THE Round Table

Winter
1991

"...a path from where we are to where we should be." -- Peter Maurin

VIETNAM

INSTANT AMNESIA

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WHY THIS ISSUE?

When I approached the Catholic Worker Community last summer with the idea of being a guest editor for this issue, I had in mind two ideas: first, the continuing uneasiness many people feel about how this country has dealt with Vietnam, the war, and its veterans these past few years; and second, my own feelings that most of the great literature that had come out of the war was being neglected--much of it unread and going out of print. As I write now, though, over a million troops and untold machines and weapons of war stand poised in the sands of the Persian Gulf area awaiting decisions by men who have already shown their total willingness to shed blood to further their political purposes. (One wonders if we will ever know just how many Kuwaiti and Panamanian citizens died in those invasions.) So, along with past questions about Vietnam that still haunt us, we are daily bombarded with mentions of that war in this new context. This war (they speak of it inevitably) will not be like Vietnam. It will not be a half-hearted effort of a muzzled military. No hands tied behind the back this time. And on and on endlessly.

Our collective repression about Vietnam allows such tripe. Our fleeting memories of 14 million megatons of ordnance fired and dropped, 19 million gallons of chemical toxins sprayed, 10 million refugees created, and almost 2 million people killed fade into the distant past as new wars are built on the false ideas of the old ones.

This issue, then, has taken on more purpose. As you read, war may or may not already have begun. We pray that it hasn't. Our struggle for healing with Vietnam veterans can be a paradigm for other healings yet to come, and to that end we attempt here to inspire a renewed discussion about Vietnam that can aid in that work. Noam Chomsky begins with his usual razor sharp analysis of ruling class and intelligentsia collaboration with the "approved" versions of our wars in Indochina. Daniel Berrigan offers challenging answers to a broad range of questions about the war in our lives, past and present. We are treated to a behind-the-scenes look at the writing of a song about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by its author, folksinger Charlie King. Larry Rottmann shares with us the poetic voices of Vietnamese veterans. And I draw upon my past work with literature about the war to offer suggestions for those who would like to read more. My student at C.B.C. High School, junior Jeremy Nantz, did the illustration for the cover.

Looking over the whole issue, I am most struck by something Dan Berrigan said: answers about healing first come out of experiences of prayer. What a challenge to us in these present bloody times as we continue to educate ourselves and others about history, and pursue that oftentimes elusive healing.

--Michael Bartz

[Editors' note: We want to thank Michael Bartz, our guest editor, for this issue. Having done extensive reading on the Vietnam War, Michael came to us about 10 months ago with an idea of looking at this reality in our lives and how the events and ideologies of that period continue to affect many people today. So Michael, for your many hours of planning, soliciting articles, editing, and writing, you have our gratitude. Hopefully, because of your labors, more of us will see that there's more to remembering than not forgetting.]

the St. Louis Catholic Worker Community

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN BERRIGAN, S.J.

Last September the School of Social Services at St. Louis University began to celebrate its 60th anniversary with the first of three conferences it will hold in conjunction with the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Ignatius and the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Jesuits. They chose Daniel Berrigan, SJ to give the keynote address, "A Faith That Does Justice." Currently working in an AIDS hospice in New York, Dan is well known for a lifetime of peace activism and poetry. I was lucky enough to spirit him away to a local fast food restaurant for coffee and a few questions between appearances during his hectic weekend of panels, press conferences, and liturgies. The following exchange took place.

—Michael Bartz

Round Table: For many veterans of the peace movement, especially the Catholic Left, your name is synonymous with protest and dissent during the Vietnam era; first, have you found this to be a burden at all recently in your life; and second, have you found that people still want to talk about Vietnam and its lessons, or have we pretty much forgotten about it?

Daniel Berrigan: I am afraid that the memory of the war is lost and that we continue to suffer from instant amnesia. There is no memory of what we have done, both on the domestic and international levels. In this country, we are born with a gun in our hands.

R.T.: As you look back on your response to the Vietnam war, what are the things that endure, what remains most important to you?

Berrigan: My friendship with Merton and the Buddhists — that is beyond price. Also, we learned about the courts, about jail, crime, and punishment. We also gained a certain savvy about the whole justice system. We found out that the people who protest or dissent or object to the system of violence become criminalized, while the criminals are vindicated. We learned that there is no justice for peacemakers.

R.T.: Do you have any regrets?

Berrigan: I hate to even speak of this, but yes, I regret being a little late and slow in responding to the war. The reason is that my training was retarded; it was difficult for anyone, especially young Jesuits, as isolated as we were. There is a great advantage for young people today; there's a hell of a lot of help out there that we didn't have.

R.T.: How is the Vietnam war present today; what are its effects or aftermath? What does it still mean for the United States?

Berrigan: First, it is present in its very powerful symbolism. The war remains "radically incomplete," especially when you include all the pain and destruction we did to not only the Vietnamese, but also the Cambodians and Laotians. Also, there is the question of the Vietnam vets, many of whom are in serious trouble. When I was in prison briefly in 1980 after the King of Prussia action, a state prison in Pennsylvania, I found out that one - third of the inmates were Vietnam veterans. This bothered and intrigued me and I found out later from Amnesty International that for that age group it is the national average. This remains a terrible part of the trauma of that war - it's like a bloodstain on the national fabric.

R.T.: In the past five years there has been a spate of movies about Vietnam, along with many events honoring veterans of that war — especially parades and public speeches. Those who opposed the war often have ambivalent feelings about these so-called "healing" experiences, especially since their tone is so non-political and non-critical of the war itself. What can those in the peace movement do to be reconciled with, to help or heal these vets (many of whom they were bitterly opposed to at one time, especially the vets who were gung-ho about the war), while at the same time keeping their fervor of opposition to the war itself?

Berrigan: Well, this is a difficult question. I know a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, still in exile from his country, probably never to go back, who is leading a retreat for Vietnam vets. This is an extraordinary thing — a Buddhist who was persecuted because of U.S. presence in his country leading people in prayer, praying with them. This is the kind of thing we need to do. Out of experiences like this come the answers about healing.

As for the question of "honoring" vets — a vet who was on the stand with me in New York recently [at a demonstration protesting the recent military build-up] said about the troops in the Persian Gulf, "The only honor I know is to bring our service people home alive."

R.T.: Besides the questions involving veterans' lives, do you think there is any other unfinished business of Vietnam?

Berrigan: The Gulf. We are right back, ready to do it again. We've already done it in Grenada and Panama. This is a continuum of violence, alienation, and fear: the whole world will be organized to look like us or we will bring it down. We want there to be only one kind of human being, one kind of society; either that, or it must be on the supply line to here.

R.T.: What are the things we should teach our children about Vietnam?

Berrigan: We teach them what we live.

R.T.: You mean the violent culture?

Berrigan: Yes, and the violent Church, and educational system, and so on. We need to live in an alternative way so as to teach them peace.

R.T.: Many on the Right are summing-up the so-called lessons of Vietnam by saying that division in an hour of crisis will bring defeat; in effect, that questioning the government is not only unproductive but unpatriotic as well. (In fact, we heard this very thing immediately after the invasion of Kuwait.) How would you respond to this?

Berrigan: Well, I'm looking for a Biblical mandate to be patriotic, and I don't find one. Jesus touched on it only very lightly. Frankly, it doesn't compel me.

R.T.: What effect has the Vietnam war, or the war as it is remembered, had on the present peace and anti-nuclear movement?

Berrigan: Vietnam was our...I hesitate to say boot camp...it was our peace camp. We learned a lot in the courts, jails, communities, families; even the Jesuits learned a little. It was a very bitter but important school.

R.T.: In speaking about the difficulties in constructing an ethical life, and in finding moral guidance in times of crisis, in your autobiography you talk of the students at Cornell in the late 60's as having very little experience of "a sacramental moment... of a tradition, mystery, prayer, sacrament, Bible, they were the unborn." Do you see any parallels today, and if so, what is to be done about this?

Berrigan: Whew! These are difficult questions that one could really spend a lot of time preparing answers for; but I'll try.... I am not obligated to be heard, but offer what I can to the community in struggle. I don't want to set myself up as a sacramental moment in anyone's life. What is a sacrament? When I was in New Orleans, teaching some classes there, all the students, especially the women, responded to what was going on in the class. There was a real awakening that went on that was very hopeful. We had a housing rally; people were arrested in Georgia.

R.T.: What was the class about?

Berrigan: It was called: "Faith and Nonviolence." After the arrests, people went into jail and court for the first time. That sets a lot in motion. We asked why we do these things? What does it all mean? Then there was a wonderful response to the murders in Salvador. Does a community come out of it? This, all of what went on in that class, deserved to be called religious.

