

THE RUPTURES OF VIETNAM

by Philip Caputo

We were in Houston, Texas in 2015, four writers who had published Vietnam war novels or memoirs: Larry Heinemann (*Paco's Story*), Tim O'Brien (*The Things They Carried*), Tobias Wolff (*In Pharaoh's Army*), and me (*A Rumor of War*). Rice University's James Baker Institute had invited us to speak on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of America's fatal plunge into Vietnam.

More than 500 people filled the lecture hall. Most were in their 20s or 30s, and I wondered, Why do they want to listen to gray-haired warrior-poets talk about a conflict fought decades before they were born?

I played mind games with myself as I waited for my turn to speak. How long was 50 years? It was the time span separating Pearl Harbor from Desert Storm. And just a little more than 50 years lay between the date of my birth (June 10, 1941) and Wounded Knee (December 29, 1890), the last battle of the Indian Wars. While I was drawing my first breaths, would 500 twenty or thirty-somethings have gathered to hear war stories from a few age-bent cavalymen and Lakota warriors? Doubtful.

We hadn't drawn such a large and youthful audience for our looks or whatever thin slice of the celebrity pie each of us could claim. I think our listeners were aware, viscerally if not consciously, that the America they'd inherited was formed during the war — and by the war. They were curious to hear what we had to say about it, perhaps hoped we could shed some light on what was, to them, a distant event that nevertheless resonated in their lives.

Last month's publication of the 40th anniversary edition of my Vietnam memoir, *A Rumor of War*, and the forthcoming broadcast, on September 17th, of Ken Burns's monumental docu-

mentary, “The Vietnam War” (Disclosure: I have a small role in it) got me to thinking about the war’s enduring effects. Ten years in the making, with 10 episodes spanning 18 hours, Burns’s TV series promises to equal, if not exceed, his Civil War documentary in impact. It notes that Vietnam was our second civil war, the central event in a divisive, tumultuous period whose after-effects reverberate down to the present day. As Faulkner once said, “The past is never dead, it isn’t even past.”

The Sixties — really the 12 years between the assassination of President Kennedy in November, 1963 and the fall of Saigon in April, 1975 — changed America profoundly, for the better in some ways, and for the worse in others. I’ve often thought of it as a social, cultural, and political earthquake that demolished or damaged many of our most cherished myths and institutions. (Some, by the way, needed demolition). The epicenter was the war, exposing and expanding the divisions in American society between rich and poor, black and white, hawk and dove.

Those fractures have spiderwebbed in the past half-century, like multiple cracks radiating outward from a single break in a windshield (to change metaphors). Sometimes I look at America today and see a shattered pane of glass still in its frame, needing only a serious shock — another economic crisis or a terrorist attack as bad or worse than 9/11 — to send the pieces flying in all directions.

John Hellman, an English professor at Ohio State University, neatly summarized the war’s cultural impact in his book, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*:

“Vietnam is an experience that has severely called into question American myth. Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a story, a distinctly American story, would unfold. When the story of America in Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the true nature of the larger American story itself became the subject of intense cultural dispute. On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future.”

To be sure, a lot of positive things came out of the Vietnam era. It wasn't coincidental that the modern civil rights, feminist, and environmental movements arose then, drawing their energy from the "intense cultural dispute" engendered by the anti-war movement. America is now less racist and sexist, and more tolerant than it was when I was young.

But the 2016 presidential campaign, along with recent events in Charlottesville and elsewhere have revealed that the old ruptures are still with us, with more recent ones branching off from them: rural America versus urban America; native-born Americans versus immigrants, legal and illegal; straights versus gays; isolationists and nationalists versus globalists; feminists versus traditionalists, and the working class versus the well-educated elites.

The grievances of the white working class, real and imagined, its alienation from the so-called Establishment, can be traced back to Vietnam. Blue-collar boys bore the brunt of the war by serving in it, whether as volunteers or draftees, while graduate-school deferments spared the privileged. That's become a cliché, but it wasn't then. It was as real as a bullet or a whack on the head. If you're old enough, you should remember the street battles that erupted nationwide between "hard-hats" and anti-war protestors, between Chicago cops from working-stiff neighborhoods and student demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in 1968.

The idea that we're all in this together was undermined, and these days it's close to being lost altogether. We are balkanized by identity politics on the Progressive side of the divide, on the right by vitriolic bombast spewed on talk-radio and the Web by people advocating white identity politics. The power of the Internet, which was supposed to unite us, to do the opposite cannot be underestimated. Barricading ourselves in virtual echo-chambers, we're so fragmented now that we can't even agree that a fact is a fact. What I call fact, you call opinion, and describe your opinion as an "alternative fact."

But the most serious legacy of Vietnam has been mistrust of government.

“Among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages,” wrote Samuel Johnson in 1758. Republican Senator Hiram Johnson, speaking in 1918, is credited with the more succinct, “The first casualty when war comes is truth.” All through the decade-long Vietnam War, our political and military leaders flagrantly lied to the American public. They lied every time they said victory was at hand; they lied about the enemy’s strength, they lied about the secret bombings of Laos and Cambodia. The Saigon press briefings known as the “5 o’clock follies” were masterpieces of mendacity, presenting high-ranking officers lying to themselves as well as to the media.

The barrage of falsehoods eroded the trust in institutions that is essential to a healthy democracy. Elected government could not be counted on to level with its citizens. Eventually, the lack of confidence in, and hostility toward, national leadership trickled down to lower levels of authority. Draft boards were stormed and looted; the violent takeover of universities by student radicals became a seasonal event; the civil rights and anti-war movements morphed into the Black Panthers and the Weathermen.

Today, the statement, You can trust your government to do the right thing, is likely to draw gales of bitter laughter; what’s different is that the mistrust has spread, like those windshield cracks I mentioned, from the left to the right. Ronald Reagan voiced it with his famous one-liner, “The nine most terrifying words are, I’m from the government and I’m here to help.” It’s not inaccurate to say that the New Left and counter-culture of the Sixties fathered today’s New Right. Just as fringe groups like the Panthers and the Weathermen barged into American politics then, the “Alt-Right,” with its radical, incendiary nihilism, has gone mainstream now. *New York* magazine reported in a recent article that the Alt-Right — embodied by the likes of President Trump’s former advisor, Steve Bannon — has become “a powerful counter-culture.”

America has been a quarrelsome country from its birth, but the quarrelsomeness has taken a dark turn in recent times. After President Obama won re-election in 2012, a petition asking that Texas be allowed to secede from the union gathered 125,000 signatures. A Senatorial candidate in Nevada suggested in the 2010 election year that if conservatives like herself didn't get their way they might resort to armed insurrection. The desire to blow things up is hottest today among right-wingers, but isn't confined to them. Witness the anarchist gangs that brought violence to protests over police shootings of African-Americans, that infiltrated demonstrations at the University of California, Berkley.

This isn't to draw a false equivalency between white nationalists and the anti-fascists who confront them; but it is point out that the laws of political physics apply: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. If the seeds of the New Right can be traced back to the New Left, the New Right is creating a more up to date New Left. The center cannot hold. Sometimes I wonder if there is a center any more.

It's arguable that our present disharmony ultimately stems from the discord created by Vietnam. Yet, to my mind, secession petitions, calls to take up arms against the established order, and black-clad anarchists carrying signs that read "Become Ungovernable" illustrate what Professor Hellman's termed Vietnam's "disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future." Part of me hopes that the Burns documentary will start a new national conversation about that war and its era, an examination of the Ur-break, so to speak, and in time lead to a re-uniting of our Disunited States. Another part fears it's too late for that. Such a dialogue should have taken place decades ago.

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