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Patriots Book: Parts 1 & 2

The interview of retired Marine Corps, General Bernard Trainor concludes with a very powerful quote, which sums up Trainor's feelings and those who took part in the Vietnam War. Trainor was asked to expand upon what he had once previously written, a "genie of anguish" that he had bottled up inside. He states, "Well I still can't go to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The genie's still there. I don't know. And I'm not alone. I guess it was the waste and frustration, both seen and what you knew about. You say, 'Jesus Christ, Fifty-eight thousand people—good kids.' That's about all I can say. Deep down there's a hurt and I don't know what it is. I can't control it. It's always there and I think I'll just live with it for the rest of my life." (Appy, 2003, p.8). What's interesting is the belief in American success during his first tour in 1965, relatively quickly turned to disenchantment upon his return in 1970. What were the reasons behind his change of opinion? Perception and reality do not always coincide and upon his return Vietnam in 1970, the Cold War world view of Communism as a monolithic block, with Moscow pulling the strings proved to be a false. America refused to realize although fundamentally Communist, Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese cause were rooted in Nationalism and has historically resisted outside direction. In the view of the State Department, the United States could not "afford to assume that Ho Chi Minh is anything but Moscow-directed." (Herring, (2002), p.13). Additionally, the democratic government under Ngo Dinh Diem was failing. Diem's nationalism and anti-communist views made him the logical choice for the leader of South Vietnam, there were concerns he lacked the political ability to strengthen and unite the people of the south. Despite the concerns, the argument was, "there was no one to take his place who would serve U.S. interests better." (Herring, 2002, p 62) Diem would later prove to be a poor choice and cause trouble for the United States and the war in Vietnam.

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Diem's lack of capacity to govern lead him to implement often brutal and repressive political policies to crush and defeat opposition, thereby alienated the majority of the population in the south. This only served to drive support to the North and harm any U.S. political objectives. Government policies and political mishandlings were not the only factor in the rising opposition to the United States and government of South Vietnam. General Westmoreland's strategy of "search-and-destroy" proved to be counter-productive. Not only were North Vietnamese being killed in relatively large numbers, civilian casualties were also incurred thereby eroding the trust of the Vietnamese had towards U.S. forces. A major flaw in this strategy of attrition and using the number of enemy killed as a measure of success was to discount the vast number of North Vietnamese with the will power to endure a long protracted war. Once it became clear the current military strategy was ineffective coupled with the corrupt Diem government the American soldier began to believe they were fighting an unwinnable war.

back to Trainor

General Trainor's view of his involvement in the Vietnam War comes across as very believable and sincere. This was not a historian's account of the events but an actual field grade officer who actively took part in both the fighting and direction of forces under his command. Due to his position of military rank he was not far removed or politicized to not see the ground-truth realities of political and military decisions.

Former North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap's attitude in the story is disappointing and lacks subjectivity in his view on the war. He paints a picture that the atrocities which occurred during the war were only committed by American forces. He states, "The American War can be described as the most atrocious conflict in human history". (Appy, 2003, p. 42) Unfortunately American forces did commit atrocities in Vietnam and this cannot be forgotten or forgiven. But to make such a bold claim as the "most atrocious" in human history denies previous war histories were there are countless documented examples of atrocities committed by the Germans, the Japanese, and Russia in World War II, and others before that. Has he forgotten Communist forces also committed atrocities on Americans as well as Vietnamese civilians? In the early years after the Geneva Accords, under Ho Chi Minh leadership there are reports of up to 500,000 people executed after implementation of a land reform program in Northern Vietnam. (Herring, 2002, p.81) Additionally, terrorism was a primary part of the

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Communist strategy in the unification of Vietnam; insurgent attacks in Saigon and Viet Cong death squad regularly killed the innocent. One could argue Ho and Giap welcomed news of American atrocities and saw it as a benefit in winning over the support of the South Vietnamese population. And lastly, let's not forget the treatment of prisoners in North Vietnamese prison camp where routine brutality, torture, and psychological abuse took place. Both sides have blood on their hands! To deny the atrocities of the North Vietnamese army is to deny history and the true price the Vietnamese people paid. Or as Giap, calls a "noble sacrifice".

From the stories in first two chapters of the book I am hopeful books like this will help the many people on both sides who fought in the war or lost loved ones gain insight into the struggles each individual had go through during their time in Vietnam. It is through stories like these that people may come to understand the long term pain and anguish many Vietnam veterans still have to this day. Some of the stories point out definite political errors made in the assumption of the war in Vietnam and that can be a good thing. It helps us to remember the world is not so simple or black and white. Not everything can be categorized as good and evil, only different viewpoints.

Works Cited

Appy, Christian G. *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*. New York: Viking, 2003. Print.

Herring, George C. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. Boston, Mass.: McGraw-Hill, 2002. Print.

David, A strange, unique, but overall good paper. I loved the use of supportive Herring material, but the discussion quickly got away from my posed questions. At least you returned briefly to credibility in Part 1. Part 2 was better in that you definitely countered the age & inaccuracies (or incompleteness) of Giap's comments. The conclusion was definitely your own topic, not mine. But because of your paper length (long) I can forgive the off topic parts because you have enough about what I asked-