R.T.: Also in your autobiography, speaking of the jurors at the Catonsville trial, you say: "They bore out an earlier insight. There were no civilians in modern war: there were only those suffering one or another degree of the infection of violence." Do you feel this is still true today; and if so, do you think there is any way to convert the masses to nonviolence, to a turnings away from the bellicosity and machismo that seems to so infect political discourse today?

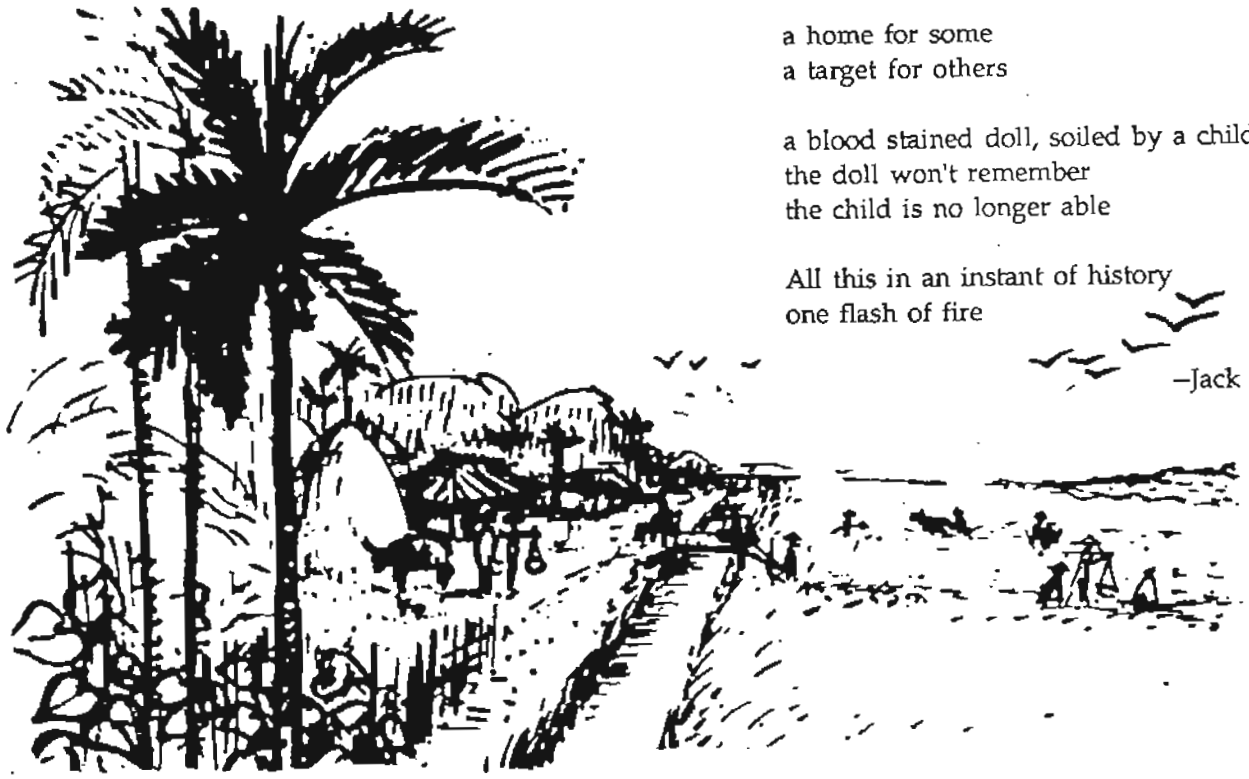
Berrigan: Life brings one down to size. I can't imagine the burden of having to convert anyone, especially the masses. That's too huge an undertaking. What are the masses anyway? We have to do what we can in the context of our small lives.

R.T.: In the same section of your autobiography you talk about the realization you had, the conviction, that in a life dedicated to nonviolence one could not depend a lot on results. Is this what you mean?

Berrigan: Yes. The gospel says: Live as though this were true. And let it go.

R.T.: Is there anything else you would like to say to the readership of The Round Table?

Berrigan: Hang in there. Carry it on. It's all worth it. ✚



Phu Cat, 3 Dec 69

A crater, just a hole
where people lived
and all at once died

a home for some
a target for others

a blood stained doll, soiled by a child's hands,
the doll won't remember
the child is no longer able

All this in an instant of history
one flash of fire

—Jack McLain

TRYING TO FIND A WAY HOME

Silently marchin' in ragged formation
Winding in wheelchairs to the cadence of canes.
Making their way past the half-empty viewing stand
A silent procession on one last campaign.
Fifty-eight thousand names etched in black granite
Are calling in grim monotone,
To the stern soldiers seeking an end to their journey
They've been trying for years to come home.

Come home, come home, you who are weary come home.
Home from the long ago, far away battlefields,
Home from the nightmares and flashbacks to hell,
Home from the psycho wards, the scag-shooting galleries,
Home from the death rows and the dark prison cells.
Home to a country in need of a healing
We're waiting for you to come home.

Jimmy Mahoney served his hitch in the Navy,
Stayed up late last night wrote these words on a sign:
"No More Wars, No More Lies, No More Memorials,"
Wears it around his neck marchin' in line.
A Vietnam mariner carries his albatross,
Telling his tale to atone,
For the sins of a nation that seems to have lost its way,
Jimmy, can you take us back home?

Come home, come home, you who are weary come home.
Home from the battlefields where we still fight today,
Home from the bottomless, treacherous mud,
Home from the oil fields, the coffee plantations,
Home from the diamond mines glistening with blood.
Home to a nation in need of redemption
Trying to find its way home.

Down at the monument, tolling the alphabet,
Faces reflecting in the dark polished stone.
Hoping you can't find the names that you know are there,
Names of the friends who will never come home.
And though no one speaks of it,
Searching the list of names,
you can't help but look for your own,
And when you don't find it, you turn away silently,
Time to be heading back home.

Come home, come home, you who are weary come home.
Home to a country in need of a healing
We're waiting for you to come home.

COME HOME ...AGAIN

by Charlie King

"Trying to Find a Way Home" is back in my active repertoire these days. I'd just as soon see most of my topical songs go out of date. It's sad how so many of them linger, how we have to keep fighting the same old battles.

I wrote the song at the urging of my friend Gar McArthur. With great integrity and steadfast consistency, Gar followed a decade of resistance to the Vietnam war with years in support of the survivors of that war — especially American veterans. The song is largely journalistic. There were such powerful images to work with: the Wall itself; the march of the survivors; the empty seats of official indifference; Jimmy Mahoney with the sign around his neck. The only imaginative piece I brought to the picture was the idea of looking for your own name.

I frequently weave musical themes from other songs into my own and I was much attracted to the old altar call, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling." I love the hymn for its simple beauty and power and for the way it has been used: sometimes to call penitents to come forward and experience conversion, to give themselves to a new way of living; sometimes to accompany the coffin as it is carried from the church to the graveyard. "You who are weary come home." Coming home has not been a sentimental experience for most Vietnam veterans. It has been dramatic, intense, difficult. I try to sing the chorus with a respectful feeling of solace and welcome.

It seems a hard and important song to sing these days. I feel like Jimmy Mahoney's sign is being trampled under marching feet and rolling tanks and it seems important to rescue it and hold it high. And it's an all too familiar feeling to watch my son Jamie prepare to go to college while halfway around the world a war is heating up.

In the early stages of this massive U.S. mobilization, the strongest impression I had listening to White House and Pentagon leaders was that they were enjoying themselves, stretching their legs, filling their lungs, leaving the nagging constraints of Vietnam behind. I am fearful that extensive American casualties, especially if chemical weapons are involved, would only serve as a rallying cause to further escalate American military action. It feels like the rhetoric of war is completely overshadowing the human cost so powerfully spelled-out on the Wall.

And remember that the Wall lists only a fraction of the casualties. There are more: the walking wounded; the inmates of prisons and mental institutions; the addicts; the suicides. If we were to write on the back of the Wall the name of every Vietnam vet who has committed suicide, we would run out of space because the list is longer than that of those killed in the war.

As an instrument of peace, the Wall may fail by its stark neutrality. It seems you can look at it, shake your head and say, "Never again" or you can stand tall and say, "This was our finest hour, they shall not have died in vain." It lacks the Hiroshima conviction that we will not repeat the sin. The enduring appeal of military adventure to U.S. leaders and the majority of citizens can turn any commemoration of past war into a rhetorical prop for the next one. I value plain, straight talk. Jimmy Mahoney adds to the Wall a necessary postscript: "No more wars. Nor more lies. No more memorials." ✝

Charlie King has been a long-time friend of the St. Louis Catholic Worker. He will be performing at SLU's Tegler Hall on Saturday, March 23rd. The concert, "Rebel Songs from Kevin Barry to Steven Biko," will be a benefit for the Economic Conversion Project. For tickets or info about how to get Charlie for a workshop or concert that week, call 726-6406.

