Some of Us Were Only Spectators

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Vietnam never laid a hand on me. I never saw a rice paddy, walked Saigon streets, woke to the thwacking rush of helicopters, or stumbled through jungle heat. The crescent shape of Cambodia I knew only from a map Richard Nixon pointed to in May of 1969.

But neither did I go to jail or move to Canada, sugar my urine, brace up my teeth, or make any other desperate attempt to avoid Southeast Asia. Neither President Ford nor Carter had to offer me amnesty. Throughout those years, I was little more than spectator.

But my generation will forever live in the shadow of the era, even those who bear no visible scars. In my downstairs office, the cover page of an old student newspaper hangs proudly on my wall—five clenched fists boldly underlined with one word, “Strike.” It’s an artifact of an era long fallen into the objective past of our own grandchildren, whose determination to gain a marketable skill makes the Vietnam era—and history itself—of no more than passing interest. Even though those clenched fists haven’t lost their grip on American politics, today what they stood for fifty years ago requires a bibliography.

Still, for every one of my generation, even the spectators, Vietnam will always be a searing memory.
Somewhere I have a high school essay, circa 1965, titled “Why Are We in Vietnam?” To me back then, the question was not rhetorical. In high school, I wondered how anyone could oppose the war. Another high school essay lists nothing but books drawn from the shelves of the John Birch Society. I’m white, Protestant, and very small-town; in politics back then, I wasn’t alone.

Churches ruled the Wisconsin village where I was born and reared, each holding dearly to their fragment of the Dutch Calvinism we inherited from immigrant folk a century before. What might seem unpityingly dour from outside the righteous gates could feel like a blessing to covenant children who stayed peacefully within. That culture, Republican and Nixonian, was convinced that if Godless communism wasn’t thwarted in Indochina, there’d be a beachhead soon near San Francisco. The liberals were already at the gates.

Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa, just ten years old, was my choice later that year, “less a choice than an echo,” to pummel a Barry Goldwater book title. Ninety percent of the students wore wooden shoes back then—and were political conservatives.

But the Sixties were formidable even to a scrappy Dutch Calvinist ethos. Almost exactly fifty years ago, I was among hundreds of sunburned college kids at a dance one night on Daytona Beach, when mid-music, some guy grabbed the mike. “LBJ quit!” he screamed, and then, “LBJ just said he won’t run again!” He stuck his fist in the air.

Nobody was thinking just then about Vietnam. It was spring break, and, in the first place, a Dutch Calvinist kid wasn’t supposed to be at a dance, much less on Sunday night. It took a few seconds before a couple hundred others raised their fists like the kid up front. Me too. I’ll never forget that moment. I felt politicized. It was March 31, 1968.

Let me also say that Feike Feikema plays a role here. Local kids interrupted a card game one night to mention that a novelist just down road wrote dirty books: “Not makin’ it up,” a kid said, wearing a goofy smile. “Guy named Feikema, but he changed his name.”

Just weeks later in a Wisconsin bookstore, I ran across a paperback with the name Frederick Manfred—I couldn’t believe it. I bought that novel, read it, and it changed my life. Seriously. When I finished it, I wanted to write myself, like he did.

But Manfred’s The Secret Place pushed me to look at my world—the Dutch Reformed world—through his eyes, as he had, in a more objective, detached, and critical way.

My parents saw me going astray. I think I was simply growing up.

The night before that Daytona Beach dance we’d arrived in Florida very late and had trouble finding a place to stay, until we happened on a rat trap Quonset hut, where we stood in line for fifteen minutes, maybe more, only to hear the sleazy manager tell the couple in front of us that he had no more rooms.

When they left, we asked him where we might still find a place.

“Oh, I got a room,” he told us, and pointed at the door. “We just don’t take their kind.”

The couple was black. It was the Sixties, the Vietnam era. I’d grown up monochrome, knew discrimination and prejudice only from a textbook, if that.

A couple of nights later we left Florida, on our way to New Orleans, packing as much as we could into one trip. That night, Martin Luther King was assassinated on a balcony outside his motel door in Memphis. All night long, deejays from whatever stations we could pick up in our ’62 Chev interrupted music for news breaks that
quoted politicians weighing in. Riots erupted all over the country. We skirted Jacksonville because the news claimed city streets had turned mean.

