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HST 195

Assignment 1

In Part One of the Appy book the account of Phan Xuan Sinh left a great impression on me. I cannot imagine the deep sense of regret felt at the realization that one has fired upon and killed innocents. At the same time that I feel a great deal of sympathy for the anguish this must have caused, I have to admit a slight feeling of incredulity. He recalls that his recon unit was waiting for Viet Cong to arrive in their boats. The boats approached and they saw what they believed to be the silhouettes of rifles against the night sky and took fire, only afterward discovering it had been a group of fishermen accompanied by women and children. The part that confuses me, the part that makes me question the truthfulness of his account, is that he then states that it is common for fishermen in Vietnam to fish at unusual hours, including late nights. Why, given the knowledge of local fishing habits, were they not more careful to determine who they were firing upon beforehand? I have, as part of my nature, a tendency to assume the good in all people, but there is a disjoint created by what seems like something so common sense here—that one should be certain, in areas where civilians are present, that those they fire upon are those they intend to fire upon. Perhaps the chaos of war overrides ones common sense. Perhaps that ought to be a good enough reason not to engage in it.

In Part Two I was instantly excited to read the account of Malcolm Browne when I learned in the opening paragraph that he was the journalist who captured the haunting images of the immolation of Thich Quang Duc. Unfortunately I found myself disappointed at his somewhat cavalier presentation of the experiences he had in Vietnam. His primary comments on his experience of the immolation were that he sought distraction through the photographing process; he did not speak to the emotional impact, the social message, or the great tragedy of it. He later goes on to state that, “You can’t help liking even sometimes naïve Buddhist monks,” which I thought was a bit smug and even more disrespectful, showing a lack of understanding for a group of people within which he had supposedly formed several close ties. He further makes me a bit uneasy when he remarks that “...by and large war is boring... not just for the journalists, but for the troops.” I am of the belief that the 58,000 Americans and countless Vietnamese who lost their lives in this war would have preferred boredom to death.

After reading the account presented by Mrs. Browne I was even more bothered by the careless statements her husband had made. Having married a woman whose

family is comprised of Buddhists I would think he would be more thoughtful in his assessment of the impact the war had on them, and yet he doesn't give it a mention. She too disappointed me. At one moment she asserts herself as a critic of the First Lady's inappropriate labeling of the immolation as "bar-b-q" but then backpedals later by expressing admiration for this same woman. After reading both of these accounts I felt that they were both trying to float the political middle line, remain somewhat neutral and avoid taking a firm stance. My final impression is that these are not people who are indifferent to the experience of war or of the people or experiences of Vietnam, but that they are perhaps careless in their choices of words; after all, these are supposedly educated individuals.

Despite the horrific nature of war, I did find some personal inspiration in the words of Vo Nguyen Giap. I hope to never know the sentiment he expressed when he stated that the reason the Vietnamese won the war was "because [they] would rather die than live in slavery." It's not a particularly cheerful sentiment, but it is a sentiment wrought with the passionate devotion all humans feel about their sense of freedom, of autonomy, and about their willingness to do anything to achieve and maintain it. As a person descended from victims of the African Slave trade and American chattel slavery, I can certainly empathize with these sentiments, for it was only as a result of my ancestors struggles against oppression that I exist today, and I imagine countless Vietnamese can say the same. My hope in this is that these great tragedies in history will eventually lead all to realize the inherent right all human beings have to self govern, not only on a national, but also on community and personal levels. It is not something I expect my children to know, nor their children, but I hope.

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