VISIONS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

by Noam Chomsky

In one of his sermons on human rights, President Carter explained that we owe Vietnam no debt and have no responsibility to render it any assistance because "the destruction was mutual." If words have meaning, this must stand among the most astonishing statements in diplomatic history. What is most interesting about this statement is the reaction to it among educated Americans: null. Furthermore, the occasional reference to it, and what it means, evokes no comment and no interest. It is considered neither appalling, nor even noteworthy [which] is a tribute to the successes of a system of indoctrination that has few if any peers.

... We find headlines in the nation's press reading: "Vietnam, Trying to be Nicer, Still has a Long Way to Go." "It's about time the Vietnamese demonstrated some good will," said Charles Printz of Human Rights Advocates International, referring to negotiations about Amerasian children who constitute a tiny fraction of the victims of the savage U.S. aggression in Indochina. Crossette adds that the Vietnamese have also not been sufficiently forthcoming on the matter of remains of American soldiers, though their behavior is improving somewhat: "There has been progress, albeit slow, on the missing Americans." The unresolved problem of the war is what they did to us.

This picture of aggrieved innocence, carefully crafted by the propaganda system and lovingly nurtured by the educated classes, must surely count as one of the most remarkable phenomena of the modern age. Its roots lie deep in the national culture. "The conquerors of America glorified the devastation they wrought in visions of righteousness," Francis Jennings observes, "and their descendants have been reluctant to peer through the aura." No one who surveys the story of the conquest of the national territory, or the reaction to it over three and a half centuries, can doubt the accuracy of this indictment....

Contrary to much illusion, there was little principled opposition to the Indochina war among the articulate intelligentsia. One detailed study undertaken in 1970, at the peak of antiwar protest, revealed that the "American intellectual elite" came to oppose the war for the same "pragmatic reasons" that had convinced business circles that this investment should be liquidated. Very few opposed the war on the grounds that led all to condemn the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia: not that it failed, or that it was too bloody, but that aggression is wrong. In striking contrast, as late as 1982 — after years of unremitting propaganda with virtually no dissenting voice permitted expression to a large audience — over 70% of the general population (but far fewer "opinion leaders") still regarded the war as "fundamentally wrong and immoral," not merely "a mistake."

The technical term for this failure of the indoctrination system is the "Vietnam syndrome," a dread disease that spread over the population with such symptoms as distaste for aggression and massacre, what Norman Podhoretz calls the "sickly inhibitions against the use of military force," which he hopes were finally overcome with the grand triumph of American arms in Grenada. The malady, however, persists, and continues to inhibit the state executive in Central America and elsewhere. The major U.S. defeat in Indochina was at home: much of the population rejected the approved stance of passivity, apathy and obedience. Great efforts were made through the 1970's to overcome this "crisis of democracy," as it was called, but with less success than reliance on articulate opinion would suggest.

There was, to be sure, debate over the wisdom of the war. As noted, much of the population rejected the hawk/dove consensus of elite circles, a fact of lasting significance. It was that part of the population that concerned the planners in Washington, for ex-

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Noam Chomsky is Professor of Linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a tireless researcher, writer, and critic of U.S. hegemony in the world. This article, in a much expanded form, appeared originally in the Spring, 1986 issue of Cultural Critique.

ample, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who asked in a secret memo of May 19, 1967 whether expansion of the American war might "polarize opinion to the extent that 'doves' in the U.S. will get out of hand — massive refusals to serve, or to fight, or to cooperate, or worse?"

It is worth recalling a few facts. The U.S. was deeply committed to the French effort to reconquer their former colony, recognizing throughout that the enemy was the nationalist movement of Vietnam. The death toll was about 1/2 million. When France withdrew, the U.S. dedicated itself at once to subverting the 1954 Geneva settlement, installing in the south a terrorist regime that had killed perhaps 70,000 "Viet Cong" by 1961, evoking resistance which, from 1959, was supported from the northern half of the country temporarily divided by the 1954 settlement that the U.S. had undermined.

...From 1961 to 1965, the U.S. expanded the war against South Vietnam while fending off the threat of neutralization and political settlement, which was severe at the time. This was regarded as an intolerable prospect, since our "minnow" could not compete politically with their "whale," as explained by Douglas Pike, the leading government specialist on the national Liberation Front (in essence, the former Viet Minh, the anti- French resistance, "Viet Cong" in U.S. propaganda). Pike further explained that the NLF "maintained that its contest with the GVN (the U.S.-installed client regime) and the United States should be fought out at the political level and that the use of massed military might was in itself illegitimate" until forced by the United States "to use counter-force to survive." The aggressors succeeded in shifting the conflict from the political to the military arena, a major victory since it is in that arena alone that they reign supreme, while the propaganda system then exploited the use of "counter-force to survive" by the South Vietnamese enemy as proof that they were "terrorists" from whom we must defend South Vietnam by attacking and destroying it. Still more interestingly, this version of history is now close to received doctrine.

In 1965, the U.S. began the direct land invasion of South Vietnam, along with the bombing of the north, and at three times the level, the systematic bombardment of the south, which bore the brunt of U.S. aggression throughout. By then, probably some 170,000 South Vietnamese had been killed, many of them "under the crushing weight of American armor, napalm, jet bombers and, finally, vomiting gases," in the words of the hawkish military historian Bernard Fall. The U.S. then escalated the war against the south, also extending it to Laos and Cambodia where perhaps another 1/2 million to a million were killed, while the

THE DRAGON OF WAR

Vietnamese death toll may well have reached or passed three million , while the land was destroyed and the societies demolished in one of the major catastrophes of the modern era — a respectable achievement in the days before we fell victim to the "sickly inhibitions against the use of military force."

The devastation that United States left as its legacy has been quickly removed from consciousness here, and indeed, was little appreciated at the time. Its extent is worth recalling. In the south, 9,000 out of 15,000 hamlets were damaged or destroyed along with some 25 million acres of farmland and 12 million acres of forest; 1.5 million cattle were killed; and there are 1 million widows and some 800,000 orphans. In the north, all six industrial cities were damaged (three razed to the ground) along with 28 of 30 provincial towns (12 completely destroyed), 96 of 116 district towns, and 4,000 of some 5,800 communes; 400,000 cattle were killed and over a million acres of farmland were damaged. Much of the land is a moonscape, where people live on the edge of famine with rice rations lower than Bangladesh. In a recent study unreported here in the mainstream, the respected Swiss-based environmental group IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) concluded that the ecology is not only refusing to heal

but is worsening, so that a "catastrophe" may result unless billions of dollars are spent to "reconstruct" the land that has been destroyed, a "monumental" task that could be addressed only if the U.S. were to offer the reparations that it owes, a possibility that cannot be considered in a cultural climate as depraved and cowardly as ours. Forests have not recovered, fisheries remain reduced in variety and productivity, cropland productivity has not yet regained normal levels, and there is a great increase in toxin- related disease and cancer, with 4 million acres affected by the 19 million gallons of poisons dumped on cropland and forest in U.S. chemical warfare operations. Destruction of forests has increased the frequency of floods and droughts and aggravated the impact of typhoons, and war damage to dikes (some of which, in the south, were completely destroyed by U.S. bombardment) and other agricultural systems have yet to be repaired. The report notes that "humanitarian and conservationist groups, particularly in the United States, have encountered official resistance and red tape when requesting their governments' authorization to send assistance to Vietnam" — naturally enough, since the U.S. remains committed to ensure that its victory is not threatened by recovery of the countries it has destroyed.

...It is a most revealing fact that there is no such event in history as the American attack against South Vietnam launched by Kennedy and escalated by his successors. Rather, history records only "a defense of freedom," a "failed crusade" (Stanley Karnow) that was perhaps unwise, the doves maintain. At a comparable level of integrity, Soviet party hacks extol the "defense of Afghanistan" against "bandits" and "terrorists" organized by the CIA. They, at least, can plead fear of totalitarian violence, while their Western counterparts can offer no such excuse for their servility.

...That the U.S. lost the war in Indochina is "an inescapable fact" (Wall Street Journal), repeated without question throughout the retrospectives and in American commentary generally. When some doctrine is universally proclaimed without qualification, a rational mind will at once inquire as to whether it is true. In this case, it is false, though to see why, it is necessary to escape the confines of the propaganda system and to investigate the rich documentary record that lays out the planning and motives for the American war against the Indochinese, which persisted for almost 30 years. Those who undertake this task will discover that a rather different conclusion is in order.

