Obscenity Without Victory

The Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1961-1975) are conveniently considered together, for both involved the artificial division of a distant country into warring north and south sections, in both the abstract enemy was the same ("communism"), and both ended in a non-victory puzzling and annoying to those accustomed to the unambiguous conclusions of previous "total" wars. Both left a residue of bitterness, and both seemed to suggest that traditional ideas of soldierly motivation and morale needed serious revision. That is, both wars revealed the unpleasant but very modern fact that without powerful patriotic motivation—difficult to generate unless the actual territory of the United States is jeopardized—American troops tend to refrain from immolating themselves, preferring comfort, safety, money-making, drugs, alcohol, and sexual pleasure to the more heroic values formerly associated with the profession of arms. When contemporary soldiers are motivated to fight, they will probably not be fighting for principles or abstractions but for each other. In the absence of a clear moral mission justifying their suffering, troops will become angry, and their anger will readily boil over into acts of sadism, destructiveness, and mutiny. To this degree both Asian wars are an embarrassment to the military, which has not yet quite figured out how to deal with this problem.

Korea

The way one modern war can smoothly modulate into another is illustrated by the beginning of the Korean War. Korea had been a possession of the Japanese since 1904-1905, and when the Second World War ended, Soviet troops, by agreement with the other Allies, occupied Korea down to the 38th parallel of latitude, while the United States occupied the peninsula south of that line. As the Cold War began developing, each occupying power began to encourage its ideas of government in its sector, and each began to encourage a local military establishment there as well. By 1949, having devised a "Republic of
Korea" in their half, and having organized a local army, the Americans conceived their occupation duty completed and went home. Meanwhile, the Soviets were raising a much better army in their half, and on Sunday morning, June 25, 1950, the North Korean army, 80,000 strong, crossed the 38th parallel, aiming at reuniting the country under a Communist government. This army soon forced the weak South Korean forces into a deep retreat. In four days the North Koreans were in Seoul, the southern capital, and only a small part of the southern tip of the country remained in the hands of the Republic of Korea.

The new United Nations had been established precisely to prevent such aggression as this, and President Truman appealed to the Security Council to do something. It responded by accepting Truman's understanding of its obligation to mount a "police action," and before long it had persuaded twenty countries to contribute forces for a U.N. army to repel the invaders. The fact that many nations were involved gave the operation a U.N. color, although the United States, which ultimately fed eight divisions into the war, was by far the major belligerent. Britain sent two infantry brigades, Canada one, plus an artillery regiment. France sent a battalion, and so did Ethiopia, Greece, Thailand, and Belgium. Luxembourg came up with an infantry platoon. Italy contributed a field hospital, India an ambulance. The whole effort was commanded by General MacArthur, whose mandate was to drive the invaders back across the 38th parallel and restore the status quo ante. He speeded up the slow progress north of his forces by a shrewd and lucky amphibious landing at Inchon, the port of Seoul, which recovered the capital. Success emboldened MacArthur to quarrel with his mandate and to conceive his mission to be the reunifying of the whole country under a South Korean, free enterprise government. With this aim, he crossed the parallel and approached the Yalu River, the border with China, whereupon the Chinese army, quiescent until now, suddenly surged into Korea with 300,000 troops and drove the U.N. army back behind the dividing line, badly battered. It was all Truman and the U.N. could do to persuade MacArthur not to invade China itself ("There is no substitute for victory," he proclaimed), and his increasing recalcitrance and uncontrolled flag-waving bellicosity finally prompted Truman to fire him (in the military euphemism, "relieve" him). Former artillery captain Truman was not at all unhappy doing this, for a lifetime of service with the National Guard had given him a contemptuous view of regular army officers, especially West Pointers. They were, he believed, pompous, power-mad, and largely fraudulent ("Mr. Prima Donna," he called MacArthur).

The Korean belligerents gradually settled into a stalemate at roughly the 38th parallel, and armistice negotiations began in July 1951. They continued for two years before a peace treaty was signed. Having accomplished nothing, the war ended exactly where it began. The two sides still confront each other, staring across a No Man's Land from trenches and bunkers. The war, which largely ruined both halves of the country, caused 3 million civilian deaths and maimings, and the U.N. force had 180,000 killed and wounded, 80 percent of them American.

