

# THE COLLEGE STUDENT AND VIETNAM

## A View from the Classroom

*John P. Lovell*

In support of its current policies in Vietnam, the American government submits its youthful male citizens to the classic demands of the nation-state at war: it demands that they be prepared to die for their country and that they be prepared to kill for their country. At the same time many of these young men face, in the college classroom, the demand that they analyze critically their nation's policies in Vietnam. How many young men are able to acknowledge the possibility that they may face death in Vietnam and at the same time are able to analyze critically the policies that lead to that possibility?

The answer to the question may be obvious—not many young men are able to reconcile the intellectual demands for analysis with the emotional and physical demands for personal sacrifice. Perhaps less obvious, however, is the fact that inability to reconcile these demands may show itself in a variety of ways—from ardent support of American policies in Vietnam to vociferous opposition to our policies, with a dead center position of apathy. Thus the heated arguments that often develop between students or student groups over the issue of Vietnam stem at least partly from a conscious or unconscious desire to justify or reinforce the response which has been made to the emotional and physical demands of facing combat.

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It is this tendency to interpret reality through a lens distorted by one's own values and psychic needs, the phenomenon that psychologists term "selective perception," that primarily concerns me here. Over a period of several semesters of dialogue with students in an undergraduate course in U.S. foreign policy I have become convinced that "selective perception," rather than lack of relevant data, is the most serious barrier to a student's critical and objective analysis of the issues in Vietnam. (And since the problem of selective perception which the male college student faces in analyzing Vietnam is merely an acute form of the affliction to which we are all subject in making assessments of our nation's

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foreign policies, some concluding observations about the general problems of evaluating foreign policy may be in order.)

My impression is that most college students have ambivalent feelings about Vietnam. On the one hand, Vietnam offers the potential attraction of a *cause*, to which one can rally in support of "the national honor," or, as a rebel, in opposition to "immorality and injustice." Particularly in an era of confused and inconsistent values, in which, as Paul Goodman put it, the individual finds that he is "growing up absurd," the appeal of identifying with a cause may be considerable. On the other hand, many young men find just *thinking* about Vietnam unsettling as they realize what it might mean for them. Therefore, a measure of emotional security (for the moment at least) lies in thinking about the issues as little as possible—directing intellectual energies instead to plans for the weekend date, the next football game, tomorrow's classroom quiz. Assessment of U.S. policies in Vietnam, which are subjected to conflicting reports and opinions anyway, can be postponed.

To avoid thinking about facing death or inflicting death is surely a natural reaction. It is a response characteristic not only of those one step removed from the problem, but often of those confronted with the immediate possibility. Indeed, people in situations in which they must kill or be killed often adopt an attitude in which the issue of death is suppressed or by-passed.

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I recall an incident which an Army colonel recounted to me several years ago when I was stationed in Germany in an artillery battalion. A number of us had gathered at the officers club one evening after a particularly hard day of training; as we chatted over a few beers, our battalion commander began to reminisce about his experiences during the second world war as a young forward observer. The job of the forward observer in the artillery is to call in fire upon an enemy sighted from a prominent position and to adjust fire onto targets. On the particular occasion which the colonel recalled for our benefit, spotting an entire German infantry battalion crossing

an open field, he had called for an artillery barrage which had landed right on target. "It was beautiful!" he exclaimed. "There must have been five or six hundred bodies sprawled all over the field!"

With only a touch of wryness one might describe the colonel who related this incident as a skilled craftsman who had learned to take pride in his work. His training had provided him with a protective lens, through which the end to which his actions contributed had meaning only as the successful accomplishment of an assigned task, much as enthusiastic American pilots in Vietnam today depict in animated motions for television and newsreel photographers how they have closed in for "the kill" with enemy aircraft.

The point here is that one means of coping with the exigent demands on the soldier, or potential demands on the college student—that one face death or inflict death—is to suppress the issue of death and direct one's focus elsewhere—the soldier to the skills and techniques required to kill, rather than to killing and wounding itself; the student to immediate personal concerns rather than to the more distant concern of commitment on the battlefield.

To "look the other way" rather than to confront the issues is perhaps the most common form of selective perception of the Vietnam situation by draft-age college students. However, as draft quotas increase, the issues become increasingly difficult to suppress. For those who do acknowledge the full personal implications of the situation in Vietnam, the response to the demands that one be prepared to die or to kill for his country easily becomes intertwined with the issue of the "justice" or "injustice" of the American involvement.