The U.S. did not achieve its maximal goals in Indochina, but it did gain a partial victory. Despite talk by Eisenhower and others about Vietnamese raw materials, the primary U.S. concern was not Indochina, but rather the "domino effect," the demonstration effect of successful independent development that might cause "the rot to spread" to Thailand and beyond, possibly ultimately drawing Japan into a "New Order" from which the U.S. would be excluded. This threat was averted. The counties of Indochina will be lucky to survive: they will not endanger global order by social and economic success in a framework that denies the West the freedom to exploit, infecting regions beyond, as had been feared. It might parenthetically be noted that although this interpretation of the American aggression is supported by substantial evidence, there is no hint of its existence, and surely no reference to the extensive documentation substantiating it, in the standard histories, since such facts do not conform to the required image of aggrieved benevolence. Again we see here the operation of the Orwellian principle that Ignorance is Strength.

Meanwhile, the U.S. moved forcefully to buttress the second line of defense, In 1965, the U.S. backed a military coup in Indonesia (the most important "domino," short of Japan) while American liberals lauded the "dramatic changes" that took place there — the most dramatic being the massacre of hundreds of thousands of landless peasants — as a proof that we were right to defend South Vietnam by demolishing it, thus encouraging the Indonesian generals to prevent any rot from spreading there. In 1972, the U.S. backed the overthrow of Philippine democracy behind the "shield" provided by its successes in Indochina, thus averting the threat of national capitalism there with a terror- and-torture state on the preferred Latin American model. A move towards democracy in Thailand in 1973 evoked some concern, and a reduction in eco-

nomic aid and increase in military aid in preparation for the military coup that took place with U.S. support in 1976. Thailand had a particularly important role in the U.S. regional system since 1954, when the National Security Council laid out a plan for subversion and eventual aggression throughout Southeast Asia in response to the Geneva Accords, with Thailand "as the focal point of U.S. covert and psychological operations," including "covert operations on a large and effective scale" throughout Indochina, with the explicit intention of "making more difficult the control by the Viet Minh of North Vietnam." Subsequently Thailand served as a major base for the U.S. attacks on Vietnam and Laos.

In short, the U.S. won a regional victory, and even a substantial local victory in Indochina, left in ruins. That the U.S. suffered a "defeat" in Indochina is a natural perception on the part of those of limitless ambition, who understand "defeat" to mean the achievement only of major goals, while certain minor ones remain beyond our grasp.

Postwar U.S. policy has been designed to ensure that the victory is maintained by maximizing suffering and oppression in Indochina, which then evokes further joy and gloating here. Since "the destruction is mutual," as is readily demonstrated by a stroll through New York, Boston, Vinh, Quang Ngai Province, and the Plain of Jars, we are entitled to deny reparations, aid and trade, and to block development funds. The extent of U.S. sadism is noteworthy, as is the (null) reaction to it. In 1977, when India tried to send 100 buffalos to Vietnam to replenish the herds destroyed by U.S. violence, the U.S. threatened to cancel "food for peace" aid while the press featured photographs of peasants in Cambodia pulling plows as proof of Communist barbarity; the photographs in this case turned out to be fabrications of Thai intelligence, but authentic ones could no doubt have been obtained, throughout Indochina. The Carter administration even denied rice to Laos (despite a cynical pretense to the contrary), where the agricultural system was destroyed by U.S. terror bombing. Oxfam America was not permitted to send 10 solar pumps to Cambodia for irrigation in 1983; in 1981, the U.S. government sought to block a shipment of school supplies and educational kits to Cambodia by the Mennonite Church.

Now, Western moralists remain silent as their governments provide the means for the Indonesian generals to consummate their massacres, while the U.S. backs the Democratic Kampuchea coalition, largely based on the Khmer Rouge, because of its "continuity" with the Pol Pot regime, so the State Department explains, adding that this Khmer Rouge-based coalition is "unquestionably" more representative of the Cambodian people than the resistance is of the Timorese. The reason for this stance was explained by our ally Deng Xiaoping: "It is wise for China to force the Vietnamese to stay in Kampuchea because that way they will suffer more and more...." This makes good sense, since the prime motive is to "bleed Vietnam," to ensure that suffering and brutality reach the maximum possible level so that we can exult in our benevolence in undertaking our "noble crusade" in earlier years.

The elementary truths about these terrible years survive in the memories of those who opposed the U.S. war against South Vietnam, then all of Indochina, but there is no doubt that the approved version will sooner or later be established by the custodians of history, perhaps to be exposed by crusading intellectuals a century or two hence, if "Western civilization" endures that long. ✚

VOICES FROM THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

The Ho Chi Minh Bird

They said I was too old for battle.
Too frail for heavy work.
But I could whistle bird calls,
so they sent me down the trail
to be a Ho Chi Minh bird.

The bombs and chemicals
had killed or frightened off all the birds
whose notes cheered the soldiers.
So, I'd hide in the forest as convoys passed,
and sing all the happy songs I knew.

I started whistling in 1963,
and by the Liberation,
I could be 357 different birds.
I got malaria, my hair fell out, and I was wounded four times.
But I was a Ho Chi Minh bird every day for thirteen years.

Trung Tuong Vo Bam Gets a New Assignment From Uncle Ho in 1959

"Bam,
build me a supply road by hand from Hanoi to Saigon;
with five main North-South routes
and twenty-one East-West branches.
Even though it will be an elephant-sized project,
keep it hidden.
And when it's complete,
report back to me."

The poems printed on this page are part of a collection Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The
Vietnam War. He is also director of the O.F. Kenworthy Southeast Asia-Ozark Project, a group tha
On a recent trip, he met with retired general Trung Tuong Vo Bam and other Vietnamese veteran

A Porter on the Trail

In 1966,
when I started down the trail,
I carried a copy of
"The Poems of Walt Whitman"
In my rucksack.

I am not a learned man,
and I know only
two poems by heart:
"Kim Van Kieu," and
"Song of Myself."

I would read as I walked
from North to South, and back.
I could share "Kieu" with anyone,
but had less opportunity to discuss "Song"
with my comrades.

Still, I drew strength from Whitman's poetry,
and optimism too. He wrote,
"All goes onward and outward...," and
"To die is different from what anyone supposed,
and luckier."

I wondered
How a nation
that gave birth to Walt Whitman,
could also produce
napalm and Agent Orange.

He wrote,
"This is the grass that grows
wherever the land is and the water is,
This is the common air
that bathes the globe."

One day, near Khe Sanh, we captured a G.I.
I was excited, and asked him about
"Song of Myself."
But the American said
he'd never heard of Walt Whitman.

e first appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, November 9, 1990. Larry Rottmann is a veteran
promotes cultural and educational exchanges between people in the American Midwest and Vietnam.
During the war, General Truong was responsible for the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

LOOKING FOR TRUTH IN THE LITERATURE ABOUT VIETNAM

by Michael Bartz

To forget Vietnam is to forget our capacity to do evil.
–Neil Sheehan, author of A Bright Shining Lie

I.

In recent posturing and bullying about Iraq, George Bush said, "This will not be another Vietnam. I will never ever agree to a halfway effort." For those who fought so assiduously against this war, statements like this are maddening. First of all, the implications here are simply false and the Bushes, Nixons, Kissingers, and Westmorelands know it. The problem is that because of the inherent media power of the Presidency utterances like this are heard by untold millions of people and begin immediately to take on a kind of historical patina that their pseudo-historical nature does not deserve. So while propagandizing about the Persian Gulf, and trying to win the support of citizens of the U.S. for war against Saddam Hussein, the President is at the same time using, reinforcing, and creating false ideas about this country's conduct in the Vietnam war. This is an insidious use of lies, disinformation, and propaganda by which historical "facts" such as this one about our armed forces having their "hands tied behind their backs" in Vietnam, repeated often enough, become not only history for the unreflective or unwary, but also the basis for action in the present. One only has to listen to the daily sound bite "interviews" with our would-be warriors in the sands of Arabia to see the effects of the government-based, popularized propaganda on the reasoning of young people in the armed forces as they beat the drums for war.

Another reason this false consciousness is so harmful is that it makes the whole healing process from the Vietnam era that much more difficult and painful. After a period of strong denial and attempts at sublimation, the last six or seven years since the war's end have seen a frenzied renewal of interest in the war and especially issues involving the veterans who fought in it. Beginning in 1983 with the dedication of the "Wall," the memorial in Washington, D.C. to those U.S. troops who died in the war, and continuing to the present with the publication of dozens of books, the production of more than a movie a year, and the planning and carrying out of a multitude of parades and memorial gatherings to honor and "welcome home" veterans, Vietnam related activity has become almost an industry in itself. But this commercialization and bandwagon effect, rather than speaking to the pain and anger of vets and the ambiguities of anti-war people, has often only further complicated the attempts at healing and reconciliation. The orgy of remembrance during the last half decade has taken on the too slick appearance of the market place. While some of the feelings at parades and ceremonies of veterans who experienced finally "getting their due" were certainly genuine and good, there remains for war protestors, especially among the Catholic Left, an uneasiness connected not only with the commodification of Vietnam veterans' tributes, but more basically with the very ambiguous feelings that many people had towards those who fought in Vietnam.

