

The Vietnam War Is It Time to Forgive and Forget? —Three Views—

They and We Have Not Paid Dues

J. Patrick Dobel

On May 22 the University of Chicago named Robert S. McNamara winner of the first Albert Pick, Jr., Award for International Understanding. Under the terms of the award the sum of \$25,000 and a sculpture will be presented to an individual who has made outstanding contributions to international peace and understanding. The citation recognizes McNamara's contribution as president of the World Bank for the last decade and pointedly ignores his seven-year service as secretary of defense during the escalation of the Vietnam war. Implicit in the university's choice and its defense of that choice is the assumption that McNamara has paid his dues and made up for Vietnam.

The award matters because it is part of a groping for a national recollection of Vietnam. We congratulate ourselves on our ability to make movies like *The Deer Hunter* or novels like *Dispatches*. A reception by President Carter for veterans and Congress's belated passage of Vietnam Veterans' Counseling legislation also contribute to our self-satisfied awakening. Papers now refer to "Vietnam chic," and there is a thriving market in war memorabilia.

In this brief and faddish moment of self-remembrance, we are creating the symbols, myths, and histories by which the nation will come to terms with Vietnam and pass on a legacy for the future. The confused nature of the student protest against the McNamara award brings the point home: Many of the students were less than nine years old when McNamara resigned as secretary of defense and therefore needed a "teach-in" to remind them what Vietnam was about. One wonders whether the formation of a national conscience with respect to Vietnam is best advanced by a few movies, a long overdue and inadequate veterans' bill, or awards to war leaders for international understanding. This is especially true for those of us who regard the war, not as

a tragedy born of misguided but basically good American intentions, but as an immoral and unlawful abuse of American power.

Aside from the false symbols, the most seductive route lies in national amnesia. Life becomes easier, but we cannot afford to forget. First, forgetting ignores our moral responsibilities. Congress struggles to pass a law to provide a little counseling for our own victims—the veterans—but the curse of drug abuse, unemployment, crushed bodies and souls still remains. Full amnesty for war resisters has yet to be declared. We assiduously ignore the flotsam of our final days—the boat people. And we still cannot consider seriously either recognition of/or aid to our other victims—the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. (We were always better winners than losers.) Second, we cannot forget the lessons about the capacity of government to deceive, misrepresent, and abuse our noblest aims in the most ignoble causes. William Shawcross's sober book on the Cambodia "side-show" recalls this lesson. Finally, we cannot forget because the Kissingers, Haigs, Moynihans, and Connallys are blaming on a Vietnam psychosis our inability to act decisively in the world. According to them, our fear and guilt over Vietnam have paralyzed us and allow the Russians a free hand in, for example, Afghanistan and Africa.

The "lessons-of-Vietnam" writers tend to focus on the last two issues, but the moral lessons remain prior. The moral resolution will provide the myths, symbols, and history lessons for the future. Here we must confront the question of guilt and forgiveness before we act again. In *The Question of German Guilt* Karl Jaspers argued that "only consciousness of guilt leads to consciousness of solidarity and co-responsibility without which there can be no political liberty. Political liberty begins with the majority of people feeling jointly liable for the politics of their community." Political wisdom in future policy requires reconciliation with our moral responsibilities, not forgetfulness.

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The McNamara award, along with the final scene of the benighted worker-warriors in *The Deer Hunter*, suggests all is forgiven and can now be forgotten. The warriors of *The Deer Hunter* paid their dues. Has Robert McNamara? Has our country? The moral debris of Vietnam remains, and the laudatory tone of the award and the calm assurance that McNamara, the World Bank, and we have made reparation and can now be forgiven is a self-serving illusion.

At best, Robert McNamara stands convicted as a ruthless bureaucratic politician bound by a limited vision of loyalty to the president and an even narrower vision of war and policy. He was a symbol of our own unbounded confidence in our rightness, power, and technology, of our passion to measure success by force ratios, body counts, and baseball averages. At worst, his responsibility for free-fire zones, forced population relocation, saturation bombing, search-and-destroy missions, defoliation, body counts, unchecked civilian casualties, and the steady, secret, and planned escalation of the war makes him a plausible candidate for war criminal under Nuremberg and, certainly, Tokyo standards.

