

Home From the War: The Psychology of Survival

Robert Jay Lifton

SURVIVING

There is something special about Vietnam veterans. Everyone who has contact with them seems to agree that they are different from veterans of other wars. A favorite word to describe them is "alienated." Veterans Administration reports stress their sensitivity to issues of authority and autonomy. This group of veterans is seen as having "greater distrust of institutions and unwillingness to be awed by traditional authorities." so that "they are less willing to be passive recipients of our wisdom." The individual Vietnam veteran, it is said, "feels an intense positive identification with his own age group" and is part of "an unspoken 'pact of youth' which assures mutual safety from threats to his sense of individual identity."

Even when sufficiently incapacitated to require hospitalization in a VA psychiatric ward, Vietnam veterans tend to stress the issue of

Robert Jay Lifton, distinguished author, psychiatrist, and professor of psychiatry at Yale and City University of New York was the first to develop analytical and interpretive categories to help explain the experience of those who have encountered severe trauma at close range. In addition to working with veterans of the Vietnam War, Lifton has studied the survivors of the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima (cf. his book, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* [New York: Basic Books, 1982]) and the psychology of the Nazi movement (cf. his book, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* [New York: Basic Books, 1986]). In all of these studies, Lifton displays the influence of Erik Erikson's work on "identity and the life cycle." Lifton's thesis is that traumatic events carry the power to reverse the desired psychological process, and to stimulate "identity crisis" instead of "ego-integrity." The subject addressed in this essay is explored in much greater detail in his book, *Home from the War. Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). The attitude Lifton takes toward the subject is important for its own sake, but needs also to be understood as having fundamentally influenced the therapy that has been developed for posttraumatic stress disorders as well as the resocialization and adjustment techniques that are practiced in Vet Centers.

"generation gap" and larger social problems rather than merely their own "sickness." And there is evidence, confirmed by my own observations in a series of "rap groups" with returning Vietnam veterans, that large numbers of them feel themselves to be "hurting" and in need of psychological help, but avoid contact with the Veterans Administration-because they associate it with the war-military-government establishment, with the forces responsible for a hated ordeal, or because of their suspicion (whether on the basis of hearsay or personal experience) that VA doctors are likely to interpret their rage at everything connected with the war as no more than their own individual "problem." The result has been (again in the words of VA observers) "degrees of bitterness, distrust, and suspicion of those in positions of authority and responsibility."

To be sure, these patterns can occur in veterans of any war, along with restless shifting of jobs and living arrangements, and difficulty forming or maintaining intimate relationships. Precisely such tendencies in World War II veterans, men who had "lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity," led Erik Erikson to evolve his concepts of "identity crisis" and "loss of 'ego-identity.'" "

But these men give the impression of something more. Murray Polner, who interviewed more than two hundred Vietnam veterans of diverse views and backgrounds for his book *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran*, concluded that "not one of them hawk, dove, or haunted-was entirely free of doubt about the nature of the war and the American role in it." As a group they retain the "gnawing suspicion that 'it was all for nothing.'" Polner concluded that "never before have so many questioned as much, as these veterans have, the essential rightness of what they were forced to do." Beyond just being young and having been asked to fight a war, these men have a sense of violated personal and social order, of fundamental break in human connection, which they relate to conditions imposed upon them by the war in Vietnam.

Some of the quality of that war experience is revealed in the following recollection of My Lai by a GI who was there, and whom I shall henceforth refer to as "the My Lai survivor":

The landscape doesn't change much. For days and days you see just about nothing. It's unfamiliar-always unfamiliar. Even when you go back to the same place, it's unfamiliar. And it makes you feel as though, well, there's nothing left in the world but this.... You have the illusion of going great distances and traveling, like hundreds of miles ... and you end up in the same place because you're only a couple of miles away ... But you feel like it's not all real. It couldn't

possibly be. We couldn't still be in this country. We've been walking for days.... You're in Vietnam and they're using real bullets.... Here in Vietnam they're actually shooting people for no reason.... Any other time you think, it's such an extreme. Here you can go ahead and shoot them for nothing.... As a matter of fact it's even ... smiled upon, you know. Good for you. Everything is backwards. That's part of the kind of unreality of the thing. To the grunt [infantryman] this isn't backwards. He doesn't understand.... But something [at My Lai] was missing. Something you thought was real that would accompany this. It wasn't there.... There was something missing in the whole business that made it seem it really wasn't happening.