There exists a great deal of sympathy for the veterans who have felt forgotten or used, who are angry and want recognition. On the other hand, it is not possible for those who felt and still do that the war was wrong, racist, imperialistic, and immoral to simply join in what they perceive to be facile tributes which imply, as Ronald Reagan's speech writers endlessly

Michael Bartz, an Englsih teacher at C.B.C. High School, is busy trying to get the Grateful Dead to come to St. Louis, and taking care of his new finches, Beatrice and Dante.

reminded us, that Vietnam was an honorable cause. Christians are called to heal and forgive, yes, but those of us who opposed the war also have a big responsibility to history and future generations. Ten years of the mind-numbing rhetoric and greed of the Reagan and Bush cabals (with more to come) have done great harm to the historical consciousness of the U.S., and, more subtly, to the good desires of U.S. citizens to put things behind them. What we are left with is a handful of the most odious generalizations, simplifications, misunderstandings, and myths that pass for fact or reality or history.

As Catholic Christians we are called to reconciliation, but given the nature of today's historical consciousness about Vietnam, to say that we are done with that reconciliation now because of the memorials and parades of the past few years is absurd. If the anti-war movement is going to live up to its integrity, to mature, grow, and continue to develop spiritually, to work towards a true healing, then it must also continue to educate. Healing cannot take place without truth. We need especially to teach the young, as part of their learning citizenship, about where we have been as a country. Right now, the high school students I teach are, I am afraid, typical of too many people throughout the land who either know nothing about Vietnam, or grasp on to a few shreds of revisionist history. They want it all to be plain and simple, but of course it is neither. This is a the task which awaits us.

II.

What better way to find the truth than through art? Great art, of course, teaches truths about ourselves, but even those works of lesser quality, if produced with ruthless honesty and informed by primal human experiences, can lead us to some truth. Each epoch in recent history has produced such art, especially literature, and the Vietnam era is no different. In our struggle for reconciliation with veterans, and in facing the daunting task of continuing to educate both young and old about Vietnam, the literature that has emerged from the war can be not only a great source of information and insight, but also an inspiration to continue our labor. Herewith, then, is a brief overview of some of that literature.

Over 200 novels have been published about this war with scores of memoirs, short stories, oral histories, and over 40 volumes of poetry. Serious questions concerning racism, the treatment of women, the nexus between sex and violence, anti-war feelings, and ecology are an integral part of the books as the writers mirror and are influenced by the social movements in the United States at the time of the war. Excluding poetry and military history, there are four main categories under which Vietnam books can be grouped. The first is *journals*. Usually done by non-combatants, these books are reportorial in nature and often written at some distance from the events. They are filled with episodes, anecdotes, and most of all excruciatingly exact observations which precisely explicate the war.

Three books stand out in this category. The first two, *The Village of Ben Suc* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) and *The Military Half* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), are really a pair, written by the then 24 year old graduate student in Far Eastern history at Harvard, Jonathan Schell. In *Ben Suc*, Schell explores the absolute destruction by U.S. troops of a prosperous village of some 3,500 people, in an attemp to rid a forty square mile stretch of jungle known as the Iron Triangle of any enemy bases or supply depots. In crystalline prose he reports on the almost manic enormity of

the attack on these villages and the destruction of the homes and environment of about 6,000 people and their "resettlement" in a squalid temporary refugee camp. The annihilation of the village of Ben Suc at the end of the book sets the stage for Schell's next book, published a year later, *The Military Half*. While the main focus of *Ben Suc* was the creation of the wretched refugee camps under the auspices of Vietnamese government and U.S. civil-affairs advisors, the "civilian half" of the operation Schell observed, the second book deals with the reconnaissance, bombing, defoliation, and burning of villages, homes, and fields in South Vietnam for the purpose of denying them to the N.L.F. – that is, the "military half." Together these two short books make for emotionally devastating reading as a tiny corner of the brutality of the U.S. attack on South Vietnam is exposed.

The other book in the journal category, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), is arguably still the best book about the war. Eight years in the making, it is a brilliant and insightful revision of Herr's dispatches from Vietnam during the two years he was on assignment there as a magazine writer starting in the latter half of 1967. *Dispatches* is a

book of great inventiveness and creativity. Herr has a dogged quest for information and a care for language and its proper use which spills over into the aesthetic realm. He realized the difficulty of communicating extreme experience in a way that is both accurate and meaningful, and he intuited correctly that the aura of this war, its tone, was radically different from any other. A lot of this is due, he believes, to the energy of the '60s and their main aesthetic expression, rock 'n' roll. This interconnectedness of the culture back home and the war gives a tremendous energy to the book that is really unique in all of the Vietnam literature.

The second category of books is *oral history*. In spite of the generally held notion that people in the United States knew all about Vietnam from T.V., scholars are pointing out now that that notion is false. Too often T.V. simply parroted the official propaganda of the Military Command. Filled with stories, anecdotes, lore, and insights that make the war intelligible, the oral histories fill this informational gap. They also mirror the shape and texture of the war itself. So much of the war was uncoordinated, episodic, lacking dramatic unity. The absence of set-piece battles, the isolation of platoons on search and destroy missions, the individualistic tours of duty for each grunt make for a post-modern vision of break-up and alienation. Oral histories are part of a post-modern literature where the "history" is often no more than scattered recollections--deep, emotional, significant though they may be--without any synthesis or integration into an historical context. And yet in the best of these books the singular voices of each interview, rich and thoughtful, come through and rivet our attention.

The two best of these oral histories are Mark Baker's *Nam* (New York: Quill, 1982) and Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House, 1984). In *Nam*, Baker does not identify the veterans whose stories are being told and so it often is not until well into the narration that the reader becomes aware of the gender of the speaker, especially if the story is not one of combat, but a reflection on the war, the country itself, or coming home. Herein are two of the great strengths of *Nam*: 1) a real dignity given to the women's stories (nurses in evac hospitals throughout the country), something often lacking in other accounts of the war (when women's experiences are included at all); and 2) an interest neither in shock value or bloodless historical facts, but rather a kind of living history--full of ambiguity--focusing on being drafted and combat and killing, on mutilation and sex and drugs, on coming home and reflecting years later, because those are the things that are important to the people who were there. As all good oral history, *Nam* is not claiming to present truth, but only to contribute a few pieces to the mosaic of truth, and this it does superbly.

In addition to all of the subjects taken up in *Nam*, what was important to the 30% of the infantry, the grunts in Vietnam who were African-American, was racism--in U.S. society, in the armed forces, in people's hearts. In *Bloods*, Wallace Terry's editing achieves a stark directness and evening out of tone that eschews for the most part dialects, Black English constructions, and obscenity and results in a book that reads amazingly at the same level of intensity whether the subject is boyhood war games or the mutilation of a corpse. The positive aspect of this tone is that the atrocities, both military and racial, are understated in a stunning manner. One realizes when the book is finished that for 300 pages, culled from hundreds of hours of interviews, Terry has presented an incisive and eloquent re-telling of the ordinary experiences of an oppressed group of people fighting a racist war for a racist country.

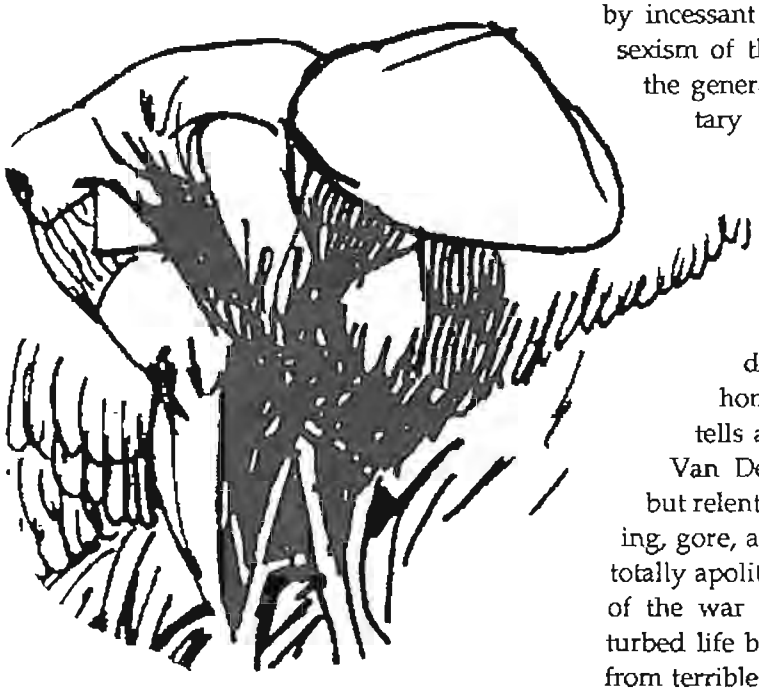
The next category I wish to suggest for exploration is what has been recently called *fictional autobiography*. This is a fascinating genre, very similar to a memoir but containing more novelistic elements of narrative and more extensively re-created dialogue. Parallel to the transmogrified voices (recorded, transcribed, edited, published) of oral history, the voice of the fictional autobiography is based on truth, but truth filtered through intense reflection on intense experiences. The exactness of any one moment is not important; it's the emotion, feeling, or spirit of different episodes, the relentless march of the quotidian, and the ultimate effect of it all on the reader that counts. Powerful and fascinating because it is based on reality, this form of writing has produced some of the finest books from the Vietnam war.

