

The Good Guys

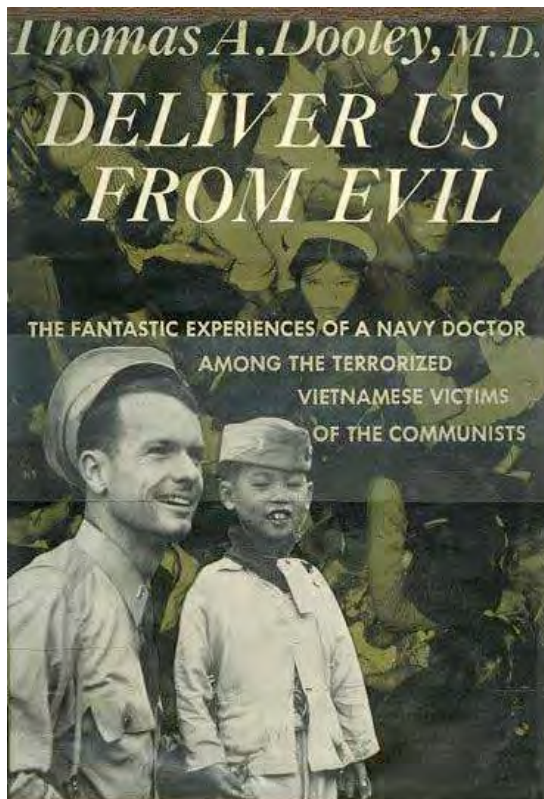
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*ONE TWO THREE
WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR
I don't give a damn the next stop is Vietnam*

Country Joe and the Fish

The year was 1966 and I was riding in my dad's car on a hot summer day in Baltimore. Stopped at a red light, I looked to my right and what did I see? It was a young marine PFC, sun tanned, with a high and tight haircut, wearing a khaki short sleeved uniform and a pisscutter (overseas cap) with the eagle globe and anchor. He glowed with the absolute self-confidence of a recent graduate of Paris Island home on leave. On his arm was a blonde giggling teenage girl. I knew at that moment that I wanted to be a marine. Of course it wouldn't take much guessing to know that he was on his way to Vietnam. It would have been impossible to know if he would survive, come back wounded, maimed or in a body bag. What I didn't know on that day was that a war in a far off land would become the defining issue of my generation.



I had first heard of Vietnam several years earlier from the Franciscan nuns at St. Anthony's. They were armored with Catholic medical missionary Dr. Tom Dooley who served as a physician, humanitarian and anti-communist activist in Vietnam and Laos. His books chronicling his work with refugees and poor villagers caught up in the fighting between insurgents and the government detailed the often brutal tactics of the Viet Cong. In particular I recall the stories of VC fighters jamming chop sticks into the ears of innocent villagers to terrorize them into cooperation. There was no doubt in my mind who were the devils and who was on the side of the angels. I wanted to be on the right side.

Around the same time I was thumbing through a stack of National Geographic magazines while searching for photos of bare breasted native women when I came across an article about a Special Forces A Team working with, living with and defending a Hmong village. There were plenty of photos of red blooded American boys gone native. They were clearly competent in weapons, communication and medical skills and they were using their skills to benefit these people. To me this was the best of American service to less fortunate people in the world. It inspired me and I wanted to be a part of it. These were the good guys and I wanted to be a good guy too. Like most Americans in the mid-sixties I was a supporter of my country's efforts in Vietnam.

There was a growing dissenting opinion, mostly among the far left, intellectuals and on college campuses, against the war. The louder the anti-war noise got the more resolute I was that the U.S. was doing the right thing and the war should be won. By the time I entered high school in 1969, with the Tet Offensive having been splashed on the TV screens in every American living room, the public opinion worm had turned. On college campuses throughout the country the most popular guys on campus were no longer the student athletes but increasingly the radical, counter culture activists and organizers. At my high school

the organizers were usually the younger brothers of university students that had already been radicalized.



