved that choice for myself and I recognized that entering the military meant surrendering that right.

The crucial moment in the passage from civilian life to military life is called "induction." The word comes from the Latin meaning "to be led into," to be induced to do something. Notice again how the very language suggests a relinquishing of freedom of choice. Yet at a certain point in that ceremony, you are asked to take a step forward. No one can push you or force you. It will not count unless you voluntarily take that step forward. It doesn't matter how many others step forward with you, it is a step only you can take or refuse to take. Once you take that step you enter a world where you are expected to obey all lawful commands given to you, no matter what your personal objections might be. I think I can understand the courage that it takes to obey, and why that courage has been considered the paragon of masculinity, especially knowing that the obedience might cost you your life. It is why we honor veterans, living and dead, for the sacrifices they have made. But it is a step I refused to take, a step I believe is a step into another kind of manhood, a step I hope that all of us might one day refuse to take.

It is, after all, one of the high triumphs of our civilization, that we feel a powerful reluctance to kill one another. It takes a tremendous amount of training to teach most people to kill, and even then it takes a tremendous amount of anger and fear before soldiers will kill an enemy they can see. A dangerous feature of our modern wars is that our soldiers increasingly are trained to kill at long distance, impersonally, and thus increasingly kill people they never have to face. I believe this is why our wars are growing increasingly less angry and more destructive of non-combatants, civilians, women and children.

I have a son, nine years old, named Jesse, and a daughter, four, named

Jenny. I held them both within minutes of their births. I love them more than I love my own life. I cannot imagine any cause that would justify their deaths. And I cannot imagine any cause that would justify the deaths of someone else's children. Yet that is what modern warfare means. In Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Biafra, Angola, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Nicaragua, soldiers have not just killed soldiers; willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly, they have killed women and children. There is no cause noble enough to justify the deaths of innocent women and children. None.

Of course, no one admits to wanting to kill women and children. No one admits to wanting war. Their deaths are due to accidents: they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, they did not stop when ordered to do so, they wouldn't answer questions, they looked suspicious, there were reports of fire from their area, it was dark, they appeared to be armed, I had orders, I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to. And so they die anyway, in numbers that have risen in every war since the turn of the century. So let's be honest, shall we? Participation in war means participation in the killing of innocents. They don't put that in the recruiting posters and it's not part of the "Be all that you can be" campaign. But honesty also requires us to admit that avoiding or evading military service doesn't relieve us of responsibility. If civilians are now the victims of war whether they like it or not, civilians are now the perpetrators of war, whether they like it or not. We are not equally responsible, but we all bear some responsibility.

During an interview three and a half years ago, I asked Walter Capps what he had lost in the Vietnam War. He told me that he thought he had lost the ability to speak about his country with the pride and enthusiasm he once felt. I would put it this way. I realize now that what I ultimately lost during the Vietnam war was my moral innocence, my ability to feel innocent simply because I was an American. And I believe that what I lost, the nation also lost. That is

why Jimmy Carter worked so hard at human rights. That is why Ronald Reagan works so hard to identify the Soviet Union as an evil empire. We Americans want to be innocent again. While I believe we are not a nation of criminals, and I believe that we can rightfully regain some measure of pride in our country, but I hope we never grow so proud as to think ourselves innocent again. Feeling innocent is a luxury no one can afford and an obstacle to empathy we all need to exercise.

The historian, the political scientist, the anthropologist all have their reasons why wars are necessary, but I will tell you what I think lies at the heart of all war: lack of imagination. It appears when we are "thoughtless" as Eichmann was and when we refuse to imagine the lives of others. In the movie Hearts and Minds, we are shown a former Air Force pilot who sits on his porch. We have heard him describe how insulated he was in his airconditioned B-52 cockpit from the death and destruction he caused below. He tells us that he did not drop napalm but that he dropped worse--CBUs (Cluster Bomb Units)--bombs that explode sending nearly 200,000 steel balls one-quarter inch in diameter into any human beings unfortunate enough to be nearby. He tells us that he has a three-year-old child and that now, if he tries to imagine the feelings of a Vietnamese farmer seeing his three-year-old hit by the CBUs he dropped...

Well, he can't finish the sentence, he breaks down under the horror of that vision. Now that he has a child, he can imagine what it would be like. He can imagine concretely the human dimensions of the damage he inflicted so thoughtlessly before. If he had been encouraged to imagine this before he climbed into his plane, before he entered the Air Force, if 18-year-old boys were forced to consider the consequences of their actions as soldiers, if those at home were forced to imagine what we are asking our soldiers to do, they might be more reluctant to leave and we more reluctant to send them off to kill.

This exercise of imagination would recast what we now call patriotism, and require of us a service quite different from military service. This service

would be called for daily, not just when the flag is presented or during a military tour of duty. It requires being mindful of Others who are far from us, mindful as to whether there is any connection between their hunger and our satisfaction, their pain and our comfort. I am not saying doing this is easy or that I myself am capable of it. I certainly think it is different from "feeling guilty," because at times there is no connection between their pain and our comfort. Unlike other forms of service, however, it would free us to act, for when there is, we would act not only because there is an abstract duty to do so, but because we feel a powerful desire not to be responsible for the pain of others and to act contrary to that desire has terrible psychological consequences for individuals and for nations.

