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History of the Vietnam War
Assignment #1

The story in Part One of Christian G. Appy's book *Patriots* that captured my attention was of George Watkins (21-5). Though obviously tragic in that he was so severely injured in a war of which he had so little understanding, what amazed me about his story were the events that led to his situation and his acceptance of it. Although his MOS [military occupational specialty] was to be a combat engineer, he found himself selected an infantryman. He was given an M-60 machine gun and, with no infantry training, was somehow expected to do a job for which he had no educational foundation. Yet, despite his horrific injuries, he holds no hatred for the Vietnamese against whom he was fighting. His ill feelings about his condition are reserved for the politicians whose policies he was sent to enforce. He made a statement in his interview with Appy that really made me stop and think. He said: "They's some of the most determined people I've ever run into. I don't hate them, they did what they had to do. It's the politicians that put everybody in that place" (23). Despite all he has been through, he seems, based on Appy's short interview, to hold the Vietnamese in high regard and without blame for his tragedy. I wonder how I would feel, were I in his shoes. His story seems quite credible because he lives with the results of that war and what happened to him there in such a physical way every day. That he does so without bitterness is the absolutely amazing part of this story to me.

His story touches on the fact that he lives with his sister who takes care of him. I was left wondering how she must feel. I cannot imagine what his situation means in her life, and I would have liked to have heard something from her perspective. What was it like for her when he came home? What is it like for her now? I think the impact on the families of Vietnam veterans, especially those of injured veterans, is an area not given the exposure it deserves. It is an inspiring story, and one that left me with a sense of awe mixed with sadness.

I found Appy's interview with Chester Cooper the most disappointing interview in Part Two (84-86). What struck me was America's lack of fundamental knowledge about Indochina and the Vietnamese people and culture. As Cooper states: "Our ignorance about

Indochina was pervasive. My first assignment at Geneva was to find out if there really was such a person as Ho Chi Minh or whether he had died many years before and somehow the Vietnamese were just keeping his image alive. We had no idea" (84). This type of ignorance has been a theme in several interviews in Appy's book. It is shocking to me that those sent to negotiate, create policy, advise, pacify, and eventually wage war, knew so little about the theater. It seems common sense to me that there should be someone in the U.S. embassy fluent in Vietnamese and familiar with their culture and religions, at the very least. Without this kind of basic understanding, it is no wonder diplomatic avenues for a peaceful resolution of the conflict proved so elusive.

Cooper also made clear in his interview the patronizing way in which President Johnson viewed the South Vietnamese government and its delegates. He regarded them as a people and a government in need of an instructor, almost as if they were children. This is evidenced by President Johnson's condescending utterance at the conclusion of Prime Minister Nguyen Cao's speech: "Boy, you speak just like an American" (86). It is disappointing to me that with so little understanding of the region, its people and their customs, our government would gamble with American lives by entering a conflict there and be so reluctant to explore a diplomatic resolution more thoroughly.

I found some goodness in the first three paragraphs of Appy's interview with Daniel Redman. Redman has an honest compassion for the refugees he was sent to evacuate from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, the same compassion and empathy lost to many soldiers then, as well as later in the war. Describing the refugees situation Redman says: "Your heart just broke when you saw them" (48). Despite the deplorable conditions created trying to move almost a million people, many of whom were simple, almost primitive in the way they lived, Redman was able keep sight of the perceived nobility in what he was doing. He does not lose his humanity in dealing with the Vietnamese people the way the French legionnaires seem to have done. I could really get a sense for his disgust at the way the refugees were sometimes treated when he says: "These goddamn French legionnaires were shoving people like cattle. I felt like a war criminal, but at least I got them out of there" (48). Redman had a real sense of purpose, and he considers his work a humanitarian effort more than anything else. He truly felt that he was saving the peasants from a brutal life under a communist regime. His feelings for the Vietnamese become clear when he says: "I developed a tremendous liking for the Vietnamese, and since I'm Catholic, I felt a religious affiliation with the refugees" (48). In Redman's mind, he was doing the right

thing; he was standing by his convictions, trying to help a people he truly cared for. I think his attitude and the empathy he showed the people of Vietnam is commendable.

Works Cited

Appy, Christian G. *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*.

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