

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE VIETNAM CONFLICT

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July 25, 1994

Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr.
1500 Wilson Blvd., Suite 641
Arlington, VA 22209

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Dear Admiral:

Teaching Vietnam in American Universities

Thank you for your letter of July 18, 1994. I take this opportunity to forward a copy of a letter I wrote, in response to your suggestion that I might find someone in the media able to do an exposé, to encourage Marc Leepson, Arts Editor of the *VVA Veteran*, a monthly, to examine the topic. I don't know what luck I might have with him, and I am not entirely satisfied with this approach, as *VVA Veteran* is not really a mainstream journal, though it certainly would reach a group of people interested in the topic.

Even as I type this letter, two additional possibilities come to mind: Joe Galloway of *U.S. News & World Report*, who, with Lt. General Hal Moore, wrote *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*, and Dr. Len Bushkoff, who is a correspondent for *Far East Economic Review* and *Asian Wall Street Journal*, and, presumably, also a free-lancer. I have corresponded with both in the past, so at least they will know who I am. I will get letters off to them in the same mail as this.

I have chosen, instead, to enclose the letter I sent to Mr. Galloway of U.S. News and World Report. I, of course, did not indicate your interest in this topic, but if you feel it worthwhile, after reading the enclosed letter, you might contact him.

Very respectfully,

James R. Reckner

VR JR

Do you have any further suggestions of people to contact?

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July 25, 1994

Mr. Joe Galloway
U.S. News & World Report
2400 N Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

Dear Mr. Galloway:

I apologize for intruding upon your already busy schedule, but I have encountered a Vietnam-related topic that I would like to present to you for possible further examination.

Within the last week or two I received a very interesting publication, *Report on the 1990-1991 Survey of Courses in the Vietnam War*, published by the Indochina Institute at George Mason University. I am certain a copy will be easy for you to come by in Washington, but if not, I will photocopy my copy and send it on to you. Although the survey was of a fairly narrow base (89 university professors), the figures are still enlightening. The survey found that 47.2% of the professors polled who were teaching courses on the Vietnam war had been active in the anti-war movement. Only 27.4% were Vietnam vets, and more than a quarter of those who identified themselves as Vietnam vets also indicated that they had been active in the anti-war movement.

This indicates to me that we very clearly are losing the war once again: this time in the classrooms of American universities. I am not certain what the answer to this might be. I hope that a new generation of university professors will arrive on the scene who are completely untouched by the war, and who can therefore approach the topic with a better balance. But the trouble is they will have to be taught by someone, and the odds are their teachers will have been members of the anti-war movement, with all of the biases that implies.

Of course, only a very small percentage of students will attend a course focusing on the Vietnam war alone. But virtually every college student will attend a survey course in American history, and this will be their only contact with Vietnam. Here, it seems, to a large extent we have lost out again. A great many of the American history survey textbooks reflect little or none of the excellent scholarship of the past two decades. Rather, they substitute sweeping and largely inaccurate personal impressions for facts.

Let me just cite a few. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich very heavily marketed their offering, *The National Experience*, at our university two years ago. With such respected authors as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth M. Stamp and C. Vann Woodward, you might expect a high level of professionalism and balance. Yet here the student learns that the American bombing of North Vietnam was "aerial terror," while the North Vietnamese

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Army's 1972 invasion of the South was merely "a strong push." The authors dismiss American capitalism as the reason for American involvement in Vietnam, and then settle on the "military machine."

"A special pressure encouraging interventionist policies, above all in Vietnam, was the military establishment. The armed forces had emerged from the Second World War with unprecedented power and status. When the wartime leaders, most of whom were sober and responsible men, departed the scene, a new group took over [who were] professionally persuaded that political problems had military solutions, professionally committed to multiplying threats, appropriations, and weapons, professionally adept at playing upon national desires to appear virile and patriotic . . . The military establishment was an independent force in its own right, operating according to its institutional aspirations." (p.873)

The statement that the wartime generals were "sober and responsible" brings with it the implication that American general officers of the Vietnam era were neither sober nor responsible. My goal here is not to defend the generals, but to suggest that the material presented is one individual's opinion (and incorrect). *But it is presented to the student as fact.*

Just as an aside, I can't recollect, from my knowledge of history, a single American general who involved our nation in a war. That is done by the politicians: our elected representatives. I also can't recollect a single American general or admiral who, once committed to a war by the elected civilian leadership, did not want all of the equipment and personnel --and freedom of action-- necessary to win. If there is one overarching criticism of the military here, I think it should be that they remained too subordinate to a civilian leadership that attempted to conduct the war without jeopardizing domestic social programs. In the process, young Americans were placed in jeopardy.

