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History of the Vietnam War

Assignment 1

October 9, 2011

Tran Thi Gung's story was the most powerful story in section one. While all the stories are meaningful and involve the war in different ways, I found myself drawn to this one because I could easily identify with certain aspects, but not with others. It is easy to understand why she joined the guerilla movement and wanted to liberate and help her country. Nationalism is something that many of us can relate to. However, the way she described killing soldiers, being shot at, and being trapped underground for days is something that would break me as a person. When she says that she never felt guilty for the killing she did, I wonder if that is true, or she is holding back these emotions.

I believe Tran Thi Gung's account of her experience to be a trustworthy account of what it was like to be a Northern Vietnamese soldier. She speaks of the Americans as the enemy, and says things that seem to be remnants of war propaganda, such as "A stork can't shit into a bottle, so with our tunnels we shouldn't be scared of American bombers". Her account is fairly objective for having been in the army and having her comrades killed. She ends her story by justifying the killing she did by saying that it was either kill or be killed, and the Americans were the ones that came to kill her people, not vice versa. I believe that the passing of time has made her capable of reflecting on her experience, however, the story she tells seems a little distant. I believe she may have

sounded more emotional when she said the words, but on paper, without a description of her facial features and tone of voice, it is hard to tell.

The most disappointing thing to read about in Part 2 was when I learned about how the American government continued to send in South Vietnamese spies into North Vietnam, even when they knew they were getting captured, killed, or turned into double agents. One of the stronger themes of Part 2 seemed to be the lack of information and the communication breakdown on the American side. For example, serious mistakes were made in training military groups for the wrong kind of battle, and the lack of understanding the people and where they come from led to a loss of support for Diem and the American government. John Singlaub was a commander of SOG, and sent teams of spies into North Vietnam. From his account as well as the account of Luyen Nguyen, it seems as if it was no secret that these missions were not going very well. None of the spies ever came back before the end of the war; however, the program still ran from 1961 to 1968! The message that comes across in Singlaub's story is that the government was able to feel good having this mission go on, whether or not it accomplished anything. There was pressure to have more people in North Vietnam, and this was a way of doing it. It is frustrating to think about people on one side of the world making poor decisions that led to the death or torture of people who were simply following orders and trusting the government to make the right choice. Another theme that has come across through the readings is the way some Americans felt as if the Vietnamese were below them. It seems as though the government had no problem sending Vietnamese soldiers into a mission doomed to fail.

Although this section had many stories that showed the negative and dirty side of the war, there were a few pieces of "light" that shone through. The story told by Daniel Redmond mentions Thomas A Dooley, who was a navy doctor that wrote a book about his experience with Vietnamese refugees. While Redmond says that the book was full of inaccuracies, Dooley was a very kind man who was "genuinely concerned about the people". He visited injured soldiers, learned Vietnamese, and got to know the Vietnamese as well as enlisted men. This reminded me that not all people who went to Vietnam separated themselves from the people. I think if more people had made the effort to learn Vietnamese when they were there, and gotten to know the people, the war could have been very different.

Another section from Redmond's account touched me. At the very end, he reads from a letter he wrote back in 1955 about what he was doing in Vietnam. He acknowledges that back then, he thought the world could be divided into good and evil. He says he wouldn't say those same things now, and he has learned that the problem was very complicated and a preventative war was no solution. It's meaningful that he was able to look back on his experiences and see where he was naïve about the situation. It shows that he learned an important lesson about the world and life. It also shows the way society has changed its thinking from "good vs evil" to complicated "shades of gray" ideology.

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