Letter from a Vietnam Veteran

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following letter was sent to us by a former Army medical officer who was returned from Vietnam as an "embarrassment to the command." We consider it of sufficient interest to print in full.*

SIR:

PUBLIC DISAFFECTION with the war in Vietnam is now general, and as a result the American agony there may be near an end. But several of the fundamental reasons for our failure there are not widely acknowledged. Thirty-thousand dead Americans and countless dead Vietnamese require some sort of an accounting.

A few autobiographical notes by way of background. I am a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy. I had decided while still a cadet that I wished to become a physician. At that time, the Army would allow qualified USMA graduates to attend medical school with the understanding that they would make military medicine their career. First, however, it was necessary to spend two years as an officer with one of the "combat arms." Accordingly, after becoming qualified as a Ranger and a parachutist, I served as an infantry lieutenant with the Eighty-Second Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. After two years, I applied for a five-year leave of absence and was accepted at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine from which I graduated in 1967. I interned at Walter Reed General Hospital, and in 1968 volunteered for Vietnam.

Before leaving, I managed to get permission to attend a course given by the Foreign Services Institute, a State Department subsidiary, which included six weeks of study on the politics, religions, culture, and history of Vietnam as well as on our own military and civil operations there. An additional five weeks were devoted to intensive language training from which I emerged considerably short of fluency, but with some limited ability to communicate. This course is one normally presented to prospective CORDS (civil affairs) personnel being assigned to Vietnam. Following this, I spent five weeks at Fort Rucker, Alabama, undergoing training as an Army flight surgeon.

I arrived in Vietnam in November 1968 with the rank of major and was assigned as regimental surgeon (the latter word is without surgical connotation; all Army doctors are called surgeons) to the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regiment ("Blackhorse"). This is a 5,000-man unit operating generally north of Bien Hoa in the III Corps area. When I joined it, the regiment was commanded by Col. George S. Patton, III, the son of the Second World War general. In the months to follow I was to come to know Patton quite well. As a member of the regimental staff, I ate at his table and attended his nightly briefings. To a significant degree he symbolized the actions and attitudes that are a source of our alienation from the Vietnamese and our consequent politico-military defeat in the war.

It is difficult to summarize the experiences that led to my expression of disaffection with our effort. In the end what I objected to was not so much individual atrocities, for these can be found in any war; war itself is the atrocity. What compelled my stand was the evident fact that at an operational level most Americans simply do not care about the Vietnamese. In spite of our national protestations about self-determination, revolutionary development, and the like, the attitude of our people on the ground, military and civilian, is one of nearly universal contempt.

This arrogant feeling is manifested in a variety of ways, from indiscriminate destruction of lives and property to the demeaning handouts that pass for civic action. The Vietnamese, a sensitive and intelligent people, are well aware of our general lack of regard and generally reward our efforts with the indifference or hostility that they deserve. We in turn attempt to create the illusion of progress by generating meaningless statistics to support predictions of success which have proved invariably incorrect. And the dying goes on.

Specific examples of our disregard for the Vietnamese are legion. At one point the corps commander issued a document entitled "U.S.-Vietnamese Relations" detailing many of these instances. It represented official acknowledgment of the problem, but its exhortation to "avoid creating embarrassing incidents" was an exercise in futility. Numerous examples are available from my own experience including the running down and killing of two Vietnamese women on bicycles with a *helicopter* (the pilot was exonerated); driving tracked vehicles through rice paddies; throwing C-ration cans at children from moving vehicles; running truck convoys through villages at high speeds on dirt roads (if the people are eating rice at the time it has to be thrown away because of the dust).

In the area of medical civic action, it was the policy to give no more than a two-day supply of medicine to any patient lest the excess fall into Vietcong hands. Since visits to any given village are generally infrequent, this meant that the illusion of medical care was just that.

Another example of the dehumanization of our relationships with the Vietnamese is evident when a civilian is admitted to one of our military hospitals. He is given a new name. In the place of a perfectly adequate, pronounceable Vietnamese name, he is given an apellation that is easier for Americans to remember. The nature of some of the designations chosen reveals their impact and intent—"Bubbles," "Ohio," and "Cyclops" for a soldier who had lost an eye.

Finally, one need only listen to a conversation between Americans concerning Vietnamese to appreciate the general lack of regard. The universal designation for the people of Vietnam, friend or enemy, is "gook" (also "slope" and "dink"). On the whole, this has no conscious pejorative connotation as used casually, but it does say something about our underlying attitude toward those for whose sake

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we are ostensibly fighting. How we can presume to influence a struggle for the political loyalties of a people for whom we manifest such uniform disdain is to me the great unanswered, indeed unanswerable, question of this war.

