

Due date: Sunday, 10 April 2011, 11:55 PM
Last edited: Sunday, 10 April 2011, 04:00 PM (1031 words)

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Assignment 1, part 1. George Watkins

George Watkins' story resonated with me because he was a sort of real life Forrest Gump. Except that in the real world we cannot rely on simply being the lead character in our own storylines to protect us from the costs of war. George Watkins is a common man. His

family background is that of a common working class family. George is no elite, no pampered American. George is, in essence, the American equivalent of a Vietnamese village peasant.

In George's encounter with the villagers of Que Son Valley he says, "They had to be some good people to withstand all that." I don't think that George realized that he was seeing his own family in those poor struggling Vietnamese. George didn't demonize the people on the other side of the conflict. I respect George for his ability to see beyond national lines and appreciate the hardships of those people that he was directed to treat like livestock.

We can take George's story at face value. He expresses no agenda, has no cross to bear, no blame to place. He seems to feel no long simmering resentment towards the people of Vietnam or their national identity. He doesn't even express disapproval of his own government in terms more harsh than "It was a bad political mistake." for sending him to fight and suffer for a cause that he describes as "...fighting over there against communism, so-called." His story is too simple to express the complexity of the overarching political circumstances of the war, but in it's own way its simplicity is the perfect expression of the truth of the war, for in the end wars are primarily fought and paid for by people at the bottom of the social spectrum.

yes . . . nice job

Assignment 1, part 2. Luyen Nguyen

The war was, of course, not lost by a single story, but Luyen Nguyen tells a story that helps explain why we lost the war. In his story we can see the elements of the mindset that prevented us from utilizing our resources and alienated the Vietnamese.

In Nguyen we had the heart and mind of an apparently resourceful and determined young man. His initial perspectives are right in line with the doctrine that we were trying to spread in South Vietnam. He believed that he was fighting for his own country, and that the American's were there to help. In a war, like Vietnam, where counter insurgency is an issue, this kind of asset is of the highest

A major issue

value.

It is terrible that we undermined his sense of purpose by telling him "You know nothing" and then failing to show him proper respect while he tried to do his job well. According to Nguyen the American trainers would tell the fledgling commandos that they should ignore the Vietnamese because the Americans hire and pay them. I feel a sense of shame reading that Americans would act so arrogant. Even more so that it was happening in a place and time where earning the goodwill of the population was so important to the cause. This kind of thinking is disappointing in how shortsighted it was. We state explicitly that we want to help build a nation, that we are there to teach them to hold themselves up. Instead we treat them like stupid savages. How can we expect to gain their support? The moral boost of purporting ideals could not outlast the honeymoon phase if we would not apply them with conviction.

Nguyen says that he believes that the operation in which he was captured was a "planned failure". **I don't think that there is enough information in this one source to accept this idea wholeheartedly** but consider it very plausible considering how the Vietnamese were generally treated in his story and others in this book. Also this claim gains plausibility when we consider how little consideration was given to the fates of the commandos in John Singlaub's account of his request to discontinue the program. In the interview immediately before Nuyen's John Singlaub explains that the program Nuyen was in was found to be ineffective. Singlaub states that the teams sent into North Vietnam were almost all captured, killed or turned. Despite his findings, five years into the program, it was kept running for two more years. John states that he expressed to his superiors that the program was a failure and supported his reasoning with logical explanations, but that the program was kept in place. It may be sarcasm but John says that he suspects that Secretary of Defense McNamara wanted to increase the number of colored pins on the northern part of his map.

It's possible to extrude that Nguyen may have suffered twenty one years of prison because the map on McNamara's wall needed more colored pins in the Northern part of Vietnam. What does it say about the moral of the entire war making edifice when middle management have no confidence in their superiors, and no respect for those they command? What does it say when valuable resources like Nguyen are wasted with disregard?

Looking for a silver lining on this cloud was actually pretty easy. War is a tragedy and exploring it can be disheartening, but inevitably it comes back to the human component. The postscript for Nguyen's interview tells us that he has regained his wife and his children, in spite of the drama of her having remarried. He also apparently has no longstanding resentment towards Americans.

Nguyen has moved to the United States and has continued to better himself through education. I cannot help but respect a man that puts his trials, no matter how heinous, behind himself and looks and acts in a forward direction. It's also nice that the American people can feel a small bit of guilt relief in the compensation paid to Mr. Nguyen.

I doubt that we could have won that war at any costs, but feel bad that we were so foolish and petty in our attempt and that people like Luyen Nguyen had to pay the price for it.

I was right. Very well done paper. You command of the English language was one of the best in the class for this first assignment.

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