The Korean War was important in establishing the model for post-atomic-bomb, undeclared, limited wars. Like the Vietnam War, it ignored the constitutional expectation that a war be not unpopular and thus readily declared by a highly representative Congress. The Korean War established another precedent by ignoring evidence that attempts to repress "progressive" reform in Asia, with its hordes of the poor and deprived, were unlikely to succeed. But if it resembled the Vietnam War in these ways, in another way it is unique: it generated virtually no literature, perhaps one reason it seems to be, as Clay Blair has called it, The Forgotten War. It did produce some good reporting, like BBC correspondent Rene Cutforth's account of what he saw when the Chinese attacked across their border. He saw "young GIs of hardly nineteen or twenty, ill-trained and in total panic, throw down their weapons and run from the front, tears streaming down their faces." But the war produced little writing worth preserving for its own moral or artistic sake. The reasons why are puzzling. Was it because the war was so short, the fighting lasting only a little more than one year? Was it because, despite the presence of some scared draftees, the war was fought largely by regulars and reserve call-backs who were not confirmed civilians and instinctive pacifists and thus capable of being eloquently shocked by what they encountered? Was it because the concept "police-action poetry" lacks appeal? Perhaps the war followed too closely on the Second World War, so that the Korean horrors could seem already too familiar to require literary exposure. Whatever the reason, the paucity of Korean War literature is striking, and in a book like this, unignorable.

VIETNAM

It is not easy to date the beginning of the Vietnam War accurately. Struggle between the organized poor of French Indochina, as it used to be called, and various foreign occupiers had been standard for decades, but the United States first became involved in a small way in 1950, when Truman sent thirty-five noncombatant "advisers" to help the French maintain their colonial authority, menaced by the Viet Minh, a radical guerrilla army. After their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French began leaving the country, and a peace conference in Geneva divided the country at the 17th parallel, with Ho Chi Minh in charge of the Communist north and Ngo Dinh Diem Prime Minister of the non-Communist south. In 1956 more American advisers arrived to train a South Vietnamese army, and the first American killed, in 1961, was one of these. The administration of President Kennedy now began increasing support of the South Vietnamese army (ARVN, or Army of the
Republic of Vietnam), and by December 1961, American planes and helicopters were introduced into the scene and the number of American troops, increasingly conceived less as advisers than combatants, reached 15,000. By 1964, assisted by the famous Tonkin Gulf incident—the pugnacious Lyndon Johnson claimed an attack on American ships, which only doubtfully took place—the Americans had become more bellicose and were bombing North Vietnam, the motivator of its South Vietnamese guerrilla arm, the Viet Cong. At the same time, Viet Cong operations became more and more unsettling: mines secretly implanted, murders of civilians assisting the Americans, destruction by mortars and artillery of American airfields, planes, and bases. By 1965 American marines and soldiers were pouring into the country, their number finally amounting to half a million. They seemed to be doing not badly at establishing an atmosphere in which the South Vietnamese government could survive, until January 1968, when the Viet Cong chose Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, as the date for immensely destructive attacks on Saigon, the capital (including the United States Embassy), and forty other cities. In retrospect, Tet came to seem the Stalingrad of the Vietnam War. It was a turning point, the undeniable beginning of American defeat.

By the late 1960s, American opposition to the war grew strident. The war was illegal, many said; it was immoral, colonialist, cruel, and unnecessary, and those directing it were simply war criminals. Richard Nixon came into office promising to end the war. His plan was to withdraw American troops gradually, replacing them with beefed-up equivalent forces from the ARVN, and to increase the bombing of North Vietnam to persuade that country to make peace. By 1970 the war had spread to neighboring Laos and Cambodia, and in the early 1970s everything began to come apart. The My Lai massacre, when hundreds of unarmed civilians, including infants and old women, were shot to death by angry U.S. Army troops, became known and was perceived less as an aberration than as an entirely representative atrocity. Anti-war demonstrations became more indignant. Protesters were beaten and, at Kent State University, killed. Troop morale began to erode, and soldiers stepped up their rate of such subversive behavior as "combat refusals" (i.e., mutinies), open hard-drug dependence, and the killing of unpopular officers. In Washington the Watergate scandal, the result of the President’s paranoia about "national security" leaks and anger at the apparently treasonous behavior of those opposing the war, brought down the government and removed from the war any pretense of legitimacy and appropriateness it ever had. In 1973 the last American troops left. Deprived of this support, ARVN collapsed, and in May 1975, the war ended when North Vietnamese troops and tanks entered Saigon and united Vietnam into one Communist country, or as some might say, replaced in the south one tyranny by another. At the end, the television audience at home was vouchsafed disgraceful scenes of wild terror in the too-long-delayed evacuation of right-wing Vietnamese and American diplomatic personnel. It was a fitting scandal to end a war which had seldom seemed less than a scandal.

