

What I Had to Do

I am in the process of writing a memoir, reliving the 12 years, from 1964 through 1975, when the Vietnam War was my life. In the years since the war ended, my obsession with it has subsided, but its impact on my thinking and activity has not. Every political activity I've engaged in over the past quarter-century, the way I read each day's news, every thought I've expressed in lectures and writings, has been influenced by my experience of Vietnam and my reflections on it, by my twin struggles to understand it and, for most of those 12 years, to end it.

Nevertheless, I find myself somewhat uneasy about the theme of this magazine's symposium. Too many Americans for too long focused only on their "inner" Vietnam while being oblivious to the "outer" Vietnam 10,000 miles away, with its own people, geography, history, and culture.

I was one of those. I worked in the Pentagon in 1964 and 1965 and watched as top decision-makers secretly and deceitfully maneuvered the country into a full-scale war with no prospect of success. Whether we had a right to pursue by fire and sword in Indochina—any more than the French before us—the objectives our leaders had chosen, was a question that never occurred to me. But in the course of two years of service in that "outer" Vietnam, its people became real to me—as real as the U.S. troops I walked with under fire—in a way that made prolonging our war in their country intolerable.

If I may rephrase the question proposed by MODERN MATURITY, Vietnam shaped my inner *America*, my sense of what we had become, and what I had to do, with the help of others, to steer us toward our declared

ideals. That experience changed my outer life as well. Before and during the war, I wanted to serve my country by serving my President, and I did that for 15 years under four of them. But Vietnam taught me a better way, for me, to serve my country.

In 1968 I met American men and women as brave and patriotic as any I had known in Vietnam or the government. Many of them were draft resisters. Although some were inspired by Gandhi, they were also following an American tradition that stretched from the Boston Tea Party to Martin Luther King, Jr., from Thoreau's nonviolent civil disobedience against the Mexican War to the Underground Railway, from women's suffrage to lunch-counter sit-ins. I had read Gandhi and King, but the day I met a young man named Randy

Kehler at an antiwar conference in August 1969 was like meeting Rosa Parks on her way to the Montgomery jail.

When Randy spoke about nonviolence and his hopes for a better future, I listened with almost a parent's pride. I thought, "He's as good as we have." Toward the end of his talk, he said he would soon join his friends David Harris and Bob Eaton, who were in prison for draft resistance. There had been no forewarning of Randy's announcement, so it took me several moments to grasp what he had said. Then it was as if an ax split my head, and my heart broke open. I thought: *We are eating our young*. In Vietnam and at home, we are using them up. Is this what my country has come to? Is this the best thing for our best young people to do with their lives—go to prison? I found my way to a deserted men's room, sunk to the floor, and sobbed for more than an hour.

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By Daniel Ellsberg

A WIDOW'S TALE

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compelled to speak. I often think about what former President Dwight D. Eisenhower said: "People want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it."

When I was in Vietnam, I heard terrible stories from the victims of the war on all sides. Americans today have never seen warfare on our own land. What would it be like to live with bombs dropping day and night, napalm burning our children on their way to school, Agent Orange destroying our forests, poisoning our food and water?

In the process of talking to widows and veterans on both sides, of hearing their stories of suffering, my anger began to melt. As I traveled through Vietnam with my friend and translator, we kept asking one another, "Who suffers more, the victim or the perpetrator?" In the early '90s the Balkans fell back into century-old blood feuds. In 1995 I went to Cambodia to interview widows of the American bombings and Khmer Rouge atrocities. I came across a group of Buddhist monks and other Cambodians who were leading walks of forgiveness through Khmer Rouge territory in the hope that the killing would not continue into the next generation. I thought that if the Cambodian people can forgive the Khmer Rouge for the genocide of as much as a quarter of their population, I have nothing to be angry about. I realized that by holding on to my rage, I was continuing the war. It still lived inside me. With this realization, my anger finally melted into compassion. ■■■

Barbara Sonneborn's documentary, Regret to Inform, was nominated for an Academy Award in 1998. She recently formed the Widows of War Living Memorial, where women can tell their stories and work for peace. For more information, call 877-END-WARS [363-9277] or visit her Web site at www.regrettoinform.org.

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When I emerged, I realized that my range of options—my power as a citizen—had suddenly expanded. I was now ready, like the others, to go to prison if it would help end the war. A month later I copied the 7,000-page top-secret history of U.S. decision-making in Vietnam from 1945 through 1968 (which was later dubbed the Pentagon Papers) from my safe at the Rand Corporation and began reading it. I learned that President Truman, followed by President Eisenhower, had fully financed the French colonial war from 1945 through 1954. I also learned that President Nixon was as determined as Lyndon Johnson had been to avoid U.S. failure in Vietnam, and he had a secret plan to achieve this: by threatening to enlarge the war dramatically if North Vietnam did not withdraw its troops from the South (as we withdrew ours). I believed that the threats would fail, so I gave the document to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Almost two years later, defying four court injunctions granted at the President's request, I gave the document to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and 15 other newspapers.

I was indicted on 12 federal charges and faced 115 years in prison. Two years later, a federal judge dismissed all charges against me and my co-defendant, Tony Russo (a former Rand co-worker), after discovering that "gross governmental misconduct" had been directed against me by President Nixon, which led to his impeachment and resignation, and more important, helped shorten the war.

I feel grateful every day to the draft resisters who showed me another way to be a good American, to be free to follow Thoreau's advice to "cast your whole vote: not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence." Since the war ended I have campaigned against nuclear weapons and subsequent unlawful U.S. interventions. My efforts included lecturing, lobbying, demonstrating, and approximately 60 arrests

for nonviolent civil disobedience, all of which the war taught me were necessary and powerful actions in order to make democracy work.

The recent movie *The Insider*, about Jeffrey Wigand, the tobacco industry whistle-blower, is a reminder that organized activities that are kept secret from Congress and the public because of their recklessness, illegality, and danger to life are not limited to matters of state or of war. Merrell Williams, a paralegal at the law firm representing cigarette manufacturer Brown & Williamson, copied thousands of pages of documents that have been called the Pentagon Papers of the tobacco industry. Wigand's and Williams's ordeals demonstrate once again that a readiness to expose the truth at whatever cost can save lives and turn the course of history.

When I look back at my actions to end the war, I wish I had done in 1964 or 1965 what I did do five years later: *go to Congress, tell the truth, with documents*. From my first day in the Pentagon—August 4, 1964—I witnessed lies about U.S. provocations and imaginary torpedos in the Tonkin Gulf. I became a participant in secret plans to escalate the war as soon as President Johnson won in a landslide by promising voters just the opposite. If I (or others) had done then what I did later, the war could have been averted.

That's a heavy thought to bear, and I'm still carrying it. It's easy to say that it simply didn't occur to me at the time. Like so many others, I put personal loyalty to the President above all else—above loyalty to the Constitution and above obligation to the law, to truth, to Americans, and to humankind. I was wrong.

That's one reason why I'm writing my memoir, to convey that lesson to future officials as well as the more positive one I learned later: Telling the truth can have a power more than worthy of the risk. ■■■

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