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The Moral Fog of War: Vietnam Through Cracked Reformed Glasses

by Sylvan Gerritsma

My father was a proud World War II veteran from Sioux Center, Iowa. So I was born and grew up there and eventually went to Dordt College. That is not just a biographical tidbit. It is the background for the deep-seated Reformed worldview I imbibed there—a worldview developed particularly by Dutch thinkers with the heritage of Abraham Kuyper. You may recognize that worldview in this essay.

My college years approximately coincided with the rise and peak of national anti-establishment protest focused most sharply against the Vietnam war, although Dordt College and Sioux Center certainly were not hotbeds of counter-cultural protest. My father’s generation was deeply committed to American exceptionalism (though we never heard that term) and was deeply worried about the threat of global communism to the world, which depended largely on America to restrain that threat. Those commitments deeply pervaded the Sioux Center of my youth. But the draft indiscriminately swept up kids from Berkeley as well as from Sioux Center.

After graduation I, too, would have been drafted, but I volunteered in order to be assured of the opportunity to become an officer. So after basic training and advanced infantry training, I completed officer candidate school in engineering but then was commissioned as a 2nd Lt in military intelligence. I spent the next year in the intelligence center of the Army, researching POWs, interrogation techniques, brainwashing, and related issues. Then, after completing parachute training, I was deployed to Vietnam for a year. About half of my time there in the 101st Airborne Division was spent as an administration officer; the other half I was in charge of an electronic surveillance unit. We implanted, monitored, and maintained seismic and magnetic sensors to track

Sylvan Gerritsma graduated from Dordt in 1968, then served in the US Army 1968-1971. Among the military honors received, “somewhat ironically,” were the Bronze Star for contributions in a combat zone and, more significantly, the Soldier’s Medal, the Army’s highest honor for heroism not involving conflict with an enemy. He is now a retired businessman, living in St Catharines, Ontario, and volunteering in various capacities. As he states, “I have been blessed for the past 50 years by the Christian worldview which I began to learn at Dordt.”
enemy movement. In 1970-71, when I was there, U.S. military activity was still intense but past its peak, and the number of troops was being reduced.

For my father’s generation, the need for Christian discernment about U.S. responsibility in the world and the justification for war did not feel so compelling. Especially after Pearl Harbor, it did not require sophisticated insight to conclude that we Americans were on the side of the angels and that we knew who the demons were. During the next twenty years of cold war, it was still easy to cast ourselves as Christians fighting for a righteous cause against the worldwide threat of atheistic communism. But as post-war U.S. military interventions proliferated—Korea, Egypt, Lebanon, Cuba, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Iran, Iraq, Grenada, Honduras, Nicaragua, Persian Gulf, Panama, Columbia, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Haiti, Serbia, Pakistan, and more—the conviction of our righteous purity faltered. Central to that faltering was Vietnam. And the big question of the purity of our cause was upstaged by questions about the morality of our methods. Let me illustrate with a story.

During my first week in Vietnam, we had a training class on rules of engagement, reviewing the Geneva Conventions and combat rules: You fight soldiers; you don’t harm women, children, civilians and friendlies, etc. We all knew that from previous training. This review class was taught by an experienced sergeant who did the proper and correct job expected of him.

Then came time for questions. Up stands a boy who looks hardly old enough to have finished high school. He was in Vietnam before, he says, serving on a long-range reconnaissance patrol team. That’s a few tough, highly trained guys sent into enemy territory, lightly armed, to spy. Being lightly armed, they can’t afford to be discovered. In enemy territory that means likely death.

So, in a baffled, naive, almost hurt boyish voice, he asks, “Do you really mean that now if we are discovered in the jungle by a woman and a couple of kids, we can’t kill them anymore?”

That is not merely an interesting story. The meanings and implications of it just don’t quit. You could start by asking how you would feel if the woman and children killed were your mother and sisters. Or if they were not killed, how would you feel if one of the consequently dead patrol members was your brother or father. On a bigger than personal level, we were in Vietnam to “win the hearts and minds of the people.” That’s what counter-insurgency is mainly about. As an aside, think about what an evangelistic concept that is: “winning hearts and minds.” Anyway, if you were in the community of the dead mother and children, would their deaths, to conceal the presence of a few alien soldiers, win the hearts and minds of the community?