The analogy is depressingly clear between our failure to relate successfully to the Vietnamese and to the black people who comprise an "underdeveloped nation" within our own society. In both cases our behavior is racist in the true sense of opposing the overwhelming forces generated by a people's search for pride and identity. The price of our lack of perception is defeat abroad, and, if not corrected, may be the dissolution of society at home.

And then there is the military. Gen. David Shoup has spoken on this issue more convincingly than I ever could. Vietnam provides a case study of how inimical to the goals of the nation can be the individual self-interest of its soldiers. Colonel Patton may be a case in point. He received numerous decorations while pursuing unrelentingly the one major criterion by which a commander's performance is judged: the body count. He was able to make the appropriate public noises about the importance of civic action, but he was never more honest than the night he told his staff that "the present ratio of 90 per cent killing to 10 per cent pacification is just about right." In my experience, Patton was neither the best nor the worst of the military there. He is simply the product of the misbegotten and misguided idea that a single-minded dedication to destruction is to be highly rewarded. That he was unable to grasp the essentially political nature of the war is not surprising. What is surprising is that our society should expect its soldiers to function in a political role and believe them when they say they can.

My work with the Eleventh ACR was mainly in the area of medical civic action. Using the eight general medical officers and 200 enlisted medics assigned to the unit, we attempted to establish regular, frequent, medical visits to a limited number of rural villages. We also tried to provide evacuation of those people requiring surgery or hospitalization. In addition, attempts were made to attack some of the public health problems (personal hygiene, waste disposal) that were at the root of much of the disease we saw. Finally, efforts were made to involve Vietnamese health officials in immunization programs, dispensary building, and the like so that something would remain after we had gone. Success in all these areas was very modest. Some necessary surgery was done, many acute illnesses benefited from antibiotic therapy, and a start was made on long-term treatment of the numerous cases of tuberculosis we encountered. When I left, one dispensary was being built, which the government of Vietnam had promised to staff. Important to me was the *idea* our efforts represented and to which the Vietnamese responded: namely, that people from different cultures can relate successfully on the basis of mutual regard; that by offering our technical expertise the Vietnamese could help themselves. There is nothing original about this concept; ostensibly it underlies all U.S. "pacification" efforts. In reality, however, the idea is diluted in its application by the pervasive myth of American superiority, and the result is that civic action in the majority of instances I observed represented little more than patronizing handouts.

Meanwhile the war ground on. My views were well known in the unit. I felt, however, that my ability to influence events by individual persuasion was insignificant when the self-interest of everyone lay in the direction of more war, more death. Even the regimental chaplain endorsed the standing order of the unit when he prayed for "wisdom to find the bastards and the strength to pile on."

I finally felt I must protest. The occasion presented itself on Easter Sunday at the change of command ceremony for Colonel Patton, which was attended by General Abrams and some twenty other general officers. It was a true dance of death, with Patton recounting his successes and Abrams awarding him the Legion of Merit as "one of the my finest young commanders." As the ceremony concluded with the chaplain's benediction, I passed among the guests handing out copies of the enclosed prayer [see box], about two hundred in all.

The reaction was immediate. I was relieved of my duties and confined to my trailer for forty-eight hours. I then received a psychiatric evaluation (a routine preliminary to judicial action), and a formal investigation was performed. It was elected not to initiate court martial proceedings; instead I received a letter of reprimand and was transferred to the Ninety-Third Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh. I worked there in the emergency room for one month until the decision was made by the USARV commander to send me back to the U.S. as an "embarrassment to the command." A request from me that I be allowed to complete my tour at the Ninety-Third Evac was refused. I returned to the States on May 17. An amusingly ironic footnote to my expulsion was provided when, shorty before my departure, I was awarded (privately) the Bronze Star for an action that had occurred four months previously.

Upon my arrival in the U.S., I submitted my resignation stating my intent to speak out publicly—in or out of the military. Even though I had some four-and-a-half years of obligated service remaining, the Department of the Army elected to accept the resignation and I received a general discharge on July 17.

That in essence is my story. I tell it both in sorrow and with hope. I believe that this nation and its institutions are capable of better direction given better information. Mine was a limited view as is that of any one person; I make no claim to the whole truth, but this is what I saw.

—Gordon S. Livingston, M.D.,
Baltimore, Md.