National Moratorium Against the War, 1969

The National moratorium against the war, held in the fall of my sophomore year, drew a line in the sand in Middle America. "Hell no! we won't go!" and Country Joe and the Fish's One, Two, Three What Are We Fighting For became the battle cry and anthem of the ground swell of Americans who had changed their mind about the war and were demanding an end. The silent majority in reaction dug in and said this is America love it or leave it and my country right or wrong. In my school it became an honor struggle between the jocks, who were mostly conservative, and the freaks, the term we used for the politically radical students. On November 15th there was actually a physical struggle at the campus flag pole when a group of students tried to take down the flag and a bunch of jocks tried to stop them. More and more of the rhetoric of the left called the war immoral. I couldn't accept or even understand such a thing. After all how could it be immoral to help the South Vietnamese defend themselves against a communist insurgency and an outright invasion from the North backed by both Red China and the USSR?

The bombing campaign in Cambodia, Kent State "What if you knew her and found her dead on the ground" and the Paris peace talks all followed and the national divide became deeper. The anti-war movement didn't end the war, it continued for seven more years, but it did transform the politics of my generation skewing them far to the left, all but erasing the naïve idealism of the early sixties.

As for me I never changed. I graduated in 1972 and that summer I enlisted in the Marine Corps with every intention of going to Vietnam. In retrospect, luckily for me, by the fall of '72 the policy of turning all the war fighting over to the RVN (Republic of Vietnam) forces had progressed to the point where all Marine Corps combat troops had been withdrawn. Although I never went to Vietnam I shared the ignominy of being an American service man at that time. For the most part we were looked on as fools at best and even baby killers. In Washington D.C. at that time it was policy that we were not to wear our uniform of post in order not to cause trouble with the civilian population. I began looking for other outlets for my idealism.

Today it is a point of political correctness that the war was wrong, a mistake and immoral. Through the years I continued to believe that not only was it not immoral but the height of American unselfishness to defend a weaker nation against communist aggression. Years later as I delved into the history of 19th and 20th century Asian history, and after living in Asia for more than a decade, I came to understand that the simple black and the white anti-communism of the 50s and 60s was not enough to understand the turbulent events that had such a profound impact on my generation. I found many parallels between the development of China, Korea, Indo-China and Japan. Colonialism, modernization, national aspirations, and the introduction of European religion and revolutionary politics all mixed together, played off each other and drove events in ways that were hard to sort out in simple terms. We Americans often prefer to see things in black and white and this, in many ways made us innocents when dealing with confusing, constantly changing and unfolding events. In two world wars and as far as we knew in Korea, it was clear that there were good guys and bad guys and the solution was to apply as much force as possible. Beginning in Korea, due to the global political realities of the cold war, it was no longer possible to apply as much force as we could. A long drawn out seeming unwinnable conflict opened the door to self-doubt. National self-doubt is a vacuum that can be quickly filled by somebody with a well-planned agenda.

Time and again we were the good guys. As Americans we are programmed to root for the guy wearing the white hat. We want to be and see ourselves as the good guys. Although our record isn't perfect again and again the United States of America has stood up to the plate, committing our blood and national

treasure in fights that were not our own. Twice in the last century we saved Europe first making the world safe for democracy and then liberating the continent from Fascists and the Nazis. We liberated Asia by defeating Japanese militarism and held the line in Korea protecting the Republic of Korea in the south. We tried but did not prevail in China, Vietnam or Cambodia with tragic results. In none of these fights was land, oil or other commodities at stake. While it is popular today to accuse the U. S. of scheming to gain a kind of worldwide hegemony, in reality it was the call to defend freedom that called us to war and it was the goal of each one of these fights and others to defend the freedom of others and thus ensure our own.



John Kennedy at his Inaugural Address in 1961

What does it take to be the good guys? For me it is best expressed in the words of John Kennedy in his Inaugural Address in 1961 that called many of my generation to service. In part he said "And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forbearers fought are still at issue around the globe, the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God". "Let the word go forth from this time and place that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans..." "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to ensure the survival and the success of liberty". These words are as pertinent today as they were fifty years ago.

Today, once again, we are debating the use of American military might in a confusing situation with lots of predicted bad consequences. As usual, good people of conscience are coming down on opposing sides. I urge our elected leaders to put aside partisan political maneuvering and keep a few critical things in mind.

We are still the good guys. The good guys don't sit back and do nothing because to get involved is too difficult or costly.

Strategic thinking and getting the intelligence right are essential to any plan of action but the bottom line is to act according to our national core values.

As a nation we have to stand up and do the right thing. The right thing is to use our military strength to protect and defend people struggling to secure their God given human rights (life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness).

When we, as a nation, continue to live up to our highest ideals God will continue to sustain and bless America. Never forget that we ARE the good guys.