The whole performance which, lasting for about fifteen years, constituted America’s longest war, was costly: its price was almost 2 million dead in Vietnam, 200,000 in Cambodia, 100,000 in Laos. Over 3 million were wounded in Southeast Asia, and 14 million became refugees. Of the American troops and marines, 58,135 were killed. Over 300,000 people were wounded, of whom 33,000 are permanently paralyzed. The price in American civil disruption and the augmenting of cynicism and contempt for the government was high also. Thousands of young people evaded the draft either by enrolling in college—the law surprisingly permitted this open validation of privilege and the class system—or by fleeing the country for Canada or Sweden. By the end of the war more people than one might expect could agree with I. F. Stone that "Every government is run by liars and nothing they say should be believed."

The lies were largely about the virtues of the South Vietnamese government and the combat adequacy of the South Vietnamese army. The government was grossly unrepresentative, a Roman Catholic autocracy governing a Buddhist majority, and its armed forces seemed to fight with the knowledge that defeat was inevitable, and besides, pimping and selling supplies were more profitable than duty. Those familiar with the Second World War in Europe can appreciate what Vietnam became by imagining French civilians and soldiers secretly selling to the Germans weapons and supplies conveyed to them, often at mortal risk, by the Allies. One marine officer, whose unit fought alongside elements of ARVN, testifies: "Every, every, every, every, every firefight that we got into, the ARVN fucking ran." Until the My Lai episode became public, the lies also had to cover the noisome fact that the enemies being shot down by American troops often consisted of unarmed civilians suspected of sympathy toward the Viet Cong, and that often these civilians were women and children and the elderly living in villages thought to be centers of Viet Cong activity. The official lies had to gloss over feelings like those in a letter left at home by one soldier to be opened if he did not return. When he was killed, his parents opened the letter to read,

Dear Mom and Dad:
The war that has taken my life, and many thousands of others before me, is immoral, unlawful, and an atrocity....

And all along, until near the end when the Americans were obviously in flight, the lies had to assure the electorate that the United States was
"winning," and that if it was leaving, it was placing the cause in the hands of the sturdy, honest, well-trained, and self-respecting South Vietnamese, who would surely win. The lies also had to conceal the number of ARVN officers who were really Viet Cong agents and the likelihood that some high government officials, like Truong Nhu Tang, were secretly aiding the Viet Cong because they sympathized with the cause of apparent social justice represented by the north.

The reasons for American defeat and humiliation were many. One was a complacent ignorance of Asian social and political conventions, languages, and history and a lack of imaginative identification with the miserable and the poverty-stricken. Another was reliance on a showy but inappropriate technology to fight a war essentially social and political. The American army was trained to fight wars like the last European one, where victory resulted from the seizure and occupation of enemy terrain and where the killing of the enemy was only incidental to this end. Confronted with a very different challenge, a war where anyone might be an enemy and where the enemy was unidentifiable and everywhere, the army had no solution but to kill people, uniformed or not, old or young, male or female, proven Viet Cong or not. It was almost as if the German practice in the Second World War of widespread massacres of guerrillas in the interest of "pacification" had now been embraced by the Americans, who seemed to advertise their contempt for human life in general by the technique of the announced "body count" of the presumed enemy. As one American public-relations official finally admitted, "We were looking for quantitative measurements in a war that was qualitative."

The Second World War provided the American Air Force with a rationale for its contribution, the saturation bombing of civilian targets in North Vietnam, despite evidence gathered by the Strategic Bombing Survey suggesting that the bombing of civilian targets actually increases the enemy's will to resist. Regardless, the Air Force dropped on the Communists three times the bomb tonnage dropped in the whole of the Second World War, with little more effect than to pockmark the agricultural countryside with craters. But if hamstrung by precedents from the Second World War, the military in Vietnam did make some changes in their procedures. One was in response to what the Second War had revealed about the inevitability of psychiatric breakdown if troops have to fight too long without hope of ultimate reprieve—except that provided by death or serious injury. In Vietnam a soldier served one year and then was returned to stateside duty. But while psychologically intelligent, this proved militarily inconvenient, for units now consisted not of men who knew each other from way back but of virtual visitors no one could count on absolutely. Another difference from earlier wars was the new emphasis on Rest and Recreation ("R and R") as a relief from the strain of combat. Every soldier was entitled to his holiday in the bars and whorehouses of Tokyo or Bangkok, where he found an atmosphere not refreshingly different from the one in Saigon.

R and R was especially required in this war because of the terrible things the troops had to do and see, and because of their anger at the Vietnamese, both North and South, and their frustration and fear at the absence of a front line and a locatable enemy. The American emphasis on the body count quite dehumanized the Viet Cong, making routine the behavior described by journalist Phillip Knightley:

The Americans mutilated bodies. One colonel wanted the hearts cut out of dead Vietcong to feed to his dog.... Ears were strung together like beads. Parts of Vietnamese bodies were kept as trophies; skulls were a favorite and the then Colonel George Patton III—"I do like to see the arms and legs fly"—carried one about at his farewell party. The Americans photographed dead Vietnamese as if they were game trophies.... The Twenty-fifth Infantry Division left a "visiting card," a torn-off shoulder patch of the division's emblem, stuffed in the mouth of the Vietnamese they killed.