The Blackhorse Prayer

(Composed by Dr. Livingston and distributed by him at ceremonies for Col. George S. Patton, III.)

God, our heavenly Father, hear our prayer. We acknowledge our shortcomings and ask thy help in being better soldiers for thee. Grant us, O Lord, those things we need to do thy work more effectively. Give us this day a gun that will fire 10,000 rounds a second, a napalm which will burn for a week. Help us to bring death and destruction wherever we go, for we do it in thy name and therefore it is meet and just. We thank thee for this war fully mindful that while it is not the best of all wars, it is better than no war at all. We remember that Christ said, "I came not to send peace, but a sword," and we pledge ourselves in all our works to be like Him. Forget not the least of thy children as they hide from us in the jungles; bring them under our merciful hand that we may end their suffering. In all things, O God, assist us, for we do our noble work in the knowledge that only with thy help can we avoid the catastrophe of peace which threatens us ever. All of which we ask in the name of thy son, George Patton. Amen.

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A Nigerian Debate on Man

Watching our hotel television set in Lagos, Nigeria, we were fascinated by an hour-long program in which college students debated the proposition that the human race is decadent. The debate took the classical form, with prepared opening statements followed by rebuttals and counter-rebuttals, and with supporting statements by members of each team. What was especially striking to an American observer was the extent to which the evidence offered by both sides was drawn from life in the United States.

The Nigerian student who took the gloomy view of the human race was a tall, bespectacled, neatly dressed young man. He spoke about the personal tragedy in store for any leader who genuinely tried to upgrade the conditions of life, then referred to the assassinations of four men—John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Kenya's Tom Mboya. Any civilization that is unable to tolerate men of stature, he said, could only be considered decadent.

The young man proceeded to develop the theme that violence was the dominant characteristic of our time. He cited the large number of Nigerian television programs glorifying brutality or cruelty. I couldn't help noting that most of the programs were imported from the United States. He then said that most of the energies of mankind today were turned to the manufacture of weapons that could smash civilization beyond recognition or repair. He found it difficult to accept the argument that these weapons would never be used in actual warfare. He reminded his viewers that the United States had not hesitated to use atomic explosives even on a living target, not once but twice, when it was in its interest to do so. He also spoke about the great disparity of wealth in the world, pointing to the fact that 80 per cent of the world's goods was produced or owned by only 6 per cent of the world's peoples—again a reference to the United States.

The young man referred to the increased poisoning of the human environment. He spoke of millions of dead fish in the Rhine River and the Great Lakes to prove his point that man was unable to use his scientific knowledge in his own interest. He quoted from sociologists who warned it may be only a few years before all the oceans will be vast dead bodies of water unable to contribute any longer to the sustaining of life on land. He spoke of the mammoth automobile industries and the networks of highways as creating a perilous combination resulting in vast quantities of poisons in the air.

The television camera panned to the applauding studio audience as the young speaker observed that man reveals himself in his entertainment. He declared that the dominant entertainment tastes today were depraved, judging by motion pictures, plays, books and magazines. In particular, he spoke of Broadway plays in which men and women cavorted in total nudity and exploited each other's bodies, not excluding sexual intercourse on stage. He referred to the high divorce rates in many parts of the world, then quoted from research studies showing the prevalence of extramarital relations in the United States and elsewhere. All in all, he said, the preponderance of evidence was that our age was not merely decadent but downright degenerate.

The young man acknowledged the further applause of the studio audience and stepped down. His opponent, a lovely and attractively dressed young lady, came forward. She began by saying that at any given time in history it would be possible to point to any number of serious faults in the human record. But the general movement of history was forward. Man was not perfect but he was at least perfectible. Whatever his propensity for error, she declared, he had an unerring instinct for justice that was at least equal to his instinct for survival. Man's ability to define the right and his insistence on achieving it, even at fearsome cost, were his main tools in fashioning an ever-better life. She spoke of the inexorable process by which peoples liberated themselves from outside rule, beginning with the American Revolution of 1776 and extending to the national freedom movements in Africa today.

The young lady did not despair of man's ability to use his science for his own good. She felt that human intelligence was on the verge of its greatest victories; disease, ignorance, poverty, and venality would eventually all fall before it. Meanwhile, all humanity could exult over man's voyage to the moon, representing as it did the combined triumph of man's knowledge, technology, and spirit. She emphasized the expedition to the moon as offering proof of man's ability to meet any problem worth meeting.

The sense of affirmation was vibrant in everything she said and was reflected in the enthusiastic and frequent applause of the studio audience. It didn't take the judges very long to

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