Most young men eventually accept the demands of their nation, rather than resist them. As a college senior interviewed in a recent *Time* cover story on Vietnam said of himself and his fellow seniors, "All these people are dodging responsibility right up to the end. Then they become patriotic. . . ." Those who accept the demands upon them are likely to "become patriotic," and to view the nation's cause as just. Beyond the emotional predilection of people in general to support their nation's policies, the young man who acknowledges that a situation such as Vietnam potentially demands of him that he face death and inflict death is supported emotionally if he has faith in the morality of his nation's policies. Once the morality of the actions to which he will be committed is taken as a "given," the justification for killing or being killed in battle follows according to a number of familiar subsidiary arguments.

The argument that death for one's country is the

most virtuous sacrifice which an individual can make derives from the essential justice of the nation's cause. Military tradition going back to antiquity echoes this theme: the pageantry, ritual, and lore of military institutions have always exalted the hero who has given his life in battle for his country. To the extent that one can accept the argument that one's death "is not in vain," that the sacrifice is directed toward the fulfillment of a noble end, one is able to justify the demand that he be ready to die for his country. The demand that one be ready to kill for his country may be resolved in part with the same argument—that it is a supreme test of one's own commitment to his country, justified because the nation's goals and actions are morally justified.

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But it is important to recognize that for most young men who confront these demands, even more salient than the question of one's patriotism ("Are you, or are you not, loyal?"), is the question of one's courage ("Are you, or are you not, a *man*?") From his early days of informal membership in a neighborhood gang to participation on a high school athletic team, to membership in a college dormitory group or fraternity—and beyond—the American male is expected to demonstrate his "manhood" in various ways, subtle and otherwise. Conformity in attire, manner of speech, attitudes, and actions deemed particularly "masculine" is the price of admission which most young men are willing to pay for membership in such groups; above all, they are eager to avoid the stigma of being branded "chicken." American military organizations have long been effective in channeling the concern young men have for proving their manhood into the development of effective and reliable fighting units. I recall that each of us in the armored division to which I was assigned in Germany wore on his shoulder patch the slogan, "Hell on Wheels,"—presumably for the benefit of those who couldn't tell by looking at us.

Particularly imbued with this concern are the elite units of the military—airborne units, special forces, Marines. Subjected to rigorous training in preparation for particularly hazardous assignments, members of such units are indoctrinated with a belief that they are the roughest, toughest men alive. The members of an airborne unit assigned to Germany during my period of service there were characterized by this spirit. With spit-shined boots, hair uniformly cut nearly to the scalp, uniforms tailored skin-tight to trim, muscled frames, the men in this unit had the demeanor of men with an impatience to get into battle. The war-like posture was further heightened

by a knife, issued to each man and carried in a conspicuous position on the upper boot, with which presumably he would decimate the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. Unfortunately, there was no war readily available at the time. Instead, the division commander found to his alarm that within a few weeks his men had become involved in a series of barroom brawls, knifings, rapes, and like incidents with the civilian German populace. The knives were retrieved from all men, and the division was confined to quarters until excess aggressiveness could be contained.

More recent evidence of how the development of what one might term the "cult of masculinity" serves the soldier in his efforts to cope with the demands of facing death and the responsibility for inflicting death was provided by a dramatic incident related on one of the network telecasts. The sequence of events, as I remember it, was this. A group of American soldiers in Vietnam, accompanied by a newsman, happened to come across a number of bodies of American soldiers from a battle a couple of days earlier. But as they approached the bodies, they discovered that one young soldier, although seriously wounded in the head, was still alive. The newscast then followed the drama in which the soldier was flown back by helicopter for emergency treatment in Vietnam, off to Manila for further treatment, and finally back to the States.

The final sequence showed an interview with the young soldier of perhaps eighteen years, now recuperating, his head still wrapped in bandages. "It certainly is a miracle that you are alive and with us today," the interviewer observed; "what do you plan to do after you are released from the hospital?" "Shucks!" said the young soldier, "What I want to do is to get back over to Vietnam and get one of them VC [Viet Cong] in my rifle sights!"

