

## The Sherman Parable

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**G**ENERAL Sherman had done the dirty work for the Union. To him had fallen the duty to break the spirit of the rebellion, to punish the rebels, whatever their sex or station. His unsparing, relentless hand had given the Union victory. The dirty work of the Vietnam war was consigned to a small percentage of the Vietnam generation: the poor, the uneducated, and the youth who fought, who were wounded, who died. Most who went to Vietnam, the studies show, saw moderate to heavy combat. It is only the glories of modern medical science and the speed of the helicopter that prevented the names on the

Vietnam Memorial in Washington from being etched in much smaller print.

The dirty work in the Vietnam aftermath has been done to all members of the Vietnam generation, not just those who fought and those who resisted, but also to the majority who avoided the nasty business altogether. In 1971, a Vietnam veteran who had turned passionately against the war, put the matter starkly. Wrote veteran and poet Jan Barry:

With the conviction of Lieutenant Calley, the real dilemma of my generation has finally been brought unmistakably home. To kill on military orders and be a criminal, or to refuse to kill and be a criminal is the moral agony of America's Vietnam war generation. . . . Every last Vietnam [veteran] is guilty along with Calley of committing war crimes. Because a "free fire zone"—where anything that moves can be shot—is by definition a violation of the Geneva Convention of 1949 with respect to the treatment of civilians; because "a search-and-destroy mission"—where anything living is destroyed or removed—is also a violation of the Geneva Conventions; because massive defoliation, reconnaissance by fire, saturation bombing, mad moments, and forcibly relocating villagers are all violations of international law, and therefore, war crimes. . . .

Our dilemma is that no matter what we do—go to Vietnam or refuse—either action is criminal, against some law, and therefore, "wrong." . . . Going to Vietnam is a war crime, refusing to go is a domestic crime and just sitting still, somewhere in exile or limbo, is a moral crime. It is a terrible time today to be American and young. In fact, it apparently is a crime.

A whole generation has been scarred by the war and immobilized in its aftermath. The choices it had and it lives with, nobody wanted to think about, not even they. Its veterans were treated first as suckers and monsters, a dangerous combination altogether, and ten years later, as lost souls, jittery and uncontrollable wrecks who dissolve pathetically before the wailing wall their government had

given them, remembering God knows what, grieving for their friends and for themselves. The country has not and may not ever look to them for leadership, certainly not in the way it turned to the brash, upright young World War II heroes like John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter—men who ran for office proudly displaying themselves in their veterans' uniforms and waving their war records.

Its vocal protestors and its conscientious objectors continue to bear the stigma of disloyalty. And worse: they take the blame for shaking the political will of the leaders to prosecute war and seize "victory." To the resisters went the scorn for official restraint, and we are asked to believe, that restraint "lost" the war. Such ideas can take hold only in a country that has either forgotten why the Vietnam war could *never* be won in the conventional sense or confounds reality by embracing the war as a "noble cause." In the rush to forget Vietnam, it was forgotten who checked the violence of two presidents, and who exposed the bottomless demands of the military, and to whom went the laurels for forcing the country out of the war. There has been precious little nobility for the protestor, except in his own mind, except in his assurance that historians will note who stood up against the madness. No memorial will be erected to his sacrifices and achievements, unless in privacy, he wishes to enter the empty room of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington and make it a protesters' memorial as well, taking comfort in his personal efforts to stop the carnage that the memorial forces one to reflect upon.

As for the well-dressed malingerers, the best educated, the most cunning, the most creative of the generation, they live with their little secret: their citizenship came of age on a note of avoidance, an avoidance without apparent prejudice to themselves which in turn bred a profound cynicism toward their responsibilities in a free society. Their man-

hood began in failing to answer the call, either to arms or to resistance. Their alienation is quiet and opportunistic. They blend well into the society. Their careers often became those specialties that could ensure a refuge from the fray. Because of early deferments for husbands and fathers, often they formed marriages that never should have been consummated, and they sired children who never should have been born. If the cruel charge of substitution is valid against any group, it is valid for the sixteen million who avoided Vietnam legally. By their avoidance, the country had, de facto, reverted to the practice of the Civil War, where a man could buy a substitute. This forced the American army to lower its standards and turn the war into a working-class enterprise. Had it not been for this overall turpitude, a Lt. William Calley could never have been an officer in the U.S. Army. And it created a formidable, muted contempt within the ranks between the few well educated and the many uneducated. Because the avoiders are the brightest, as well as the majority, of the generation, their cynicism in the aftermath is especially damaging to the country. The luster went off public service and the political career after Vietnam and Watergate, and the talented young pursued strictly private careers. As for congressional duty, some who might otherwise have been motivated to serve, shied from the risk of exposing a non-existent war record.

Sherman's dirty work ended in victory, and the victory swept away in the North any preoccupation with the manner of victory. Victory sealed over for the Union veteran his memory of theft or wanton destruction in Dixie. In Vietnam, defeat and atrocity are fused. It is sometimes said that a veteran's own narrative of what happens to a man degraded by ignoble, impersonal violence has an authenticity that only the veteran can have. But in our first television war, the degradation was no secret, and a young man did

not have to experience it to know it. For ten years, most veterans could not or would not talk about Vietnam, for the mere telling had a profound psychological danger of its own. The society disavowed responsibility for the war and separated itself from the warrior's actions. As a result, the veteran was left on his own to come to grips with what he had done personally in Vietnam. Most have yet to digest their experiences and come to terms with them, and thereby to seal them over. Now some are beginning to talk, and the society has suddenly decided to listen.

A new and quite different heroism for the Vietnam veteran has suddenly become possible. The veteran who can articulate his experience in war and his emotions in the aftermath, and who has made his way through a painful self-renewal, could be the best agent for a Vietnam reconstruction. In coping with what happened to him in Vietnam, he can turn that agony to a positive force. In doing so, he must know that he is not unique in the American annals of war. The wanton violence of Sherman's bummer and Westmoreland's grunt differs as looting differs from killing, but neither time nor morals are static. Stealing the jewels from a peasant's hooch in Vietnam would be a precious little crime today. The patterns of behavior in both armies were encouraged by the official policy and extended the rules of permissible conduct in the same degree. The burning of Columbia and the slaughter of My Lai were exceptional only in their dimensions. The formal order for civilized behavior contrasted with the informal message toward atrocity in precisely the same way.

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