But the story doesn’t end there. The instructor has to answer the question. He is an experienced, well-trained soldier. Likely he has heard similar questions before; perhaps he has experienced the dilemma. As robotically as he would swing his rifle toward enemy fire, he presses the rewind button and carefully repeats what he mouthed earlier and what the questioner had heard repeatedly before: “The rules say...”. He didn’t even have to wink or continue with “but...”. The answer was clear, and it wasn’t in his words. Nobody could say that he didn’t teach the rules. Yet everybody knew he didn’t.

But that still isn’t the end of the story. There were about fifty people there. I was there. Every one of us knew the rules. By the rules it looked like we might have right there a real live war criminal. Every one of us should have reported that. Was I, were we all, complicit in the cover up of possible war crimes? How could this happen? Is this simply a conspiracy of lawlessness? And this is not just a rare incident. You have all read in the news many variants of this story, from My Lai to Abu Ghraib.

The agonizing dilemmas illustrated by that story are even further complicated by deep personal damage inflicted by previous military experience. Let me illustrate that with a story very different and at the same time containing common elements. It’s a story of evil, evil also in me, evil deeper and more complex than we usually realize. More importantly, it also hangs on, however desperately and tenuously, to God’s promise that
For my father’s generation, the need for Christian discernment about U.S. responsibility in the world and the justification for war did not feel so compelling.

Grace overcomes evil. I relate the story leaving the moral complexity unresolved.

The scene: a hot evening almost fifty years ago at the little sandbagged hootch where I slept in Camp Eagle about fifty miles south of the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam.

Knock, knock.
Who’s there?

It’s the commanding officer of my unit! This has never happened. When he wants you, he sends a private to summon you.

Do you know Sergeant Prince? “he asks.

Thoughts run through my mind. Sgt. Prince. Richard Prince. An appropriate name. Genuinely a prince among men. Richard, as in Richard the Lion-hearted, King of England. Richard Prince, a soft-spoken, kind, gentle, noble man. A career soldier who had already been in the Army twelve years, but not the stereotypical hard, macho, insensitive creature that the word sergeant brings to mind. This is his third tour in Nam. He is with us just briefly between assignments.

Then the bombshell: “He’s in the bunker with a grenade threatening suicide. Can you do something?”

No longer are thoughts running sequentially through my mind. They are spasming. Auto pilot takes over because I don’t have the wherewithal to deal with this thoughtfully. Can any autopilot be programmed for this?

Auto pilot should have said, “Sir, I am just a 23-year-old kid. You have been in the Army 23 years. Why are you asking a kid to do a man’s job?”

But that response is not programmed into my autopilot. Twenty-three years of Christian nurture and two years of Army indoctrination have programmed me to automatically take up the call of duty.

So I find myself in the bunker—Sgt. Prince, a grenade, and me. The inside of the bunker is about the size of two coffins side by side but four feet high, sandbagged on all sides and roof with crude benches along the walls and a few small firing ports. The entrance is a maze to prevent explosions outside from directly hitting occupants, but now also preventing quick escape or disposal of the grenade.

Other thoughts about Sgt. Prince spasm through my mind. Earlier he has told me that he is torn apart by the impending failure of his marriage, largely due to his absence for three of the last six years. Likely, the psychological damage he suffered from combat has compounded the problem. From 8,000 miles away he is powerless to do anything about his wife’s affair. He so dreaded this tour in Nam that before he left home, he loosened crucial steering components of his car and drove it down a rough winding road as fast as he dared, hoping for suicide disguised as an accident.

All of these things and more had also given this gentle boyish man an edge of cold, hard fury, usually well concealed. He had told me of seeing a close buddy killed. A few days later the small unit he commanded overran an enemy position. There appeared an enemy soldier, hands up, surrendering. With the thought of their almost still warm buddy in their minds, some of his men turned their guns to shoot the bastard. He stopped them. He knew the rules of war. He might have cynically articulated those rules something like this: A prisoner must be treated according to the Geneva Conventions. It’s like the end of a basketball game. You shake hands. “Good game buddy. Would you like to join us for a beer? And by the way, would you like to tell us, please, the location of the mortars from which your teammates are raining explosives on us?”