The young soldier's response epitomizes a commitment to masculine ideals, uncontaminated by any broad philosophic or even narrow pragmatic considerations. Many will see this soldier as the modern-day American folk-hero, narrowly escaping death himself, in recovery he seeks not to avoid further danger, not to pursue a life of "swollen, slothful ease" (as Teddy Roosevelt used to say contemptuously), but rather to return to the "field of Mars" to prove his mettle by killing an enemy soldier.

Not all college students will share the young soldier's enthusiasm for shouldering a rifle in combat. But many will accept uncritically their nation's policies in Vietnam, thereby justifying (to themselves at least) their readiness, if need be, to meet the maximum test of manhood on the battlefield.

While some students avoid coping with the prob-

lems intellectually and others justify U.S. policy in Vietnam, still others protest. The mass media and officials of the Johnson Administration undoubtedly are correct in their claim that student protests of U.S. policies in Vietnam have been led and supported by only a small minority of the total student population in this country. However, it has been my observation that this minority of protesters is drawn heavily from an important sector of the total student population, those students with the most intense commitment to an intellectual role. Of course, commitment to an intellectual role is not necessarily to be equated with unerring intellectual vision. Ironically, the intensity and nature of the intellectual commitment itself may become the source of distortion of one's view of reality.

Taking their cue from the late C. Wright Mills, many students (and professors and others) would define the requisites of intellectual commitment today to include not simply a commitment to pursue truth, but also a commitment to eradicate evil and to enoble the human condition. The appropriate role of the intellectual, in Mills' words, is to transcend "the liberal rhetoric and the conservative default" in contemporary America by formulating "commanding views of the future" which would serve as *divisive* and *partisan* political issues within the U.S.A. Protest of U.S. policies in Vietnam, for a student who adheres to the above outlook, may be viewed as but part of a larger protest against war, against injustice, against inequality—indeed against the total absurdity of the human predicament. Furthermore, the extent of one's willingness to protest is for many a measure of one's commitment to the intellectual role—to fail to protest is to violate one's moral responsibilities through abdication, much like the professor who limits his intellectual commitment to cautiously weighing the pros and cons of every issue.

The potential irony of such a definition of the intellectual role is that important intellectual options may be foreclosed on a given issue before real inquiry has begun. Thus, if the view espoused by "fellow intellectuals" is that U.S. policies in Vietnam are "wrong" or "immoral," then one anxious to establish or to maintain his "intellectual credentials" is likely to abandon the intellectual process of sifting and winnowing in pursuit of truth in order to affirm vocally his identification with the view of his peers. It is all the more ironic that many who see their social role as an intellectual one, ordinarily critical of conformity and concern for one's "respectability," should seek respectability of their own through identification with the views of their associates.

As one of countless examples of the phenomenon

of the conformity of the self-proclaimed intellectual nonconformist to the "norms of nonconformity," I cite the political behavior of members of a Midwest academic community this past spring. Eight or nine candidates were running in Congressional primary elections in the district. One of these, a professor, offered voters a simple appeal—that he was "for peace in Vietnam." A simple appeal of this sort sometimes has utility as a rallying point for a protest vote, and the point to be made here is not one of disputing the tactics of the candidate. The point is that once one candidate had announced that he was "for peace," whereas the platforms of other candidates were more detailed and complex, setting forth a range of views on Vietnam and other issues, but lacking a simple declaration for "peace," many persons in the academic community saw support of the one candidate as equivalent to demonstrating one's allegiance to the moral responsibilities of the intellectual. The query, "Are you supporting the peace candidate?" became, for many, an inquisition into one's intellectual fidelity. Petitions were circulated among students and faculty asserting that one might serve the forsaken cause of peace by supporting its candidate. A group of local ministers, perhaps anxious to indicate that the church was no longer aloof from the great social issues of our time, made a public announcement registering their support of "the peace candidate."

For some, then, protest of U.S. policies and actions in Vietnam is required as a manifestation of one's intellectual commitment. For a young man, protest may be in addition a form of justifying one's response to the potential demands that he face death or inflict death on the nation's behalf. One may find these demands personally intolerable for one of a variety of reasons—fear or repulsion at the thought of death, indignation at the inequities of the selective service system, commitment to religious principles seemingly incompatible with the demands, general alienation from the notion of commitment to national goals in an imperfect world, and so forth. If, for whatever reason, the personal posture one adopts is one of resistance to, rather than acceptance of, the demands to be ready to die and to kill for one's country, then opposition to the nation's actions on the grounds that they are immoral reinforces the personal decision.