Forgiveness can be given freely and openly when "They know not what they do." But Robert McNamara knew what he was doing even as he planned individual bridge targets; just as we knew—thanks to his own tele-

vised lectures, replete with charts, and the daily televised war in our living rooms. Even as his qualms grew and he came to know the political absurdity and moral disaster of the war, still he continued to prosecute the war and suppress internal bureaucratic dissent. When he finally tried to stop the bombing in 1967, he had lost power and was eased out of office.

True forgiveness and reconciliation require a confession, an admission of the wrong done, and a penance, a genuine attempt at reparation and a new start. But, like most of us, Robert McNamara is no Lord Jim, and he did not place himself courageously before his peers and country and admit his wrong, or even that it was a mistake. He left office quietly; his doubts and information remained with him. To friends he hinted that his tenure at the World Bank would serve as an air-conditioned expiation for Vietnam. But he also let friends know of his doubts about the war even as he publicly defended it and destroyed others in government who opposed it.

There has been no public acknowledgment of wrong or guilt, no contribution to the national need to gain a clear self-understanding of our moral failures and obligations, no fight for actions to repair the harm. The award to McNamara mocks all of us. Like the last scene of *The Deer Hunter*, it is unearned catharsis. Dues have not been paid. [WV]

Forgiving vs. Fanaticism

Paul Ramsey

I must describe J. Patrick Dobel as a "fanatic." I do not mean all the offensive overtones that word has in ordinary speech. By "fanatic" I mean only a person who is not *open* to any revision of former opinions he held, and held sincerely, and at that point held for what he believed were good reasons. It can then come to pass that such a person defensively protects the righteousness of his view by now allowing no forgiveness to anyone who at that earlier time judged and acted differently. In other words, to forgive—no longer to exclude Robert McNamara from our ongoing political community—would be to admit that the author in some measure was wrong, or might have been. Or it is to admit that he too contributed unknowingly to the tragic outcomes for which McNamara and others were also responsible.

The dominoes have evidently fallen in Southeast Asia: North Vietnamese despotism in the South, and now in Cambodia. The author apparently *needs* to believe that U.S. policy and action alone caused all this. That policy, however, was aimed at preventing what has in fact happened. However failed, vain, or useless in retrospect, such a policy was not in principle immoral; and so it was

not undeserving of the political forgiveness the author now refuses to extend to McNamara and others who carried forward the policy he opposed and opposes. Those who advanced the policy meant to prevent the consequences of which the author now accuses them.

I do not suggest that the author should now switch and adopt the defenses offered by recent apologists for the U.S. policy in Vietnam, much less its conduct. I do not suggest that he become a political "revisionist." However, I do suggest that he ought to have a more fitting humility before the fact that history itself inexorably brings about a far more objective revision of past moral positions that were in contention and of their *effects* upon the outcome. And I suggest that a proper sense of tragedy in human affairs, of sin, finitude, and fallibility in political and any other decisions should lead the author to wish for himself what he does not accord to McNamara, namely, forgiveness for any degree that his own position and action during the war in Vietnam may have contributed to the present unhappy consequences of that failed U.S. action. Quite apart from a Greek sense of tragedy or a Christian sense of the universality of sinfulness, if an author does not give ample space for his own finitude and his own fallibility, I must conclude that his unforgiving judgment of others is that of a fanatic. [WV]

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Forgiveness and Political Community

Stanley Hauerwas

Mr. Dobel is right—as a society we act as if the war in Vietnam was just a nasty little mistake. This not only excuses those who, for a variety of good and evil reasons, unwarrantedly perpetuated that war; but, more important, it dishonors those who conscientiously served there and those who conscientiously refused to serve there. If there is any forgiving to be done, people in those two groups must lead the way; they alone know what such forgiveness might mean.

