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Patriots Journal Entry #3

One theme that is seen again and again when reading the personal accounts presented in Patriots by Christian Appy is that of willful ignorance. Willful ignorance can be defined as "a bad faith decision to avoid becoming informed about something so as to avoid having to make undesirable decisions that such information might prompt" (wikipedia.com). There are many ways that we see this type of ignorance manifested throughout the accounts of those involved in the conflict. What all of these have in common, however, is the fact that willful ignorance was a necessary defense mechanism. On both sides of the conflict those involved were asked to continue to struggle through relentless turmoil. In circumstances such as these, reason and rationality could work against you, and the human brain seemed to need to find a way to cope with the intellectual dissonance that living in this environment created. "In Vietnam I learned about the capacity of the human mind to build a model of experience that screens out even very dramatic and obvious realities." (Patriots, pg. 205) This is a quote from the war journalist Jonathan Schell, and it gives us a very clear idea of what it is to be willfully ignorant. He is speaking of how his fellow journalists held on to "a story they had brought with them to Vietnam" of the American efforts being those of "freeing an enslaved people" (Patriots, pg. 205). The devastating bombing witnessed by these journalists in Quang Ngai Province should have proven to them otherwise. Instead *The New York Times* article that came out of this was one about marines building a hospital, not of the destruction of over three fourths of the villages of this province. It seems that they simply could not believe what was going on right in front of their eyes.

Sometimes this type of ignorance seemed even more willful than others. This can clearly be seen in the interview with fighter pilot Harlan S. Pinkerton Jr. It is within his account that we can see the most common manifestation of willful ignorance during the Vietnam war: blind patriotism. By following orders and doing exactly what is asked of you as a soldier, unquestioningly, you are by definition being willfully ignorant. "To me, it was my responsibility as an American citizen. I didn't really question it. I had orders. My country had made the decision that we were going to take part in that conflict over there and it was my duty to my country to follow the orders." (Patriots, pg. 221) He uses this inherently weak argument to justify to us and, most importantly, to himself the reason why he happily dropped thousands of pounds of bombs on the heads of simple country farmers. The British author Samuel Johnson referred to this reality almost two hundred years earlier with his famous quote: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel".

At other times, however, we see this type of ignorance utilized as a true defense mechanism to shield one's psyche from unspeakable pain. Whereas Pinkerton was willfully ignorant in order to help justify to himself his deeds, Truong Ma Hoa held fast to her belief system in spite of the fact that doing so would subject her to even more horrific torture. She, as well as many of her fellow prisoners of war, had taken to heart the words spoken by the poet To Huu: "I consider myself a half dead person already" (Patriots, pg. 230). The most natural instinct for a human being is to do anything it takes to survive. In her case, she defies this instinct by refusing to give any information to her captors. A more existentialist definition of willful ignorance is simply the denying of one's total freedom of will. By considering herself half dead already, while acknowledging "A revolutionary's integrity is sacred" (Patriots, pg. 230) we can see very clearly how willful ignorance shaped her experience during the Vietnam war. She went as far as almost dehumanizing herself for her cause.

Willful ignorance has as much to do with reconciliation than anything else. How do I reconcile to myself the fact that I am being tortured; the fact that I am torturing someone else? How do I justify an overall peaceful pursuit (the "liberation" of South Vietnam) by the slaughtering of hundreds of thousands of people? Paul Warnke unknowingly sums up the theme of willful ignorance perfectly with one line: "I don't know whether the war was morally wrong, but it was killing so many people"(Patriots, pg. 280).

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