The test of physical courage implicit in the demands to face death and to inflict death is not easily dismissed for a young man approaching full manhood, however. It is perhaps instructive that most of those British students who, in the early 1930s, subscribed to the so-called "Oxford Oath" and vowed

that they would "in no circumstances fight for King and country" subsequently bore arms on their nation's behalf. Yet the sweeping pacifism of the Oxford Oath is probably less meaningful for those Americans who currently protest the commitment of American troops to the battlefields of Vietnam than, say, Thoreau's argument for civil disobedience, directed at a specific list of alleged defects and wrongs of the state. Thoreau's willingness to go to prison to protest what he considered wrongs committed by the state has a redeeming quality to young men who protest against the demands of the nation today. For there are, after all, various ways of demonstrating courage; facing death in battle is one, but becoming a spokesman for an unpopular cause is another.

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The problems which the male college student faces in confronting the task of analytically appraising U.S. policies in Vietnam are but one vivid example of difficulties which we all encounter in attempting to engage in the intellectual process of evaluation of foreign policies of one's government, made acute by the tendency of all of us to perceive reality selectively, are heightened by the complex maze of reference points from which foreign policies can be assessed. The complexity of our policy in Vietnam can be illustrated by a number of examples.

For example, the decision of the American government in early 1965 to shift U.S. military forces from largely an advisory role to an active combat role certainly helped to bolster the sagging morale of South Vietnamese forces and to improve the rather desperate military situation, but only at the cost to the South Vietnamese of considerable control over their own affairs, and to the United States of a greatly increased cost in American lives.

Second, if American willingness to escalate the conflict in Vietnam in order to achieve a peace on terms more favorable than those prevailing in the winter of 1964-65 has increased American prestige among those governments in Asia dependent upon American aid and protection, clearly the escalation has imposed costs in terms of American prestige among her allies in Europe.

Third, whereas the immediate withdrawal of American troops might bring about a temporary cessation of hostilities (although this consequence would not necessarily follow from an American withdrawal), in the long run a precipitate withdrawal of American forces might so undermine the confidence of friendly governments in Asia as to contribute to greater instability and bloodshed over time. Or to look at a different course of action, whereas a pro-

longed commitment of American military forces to Vietnam might "contain" communism for a period of years, in the sense of preventing Communist control of the government of all of Vietnam, one might argue that the longer a massive military presence by the United States is maintained in Vietnam, the more credible in time charges of "neo-imperialism" and "white-man's war" will become to people of Asia.

Finally, it is obvious to all but the most myopic chauvinist that there is no reason to evaluate American foreign policies only with reference to the goal-values which we identify as comprising "our national interest;" we can, and indeed must, seek more universal standards of evaluation. But just as one seeks norms that transcend the existential limitations of identification as a member of a particular nation-state, so one must recognize the moral obligations which the existential reality of the nation-state system imposes upon those who speak or act on behalf of the state. As George Kennan has noted, ". . . no one could be more sadly conscious than is the professional diplomatist of the primitiveness, the anarchism, the intrinsic absurdity of the modern concept of sovereignty." And yet, as Kennan adds, ". . . it is

precisely to the working of this imperfect mechanism" of the modern nation-state system to which the diplomat is, in Kennan's words, "professionally condemned." If from the broad perspective of the welfare of Mankind the pursuit of "national self-interest" seems an ignoble or even immoral purpose for national policy-makers, neglect of the interests and desires (parochial though they may be) of the national constituency by policy-makers may be equally condemned.

The complex maze of reference points by which foreign policies can be evaluated paralyzes many persons intellectually, while it prompts others to rush for simple answers or familiar slogans on behalf of which to act. Yet the ambiguity inherent in foreign policy ought to serve not as a deterrent to critical intellectual inquiry, but as the occasion for it—not as the stimulus for action commanded by emotion at the expense of thought, but as the incentive to harness one's emotions to directions dictated by thought. Vietnam is not the only painful area of foreign policy choice, and perhaps not the most ambiguous one, but it is sufficient to test our capacity for analysis and reasoned action in the years ahead.

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