Early the next morning, half-asleep, we pulled over at a greasy spoon somewhere along the Gulf and stumbled in to find the joint in full party mode, a dozen rednecks drinking from bottles they’d brought in, singing racist ditties accompanied by the jukebox, tunes we’d never heard nor even imagined. Wasn’t karaoke either. A sign at the register, all upper case, said proceeds that day would go to the Klan, even though my pancakes were cooked up by a man whose black face appeared only rarely from a little square above the counter. MLK was dead.

My father thought Martin Luther King was a communist sympathizer.

The Sixties—and Vietnam—left marks on all of us.

I remember the almost vicious righteousness in the eyes of a Navy vet who came back from Vietnam in 1967, convinced that anything less than full speed ahead in southeast Asia was cowardly and defeatist. He wouldn’t tolerate an argument. Vietnam turned his spirit to stone.

But I’ll also never forget the bloodied knuckles of a roommate in the spring of 1969, a kid who’d been out in the jungle with the special forces just a month before school started. His readjustment staggered fitfully through endless nights of boozing and beatings. Vietnam blessed him with a thirst for action that, from crippling guilt, he couldn’t assuage in a small Iowa town. Haunting memories wouldn’t let him sleep. His scars were real. I spent several nights trying to help him stop crying. That none of his wounds were physical didn’t mean he hadn’t earned his own purple heart. During those years, I knew guys whose eyes held the empty horror unmitakable in the faces of the men on the D. C. monument right there beside the Wall.

Columns I wrote in the student newspaper created some anger among hundreds of Dordt students who had rallied in Central Park downtown in support of the President. I still have a petition I must have passed around in a criminology class I don’t even remember. That I was my own kind of rhinestone radical is embarrassingly evident from the fact that I still have it, never sent it anywhere.

All of that doesn’t change the fact that during the Vietnam era, I was little more than a spectator.

My family doctor had told me in high school that my uneven heartbeat, a “chaotic heart,” I was told, would disqualify me from military service. I honestly didn’t believe him. On December 1, 1969, the national draft lottery turned up my birthday at number 187. I guessed I’d be eligible. Student deferments were ending. It was my final year in college.

On April 30, 1970, I listened as President Nixon, who had earlier assured the nation we were getting out of Indochina, and who’d told the American public that our bombers were about to destroy North Vietnamese bunkers in Cambodia, thereby, it seemed, escalating the war. Anti-war forces exploded.

Just a few days later, on May 4, National Guard troops at Kent State University determined collectively that they were in significant trouble from student rioting. They opened fire—four students were dead.

The next day, May 5, just a month before I would graduate, I boarded a bus at 6:20, or so the orders say, in Orange City, Iowa. I don’t think I even knew about Kent State; the deaths had occurred in the afternoon, and I generally listened to the news only in the morning. With a crowd of others, that bus left for Sioux Falls, where we’d take our physicals. I had my family physician’s
letter in hand.

We got down to our skivvies and stood in a line waiting. When it was my turn, I handed the uniformed man the letter. He read it slowly and told me to get dressed. It was over. I wasn’t going to be drafted. I was 4F. That designation, like the admission, still makes me feel weak.

The next morning the news reported that student protest leaders were asking college kids from all over the nation to come to Washington for a march on May 9 to protest the war and the deaths at Kent State. For some reason, at that moment I decided to go.

The Dordt College baseball team—I was the catcher—was scheduled to play that Saturday; but I told the coach, who certainly didn’t share my politics, that marching against the war meant a great deal more to me than catching a Saturday doubleheader. So I left.

Later, he asked the team to vote on my remaining a team member, despite my desertion. They voted to keep me on. The actual scars I bear from that whole terrible era lie no deeper than a skipped double-header. So high, for me, honor soared.

The march on Washington was a remake of Innocents Abroad. I’d never been around so much dope, never seen kids just doff their jeans and shirts and get cool in the capital reflecting pools—never seen women gather under banners that announced their liberation, never watched yuppies “liberate” a Coke stand—“power to the people.” I’d never seen peacenik Christians before or Vietnam Vets against the War, never heard the eerie chanting of the Hari Krishna. I’d never been among 100,000 people in my life or seen “Impeach Nixon” close enough to touch the letters on a banner. I’d never, ever thought of protest as a party. But then, a part of me was still a Calvinist.