Mr. Dobel is also right in stating that Vietnam continues to lie uneasily on our national conscience. Our inability to explain why we were in Vietnam and why we stayed there indicates the moral limits of our political self-understanding. We simply lack the moral means to recognize and understand what we did there. But then it would be a mistake to single out Vietnam—have we recognized or understood any better what we did to the Indians or that we were a slave nation?

Our usual response to such accusations is, “Hold on there a minute. What do you mean by ‘we?’ ‘We’ did not slaughter the Indians! ‘We’ did not own slaves! ‘We’ did not fight in Vietnam! We have done nothing for which we need to be forgiven. Maybe people like McNamara or Kissinger should be called to account, but not us. Not America.” As Mr. Dobel suggests, our nation prefers to forget rather than to forgive. By forgetting, we only magnify our crimes and make it more probable we will repeat them in the future under cover of assumed righteousness.

Our refusal to face the necessity of forgiveness, however, exacts an even greater price. Ironically, rejecting the need for forgiveness as a people forces us to exist as a society without a past, or at least with a far too selectively remembered past. Just as loss of memory in the individual results in loss of self, so we have lost any sense of ourselves as a people.

Therefore, I think Mr. Dobel is profoundly right to insist that forgiveness is essential for any community's existence as a decent society. We have failed to understand this because our policy has been grafted to an idea of politics that excluded forgiveness as an essential element in its business. We have all been schooled to believe that politics is a nasty business involving power, or at best the attempt to seek a just distribution of power through the bargaining of interest groups or nations, by its very nature excluding forgiveness as a political reality. So schooled, we fail to see that even politics ruled by the most “realistic” presupposition necessarily depends on forgiveness as an ever-present necessity where and whenever people attempt to live cooperatively.

Hadden Willmer has recently suggested in his

remarkable article, “The Politics of Forgiveness” (*The Furrow*, April, 1979), that

people cannot live together with the degree of amicableness and co-operation that people do in fact live together with for a lot of time unless forgiveness is operative. We are not all naturally good at fitting together with others, making co-operative relationships, and putting up with other people's faults and deficiencies. The causes of friction, tension and disharmony are constantly with us. When we see a community that is working relatively well together, we should not say that they all must be very nice people, or very intelligent people who know how to get on with each other. We ought to be prepared to think that they are probably average people; that will mean that there are many things which could blow that community apart unless some kind of forgiveness operated. It may be quite hidden, only happening in trivial things, moment by moment, occasion by occasion, but it is one of the many little-noticed necessities of life. It is very important to stress this point because once we start looking for forgiveness actually operative, we will then encourage ourselves in two ways. We will find perhaps that there is more forgiveness about than we actually thought (this is not always true). The other more encouraging thing is that we will be rescued from supposing that we are mere dreaming idealists when we think about forgiveness in politics. Although I have my moments of doubt, I really want to argue that operative forgiveness in politics is not a mere ideal but is a reality. I do not want to deny that practical politics is always something of a tussle and a tension between the operative politics of forgiveness and the various kinds of the politics of non-forgiving, of which there is plenty about. I want to say that the politics of forgiving is basic, because unless people did in fact forgive each other enough to make a moderately workable community, there would be no possibility of anyone having a community to exploit and use as a power for non-forgiving ends.

We overlook the ever-present reality of forgiveness because we fail to notice how much of our life is made up of implicit promises to forgive. Thus we often stand by our friends, even when we think they have done wrong or been misguided, because forgiving is part of what it means to be a friend. Marriage, which certainly is no less political for being intimate, depends on the constant need to forgive as we pledge to stand by one another through better and worse. And, as Willmer points out, the very consent of people to be governed involves forgiveness—there is no government so perfect that we can always agree with it without question.