Two of these memoirs, *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) and

Born on the Fourth of July by Ron Kovic (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) have been made into movies, the former a commendable one for T.V., the latter an academy award winner for screenwriter Kovic.

A Rumor of War is one of the first books of its type written after the war, and in many ways it set the standard and stage for those which came after. Three main elements obtain in Caputo's book, all of which are taken up by subsequent authors. First is the question of the environment, specifically the jungle, which becomes for Caputo the central metaphor of alienation and fear. Second is the idea of John Kennedy as king of Camelot and Caputo and other contemporaries as Kennedy's knights with Vietnam as their crusade. This romantic, but ultimately fatuous, image is mentioned time and again by the young men of the middle '60s who became soldiers asking what "they could do for their country." The third element is the question of guilt. Caputo is a fine, ethnic, Italian Catholic boy taught to love God and country and to atone for his sins. The book he has written becomes an attempt to expiate his guilt by recounting his transformation from an ideal knight, full of zeal and religious patriotism; to a jaded killer, full of contempt and then emptiness; and finally to a penitent realist, confessing to giving the "implied" orders for the assassination of two young Vietnamese men, the central incident of the book. *A Rumor of War*, then, is Philip Caputo's confession and penance, his attempt to return to the sanctified environment of grace.

In *Born on the Fourth of July* Ron Kovic recounts his journey from a childhood strikingly similar to Philip Caputo's to an adulthood as a paraplegic bitterly questioning all the principles of his childhood and passionately committed to stopping the war in Vietnam. After he goes to Vietnam three terrible things happen to Kovic: as a squad leader, he accidentally shoots and kills one of his own men; his platoon accidentally but stupidly kills and wounds a large group of Vietnamese children and old men; and in a firefight, he himself gets shot, his spinal cord is shattered, and he is paralyzed from the chest down. Still, his anti-war feelings stem not so much from the fact that he is paralyzed, but from his treatment after he returns home in the various V.A. hospitals he is sent to, and his contact with the anti-war movement–both the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the general mass of people partaking in demonstrations, particularly after the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and the killings at Kent and Jackson State. He is also especially despairing over the loss of his sexual faculties. One of the very few authors to deal with and explore this awful condition, Kovic here becomes almost painfully vulnerable and intimate. The power of *Born on the Fourth of July* comes from the absolute dissection of Kovic's memory and experience, and the deep level of vulnerability to his audience that he achieves. His life is unhappy and stalked by death, and he will not tell it any other way.



Two more memoirs are especially noteworthy, wonderfully rich and emotionally wrenching narratives, Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* (with Christopher Morgan, New York: Warner Books, 1983) and Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984). Van Devanter, whose book is the first by a woman vet, is not really a writer, but the tone she and her collaborator, the journalist Christopher Morgan, have chosen redeems the pedestrian and cliched style: it is a straightforward, brutally honest and confessional approach that is stunning in its collective force. The reader follows Van Devanter from her Catholic girlhood as a patriotic innocent of the '60s (not unlike the Caputos and Kovics of other books) responding to John Kennedy's inaugural address, to a bitter, experienced woman, beaten down 10 years after her tour of duty as a nurse in Vietnam, by incessant nightmares and the cruel sexism of the medical profession and the general sexism both in the military and in U.S. culture as a whole.

Of particular interest to those wishing to reconcile with Vietnam veterans is both Van Devanter's and Robert Mason's discussion of their coming home. In *Chickenhawk* Mason tells a story chillingly similar to Van Devanter's in that the slow but relentless accumulation of maiming, gore, and death leads him from a totally apolitical stance to one of hatred of the war and finally to a very disturbed life back in the States, suffering from terrible nightmares and the symptoms of Post-Vietnam Stress Syndrome.

Unlike *Home Before Morning*, though, *Chickenhawk*, a shattering personal account of the helicopter war in Vietnam, is a *tour de force* of writing. Mason possesses a superb narrative style and, coupled with his sensitivity and the feeling that flying is such a compelling and joyous activity, that style helps the reader veritably soar through its powerful narrative. Taken together, *Home Before Morning* and *Chickenhawk* are stunning and almost overwhelming examples what war can do to idealism and the people who possess it.

The final category of books in our survey is the novel. With over 200 of them published about the Vietnam war there is obviously a broad range to choose from. I offer here four of the best, but be assured that there are many others well worth reading both for enjoyment and in the search for truth.

In *The 13th Valley* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), John Del Vecchio has undertaken an enormous task. He wants to tell the story of the Vietnam war both realistically as possible, but also symbolically as a tale of Nature ravaged. As he sees it, U.S. presence in Vietnam has set up a kind of terrible tension between humans and a violated ecosystem. It is Del Vecchio's analysis of this tension that is the inspiration for the structure of his novel. But in addition to this, he has chosen to develop other major themes as well including the philosophical roots of conflict, both political and racial; the importance of language in conflict cause and resolution; the history of First World imperialism in Southeast Asia; differing cultural and intellectual patterns based on race; and the psychosexual effects of war on males and marriage. *The 13th Valley* has been likened to *Moby-Dick* in that it is meticulously realistic while at the same time filled with philosophic musings about the conflicts at hand.

The final works of art I wish to review here are the magnificent triad of books by Tim O'Brien: *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (New York: Dell, 1974), *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Dell, 1978), and *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

In *Combat Zone*, the spare, reportorial fictional memoir of O'Briens's induction and subsequent combat, we were presented with a young philosopher working out theories of morality, duty, and courage while in the midst of it all. He quotes extensively from Plato's dialogue *Laches* on courage, and agonizes over whether to escape to Sweden or to submit to his past, his family, his town and go to Vietnam. As intellectually stimulating as this book is, it is also a wonderful example of creative and experimental structure which makes it read like a compelling novel.

Going After Cacciato, which won the National Book Award for fiction, is an elegant, peaceful, humorous, gentle, and thoughtful work. While the narrative is exciting this is primarily a novel of ideas. O'Brien is surer of the answers now than he was in *Combat Zone* and there is a distillation and even deeper questioning about the war and Vietnamese culture. And although the brilliant journey into the imagination, the escape from reality, the magic surrealism of the central conceit seem far removed from the devastation of so many Vietnam books. *Cacciato* is first a novel of death. It is the deaths in Paul Berlin's squad that define the book. They begin the book and permeate it, making clear that O'Brien is, indeed, fundamentally a realist about the war.

And finally, we come to the extraordinary *The Things They Carried*. Here O'Brien reaches full maturity as a writer, still concerned with the same themes that informed his earlier work, but pushing structure, questions of epistemology, and meaning even further than before.

The book is a series of award winning stories about a fictional platoon in Vietnam interspersed with what appears to be O'Brien's autobiographical musings. But much more is going on here: first of all, O'Brien insists that "except for a few details regarding the author's life" the work is entirely fiction; next, we see increasingly as the book progresses that many of the stories are interconnected, sharing common themes and characters, and that every time we begin to feel that a story is "real" or "true" O'Brien most assuredly tells us in his own (the narrator's) voice that it isn't. But whose voice is this? Like many fascinating recent experiments in fiction, *The Things They Carried* challenges the reader with provocative questions about reality and truth. All of this, though, is only a structure which aims at a further truth: for O'Brien, the writer whose life was changed irrevocably by the Vietnam war, this book is about stories and their ability to save. If *Combat* was for speculation and *Cacciato* for healing, then *Things* is for redemption. O'Brien the supreme transcendentalist, believes that we are saved through our imagination, that this is where truth resides. This is not a bad idea for someone who has been in war. It is not a bad idea for us, who have all been touched by Vietnam in some way and continue to search for the truth. ✚

FROM OUR MAILBAG

Dear friends,

Many thanks for your recent issue of The Round Table. As always you provide the insights and background to world events one needs to know even if one is not happy to know them.

My issues of Sojourners have stacked up and time for the wider dimensions of life seems constantly to disappear. Thanks, then, for those few pages which helps again to know a wider focus and to know that [there are people] who care and care enough both to embrace the pain and challenge others to do the same.

With gratitude...for all you do. We would be less a Church, less a city, less a people, without your presence.