He put a furious burst of bullets through the prisoner himself.

But I digress. I am in the bunker, somehow now armed with a flashlight, obligated by duty to come out with an unexploded grenade and two live soldiers but having no idea how that could
happen. So for the next three hours, Sgt. Prince and I share the crazy camaraderie of courting death. How much does he desire death? How much do I love life? Repeatedly he pulls the pin and later replaces it. If he lets it go, we have four seconds. At one point with the pin out, he orders me to “turn off the damn light, sir.” Throughout all this, the thought races through me, “What if he lets it go? Do I try to throw my body on it to save him? Or do I dive for the exit? Could I pick it up and throw it out of a gun port all within four seconds? Could I even find it in the dark?”

I remember little of the conversation, perhaps because I had no strategy to deal with this. “I got the right to kill myself,” he says and tells me repeatedly to get out so he can do it. The fact that I outrank him is ridiculously irrelevant in all of this. I follow his orders—except the order to get out.

After a few hours he gives me the grenade. Outside, the scene is surreal. There is an audience sitting on lawn chairs on the hillside as if this is live outdoor theater. The only thing missing is the popcorn.

Astonishing today, but the event was absolutely normal then. The next day life goes on as if nothing has happened. Duty—other duty—calls.

I saw Sgt. Prince only once after that, a night or two later, alone, in company headquarters, handcuffed to a filing cabinet like a short-leashed dog. He looked at me plaintively. Not a word passed between us.

War: what a murky, muddled moral morass! What is war anyway? To get the issues before us, I will state some of this with brutal starkness, simplification, and hyperbole. Nuance can be debated elsewhere.

First, the standard definition of war is something like this: It is an instrument of statecraft. In just-war theory, that distinguishes it from private violence, even private violence on a large scale like that of drug cartels or terrorist organizations. That line gets fuzzy in cases like insurrection, terrorism, and civil war, but the pure idea is that war is between states—not between individuals or nongovernmental groups. War is also subject to rules of warfare, like the Geneva Conventions and just-war theory.

Isn’t that a charmingly comforting, sterile definition of war, fervently desired but fanciful? One could be forgiven for likening it to professional sports. Yes, there is a bit of physical contact between players, but there are nice rules limiting that contact. Players wear uniforms to distinguish the teams and to distinguish players from spectators. Rarely would spectators be involved or hurt and then only as collateral damage. There are referees, governing bodies, appeals boards, and courts to deal with violators, both in the stands and on the fair level playing field.

Let’s try a very different possible definition. War is a wild, unrestrained melee between two or more nations (or other entities such as guerilla groups) that may require nearly the total resources (i.e., not just military) of the involved nations (meaning that civilians as part of the military-industrial complex are also mobilized) and in which almost all rules other than winning have failed or been abandoned.

But even that is a rather academic, sanitized definition. So let’s be blunt. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about war? It’s killing, purposeful killing, killing on a large scale.

We hear about killing in the news and see it portrayed so casually in media that we are easily desensitized to it. But did you ever think about how hard it is to kill? I mean real close-up killing in which you see the fear in the man’s eyes, you see the messy blood, you bludgeon, you plunge in the knife or bayonet, you hear him beg for his life for the sake of his children. A shudder of revulsion overwhelms most of us when we even think of it.

That’s because God did not create us to kill. Genesis 9 says that when we kill, we are destroying the image of God. It is as if we are trying to destroy the closest thing we see to God—burning Him in effigy. That doesn’t come naturally. We are not created to do that.

But the sad reality is that in this time—between the Fall and Christ’s return—some evil is so powerful and threatening that most of us think it has to be opposed by deadly force. So, until Christ returns, armies have to make ordi-
nary people into killers. That’s not easy to do. Consider some of the evidence of how it can be done, beginning with relatively unsophisticated methods and proceeding to subtle but more powerful ones.