The predominant emotional tone here is all-encompassing absurdity and moral inversion. The absurdity has to do with a sense of being alien and profoundly lost, yet at the same time locked into a situation as meaningless and unreal as it is deadly. The moral inversion, eventuating in a sense of evil, has to do not only with the absolute reversal of ethical standards but with its occurrence in absurdity, without inner justification, so that the killing is rendered naked.

This overall emotional sense, which I came to view as one of *absurd evil*, is conveyed even more forcefully by something said in a rap group by a former "grunt." He had been talking about the horrors of combat, and told how, after a heavy air strike on an NLF unit, his company came upon a terrible scene of dismembered corpses. Many of the men then began a kind of wild victory dance, in the midst of which they mutilated the bodies still further. He recalled wondering to himself: "What am I doing here? We don't take any land. We don't give it back. We just mutilate bodies. What the fuck are we doing here?" Whatever the element of retrospective judgment in this kind of recollection, the wording was characteristic. During another rap-group discussion of how men felt about what they were doing in Vietnam, a man asked: "What the hell *was* going on? What the fuck *were* we doing?"

These questions express a sense of the war's total lack of order or structure, the feeling that there was no genuine purpose, that nothing could ever be secured or gained, and that there could be no measurable progress. We may say that there was no genuine "script" or "scenario" of war that could provide meaning or even sequence or progression, a script within which armies clash, battles are fought, won, or lost, and individual suffering, courage, cowardice, or honor can be evaluated. Nor could the patrols seeking out an elusive enemy, the ambushes in which Americans were likely to be the surprised victims, or the search-and-destroy missions lashing out blindly at noncombatants achieve the psychological status of meaningful combat ritual. Rather, these became part of the general

So did the "secret movements" on this alien terrain, since, as one man put it, "Little kids could tell us exactly where we would set up the next night." The men were adrift in an environment not only strange and hostile but offering no honorable encounter, no warrior grandeur. I

Now there are mutilations, amidst absurdity and evil, in any war. Men who fight wars inevitably become aware of the terrible disparity between romantic views of heroism expressed "back home" and the reality of degradation and unspeakable suffering they have witnessed, experienced, and caused. One thinks of the answer given by Audie Murphy, much-decorated hero of World War II, to the question put to him about how long it takes a man to get over his war experiences. Murphy's reply, recorded in his obituary, was that one never does. What he meant was that residual inner conflicts-survivor conflicts stay with one indefinitely. These conflicts have to do with anxiety in relationship to an indelible death imprint, death guilt inseparable from that imprint, various forms of prolonged psychic numbing and suppression of feeling, profound suspicion of the counterfeit (or of "counterfeit nurturance"), and an overall inability to give significant inner form-to "formulate"-one's war-linked death immersion. This was undoubtedly a factor in Murphy's repeated difficulties and disappointments after his return from his war, as it has been in the unrealized lives and premature deaths of many war heroes, and indeed in the paradox stated by Charles Omen about warriors during the Middle Ages being "the best of soldiers while the war lasted ... [but] a most dangerous and unruly race in times of truce or peace."

Yet veterans have always come to some terms with their war experiences-some formulation of their survival permitting them to overcome much of their death anxiety and death guilt, their diffuse suspiciousness and numbing. Crucial even to this partial resolution of survivor conflict is the veteran's capacity to believe that his war had purpose and significance beyond the immediate horrors he witnessed. He can then connect his own actions with ultimately humane principles, and can come to feel that he performed a dirty but necessary job. He may even be able to experience renewed feelings of continuity or symbolic immortality around these larger principles, side by side with his residual survivor pain and conflict.

But the central fact of the Vietnam War is that no one really believes in it. The "larger purposes" put forth to explain the American presence-repelling "outside invaders," or giving the people of the South an opportunity "to choose their own form of government"-are directly contradicted by the overwhelming evidence a GI encounters that *he is* the outside invader, that the government he has come to defend is justly hated by the people he has come to "help," and that

he, the American "helper," is hated by them most of all. Even those who seem to acquiesce to these claims do so, as Polner's work suggests, with profound inner doubt, and in response to tenuous and defensive "psychological work."