Gratefully,
Jim Telthorst
St. Louis, MO

Dear friends,

Thank you for the Fall 1990 issue on what has been misnamed, deliberately, Low Intensity Conflict. The horror of this demonic warfare carried out in our name is sometimes almost more than I can bear. I can't believe that I just go on with my life, and that I frequently say things about Central America in a prudent way that won't upset people....

The faith and goodness that inspired this issue give me strength and courage. I'm buying copies for both our Core Committee and our Development Committee, that they, too, may profit from your good works and words.

Maggie Fisher
St. Louis Inter-Faith
Committee on Latin America

FROM LATIN AMERICA

by Ann Manganaro, S. L.

Besides being the first Sunday of Advent, today is the tenth anniversary of the martyrdom of Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan here in El Salvador: a good time to stop and reflect on the complex reality of life and death in El Salvador.

Both life and death in this tiny country are experienced in a context of violence. Even as I write I hear intermittent bursts of machine guns in the distance and the drone of a bomber overhead. So, somewhere in the distance, some of the young combatants on one side or the other of this conflict are probably being wounded, possibly dying, even as I write.

The last few weeks have been filled with an awareness of that violence on so many levels. During the week of November 12th to 16th, the Jesuit University and Jesuit Community (along with many other organizations and individuals) celebrated the first anniversary of the martyrdom of the six Jesuits and two women who were brutally slain by the Salvadoran Armed Forces on November 16th last year. And, it was truly a celebration: an affirmation that life and love are indeed stronger than death; a tribute to the inspiring commitment of those men and women; an opportunity to renew one's own sense of commitment to the Gos-

Ann Manganaro is a Sister of Loretto, a physician, and a founding member of the Karen House community. She does health care work in El Salvador under the auspices of the Jesuit Refugee Services.

pel, to justice, to the poor. Especially moving for me was a torchlight march on November 15th from the Plaza Civica to the UCA (the Jesuit university) sponsored by the Permanent Committee of the National Debate for Peace: thousands of peasants, workers, students, members of various churches and political parties [marched together]. The march was followed by an all-night vigil and pre- dawn Mass at the UCA.

I returned from that celebration in San Salvador to the uncertainties and tensions of life in the conflictive zone of Chalatenango in which Guarijila is situated. I could sense the heightened tension and soon understood why. On Tuesday, November 20th, the FMLN launched military strikes all over the country including an especially strong attack on the military headquarters in the town of Chalatenango (about 9 kilometers distant). The fighting started about 2:00 a.m. and went on all day. It was evidently particularly bitter and bloody, with lots of wounded and dead on both sides including a number of civilians from the town of Chalatenango and nearby villages). There has been sporadic fighting in our area since, though fortunately none of it has come close to Guarjila and the other villages.

The FMLN states that its military strikes are meant to pressure the Army and the government to negotiate more seriously. The Army and the government accuse the FMLN of terrorism. Both sides still say they are committed to trying to negotiate a ceasefire by January. Incidents of death-squad style killings and disappearances continue. In the midst of all the confusions and contradictions, I hesitate to predict what may happen over the next few months.

I do feel, though, sure of the resiliency of the Salvadoran people even in the midst of violence and uncertainty, and especially sure of the tenacious courage of so many in this country who continue to struggle for justice in spite of all manner of repression and threats — exactly as did Ignacio Ellacuria and his fellow Jesuits.

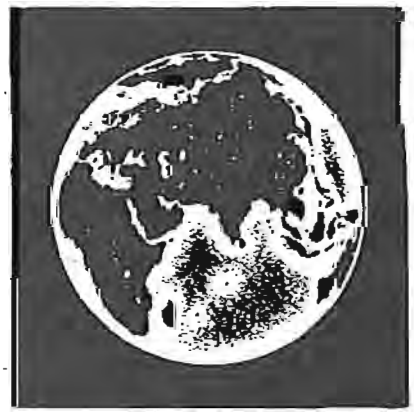
Also, in the midst of violence and uncertainty, the daily life of Guarjila continues: the corn harvest, the construction of a school, plans for a day-care program, and plans to begin construction of a new regional clinic here (to serve not only Guarjila but the surrounding villages).

My own days have been especially full in the last few weeks. And, I have been especially heartened to see, in so many concrete situations, how much the health promoters here have learned in the last two years and how independently and well they work when faced with crisis situations.

I don't have any profound reflections of my own to share with you at the beginning of this Advent season, on this tenth anniversary of the deaths of Ita, Maura, Dorothy and Jean. But, I would like to share with you a quote from Oscar Romero which I have turned to frequently over the last three years. May its truth shine forth in our own lives:

"Let us not be disheartened even when the horizon of history grows dim and closes in, as though human realities make impossible the accomplishment of God's plans. God makes use even of human error, even of human sins, so as to make rise over the darkness what Isaiah spoke of. One day prophets will sing not only the return from Babylon but our full liberation. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. They walk in shadows, but a light has shone forth!" (December 25, 1977)

Thank you so much for all your love, prayers, help and support in my almost three years here. Thank you for your love and commitment toward the Salvadoran people in their sufferings and struggles. God be with you, each and all. ✝

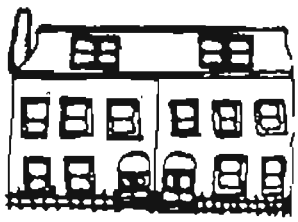


Patriotism

On my honor I'll defend
my country to the very end.
Killing, hating, murder, war —
That's what patriotism's for.

Ellen Rehg, 1969

FROM LITTLE HOUSE



by Mary Ann McGivern, S.L.

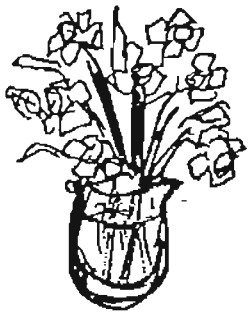
The Little House has had a reprieve. Federal Judge Stephen Limbaugh ordered a halt to property acquisition for the new magnet schools. The School Board has no money. The Court of Appeals said bond issues must pass by two thirds and the one last April only got 61% of the vote. It may be decades before the city has money to build schools.

That is not cause for rejoicing. We need decent schools. We need them for the sake of the children. We also need them as part of the infrastructure that will attract industry back to the city and offer some economic hope.

I've moved to Karin and Pat's apartment [same building, but next door], and from my bed I see the city skyline, from the Arch across Mercantile Tower and One Bell Center to the Federal Building and the funny turrets of City Hall. I didn't think ahead that there would be such a view and the first night, sitting on my bed, I was startled into awe at the display of city lights. This city display is the last thing I see before I go to sleep and my first sight each morning. It is a splendid statement of human capability. I just know too much about our failures to have much simple feelings of pleasure when I look.

But on a very local level, here at home, there is cause for hope. Lorraine's twins were born at the end of October and are healthy and alert. As I sit and write on a Saturday morning, I hear her older children playing next door, sounding happy and busy. The sun is shining and now, ten days before Christmas, there are still roses blooming in the garden. I've been feeding a small puppy I call Fraidy Dog because she skitters away from everyone. The neighbors call her RunRun. but gradually, by means of tearing at a peanut butter sandwich, she learned to eat from my hand; and now she ignores the pan of dog food and follows me, waiting for me to pull out food from my tool pocket and feed and pet her. But she still won't come to me if I don't have food. How she will survive the winter, I don't know, but she is healthy and resourceful.

The city and county have a $100,000 planning grant from the Department of Defense Office of Economic Adjustment (OEO) to begin extricating ourselves from dependence on military spending. That is good news. The OEO really shouldn't be within the Department of Defense; the Departments of Commerce or Labor would be more appropriate places to carry out economic development plans. But I've been on the work group and found the OEO staff to be bureaucrats in the best sense, committed to doing the job they are told to do. They've held St. Louis planners to specific economic strategies and encouraged concrete practical steps that will help local companies expand plant capacity, retrain workers, and find new markets beyond the military for their products. It is only a grant to make a plan, but the work holds hope for the new year.



Finally, I am watching with delight as Elijah gives evidence of moral maturity. His family was one of the first three to come when we opened Karen House and he was just nine years old. He's 22 now and when he learned the School Board was planning to move everyone out of this seven square blocks without relocation benefits, his moral thermometer went way up. We went to a meeting and he stood in the hallway telling the local organizer how wrong it was to order renters out of their homes without some plan to ensure they wouldn't be forced to go to a shelter. "I know," he said, "what it is like to have to go to a shelter. These people don't have much money and can't afford a classy neighborhood, but this is their home and it is wrong to make them leave it and not help them find another." Elijah has a trade and a good job and he's getting married in the spring. He also has a passion for justice that I hadn't seen before and that reminds me our children will carry on. ✚

Mary Ann McGivern is celebrating her tenth aniversy at the Little House.

