

My Journey as a Vietnam War Protestor

By Nick Gier

I watched the Ken Burns' and Lynn Novick's "The Vietnam War" on Spokane's Channel 7, primarily because it offered two viewings each evening. At end of each episode, there was a phone number for a Veterans Hotline for those who needed to talk.

Even though I did not serve in the war, I felt that I, too, needed a number to call. As I watched the series, a flood of memories came over me, and the emotional impact was even greater than my visit to the war museum in Ho Chi Minh City in 2010. I left the premises midway through the tour, because I was so devastated by the large pictures depicting what my country did to the Vietnamese people. Although I flinched and occasionally cried during the "Vietnam War," I stuck with each episode from beginning to end.

1964: Lies about the Gulf of Tonkin

In the summer of 1964, I was working for the U. S. Forest Service on the Olympic Peninsula. As my crew got off work on August 5, we turned on the radio. An announcer reported that President Lyndon Johnson had ordered the bombing of North Vietnam. We all cheered and shouted, as close as I can remember, "Get those dirty Commies"!

Thanks to the publication of "The Pentagon Papers," we now know that the pretext for the bombing was a lie. Johnson claimed that the destroyer USS Maddox had been attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats, when in fact the Maddox was in an offensive, not defensive position. It was gathering intelligence for South Vietnamese raids on North Vietnamese islands. The CIA had also been ordering secret bombings on mainland North Vietnam.

1965-66: Oregon State University

I returned to Oregon State University that fall, and by the spring of 1965, in a dramatic about-face, I was being called a "Commie Lover." Along with my adviser in religious studies, we founded the Student-Faculty Committee to End the War in Vietnam. We organized on-campus protests, and we also went out to picket at regional military facilities.

I bought subscriptions to the *Viet Report* and *Ramparts* magazine, and I started writing letters against the war to the Corvallis and campus newspapers. I combined my reading with research at the university library, and I wrote several papers for my political science classes. I presented the results of my research during protests on campus. My notes show that I also debated a representative of the conservative Young Americans for Freedom on May 25, 1966.

B-52 Bombings and Napalm Atrocities

During that time, a State Department representative visited campus to defend the Johnson administration's prosecution of the war. After his talk, I stood up and protested the carpet bombing by B-52 Stratofortresses. I was near tears when I also pointed out the immorality of using napalm, which causes huge fire storms when dropped.

The Burns/Novick series gave us more details about the 9-year-old girl Kim Phuc, who was badly burned by napalm while fleeing Trang Bang. South Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut

won a Pulitzer Prize for an iconic image that symbolized the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Phuc is now a Canadian citizen and peace activist, and Burns/Novick's unnarrated image of her holding her infant with her horribly scarred back turned to us is just as heart-wrenching as Ut's prize-winning photo.

A Sport Coat and Tie Protestor

Watching the Burns/Novick documentary, I was struck by how well dressed most of the protest leaders were. Even Stokely Carmichael, a member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, wore a nice suit and tie.

I didn't think it was necessary to wear a suit, but I always showed up in a corduroy sports coat and tie—and short hair. None of my fellow student protestors were hippies. Most of our faculty were, just like us, straight-arrows. There was no one straighter than the radiology professor who joined, and sometimes, lead our efforts.

Johnson's charge that we were being directed by the Soviets was as laughable as it was absurd. Sometime during 1965-66, I was contacted by a member of the Corvallis John Birch Society and was invited to one of their meetings. I presented my arguments against the war and assured them that my organization was not a Communist front.

A Mystery: from 2-S to 1-Y Deferment

In the Spring of 1966, I was called up for a physical, even though I had a student deferment. Along with a busload of other OSU students, we were driven to an induction center in Portland. As far as I could tell, I passed the exam, and upon returning to Corvallis, I was seriously considering moving to Canada.

Soon thereafter I received a 1-Y classification, which meant that I was "qualified for military service only in time of national emergency." (This deferment was eliminated in 1971.) I was told, without any further verification, that 1-Ys were being given to war protestors to avoid dissent in the ranks. I chose not to ask for a clarification.