Nor do many actually fighting the war take seriously the quasi-religious impulse to "fight the Communists." Rather, their gut realization that something is wrong with this war is expressed in combat briefings (often by lieutenants or captains) as described to me by a number of former GI's: "I don't know why I'm here. You don't know why you're here. But since we're *both* here, we might as well try to do a good job and do our best to stay alive."

This is the very opposite of calling forth a heroic ideal or an immortalizing purpose. And while it is true that survival is the preoccupation of men in any war, this kind of briefing is not only a total disclaimer of any purpose beyond survival but a direct transmission of the absurdity and antimeaning pervading the Vietnam War. That transmission has a distinct psychological function. It inserts a modicum of outfront honesty into the situation's basic absurdity, so that the absurdity itself can become shared. And the way is paved for the intense cooperation, brotherhood, and mutual love characteristic of and necessary to military combat. In the end, however, everybody feels the absence of larger purpose. Hence the deadpan professional observation by a Veterans Administration psychiatrist, in response to a query from his chief medical director concerning the special characteristics and problems of the "Vietnam era veteran": "Vietnam combat veterans tend to see their experience as an exercise in survival rather than a defense of national values."

The distinction is important. Johan Huizinga, in discussing the connection between play and war, speaks of the concept of the "ordeal," its relationship to "the idea of glory" and ultimately to the warrior's quest for "a decision of holy validity." This theological vocabulary conveys well the immortalizing appeal battle holds for the warrior. But in Vietnam one has undergone the "ordeal" or test without the possibility of that "idea of glory" or "decision of holy validity." There is all of the pain but none of the glory. What we find instead is best understood as an atrocity-producing situation.

THE BODY COUNT

Many forms of desensitization and rage contributed to My Lai, some of them having to do with specifically American aberrations concerning race, class, and masculinity. But my assumption in speaking of an atrocity-producing situation is that, given the prevailing

external conditions, men of very divergent backgrounds-indeed just about anyone-can enter into the "psychology of slaughter." This assumption is borne out by an examination of the step-by-step sequence by which the American men who actually went to My Lai came to internalize and then act upon an irresistible image of slaughter.

During Basic Training, the men encountered (as did most recruits) drill sergeants and other noncommissioned officers who were veterans of Vietnam and as such had a special aura of authority and demonic mystery. From these noncoms the recruit heard stories of Vietnam, of how tough and "dirty, rotten, and miserable" (as one remembered being told) it was there. He also heard descriptions of strange incidents in which it became clear that Vietnamese civilians were being indiscriminately killed-tales of Americans creeping up to village areas and tossing grenades into "hootches," of artillery strikes on inhabited areas, and of brutal treatment of Vietnamese picked up during patrols or combat sweeps. Sometimes pictures of badly mutilated Vietnamese corpses were shown to him to illustrate the tales.

Here and later on there is a striking contrast between the formal instruction (given by rote if at all) to kill only military adversaries, and the informal message (loud and clear) to kill just about everyone. That message, as the My Lai survivor put it, is that "it's OK to kill them," and in fact "that's what you're supposed to do"-or as a former marine received it: "You've gotta go to Vietnam, you've gotta kill the gooks." Similarly, American leaders have found it politically inexpedient and morally unacceptable (to themselves as well as to others) to state outright that all Vietnamese (or "gooks") are fair game; instead they have turned the other cheek and undergone their own psychic numbing, while permitting-indeed making inevitable-the message of slaughter. Sometimes the informal message of slaughter was conveyed by such crude symbolism as what the marines came to call the "rabbit lesson." On the last day before leaving for Vietnam, the staff NCO holds a rabbit as he lectures on escape, evasion, and survival in the jungle. The men become intrigued by the rabbit, fond of it, and then the NCO "cracks it in the neck, skins it, disembowels it ... and then they throw the guts out into the audience." As one marine explained: "You can get anything out of that you want, but that's your last lesson you catch in the United States before you leave for Vietnam." The message reflected profound moral contradictions-something close to a counterfeit universe.