Because forgiveness is so present in our lives, we not

only fail to notice it, we are constantly tempted to trivialize and misuse it. For the nature of forgiveness is that it accepts those matters which cannot be changed. The past is past; we cannot change it. And often persons with whom we are in closest relation are those who, while capable of some change, can only be forgiven. The very unchangeableness of that which needs forgiving frustrates us, since we feel we should be able to do something to make matters right. In our frustration we are torn between two temptations—forgetting or revenge. As a result, we lose the foundation for reestablishment of community, which comes only through forgiving. Such forgiveness, of course, does not exclude punishment, as punishment often is a crucial gesture to guard against the trivialization of forgiveness.

Genuine forgiveness is always painful and costly. It requires recognition that we not only need to forgive, but need to be forgiven. (In our concern as Americans to know how to forgive each other and ourselves we must remember the need to be forgiven by the Vietnamese.) As Willmer observes, all politics involve the distribution and management of pain. As I live in society, seeking security and comfort for myself and those close to me, I will inevitably pass on the burdens of our existence to somebody else. Knowledge that we are such a burden frightens us as it reminds us how much our lives depend on the existence of others. We often are willing to concern ourselves with those whom we love or with those with whom we share some common history, but it seems too much to ask that we incorporate the story of one to whom we are only remotely related.

Mr. Dobel rightly objects to the acceptance of McNamara (or Kissinger) into decent society, and the symbolic forgiveness implied, because such forgiveness is too cheap. I trust he is not raising the question of whether Mr. McNamara has reconciled for himself his involvement in the war, nor do I believe he is interested in being particularly vindictive toward Mr. McNamara. Rather, the issue is properly political and is addressed to our description of ourselves as a people able to forgive ourselves and our agents for the injustice we perpetrated in the Vietnam war.

Such an account, however, will certainly require us to deal more adequately with our history than we have until now. As a nation we have not yet faced our need to be forgiven for our involvement in slavery. We have, in fact, pursued strategies that in many ways worsened the lot of the black people by programs fueled by desperate attempts to relieve ourselves of our unacknowledged guilt. By providing "equal opportunity" for blacks, we sought to avoid the necessity of forgiveness. After all,

for people who enjoy the wealth of America, what is a little slavery between friends?

In asking blacks to accept such a strategy, we required one very important thing—that they also forget their suffering. But Julius Lester reminds us how difficult a maneuver that is. He also reminds himself that though he has suffered by virtue of his race,

I cannot indulge that suffering. Neither can I use suffering to crown myself with a tiara of moral superiority. I must learn to carry that suffering as if it were a long-stemmed rose I offer to humanity. I do that by living with my suffering so intimately as to never forget that, having suffered evil, I must be careful not to do something that will, as Dr. King put it, "intensify the existence of evil in the universe." Because I have suffered as a Black person, I do not succumb to the thrill of making others suffer. I look at my own suffering and say, let this inhuman suffering end here ["A Black Writer's Comments on Jews and Israel," *New York Times*, September 30, 1979].

Only when we are able, as a polity, to accept the suffering, and forgiveness, offered by Lester will we develop the resources to understand, forgive, and be forgiven for what we have done in Vietnam. To accept such suffering will require nothing less than for us to make the story of black suffering integral to our social and personal histories. It may be objected that this is too much to ask of any polity. The sovereignty of nations often depends on claims of righteousness, excluding the kind of forgiveness for which I am calling. That may be, but I think we must ask more of the political process. Recognizing the significance of forgiveness in politics obviously does not mean we are expecting "a perfect society, where forgiveness becomes unnecessary. We look not for the perfect society without offense, but for a society sustained by adequate forgiveness operating in persons and process and institutions, so that the offenses that occur are deprived of their power to destroy the good fellowship of God and man" (Willmer).

In order for forgiveness to operate without deception, training in the experience of forgiveness is required. Surely here we can see one of the most glaring failures of the church. For as Christians we have, under the spell of our national polity, allowed the concept and experience of forgiveness to be relegated to the purely personal. We have failed to exhibit decisively that the church is a polity of the forgiven and the forgiving. No more important political task awaits the church than a recovery of the significance of forgiveness and reconciliation for our common life. [WV]