1966-67: Rotary Fellowship to Denmark

In May of 1966, I received a letter from Rotary International informing me that I had been awarded its Fellowship for International Understanding. I was invited to give an acceptance speech at the Medford, Oregon Rotary Club, and, in one of the most impolitic and ungrateful moments of my life, I talked mostly about bringing the troops home from Vietnam.

I learned that some Medford Rotarians had called Rotary headquarters in Evanston, Illinois urging that my fellowship be revoked. Their request was considered, but authorities in Evanston decided that they had made a firm commitment, and that I should prepare for year in Denmark. During 1966-67, I gave 21 speeches in Danish Rotary clubs (20 in Danish), and not once, did I mention the Vietnam War. I did this voluntarily and not by Rotary's dictate.

While in Copenhagen I went to the Royal Library frequently. Instead of concentrating on my work on the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, I spent a great deal of time reading

everything I could find on the Vietnam War. When I talked to my new Danish student friends, they seemed uninterested in my critical position on the war. Instead they saw me as simply another American who was somehow responsible for the war. I simply had no credibility with them.

1967-1970: Graduate School and Kent State

In 1967 I returned to the U. S. and started my studies at Claremont Graduate University. I followed the war, but my main focus was on my classes. That changed with the Kent State shootings on May 4, 1970. Once again, I took the lead (I was President of the Graduate Student Council), and about 50 students joined me in a sit-in at campus administration offices.

1972 and George McGovern for President

When I came to Moscow in 1972, I was occupied with a new job, a new wife, a mortgage, and soon a baby daughter. My last anti-war effort came in campaigning for Sen. George McGovern, a veteran World War II bomber pilot, and one of the most honorable men to ever to run for the presidency.

A President McGovern would not have been able to do much to mitigate the disaster for the Vietnamese people that years of lies had made inevitable. He would, however, have served a full term, and he would have facilitated a national healing far better than a corrupt and disgraced President Nixon.

1976-1977: Congressman Steve Symms and my FBI file

In January of 1976, news reports indicated that the FBI had a list of 15,000 people, who would be detained in case of a national emergency. I soon filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act for access to any files that would incriminate me. Within a month I received a letter from the Justice Department informing me that I was not on this list nor was there any derogatory information about me found in any files.

This was not satisfactory, because I wanted to see the files for myself. On February 19, I filed an appeal and didn't hear back until July 8. The excuse for the delay was a huge backlog of appeals and there were still 200 before me to be processed.

At this point GOP Congressman Steve Symms, with whom I had had a heated debate about "limited" government, intervened on my behalf. The result was three-page dossier containing a copy of one letter I wrote to the OSU student newspaper, and details of some of our on-campus activities. I was still not satisfied, but I decided that it would be futile to press the FBI for any more information.

No Flag Burning; Standing for the Anthem Instead

My fellow protestors and I never burned Old Glory and we never waved the Viet Cong flag. I always stood, and still do stand, for the national anthem. Then and now, while I sing the anthem, I noticed my fellow citizens are also standing, but most of them are not singing, nor are they paying much attention.

On October 11, 2017, Trump did not stand nor did he stop talking to Sean Hannity during a bugle call at a hangar for the Pennsylvania Air National Guard in Harrisburg. Totally clueless as to military protocol, Trump thought that the music was for them: “What a nice sound that is. Are they playing that for you or for me”? Trump turned to the audience and said: “They’re playing that in honor of [Hannity’s] ratings.”

I personally think the NFL players are making a mistake by not standing for the Anthem. In these times of radical polarization, there are so few chances for us to show national unity. The NFL players are losing the public relations battle, and their coaches are now threatening to sanction them rather than support them.

Far too many Americans, unfortunately, choose to see them as unpatriotic rather than as citizens exercising their First Amendment rights. Those rights are now under threat by, and, as GOP Senator Ben Sasse says, Trump is violating the oath he “took on January 20 to preserve, protect, and defend the First Amendment.”

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