In August of 1970, I lived just outside Madison, Wisconsin, and had just begun a teaching career, when the blast at the Army Research Center on the University campus shook windows all over town and killed an innocent graduate student. That fatal act of protest was the end of something romantic, of flower children, and I knew it.

I’m a child of the Sixties. I’d seen it all from a distance, from the days of U.S. military advisers, the days when “nabobs of negativism” were thought commie sympathizers. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution I’d read. I got angry about the Cambodian incursion. I knew about Kent State, a dead research chemist, and a pitiful, hasty retreat from Saigon; I’d experienced all of that through the pall of far too many thousands of American and Southeast Asian war dead. Still, the story belonged to those who acted.

A decade later I sat alone in an armchair late one night at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Middlebury, Vermont, and watched two of my friends, two 30-year-old drunken Vietnam vets, hugging each other and bawling like children, as if all of it—the dope and the death and the lunacy of a war few of them ever wanted to fight—as if all of it had ended just a week before. I tried my human best to empathize, but I always was a spectator.
In three years, my wife and I will have been married for 50 years. We’re not in trouble, never have been. But she’s more of a veteran than the spectator her husband is because just about every day of an entire college year, she wrote to a grunt in Nam. When he came back to the world, he treated her like dirt, the same way he treated himself. He was born on the Fourth of July.

A decade later, I wrote a play, a one-act, about a husband who has this nagging feeling that nothing he would ever be able to do with his wife—a woman who’d been wronged by a Vietnam vet with horrific PTSD—could ever compete with a weekend the two of them spent, R and R, in Virginia, mid-deployment, alone, lovers. It wasn’t hard to write that play. I did it in one sitting.

For kicks, I submitted it to a one-act play contest at some little theater in Houston, and it won. “Virginia is for Lovers.” We flew down and watched it.

It was perfectly horrible. I just about died, so shocked and embarrassed I was, even angry. The guy who played me was a simpering, childish fool.

Afterward at a party at which I was the honored guest, the director was anxious to hear what I thought of the production. I could barely speak. “Well,” I said, “the husband isn’t what I thought he’d be.”

“No?” she said, “I’m just going by what’s in the text.” She shrugged her shoulders. I don’t think I’ve looked at it since.

Back in December of 1969, when I was still in college, I wrote an opinion piece in the college newspaper that some conservative students hated—and told me as much. The title was “My Lai—Who’s to Blame?” What should be on trial, I said in that piece, is a whole lot more than a soldier. The real killer is this nation’s commitment to a war that, in 1969, seemed never to end.

In 1972, I was a graduate student at Arizona State University, where I became friends with Ron Ridenhour, who was, truth be told, not much of a student. It was Ridenhour’s whistle-blowing letter to 30 congressmen and the Pentagon that had started an investigation of a massacre at a place he called Pinkville, the horror of My Lai. Ridenhour hadn’t been there himself, but he used to say he saw enough as a helicopter gunner to believe the men who told him they were.

Ron Ridenhour went on to become a journalist, but right then he was in no shape to study Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1972, he was trying to ascend the ladder of blame and bring it on higher-ups, the C.Os who’d trained Lt. Calley to do things the American public had no idea were going on. Often, he was gone somewhere, testifying. When he was in class, he couldn’t sit still.

And then finally this. That same year I drove a school bus for a little private school in the middle of the city of Phoenix. With the radio playing one morning, I heard the news. The war was over. Officially, Paris Peace Accords had been signed. Finally, the war was over.

The school kids were little. Once they were in, I simply announced to some up front the news I’d heard on the radio. “Hey, guess what, you guys—the Vietnam war is over.”

Silence.

“Well, that’s really something, isn’t it? I said.

One little guy right behind me cheered a little, then said, in all innocence, “Who won?”

I don’t remember what I said, but I believe I wouldn’t have had the heart to tell the kid the truth that without a doubt, no one did.

Fifty years later, that is the wound all of us carry.