Here's a piece from a text entitled *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence* (p.293):

"Television news coverage of the destruction and carnage along with reports of atrocities such as the My Lai massacre disillusioned more and more Americans. Yet Johnson continued the bombing . . ."

While the My Lai massacre did occur in 1968 --and it was entirely inexcusable, and all of the officers involved should have been court-martialled-- it did not become public knowledge until December, 1969. Johnson announced his decision not to seek re-election on March 31, 1968 and left office in January 1969. The distortion is obvious.

On the same page, same text, the authors refer to the Tet offensive, "in which the Communists captured every provincial capital and even entered Saigon." Of course, the story sounds much more dramatic when presented like this. But this is supposed to be a history text, and it simply didn't happen. A couple of provincial capitals were captured,

Hue being the most important and the one longest held. And the authors call this "*An Examination of the Evidence*" (!!)

And while mentioning Tet, you would be surprised how many texts still report that a VC suicide squad actually broke into the American embassy in Saigon. Yes, approximately 20 sappers blew a hole in the compound wall and entered the compound. But you must understand that many important installations throughout the Far East are enclosed in compounds, with walls that perform the same function as the fences that enclose military bases. In this particular case, of course, no VC ever entered the Embassy itself; the Marine guard swung shut the heavy doors before they could enter. Even Walter Cronkite will agree with that, I think.

Norman Risjord, in *America: A History of the United States* (p.390) paints a remarkably naive picture of the Americans involved in Vietnam:

"The justification for American intervention was that the United States was aiding a free democratic regime that had the support of most of its people, and that the Viet Cong were an assortment of malcontents reinforced by infiltration from the North. If the malcontents could be wiped out and the infiltration halted by air raids, the war would end, went the official reasoning. Thus 'body counts' told the fortunes of war. When the numbers of Viet Cong continued to increase, the Army, still unwilling to admit that the guerrillas might be recruiting among the South Vietnamese peasantry, claimed the increase was due to infiltration from the North."

It seems remarkable to me that in the 1990s an academic of Risjord's stature might still suggest to our students that the struggle in the south wasn't sustained by infiltration from the north, but there it is. The first regular North Vietnamese Army units entered South Vietnam in 1965 (as you well know from the Ia Drang), and their presence was permanent from then on. After the communists' military debacle of Tet, North Vietnamese bolstered most Viet Cong main force units. From 1968 onward, the nature of the war changed significantly. It was no longer principally a guerrilla war.

One of the major problems that plagues American history survey texts is that the history is not treated topically. Therefore, there is a little bit about Vietnam in the chapter dealing with the Eisenhower presidency, a bit more with JFK, and then installments in LBJ and Nixon. Only one text of the dozen or so that I reviewed here, Garraty's *The American Nation*, pulled Vietnam together into a single chapter. Presented in that way it is much more coherent, and the material, generally speaking, is very well presented. However, here is one statement worth checking (p.846): ". . .in July [1954], while Dulles watched from the sidelines, France, Great Britain, Russia and China signed an agreement at Geneva dividing Vietnam along the 17th parallel." In reality, there were only two signatures at Geneva: a junior French officer on behalf of French forces in Indochina, and an equally junior Vietnamese foreign officer on behalf of the Ho Chi Minh government.

In summary, there are two main points that I would like to suggest for some investigative reporting:

1. Teaching of the Vietnam war at the university level continues to be dominated by professors who were active in the anti-war movement, and thus, predictably, an anti-Vietnam vet bias must enter into the teaching.

2. A great many of university American History Survey textbooks are remarkably inaccurate and biased against the military (and by extension, the Vietnam veteran). Students in the 1990s are still being presented distorted opinions of the war in lieu of the facts. Both of these trends are most regrettable, for they bode ill for the image of the Vietnam veteran in the years ahead, and for the younger generation's understanding of America's Vietnam experience.

Hoping that some of the ideas I have presented here trigger your interest in this topic, I remain,

Very respectfully,

James R. Reckner
Associate Professor &
Director