Condemned to sadistic lunacy like this, the troops developed the particular sardonic-joky style, half-ironic, totally subversive, which is the hallmark of Vietnam War rhetoric. One popular saying among the troops was "A sucking chest wound is nature's own way of telling you war is hell." They held up two fingers in a "V" as a peace signal, and they exhibited everywhere they could, on helmet covers, rifle stocks, or medallions worn around the neck, the nuclear-disarmament peace logo. Because the war seemed run along business lines, with quantitative results expected, and because killing became so routine, mock business cards and mock ads flourished, a satire of both management style and the fraudulence of publicity. One helicopter gunship commander dropped visiting cards on his victims reading, "Congratulations. You have been killed through courtesy of the 361st." Another helicopter company which named itself the Kingsmen issued cards designating its specialties—"VG Extermination," "People Sniffer and Defoliation"—and promised to provide "Death and Destruction 24 Hours a Day." It concluded: "If you care enough to send the very best, send THE KINGSMEN." This mode resembled the normal irony practiced by troops in modern war, but now the irony was twisted and turned by hatred and anger into something close to sarcasm. On one vehicle was neatly painted: "Vietnam: Love It or Leave It."

This sarcastic tendency suggests that in its style the Vietnam War may be more than a modern one. It may be a "post-modern" one. That term, denoting certain kinds of contemporary writing and art which
press beyond the "modern" to something even more skeptical, problematic, and even nihilistic, seems applicable to this war which so seriously damaged the remaining cliches of patriotism and heroism. "In the end," says one observer, "I came to believe that the war was destroying the U.S. Army." One characteristic of post-modern procedure in the arts is a self-consciousness bordering on contempt about the very medium or genre one is working in, amounting to disdain for the public respect and even awe that normally attend such artifacts-the works of Andy Warhol are a well-known example. The correspondent Eddie Adams remembers reporting and photographing techniques in Vietnam: "We used to go out in teams," he recalls, "so that if one of us got blown away, the other could cover it. A bit sick." That can suggest the way the troops regarded their capture and degradation by the war. Lionel Trilling once spoke of the "modern" movement in culture as "the legitimation of the subversive"—and that definition applies with increasing intensity to the tendency called post-modern.

Because of the lies the home-front audience had been fed, soldiers returning finally from Vietnam had more trouble than usual trying to persuade some civilians that the war had been shamefully nasty. One paralyzed ex-marine lieutenant, addressing an audience on Long Island, was trying to depict for them the war as it was:

This woman stands up and says, "I object to your use of obscenity," I said, "What did I say?" A guy said, "You used the word bullshit." I said, "You know, it's amazing. I'm talking to you about the obscenity of war, about wholesale atrocities as a matter of policy, and what you relate to as an obscenity is the word bullshit. What would you do if I said, 'Fuck you'?" This was in a full auditorium.... It was total pandemonium. In the aisles, ranting and raving.

"In Vietnam," wrote journalist John Mecklin, "a major American policy was wrecked, in part, by unadorned reporting of what was going on." A lot of that unadorned reporting will be found in these selections. All is courageous, and most is informed by an uncompromised moral sense. There are also some memories of the combatants, in the form of autobiography and poetry. These selections register in various ways a confrontation with the monstrous and the unbelievable. That is what writing about Vietnam had to be, but looking back one sees that that is what writing about all modern war inevitably must be.

From WAR IN KOREA: THE REPORT OF A WOMAN
COMBAT CORRESPONDENT

I met the Eighth Army commander, Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, for the first time when I returned to the front in mid-July after MacArthur had lifted the ban on women correspondents in Korea. General Walker was a short, stubby man of bulldog expression and defiant stance. I wondered if he were trying to imitate the late General George Patton, under whom he served in World War II as a corps commander. He was very much of a spit-and-polish general, his lacquered helmet gleaming and the convoy of jeeps that escorted him always trim and shiny. I shall never forget the expression on the faces of two United States marine lieutenants who, on driving up to the Eighth Army compound at Seoul, were told by the military policeman at the gate: "You can't drive that vehicle in here. It's too dusty. No dusty jeeps in here. General Walker's orders!"

"Well, I'll be damned," breathed the marine lieutenant with deliberately exaggerated astonishment. "Everything we've been saying about the United States Army is true."

General Walker was very correct and absolutely frank with me.