FROM KAREN HOUSE

by Katrina & Jim Plato

"The birth of a baby is God's opinion that the world should go on." — Carl Sandburg

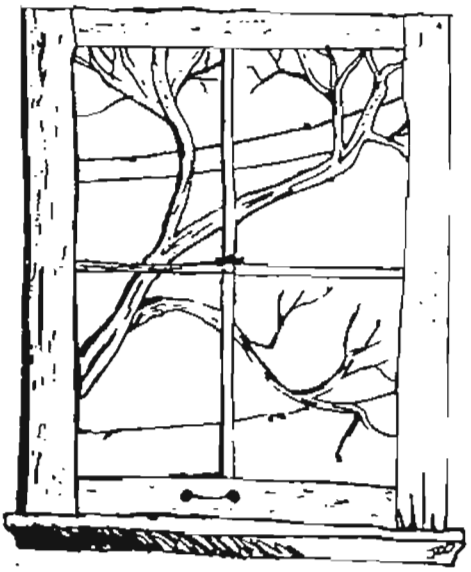
The painful times we are in give us cause to fear for Ben's future. We ask, "Would it be better not to bring children into this world?" But now that we have seen Ben, we believe children are God's gift to remind us to live in hope and love with one another. It would be sad not to have children for fear of wars and rumors of wars because they are just what we need. They are laughter and innocence and they bring questions which, if we listen, could move our hearts of stone to change for the good of all.

Benjamin James was born to us September 13th — a month after we moved into an apartment next to Karen House. Now as a family, we are a part of the Catholic Worker community. Bringing children into community changes its dynamics. Caring for Ben takes up time once given to help the guests. Can families be part of a community focused on serving the urban poor? Can our community emotionally, physically and financially support families when its energy has been directed primarily to the work of the House? Our community is struggling with these kinds of questions. We would appreciate letters from communities who have reflections on this issue.

A positive side to having a family in community is the new life it brings to community dynamics as well as the healthy parenting model we hope to bring to the mothers at Karen House. A child born into community has the benefit of an extended family. This is something very important that is missing in our fractured society today. The guests at Karen House are also part of this extended family if only for a short time.

Having a child has also given us a new sensitivity for the mothers at Karen House who try to cope with the added stress of homelessness. Our hearts hurt with a new understanding for the strained relationship between mother and child as the mother attempts to provide for her family with little support. Children are about all these mothers have. We believe the bond we have with Ben reflects the love God has for us. This bond is beyond words. If a guest wants to strike out at another guest, she only needs to speak against the other's children or the mother's ability to parent. Such attacks wound the mother's fragile self- esteem and dig at her guilt for her children's situation. The community has been encouraging mothers to take parenting classes so they can learn to communicate their fears with their children rather than attack them in reacting to the stresses of homelessness, loss of dignity, and low self-esteem.

By the time you read this, our community will have welcomed another new family member as Sharon



Cummins will have delivered her baby girl, Terri. Last but not least, we welcome two new community members — Sennora, a former guest, and Tim, who used to be with the Cass House community.

Thanks again to all our supporters for the prayers and help in whatever form. We couldn't maintain without you! ✚

Katrina & Jim Plato continue to work at Karen House, share their art and music and, of course, are busy parenting Ben.

Round Table Talk

by Ellen Rehg

In November of 1989 two crimes occurred in a week of each other which touched me personally. The first one to which I refer is infamous: the brutal slayings of the six Jesuits, their cook and her daughter by the El Salvadoran military. I had travelled to El Salvador to visit a friend the year before these murders, had met several Jesuits there and had visited the University of Central America where the six lived and taught. The scene of this crime and some of the people that it affected were, therefore, very vivid to me.

Within a week of these slayings, my apartment on 17th Street was broken into, along with Pat and Karin's flat directly above mine. Virginia and Mary Ann had discovered the break-in and summoned me there from Karen House. I recall this scene vividly too. The first thing I noticed as I entered my living room was the untouched rows of philosophy books lining my bookshelves. Rarities such as the complete and unabridged Summa Theologiae and the now out of print Being & Having by Gabriel Marcel had not been eagerly snapped up. Wonderful and expensive reference tools such as The Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Copleston's History of Philosophy had not proven to be too tempting to pass by. Classics such as Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, and Marx's Capital had not been rifled through. Clearly, these burglars were not out for philosophy.

Instead, the burglars chose the TV sets. I could not help thinking to myself that, in El Salvador, the philosophers, sociologists, theologians and other scholars are pulled from their beds at night and killed. In the U.S. however, it is our TV's and VCR's, our CD players and microwaves, which are pulled from their resting places in the darkness and taken. Of course, I know that there are political assassinations and countless other killings in the U.S. and burglaries in El Salvador. My point is, that my life is threatened in this country, if it is at all, not because of the work I do but because of the things I own. And my question is, why is this?

Why is being a philosopher not a dangerous profession in the U.S.? I can think of several possible explanations for this. Either (1) unlike El Salvador, one may speak freely in the U.S. without endangering one's life; (2) North American philosophers are merely concerned with the analysis of language and have nothing of further value to say; or (3) philosophers do have something of value to say but by and large they say it only to each other in poorly written and expressed academese.

As to option (1) it is clear that the U.S. is a world power. Any power always crushes whatever is a threat to it. If philosophers in "the belly of the beast" are not being persecuted it is because they have failed to touch the appropriate nerves of the Leviathan. Regarding (2), Jon Sobrino said that the Jesuits were killed because they spoke the truth about their country. In the U.S., a question about truth in philosophical circles would probably be met with the response that Pilate gave to Jesus: "Truth? What is that?" Those thinkers who know the answer to this question (option 3) do not put themselves in the position of Jesus vis-a-vis the power structures. If we couch the truth in complex academic language, we pose no threat to the system.

This is one reason why T.V. is more appealing in our society than philosophy. It plainly speaks the "truth" of our culture: "I own, therefore I am". It speaks it in easily understood language and images. Unlike philosophers, T.V. tells us what values are important and how we should live. People yearn to know the answers to these questions, as the existence of such a discipline as philosophy attests. Of course, these T.V. images enslave us to the false gods who make them, hence they are not good answers to the questions which dwell within us. Kant identified these basic human questions to be: Who am I? What am I to do? What can I know? and What can I hope for? Philosophy should serve to provide truthful answers to these fundamental questions, which are, when adequately reflected upon, dangerous questions. ✚

Ellen Rehg teaches philosophy at St. Louis University and Webster University. She recently passed her oral comprehensive exam (Congratulations Ellen!) and now is working on her dissertation.

STATEMENT ON THE PERSIAN GULF

In the midst of the potential for military conflict in the Middle East involving the United States, the St. Louis Catholic Worker stands in the spirit of our founder, Dorothy Day. "We are opposed to the use of force as a means of settling personal, national, or international disputes....As long as people trust to the use of force — only a superior, a more savage and brutal force will overcome the enemy."

The Catholic Worker is best known for its work of hospitality — we shelter homeless women and children. But these homeless, these poor, are in a very real way already the victims of war, as funds that go to war preparation are denied to those in need — for housing, food, health care, child care, education.

Doing the works of mercy, sheltering the homeless and feeding the hungry, is but part and parcel of our desire to follow the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Christ also taught "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." In opposing evil Jesus explicitly taught not to return evil for evil, but to love and pray for one's enemies. These are not trite or empty phrases: he embodied their truth and that is why he is our redemption.

Unleashing war against the nation of Iraq will not bring peace or justice to the Middle East. In the Gospel when James and John wished to call down fire from heaven on their enemies, Jesus rebuked them. He also said, "In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me."

The governments of the United States and Iraq stand on the brink of war because the United States demands control of the oil resources of the Middle East and insists on challenging through violence the Iraqi aggression. It is precisely this deadly struggle for power among nations that the follower of Christ is called to renounce and resist. We are called to resist violence with the nonviolent weapons of prayer, fasting, and noncooperation. Refusal to pay taxes which fund war, refusal to register for military service, refusal to fight — any withdrawal from the dominant systems of injustice are the true means to establish peace.

When St. Peter drew the sword, the Lord rebuked him. Instead Jesus suffered the "failure" of the cross. Instead of spilling the blood of others in war we are called, as Peter Maurin our co- founder said, "to build a new society in the shell of the old," by living in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, by renouncing violence, and by reforming our lives in accordance with Christ's example.

Yours in the peace of Christ,
The St. Louis Catholic Worker Community

The Round Table is the quarterly journal of Catholic Worker life and thought in St. Louis. Subscriptions are free. Please write to The Round Table, 1840 Hogan, St. Louis, MO. 63106. Donations are gladly accepted to help us continue our work with the poor. People working on this issue include: Joe Angert, Michael Bartz, Margaret Boyer, Pat Coy, Virginia Druhe, Bill Miller, Tom Nelson, Katrina Plato, Barb Prosser, Ellen Rehg, and Mark Scheu. Letters to the editor are encouraged; we'll print as many as space permits.

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