A baffling discovery was made after battles during the U.S. Civil War 150 years ago. The guns of the dead and wounded were collected from the battlefields to be used again. Remember that these were single shot muskets. After each shot, powder and bullet had to be pushed in from the front of the barrel. Ninety percent of these guns were found loaded but not fired. More than half had more than one load. And that is despite the fact that it takes 95 percent of the time to load and only 5 percent to fire. How could that be?

It was discovered that soldiers had just pretended to fire and then reloaded as if they had fired. Of those who did pull the trigger, few fired to hit the enemy. All of this occurred because they could not find it within themselves to kill. They actually found it easier to risk being killed than to kill. Even as late as World War II, studies showed that only about 15-20% of individual riflemen could bring themselves to fire at an exposed enemy soldier. That is alarming for an army. If 85% of your soldiers really don’t want to kill, it’s hard to win a war. It’s worse than having 85% of librarians illiterate. So armies had to fix that problem.

By the time I was in Vietnam, the figures were inverted. Over 90% could kill. That’s an astonishing change. You could call that behaviour modification, but it is really closer to psychological DNA change. The person, the self, at a very deep level is modified into a creature God never intended that creature to be. How can that be done?

At an elementary level, armies and nations do that by demonizing the enemy. In Vietnam we were fighting the demon of godless communism. But let’s go a step deeper, getting back to definitions of war we earlier examined. Is war really a game played by nice law-abiding gentlemen under clearly defined rules? It settles us comfortably and shields us from the horrors of war to tell ourselves that. We can then dismiss atrocities simply as violations of the rules, unusual exceptions, a few bad apples in the barrel. But is it possible that beneath this public and accepted set of rules there is a powerfully functioning alternate set of rules more deeply indoctrinated than the official ones, and that this set of rules explains a lot of what actually happens in the military? Then our first story is not so much a matter of fifty men complicit in a war crime as it is of fifty men working under alternative rules so deeply indoctrinated into them that these alternative rules are mainly subconscious.

As an aside, I think quite a bit of the non-combat immorality often associated with soldiers (drugs, sex, foul language, alcohol, pillaging) is also partially explained by the unspoken defini-
tion of army as the camaraderie of those living by an intimately understood different set of rules. That would help to explain what my pastor told me before I left for basic training: a large percentage of Christian young men suspend their Christian morality and life-style during the two or three years they are in the army, then revert back to their former behaviour when they return. The depth of that camaraderie also helps to explain the high rate of divorce among combat veterans: the depth of commitment and attachment to buddies is often deeper than to spouse.

I anticipate skepticism about all of this. Come on. Don’t try to tell us that twenty years of Reformed nurture and education can be upended by a few months of army training. So let me present just a few examples of how the alternative values begin to supplant or at least co-exist with official ones, and how all of that is unofficially indoctrinated. I’ll do it in bullet form if you’ll allow the pun:

- When I began basic training, most of us were draftees—not volunteers. Within weeks, the army had us singing and marching to songs that glorified military camaraderie and disdained civilians. We were mainly unaware of the irony.
- Later I was in officer candidate school. Surely they would teach leaders to obey the rules. One rule was that we must be in bed from 10 PM to 5:30 AM. But every minute during the day was regimented. When could we polish boots, get equipment and clothes ready for inspection, do the academic study and any thing personal like reading and writing letters? If we were naïve enough to ask or try to use the impossibility of the rules as an excuse for not accomplishing all that, the sarcastic response was, “Ask the good fairy to do it.” So we went for months getting two to four hours of sleep per night, doing our work by flashlight, ready to hop into bed at a moment’s notice if our lookout spotted an officer coming.
- Part of the time during that same officer training, we were systematically underfed. One solution was to arrange to smuggle in fast food. But that was strictly forbidden, extremely difficult to arrange, and punished severely if we were caught. But periodically we were coyly asked if we had done so yet.

Now in case your non-military minds are still reeling, wondering what the unspoken message is, it is this: if you fifty guys are too dumb to muster the collective ability to evade the rule by smuggling food when you are hungry, how could you ever lead men in battle? That is the micro message. The macro message is this: live by the real rules; watch out for the official ones. It’s all about mission. Little impediments like official rules are no excuse for failing in your mission. That’s the real rule, part of that alternative set of rules, the unspoken one: accomplish your mission: win. The fact that the alternative rules are so deeply ingrained explains, too, why it never even crossed my mind to report the possible war crimes of the first story. Moreover, this kind of activity cannot be merely the violation of one or two law-flouting bad apples in the barrel; it requires complicity of everyone in the unit—without exception.