After the War: The Emergence of Nihilism *W.* *Richard Comstock*

Through the Vietnam experience, we have witnessed and, indeed, have participated in a dissolution of the synthesis of religious and political values that has characterized America. All great civilizations have such a synthesis, whereby that which is religious, or transcendent, is combined with, gives force to, transforms, and lends moral direction to the political order. The Vietnam War did not cause the dissolution of this synthesis, but it did bring it to the surface.

I view this dissolution with sadness. On the one hand, the American ideology supported a humanistic individualism. The self-sufficient individual is a heritage of the Enlightenment, but it is practically an axiom, an *a priori* assumption of every American.

On the other hand, what is intriguing is that this individualistic value system was connected to a political commonwealth. We were not only individuals, we were also citizens. In religious terms, we sought private salvation and also the Kingdom of God on earth. These were not contradictory; somehow each would reinforce the other.

Now, through the Vietnam experience, we are beginning to lack confidence in the value and integrity of the commonwealth ideal. We lack confidence in government. We know the government lied. We always felt that while there might be some duplicity in government, still on the fundamental issues we all participated in the decision-making process. Now we know we were lied to, and that is carrying over to other things. Take the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. We had been absolutely assured there was no danger. Then, when

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danger emerged, we were told we had misunderstood the authorities, that, of course, there is some danger, but that danger is part of life. If you fly in an airplane, you might crash. If you live near an atomic plant, there are risks.

But all of us now feel that some of us are being made sacrificial goats for the rest of us. That leads to a lack of confidence, a lack of faith, a lack of trust in our government. That is the disintegration of the commonwealth ideal.

Many have tried to justify the war on legal grounds, but this is irrelevant. The issue is not whether the Vietnam war was waged according to some international standard of what a just war should be. I am quite ready to entertain the hypothesis that other wars may have been more unjust and that in many ways the American military in Vietnam conformed generally to international law. That doesn't matter. What matters is the devastated land, the deaths, the repugnance for war itself. The Vietnam experience brought all that to a head. Values have a deep emotional layer. If you witness an atrocity like an ax murder you don't want someone to try to mitigate that with a detailed explanation of why it really is not as bad as it seems. You are appalled. That is what happened to many Americans because of Vietnam....

We are falling back, more and more, on the individualistic norm. That can reflect personal integrity, but perhaps more often it means a hedonistic and narcissistic repudiation of all values. We are seeing the emergence of a nihilism which is leading to the dissolution of all values. That may have been going on before Vietnam, but we still treasured the American ideal of God and country. Now that is disappearing. So we fall back on ethnic values and familial kinship systems. If those go, then, of course, we fall back on the individual himself. But who or what is the individual? A nihilistic nothing? Or a source of new values?

Consider but two of the many movies on the Vietnam experience: *Who Will Stop the Rain?* and *The Deer Hunter*. *Who Will Stop the Rain?* used the metaphor of heroin. The hero, a Vietnam soldier about to return to the States, becomes obsessed with a sense of nihilism. He had heard that the government had ordered the soldiers to strafe elephants because of their transportation value. It suddenly came to him that a world in which one must strafe elephants is a world without meaning. He then decides to become a heroin carrier, a symbol of the loss and dissolution of values.

The Deer Hunter has an even more powerful metaphor-Russian roulette. Life is reduced to that level, and there seems to be no way out. It is significant that in the first hour of *The Deer Hunter*, the stress

is on an ethnic community. That is to say if there is any value left, it is in ethnic values. But what you do not see in the film is anything of the political order, the American values that transcend the ethnic or melting-pot idea. You are reduced to either ethnic values or the nihilism of Russian roulette.

Vietnam has caused us to lose confidence in the integrity of our way of life. It is hard to predict the future. We may proceed further into nihilism. We do see many evidences of the growth of individualistic religion, religion that no longer connects with the political order, but simply seeks to give the individual private salvation. For many this has become a source of meaning.

On the other hand, there could be a renaissance of the commonwealth or kingdom ideal. One of the things I have lost in recent years is my belief in irresistible trends. I no longer believe that we are necessarily moving toward either utopia or the final holocaust. Things can be reversed. The people in the Renaissance complained of nihilism. Martin Luther could not imagine the world becoming more corrupt than it was during his day. Luther expected the end of the world in a few years. But there are always reversals, new opportunities.

Vietnam was the symptom of a crisis. In a crisis, the patient may die, but he may return to health. It is not yet clear how this crisis will end.

