

My reflection on USA in the time of the Vietnam War

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October 15, 2015



A short time ago, I began thinking about the *War in Vietnam* for the first time in many years. I decided to read a book, but it was too specific for someone who had never been there. Someone who has become a dear friend, a decorated Marine in Vietnam has really helped me change my perspective about the character of those who served. I was in college at *Indiana University* from 1965-1969, a period that included the anti-war movement on campus, the assassinations of *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* and *Robert F. Kennedy*, the 1968 Presidential Election and Democratic National Convention in Chicago and anti-war rallies from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco including the horrific happening at *Kent State University* in Ohio.

My father was a navigator in the *Army Air-Corps* in Italy during World War II and I had a hobby of learning the names of every aircraft ever flown. During my senior year in high school I wrote an essay on how we should bomb Communist North Vietnam back into the stone-age. However, the next several years at a liberal university would find me marching against the war and writing essays that were 180 degrees away from the one that I had written in high school.

I was never anti-American; never had any fantasy that life in Canada would be any better; and always believed that despite her flaws, the United States was the best country in the world in which to live. Yet by 1968 America was surely going down the wrong road. My heroes, the Kennedys were both dead and every time I heard the Star Spangled Banner, I thought of each of them. In truth I was not that radical and the radicals that I knew were among the most disorganized and least inspiring people that I had ever met.



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One day in the Spring of 1968 I attended a concert on campus that featured Peter, Paul & Mary, Tom Lehrer and a folk singer that I had never heard before named *Phil Ochs*. His songs were very similar to those of Bob Dylan. They criticized the hypocrisy in just about everything. (Interestingly, he always felt that his one patriotic song, *The Power and the Glory*, would be the song that he would be most remembered for. Incidentally, this song was often sung at many of the Unificationist workshops).

After the Spring semester was over I went to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and listened to Phil Ochs once again. I also chanted with Allen Ginsburg and Jean Genet in Lincoln Park and rubbed shoulders with Harry Belafonte, Dick Gregory and so many other celebrities.

What was especially important to me was that everyone seemed to be united in opposition to the war. And what mattered especially to me was that it didn't seem that we were really trying to win the war. Later, Senator John McCain would confirm my doubts, as to why we would suddenly stop the bombing and other activities that were winning the war for us.

After finishing three years of graduate studies I decided to take a year off and figure out what was of real importance in my life. Of course my parents freaked out because I was giving up my school deferment. They quickly arranged an appointment with our family physician in hopes that he would be able to write a note claiming that I was somehow unfit for military service. My dad had gotten married on a Sunday in 1942 and went off to war 2 days later. But he was fighting for something he believed in—making the world free for democracy. I, on the other hand, saw no value in fighting or dying in a war which was going nowhere. My only friend who had gone to Vietnam was a fighter pilot. When we met, he told me that it was like playing a video game as he gauged his bombing targets and pulled the trigger. There was no ideology, no purpose and no hope.

My generation was saying, “*Make Love, not War,*” and was standing up against the corruption of our

government and the military industrial complex that President Eisenhower had warned us about. We marched on Washington, carrying placards with the names and hometowns of American soldiers who had died in Vietnam, and we were willing to breathe in the tear gas that our own police had shot at us for demonstrating against the war.

Years later, after a very significant religious transformation, my life took on some very dramatic re-direction. I began to understand that while the Hippies knew what was wrong with our country, they had no idea what to do about it. They had been making love and trying every drug, diet and meditation imaginable in order to enter into nirvana, but as *Kabril Gibran* would say, “anyone can go to the top of the mountain and commune with God—the real challenge is to return to the city and apply that same inspiration in real life.”

I began to understand that the tragedy of *Watergate* was that *President Nixon* actually understood the situation in Southeast Asia better than any of his peers. But because of his fragile ego, he could not apologize to the American people for the break-in fiasco and move on with his presidency. *President Jimmy Carter* would then inherit the Presidency, but he got lost in promoting his human rights agenda above all else. However, because of his naiveté, millions of innocent men, women and children would be killed by the Communists throughout Southeast Asia, something I believe that President Nixon could have prevented.

Several years later, I had the opportunity to deliver some black arm bands to support a *POW/MIA* March through downtown Chicago. This began an incredible friendship which I would develop with the architect of that march. *Jim Balcer*, a decorated Vietnam Marine would later become the Director of Veterans Affairs for the City of Chicago. I would work with him planning the first welcome home parade after the war in Kuwait. But that parade also honored two groups that had never been honored for risking their lives for their country—the Veterans of the Korean War and the Veterans of the War in Vietnam. Marching past the Mayor of Chicago and the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *General Colin Powell*, I witnessed an incredible healing take place within these soldiers. And I began to understand the missing purpose that I was now fulfilling in my life.

After serving the Veterans of Chicago for several years, Jim Balcer became a Chicago City Councilman. In this capacity he led all of the Memorial Day, Veterans Day and military events in the city. He introduced me to the head of the CIA, our Congresswoman (who had lost both her legs in a helicopter accident in Afghanistan) and to many war veterans from World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Through these experiences my heart was able to finally settle down with love and pride for my country.

I had never heard of Vietnam until the war when I was in college. Now my son’s best friend from school is from Vietnam. In an analogous arena, if there is one positive that we can take away from 9-11, it is the resurgence of honor and pride for our *first responders*, the fireman, the policemen and paramedics. Today we honor one soldier at every ballgame in every stadium and he or she will receive a standing ovation from the tens of thousands in attendance at the event.

Jesus walked away from those who were wishy/washy looking for passionate people. Hopefully my passion to help straighten out America’s path when she was lost in the 1960s and 1970s has been turned into a passion which loves my country, and expects the best from those to whom so much has been given.