So in almost any situation, you subconscious-ly do the calculus. Which set of rules applies? The official ones or the real ones? They exist uneasily side-by-side. And if I go by the real ones, what is the likelihood of getting caught? What are the consequences if I get caught? And how do those consequences compare with the consequences of following the official set of rules but possibly failing in the mission? I know, of course, that if I get caught, the official rules apply; the very existence of the real rules—which were only unofficially taught—will be plausibly denied. All of these considerations come to mind, whether I incinerated the village where my buddy was killed, kept a string of dead enemy ears on my belt, conducted an energetic interrogation, or just snuck in some food.

So far, in considering how to make ordinary people into killers, we have talked about demonization and depersonalization at one level. At a little deeper level there are the preparatory desensitizing effects of media and game violence
before one even enters the military. There is also the effect of technology like bombs, missiles, and drones, allowing easier remote killing. Then, at a still deeper and more sophisticated level, we have looked at the ambivalence of the rules. But we need to return to that still deeper question of whether military training and war itself tend to mess with our very DNA.

Let’s start with psychologist and retired Lt. Col. Dave Grossman’s description of basic training:

Brutalization and desensitization is what happens at boot camp. From the moment you step off the bus you are physically and verbally abused. Countless pushups, endless hours at attention or running with heavy loads, while carefully trained professionals take turns screaming at you. Your head is shaved, you are herded together naked, and dressed alike, losing all vestiges of individuality. This brutalization is designed to break down your existing mores and norms and to [make you] accept a new set of values which embrace destruction, violence, and death as a way of life. In the end you are desensitized to violence and accept it as a normal and essential survival skill in your brutal new world.\(^4\)

Read those last two scary sentences again. Consider also a few items from the U.S. Army website a few years ago. Again in bullet form:

- “American soldiers, possessed of a fierce warrior ethos and spirit, fight in close combat….\(^4\)
- “No soldier can survive in the current battlespace without … continuous immersion in the Army’s Warrior culture.”\(^5\)
- “[I]nculcating the Warrior ethos into all soldiers of both the active and reserve components is one of their top priorities…”\(^5\)
- “The Warrior ethos statement contained within the new Soldier’s Creed – ‘I will always place the mission first [before the rules even?]. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade’—is a key aspect of the Soldier focus area.”\(^5\)
- “This is about shifting the mindset of Soldiers from identifying what they do as a Soldier—

‘I’m a cook, I’m an infantryman, I’m a postal clerk’—toward ‘I am a Warrior’ when people ask what they do for a living.”\(^5\)
- “This will require the deep and personal commitment of every member of the Army team—every leader, every Soldier, civilian, and every family member.”\(^5\)

Notice all the confessional religious language and allusions: ethos, Creed, mission, spirit, immersion (as in baptism), commitment. The change said to be required to be a soldier is eerily parallel to Christian conversion. Recall Paul’s language in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 of taking off the old self (civilian) and putting on the new self (Warrior). Or consider Paul saying in II Corinthians 5:17 that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Parallel that with the idea that if anyone is in the Army, he is a new creation; the old (cook or postal clerk) is put away; the new (Warrior) is put on.

Some say that the Army breaks you down and rebuilds you into the kind of creature it needs. Does it fully succeed? By God’s grace, no. Even the Army cannot totally erase the created way in which we reflect or image God. The extent of change and damage also varies immensely from one person to the next.

The reactions to that change vary as well. Among the many reactions was the serious problem of an extensive use of mind-altering drugs. I cannot erase from my mind, for example, a child under my command. Yes, a child, the child of a mother, perhaps her only child, now about nineteen years old, soft-spoken and gentle, addicted, terrified, crying. He stood before me like a scared bunny as I told him he was being transferred to an infantry unit. His performance of duty was impaired by his addiction. He had been repeatedly warned that this transfer would happen if he did not smarten up and appreciate how good he had it.

