

“Our resistance will be long and painful, but whatever the sacrifices, however long the struggle, we shall fight to the end, until Vietnam is fully independent and reunified.”

HO CHI MINH, statement, Dec. 19, 1946

“If I left [the war in Vietnam] and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser, and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe”

President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1964

Difficult Decisions

I recently spent some time trying to account for every decision I make during the course of a single day. Geez! Not only was that a waste of time, but it was also impossible! Thinking over the memorable decisions I’ve made as an adult, though, I realized that no one is immune to making difficult decisions. Minimalist case study: I remember being the last one sitting at the dinner table staring at a pile of Del Monte faded green peas. My moment of decision was: eat the green peas and enjoy some unremembered dessert, or sit at the table (the pile of peas eyeing me as viciously as I glared at it) until my mother tired of monitoring me or bedtime arrived, whichever event came first. At that time in my young life, this was a very difficult, stomach-churning decision.

Aging and experience broaden the decisions we face and the stakes become higher, and concurrently, there is more to gain or lose. Of the 350 interviews Christian Appy conducted for his book Patriots, 135 were included and the majority involved difficult decisions. After I read portions from Patriots, I noted a distinct pattern emerge from three individuals whose only shared experience was the Vietnam War. The decisions they made were difficult, the kind that haunts a person at night, raising answerless questions and leaving behind the tormenting query *what if?*

Contrary to what some people *may* believe, I’ve never been elected to the office of the President of the United States nor do I even know anyone who has even met a president. I know there are presidents whose names few people outside of historians remember and some presidents whose names few could forget. Lyndon Baines Johnson falls into the second category. Charles

Cooper, a person interviewed for Patriots, had this to say of our 36th president: “He used the f-word more freely than a marine in boot camp.” [Note: the infamous f-word will hereafter be referred to as the F-bomb – a term somehow more fitting to the subject at hand.] Cooper, an aide to Admiral David L McDonald who was a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [paraphrased pg. 121], prepared a map to take in to President Johnson for a briefing regarding Vietnam. General Wheeler presented a plan which involved using U.S. strength to suppress the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese, it was believed, would “sue for peace” if the U.S. castigated enough.

Johnson’s roaring response: “So you’re going to cut them off, keep them from being reinforced, and then you’re going to bomb them into the Stone Age.” While this was not specifically said, it seemed Johnson did hear the unspoken words. The Army and Marine chiefs fully supported the plan. This is where the President of the United States memorably unleashed, at full volume, dropping multiple F-bombs which were supported by a cast of colorful words designed to leave ears at the receiving end yearning to sprint out the door. At the end of Johnson’s harangue, he calmly stated: “Imagine that you’re me.....and five incompetents come into your office and try to talk you into starting World War 3....let’s see what kind of guts you have with the whole damn world to worry about.” Cooper’s memory recalled in sharp detail Johnson’s words that day and the words of General Wheeler: “Well, Mr. President, we fully realize that what we’re going to present to you today requires a very **difficult decision** on your part.”

“A goddamn chopper was worth three times more than David.” This is the opening to the interview between Appy and Jim Soular. David is dead and is one of Soular’s “...greatest sorrows.” As a 19-year-old flight engineer during Vietnam, Soular admits he loved the war and he loved the flying [Paraphrased pg. 157]. The turning point for him came when his best friend, David, was killed in front of him by another GI. Harris, a drunken, out-of-control GI, picked a fight with David and, with no provocation, shot him in the face. Twenty years after the war, Soular went to Minnesota to talk with David’s mom. She said that her husband was dead and never had gotten over the death of his only child. During their conversation, David’s mom referred to her son’s death as an “accident in the barracks” and Soular understood that, after twenty years, she did not know the truth. I believe it must have been an incredibly **difficult decision** Soular had to make, weighing the consequences of giving knowledge to the woman who had given birth to David. Often, consequences are bittersweet. David’s mother was “crushed” when she learned the truth yet “comforted” that David did not die alone.

“We amputated the limbs of men who even expressed relief. For them the war was finally over.” This is the last sentence of the interview between Appy and Chi Nguyen. The interview was short and difficult for me to read. Nguyen worked in the Vietnamese military’s largest hospital, located in Saigon. As an

orthopedic surgeon, he saw horrific wounds that most people cannot even imagine. Nguyen recalls a procedure he performed for a young man who'd had a grenade explode in his hands. The young man lost his eyes and his hands. Nguyen took skin from the young man's forearms and wrapped it around bones to create two big fingers. The young man cried when he was able to hold a cup of tea. Were these tears of joy because he could hold a cup, or tears of heartache at what his future would hold? The **difficult decisions** Nguyen made every day were endless. He shared with Appy that he felt as if he'd held the destiny of those soldiers in his hands. Nguyen chose who would receive treatment first. I cannot envision ever being in that situation. It's not within my capabilities to make a choice whether someone may live or die. Chi Nguyen retired from a Veterans Administration hospital in Boston, having caught one of the last flights out when Saigon fell.

From those who sat in the highest positions within their governments to the frontline soldier crawling on his belly in a trench while the enemy rained down death in the form of munitions, each person made **difficult decisions**. Literature is filled with plots and references concerning **difficult decisions** but sometimes truth does outdo fiction and the choices faced during times of war may prove to be the most difficult, and ultimately most controversial, decisions of all.

"No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now."

RICHARD NIXON, New York Times, Mar. 28, 1985

Works Cited

Patriots. Christian G. Appy. Penguin Books. 2003

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