

May 19, 1979

Dave:

Here's an essay I pumped out for you and Vietnam Veterans Week. I tried to tie together the experience of growing up in towns like Elgin and going to Vietnam. Hope you find it appropriate.

I have used the word "Elginites" in the title. If that indicates too narrow a group for your readership, it can be changed to, for example, "Middle Americans in Vietnam:..," in which event other places in the text might also need alteration. Up to you.

I'd be interested to know what kind of reaction readers make to your special Vietnam Veterans Week observance. Hope I've helped. Give them something to think about.

All the best,

*C. R. Anderson*

ready or not, all of us took some very similar things, some things that Elgin and Middle America had given us.

Our parents were quiet, solid citizens, veterans of the Great Depression and World War II, charter members of what the journalists would identify as America's "Silent Majority." They obeyed the laws, paid their taxes and stood at attention when the national anthem was played. They taught us respect for authority and love of country. In school we recited the pledge of allegiance and learned our country won every war it fought. In and out of home and school, by observing our teachers and other respected members of the community, we learned other lessons: personal modesty, skepticism of extremism in any form and, above all, moderation in everything. These three traits -- modesty, skepticism and moderation -- were prime components of our pre-Vietnam education, but we did not learn them in conscious preparation for the Vietnam War. Indeed, most of us were not even aware of a country named Vietnam as we were learning those three values.

Our awareness of Vietnam came slowly. I remember drawing a map of Southeast Asia when I was in sixth grade. Of course the map included Vietnam, and of course I could not know I would one day be sent to a place so far away, a place with such a strange name. I was much more interested in all those thousands of islands farther south of Indochina. And the

colors -- could the ocean really be as blue, and the land as green, as in the encyclopedia? Five years later, at Elgin High School, I was looking at an enlargement of the same map again. This time, history teacher Mr. Harry Barnes, now on the Elgin City Council, was calling our attention to something called "the Laotian Crisis" and its meaning for the rest of Indochina. Most of us in the class were wondering if countries with such hard-to-pronounce names were really worth studying, let alone fighting for. But sometime during the next eight years I answered that question in the affirmative, for in the summer of 1968 there I was, trying to get everything in focus through the hot dust of DaNang. Now, many seasons later, some aspects of it all still are not in as sharp of focus as I would like, but the worst effects are receding into the past.

Growing up in Elgin and Middle America, and learning about modesty, skepticism and moderation were pretty good preparations to face adversity in most of its forms, adversity of the kind war in general and the Vietnam War in particular presented us. Modesty, skepticism and moderation helped us hang onto a measure of reason, a balanced vision, as we faced all that Vietnam threw at us -- a debilitating climate, a baffling culture, and extremes of heat, thirst, boredom, loneliness and danger. We were not headline-grabbers. We did not embrace hopeless ideals that would have led to deep disillusion. The record shows that we did our job and we did it with quiet competence.

While growing up in Elgin and Middle America was in some ways good preparation for the adversity of the war in Vietnam, it was not good preparation for what we faced on our return from the war: indifference, no jobs, sometimes outright hostility. It seemed Middle Americans had forgotten the compassion, generosity, even the patriotism for which they were so well known. There was no preparation at all for the searing question many of us heard: "How many babies did you kill?"

Of all America's veterans, only those who survived Vietnam found as wrenching an experience back home as they did in the war. That is what makes the experience of Vietnam veterans special, and that is why they deserve recognition and understanding beginning this week. By reflecting on what Vietnam veterans have experienced, we can help keep valid the lessons implicit in growing up in a community like this. And by doing that, we can help complete the healing of divisions opened during the war and promote the growth of an intelligent patriotism for the future.

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