I don’t know what happened to him after that. But in my worst imagination I have to answer anguished questions from his mother:

The person, the self, at a very deep level is modified into a creature God never intended that creature to be. How can that be done?
“How did my child, trained for and holding a comparatively safe position in military intelligence, end up in an infantry unit?”

“Sending him to his death in a dangerous position was his punishment because he could not quickly drop his addiction after a few warnings?”

“The only possible treatment for his addiction was to make him cannon fodder?”

I was hardly more mature than he was. One of the sad ironies of that war is that junior officers like me had to be quickly manufactured by mass production to fill the needed, low-level leadership positions. So inexperienced and ill-prepared kids were in command of other kids in life-and-death situations.

Now before we become too glibly critical about all of these nefarious things armies do, we need to explore our civilian complicity as well as the possible cruel irony that a lot of this may be necessary as long as we have or anticipate war.6 The point is that we create armies to win wars. To what extent is it fair to then condemn them when they excel at manufacturing killers to do that?

But military efforts to recreate a person into a killer do immense damage at that very deep DNA level—the level of self. Training already does that; combat exacerbates it. At the same time as soldiers are trained to dehumanize the enemy, they too are partly dehumanized. That’s why soldiering is arguably the most self-sacrificial of callings, not just because of the risk of physical death or injury but because it sacrifices the self at that very deep level. That’s why soldiers so often experience post-traumatic stress disorder and the more recently recognized disorder called moral injury,7 with all of their devastating consequences. I don’t know how reliable the statistics are, but already years ago I read that about 90% of Vietnam combat veterans were divorced and that we lost more to suicide than to enemy action. Iraq and Afghanistan veterans experience similar statistics. There are 18 veteran suicides a month; no, it’s 18 a week; no, really 18 a day, one every eighty minutes.8 With exaggeration, some have said that the dead are the fortunate casualties. They suffered for seconds, minutes, or hours before death. The walking wounded suffer for life.

And it’s not just the training, the killing, the visions, and recollections of killing that torture post-war victims. It’s also the moral ambiguity that eats at them for the rest of life: ambiguity like that of our first story; ambiguity they know no one will understand; ambiguity that questions whether the horrific things they have seen and done were in any way justifiable; and sometimes ambiguity that they are forced to keep inside, knowing that sharing it might result in long and humiliating judgment and punishment under the official rules.

War: what a murky, muddled, moral morass. What evil we are capable of. What opportunities for good we ignore.

Yet that is not the last word. There is grace. I want to leave you with a poem, a poem that culminates in the future, a poem that challenges us NOW to begin exchanging guns for garden tools and atomic bombs for medical isotopes. God will finish the job, but he calls us already now to begin, by his grace, to make into reality the prophecy of this poem:

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid. for the Lord Almighty has spoken.9

Endnotes

1. See the article in this volume (referenced in the Editor’s Note above) about my father, presented by my brother-in-law, Don Sinnema.

2. See, for example, Albert Wolters, Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).


5. This is from a printout from the U.S. Army website in 2004, last revised December 11, 2003. It can be found now at www.army.mil/News/publications/RRBooklet_final.pdf. Emphasis is mine.
6. That is an issue for another paper. Such a paper could consider theories about pacifism, just war, just policing, responsibility to protect, the sovereignty of nation states, the role and limitations of sovereign states in relationship to the United Nations and more, all considered in the context of a realistic recognition of the devastating effects of sin on international relations and conflict resolution.

7. Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012). This book explores moral injury, which is now recognized by the U.S. military and a rising number of mental health professionals. In simple terms, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder results from external trauma; moral injury “…comes from having transgressed one’s basic moral identity and violated core moral beliefs.”(xiv). Analogies are always limited, but if one would compare PTSD to the results of the explosion of a nearby grenade, then moral injury could be compared to the results of exploding a grenade within one’s heart.

8. Rita Nakashima Brock, xii. These rates of suicide continue to rise despite more research, better screening, and better treatment. I have heard that the number has now increased to 21 per day. That number does not include suicides of active duty soldiers—only veterans. In recent years, active duty suicides alone exceeded combat deaths.