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Assignment 1

Part 1

Which single story, other than that of Jo Collins, in Part 1 of the Patriots book caught your attention? Why? How reliable, trustworthy, believable do you believe that speaker to be? After all, unlike you or me, they were there, at that specific point in time. Does that give them more or less credibility? Are they objective and factual or do they suffer from too much subjectivity, too much time having passed, too much forgotten? (These are not easy questions... please take some time to analyze what I'm asking for here.)

When multiple people experience the same event, each and every one has a different experience related to that event. This is where it can be most helpful to hear the collective story in order to more accurately understand what happened. Although all of the stories in Part 1 of Appy's Patriots were touching in some way, I had a difficult time deciding between Roger Donlon's (p.12) and Tran Thu Gung's (p.15) stories as the single story that most caught my attention. I have decided upon Donlon's for the way he succinctly captures both the factual and emotional aspects of some extremely heart wrenching aspects of the war. I believe Donlon to be a reliable, trustworthy, believable speaker on the subjects which he describes because he really doesn't make many personal judgments, but rather tells exactly what happened during the five-hour defense of his Special Forces camp in the mountains of northern South Vietnam. He does remark about feelings related to the events, but I believe the fact that he was there himself, living through the horrors as well as seeing some victory, gives him more credibility overall. It is easy for those of us who hear about wartime details to make judgments about them without actually experiencing the truth for ourselves. It is true that there will always be some subjectivity involved when recalling an event from the past, but memories such as Donlon's are so horrific that it is difficult not to believe he remembers the details well. As I read his recollection of the Vietnamese interpreter who continued running on his stumps for 30 seconds before dying, I felt like I was there watching, and it was terrible. His explanation of not being able to raise a U.S. flag at camp and how that affected morale also was quite telling. Although his story evokes strong emotions and is told from his vantage point, it is incredibly valuable toward helping us understand the realities of the Vietnam War.

Part 2

Which story or stories (definitely one, but not more than two) were the most disappointing for you to read and why? You may have been disappointed with the speaker him/herself (with their attitude, for example) or disappointed by the events in their story (with the frustrating way in which they were treated or in the negative situations in which they had to interact with others). Start your answer to Part 2 with this negative, critical point of view first.

It is always disappointing to read about someone in power using that power to destroy innocent lives. Ngo Vinh Long's story (p.54) created deep feelings of disappointment in me for several reasons. First, here was a South Vietnamese young man who idolized the United States, seeing our country as the beacon of light we claimed to be to the world. His father was a Christian idealist who spoke highly of Americans, but who was then horribly tortured by the French when he joined the Viet Minh cause. When America began supporting the French, his father became quite worried about the Americans replacing the French in Vietnam, because all along he was a nationalist who just wanted independence for his country. He wisely foresaw the dangers of too much American involvement there. Sadly, Vinh Long's opinions of the U.S. (actually, for their policies, but not for the people) changed dramatically for the worse. Second, here was a mapmaker who traveled the country extensively and saw firsthand the way U.S. "strategic hamlet" policies negatively affected the thousands of Vietnamese peasants who were touched by them. I cannot imagine having my only source of livelihood burned down as so many of the peasants' rice fields were, or being held a political prisoner on my own land as many of them were, or being starved to death by my own government as many of them were. Third, Vinh Long grew up with Diem as president and looked up to him, thinking he was a "good guy." Yet again, as he witnessed the numerous public executions that Diem flaunted, his positive opinion of what was supposed to be a good government turned negative. I find it sad when a young person looks up to leaders, only to have those same leaders fill him with utter disgust and disappointment as he witnesses the truth. If anything, I am learning that the conflict in Vietnam was very complicated, and it was not clear what the U.S. should or should not have done at the time. However, in retrospect, it is disappointing that we lost the support of such a brilliant young mind as Vinh Long's.

In the second half of Part 2, address any positive lesson(s) you may have learned from one or more of the accounts in Part 2 of the book. Is there any "hope", "compassion", "goodness" or the "potential for good" that comes out of any of these stories?

Although Vinh Long's story was disappointing in many regards, I definitely see hope in his story as well. I greatly respect his father's beliefs that you shouldn't hate the people of a nation, just the policies. It seems this teaching stayed with Vinh Long. He lives and works in the United States, which tells me he must not harbor resentment toward this nation. It is possible to disagree strongly with the policies of a government without internalizing lasting hatred toward that regime. Another part of a story that offers goodness is that of Richard Olsen (p.62). He tells of when he almost drowned in

Vietnam years after the war, but was rescued by a young Vietnamese lifeguard who represented the Viet Cong to him. What a wonderful depiction of the bridging of a gap between two people groups who were sworn enemies years before. Finally, it is amazing to me the overall resilience and good-nature of the Vietnam people. A local man I know of was only ten years old living in Saigon when it was taken in the final days of the war. He was there the day it was overthrown but left for America only hours before it would have been too late. His father, who was a military official for the South Vietnamese, was held as a prisoner of war by the North for many years afterward. It was almost thirty years before the family was reunited. However, this man says, "I have no flashbacks, and no regrets."

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