

Tulane

CROSSING THE LINE: MY LAI AND THE AMERICAN CONSCIENCE

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Dear Jim:

I write to thank you again for a marvelous conference and to express my compliments, as a former conference director myself, on the well-oiled machine you run.

I also write however to share some unsolicited advice. I have no business giving you advice except that I feel strongly about it; and there's no reason why you should listen to my suggestions unless they make sense to you. I'm sure you keep a circular file handy for such free and unsolicited advice as I am about to offer. But offer it I will.

Here it is: I urge you to carve out a larger place in future conferences for two constituencies in Vietnam Studies who were underrepresented, the left and the literary. The Vietnam Center clearly will be key player in the future of Vietnam Studies and I would suggest to you that you at its head bear a responsibility to create a large enough playing field for everyone.

As the tone and substance of this fine conference made clear, we in Vietnam Studies continue to fight the war. And this is as it should be. The emphasis on inclusiveness and balance that I would urge upon you speaks to a central commitment of the humanities since classical times (as well as the foundation of our Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence system) to what is known as the "two-sided argument." Truth, we seem to believe, stems not so much from adopting an ideology and seeing the world through it, but from considering opposing points of view. Truth, we believe, lies in the middle. At the heart of the liberal arts enterprise is the development of empathy, the experience of imagining another's point of view. Wherever we stand, the Vietnam War invites such an enterprise, challenging us to consider the *other* pole of the hawk-dove debate, as well as our former enemy's point of view.

Thus what I am urging is that the goal of the Center should not be to develop or to convey a "right reading" or even a consensus reading of the Vietnam War. Just the opposite: real learning comes from examining the very filters with which we make connections. Understanding the war means understanding how we understand it (thank you, MC Escher!). Approaching the war in this way speaks both to the kind of self-reflection and to the diversity of viewpoints that are the foundation of the humanities. The unexamined knee-jerk reaction is not worth having. Once examined it becomes an opportunity to know oneself and to explore the world around us.

What I wish to suggest is that future conferences need to take this two-sided argument as its fundamental goal. *This means that balance is needed on each and every panel and that time for discussion needs to be carefully guarded, which probably means fewer panelists per panel.* It is clear that you have created an excellent forum for key players in the Vietnam War drama and it is important that we who study the war have the experience of meeting and talking with them. But it is only by inviting and attracting larger numbers of scholars from the left that you are going to make these conferences all they can be. It is only by achieving this kind of balance that the conference will begin to reflect the real makeup of the Vietnam Studies field. Likewise it is only through such balance that the polarized sides will begin to hear one another. The present imbalance puts too large a burden on the George Herrings and Marc Gilberts and you may begin to lose them from burnout; and it conveys to your audience a false notion that a consensus has been reached. It hasn't.


I am calling then for one kind of inclusiveness, an ideological one. I think you and the conference face a hard decision about another type of inclusiveness, your present resolve to accept all comers, all papers. As the conference matures and the word gets out, you may have to reconsider this admirable goal and develop some kind of vetting system.

Finally, I would urge you not only to include the left but also the literary or artistic approaches to the war. It's certainly regrettable that Kali's panel bailed out and that has perhaps left a bad taste in your mouth about us literary types. Still, as the John Clark Pratts of the field make clear, the literary and filmic approach to the war is an important and powerful one. Some kind of effort to attract literary scholars needs to be made.

Of course the burden is not entirely yours on either of these fronts. I certainly will do my best to get the word out that the Vietnam Center's conferences are absolute musts for anyone serious about the study of the war. And I will certainly be there next year hoping to give a paper on "Seeing the War We Expect to See: The Role of Ideological Filters in Teaching the War."

Thanks for considering my unsolicited advice. I certainly do not mean to convey anything but the highest respect and regard for a job well done. Bravo!

Sincerely,


RJ Fertel

PS I'm working with Ed Youngblood on posting my Oral History Panel on the net and I thank you for that opportunity. I have sent him a copy of the tape for the Center.