Some of you have asked whether I felt guilty when I met returning Vietnam veterans. The answer is no. How I feel when I meet Vietnam veterans these days depends completely upon the veteran. One of the co-producers of the radio series Vietnam Reconsidered was a Vietnam veteran. One of my closest friends was a medic in I Corps near the DMZ, the border which divided what was then North from South Vietnam. The war has never been an issue between us; I admire the choices he made while there and the opposition he voiced to the war back here.

I think behind the question lies another one: do I feel any guilt for the deaths of Americans killed during the withdrawal I advocated? And behind that question lies a related one, a question asked of me last year: do I feel guilt for the deaths of Indochinese killed after the American withdrawal, when the Hanoi government consolidated its power in Vietnam and extended it into Cambodia. Dozens of books testify to the complexity of these questions, but let me give you the short answer here: I opposed war, not just American war, and I have yet to encounter compelling evidence that military effort--American or Vietnamese or Cambodian--justified for whatever reason--the defense of freedom, the extension of Communist ideology or national security--does anything but

increase human misery. If there be exceptions, I will look at them on a case by case basis, but the impact of the Vietnam War on me has been to make me forever skeptical of the proposition that military intervention does anything but save people by destroying them.

If I felt any guilt it was while the war was raging and due to the fact that nothing I did--publicly demonstrating my opposition to the war, trying to educate my fellow citizens, campaigning for peace candidate Eugene McCarthy, refusing to serve in the military, refusing to pay war taxes--nothing was enough to end the war soon enough. I did feel anger and revulsion at the atrocities and devastation documented daily in newspapers and nightly on television. I felt great anger toward those who justified the awful loss of life in the name of America's "image" or "honor," as if what we were doing was not appalling to the civilized world. But then, it is easy to feel righteous anger toward people when you do not have to talk to them and understand them--that's why it's so easy to make war on people we haven't talked with and don't know--that's part of what gets us into wars, isn't it?

So what stands against war? The philosopher Martin Buber has a suggestion:

War has always had an adversary who hardly ever comes forward as such, but does his work in the stillness. This adversary is speech, fulfilled speech, the speech of genuine conversation in which human beings understand one another and comes to a mutual understanding.

I believe we always have need of such speech and that we need it now more than ever, before another war makes it hard for us to hear one another. I believe it has taken place between veteran and non-veteran in small private conversations around this country, but now it must become a public conversation. And you are the reason we must talk publicly. You must not be permitted to choose war without knowing the consequences and the alternatives. Veterans can tell you the consequences. I can tell you the alternatives. Only together can we break the cycle of war.

Dialogue is impossible in combat. Opposition to war must begin beforehand,

and it begins when men remember how horrible war is. Wars have always been followed by terrible silences. Here and there a few voices are raised: in All Quiet on the Western Front after World War One, in The Naked and the Dead after World War Two. But if you ask the children of veterans, you mostly hear, "I never heard my father talk about it."

That is not true of Vietnam veterans. They are talking about it. And the rest of us need to engage them in dialogue, not to help them, but to help us all. I have given you some idea of what I would bring to such a dialogue. I would bring the story of someone who said "no." Another would bring the story of someone who said "yes." Among other things, they would bring stories of carnage and courage, of sacrifice of life for others, and of the terrible weight of taking life. I need their testimony. I need it because while I can tell Jesse firsthand how to resist induction, I cannot tell him firsthand what it is to be in combat. Only combat veterans can do that. And if they are silent, if they allow sentimentality, or grief, or even shame, to prevent them from telling the stories only they can tell, then another generation of young men is doomed to go to war to learn what war is, thinking, like that young chemistry student at USC, that only by going to war can he serve his country.

We must break the cycle and we can only do it together. I believe in my heart that I and Vietnam veterans do not stand opposed to one another: the same idealism that made me oppose the war led other men to enlist to fight it. And now we stand together, as people who understand that life is morally serious, that the choices we make matter. In that we stand together, the veteran and the conscientious objector, and challenge the indifferent and the apathetic.

I would like to end again with a poem I wrote for an English class I taught at Berkeley in 1977, but which still reads as if I'd written it for you:

## Valediction

I came here in my imagination several days ago and received a gift.  
I have written it down. It is a poem.  
To you.

The poem was not what I came here for. I came to speak to you and  
that speaking became the poem.  
If a poem falls to the ground and no one hears it,  
It might as well be a tree.

So if you give me your attention, please, one last time,  
I have one last assignment for you and your attention,  
one last time.

You won't turn this one in to me.  
I won't be here.  
You need no pencil or paper.  
I don't know how much time you have.  
You don't either.

The form of this assignment is the content of your life.  
Use whatever margins you wish.  
That's all.

That's all I can tell you, because  
I did not give you this assignment.  
I'm only here to remind you. I think that's part of my assignment.

What I do know, what I can tell you, what makes it an assignment, is  
It ends someday.  
I know we didn't discuss this in class.  
But you should know it for the final.  
I don't know how much time you have.  
You don't either.                      You may begin now.                      Please begin now.