

A Review of
They Marched into Sunlight

By David Maraniss

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Nauset Regional H.S.

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“Elegy”

By Bruce Weigl

From Archeology of the Circle, 1999

Into the sunlight they marched,

Into dog day, into no saints day,

And were cut down.

They marched without knowing

How the air would be sucked from their lungs,

How their lungs would collapse,

How the world would twist itself, would

Bend into the cruel angles.

Into the black understanding they marched

Until the angles came

Calling their names,

Until they rose, one by one from the blood.

The light blasted down on them.

The bullets sliced through the razor grass

So there was not even time to speak.

The words would not let themselves be spoken.

Some of them died.

Some of them were not allowed to.

So many books have been written on the tragedy of the Vietnam War that it would seem there is little left to say. Yet, David Maraniss brings the complex issues of that war to life in his book They Marched Into Sunlight by focusing on two events in October of 1967, an ambush in Vietnam and a protest at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Here they were, side by side, on the front page of the final edition of the Milwaukee Journal that afternoon (October 18), both above the fold, early reports from the battlefields of war and peace. First on the upper left, an understated dispatch from Madison: "Club swinging policemen and hundreds of angry, yelling University of Wisconsin students clashed Wednesday afternoon in a battle that left at least 12 students injured. At least one ambulance was called. The policemen waded into the Commerce building where about 150 demonstrators were protesting job recruiting by Dow Chemical Co., makers of napalm for Vietnam."

Then, tucked beside it, with a Saigon dateline: "A veteran Communist regiment ambushed two companies of the United States 1st infantry division in canopied jungles 41 miles north of Saigon Tuesday. After a day of fierce fighting, 58 Americans and at least 103 Communists had been killed."(Maraniss, 395)

Maraniss juxtaposes the stories behind these events to give the reader two snapshots of the Vietnam War, one from the battlefield and one from the home front. Maraniss' thesis is that the participants in both were victims of an unjust and ineptly-run war.

In Vietnam, we see the war mainly through the eyes of Delta Company. We read their words and are introduced to their lives and the cost of Vietnam to those lives. We meet Terry Allen Jr. whose wife turns against Vietnam and is unfaithful to him. We learn that, partly through poor direction up the chain of command, Commander Allen (Black Lions battalion commander) will die in the October 17th ambush. We meet Delta Company Commander Clark Welch who, upon realizing his team had killed a female V.C., says the sight "stayed with him for the rest of his life."(150) Welch will go back to Vietnam many years later to revisit the site of the battle and will meet Vo Minh Triet, who engineered the ambush. Welch says, "We together grieve for the terrible losses." (photo 47 caption) We meet Donald Hollender, a football hero, who attempts to retrieve the dead & wounded, and ends up losing his own life. There are so many individuals and stories that Maraniss includes a cast of characters in the front of the book.

At the University of Wisconsin in Madison, a new chancellor, William Sewell, is hoping for a relatively uneventful first year as he adjusts to his new position. Unfortunately, the decision to allow a recruiter for Dow Chemical to recruit on campus, leads to violence. Dow Chemical was the maker of napalm, a major American chemical weapon used in Vietnam.

Napalm was cheap and easy to make. The latest variation of the hellish concoction, known as napalm B, was 25 percent gasoline, 25 percent benzene, and 50 percent polystyrene

mixed together...Dow began producing napalm B ...in the summer of 1965...(and) it stood alone as the military's sole supplier. The weapon and the chemical company thus became inextricably linked in the public mind just as napalm was emerging as the most provocative symbol of modern warfare, with press reports and photographs chronicling its horrible effects on civilians in Vietnam... (70)

In 1894, the Wisconsin Board of Regents stated "we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found." (67) Thus, UW Madison evolved into a liberal university admitting students from many areas of the country who brought with them many different viewpoints. There was an active SDS on campus and a vocal anti-war movement. There was also some "town/gown" controversy as some townspeople of lower economic status looked on the students as spoiled and ill-mannered. This viewpoint was, in fact, held by certain members of the Madison police force. Add to this mix the San Francisco Mime Troupe, interested in provoking "street theater", and the Dow recruiter and you have the recipe for the violent confrontation that left at least 12 students injured. Leaders of the sit-in at the building where Dow was recruiting included Evan Stark and Robert Cohen, who both ended up leaving UW because of the incident. Junior Jonathan Stielstra, who cut down the American flag atop Bascom Hall, "spent twenty-three days in the Dane County jail..." (510) Graduate student Vicki Gabriner, who ironically titled herself Miss Sifting and Winnowing, was arrested but eventually released. Also at UW but not participating were Dick Cheney and Susan McGovern (George's daughter). And, finally, Paul Soglin, as one of the injured protestors, will make future protests through conventional channels, ultimately becoming mayor of Madison and, later, teaching public policy at UW. "His classroom was in the old Commerce Building...around the corner from where his back and legs had been bashed by billy clubs that long-ago October day. The same building also now housed the offices of Wisconsin's center for Southeast Asian studies." (511)

In addition to the stories of the soldiers and protestors, Maraniss gives us the Washington Story. It is here, as much as through the words and actions of the soldiers and protestors, that he lays out the complexities and egregious mistakes of Vietnam policy.

One mistake was the decision to court public opinion by playing with numbers. The Johnson Administration and the Pentagon were looking for "an easy formula that could provide the answer" as to whether they were winning the war, a "military equivalent of the Dow Jones average." (185) In the end, American casualties were minimized and enemy casualties exaggerated, an effort that fooled few reporters on the front and an increasingly smaller number at home. By October of 1967, "only 44 percent of those polled thought American involvement in Vietnam was not a mistake." (187)

Another mistake was the continual bombing of Vietnam carried out by the Johnson Administration. Even Johnson's Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara "had asserted that no amount of bombing could stop the enemy "short, that is, of the virtual annihilation of North Vietnam and its people"." Nevertheless, the U.S. will end up dropping more bombs on Vietnam than it did on Europe in World War II. Eventually, Robert McNamara will quietly resign and later write a book called In Retrospect, deploring government policy (some of which he made). Subsequent bombing under the Nixon Administration will lead to the killing of four college students at Kent State and the destabilization of Cambodia.

Yet another mistake of the Vietnam War involved the recruitment of soldiers. The concept of a rich man's war, poor man's fight was never truer. The economically privileged, like many college students, received deferments. Chancellor Sewell noted that in a state like Wisconsin, for example, there was a person-to-cow ratio. "Let's say you were up for the draft and your father had a herd of a hundred cows; he could get two sons deferred on that basis...In the South it was bales of cotton, the same way." (123) If you did get sent to Vietnam, more effort was spent on making the GI's feel at home, than in proper training. "The military built more than forty ice cream plants in Vietnam." (212) In contrast to this, the enemy soldier did not have ice cream plants but bought(or confiscated) food from farmers and imported food from outside the region. At times, there was little food and the soldiers of the First Regiment (responsible for the ambush on Alpha & Delta Companies) "avoided starvation by eating baby bamboo shoots and boiling a plant known as stink grass, a distasteful weed that in the north was used as fertilizer." (247)

A further problem was tactics. We were the superpower but the NVA & VC were on home turf, had a cause and were overseen by General Giap, who was responsible for defeating the French at Dien Bien Phu. Vo Minh Triet orchestrated his successful ambush against the Americans by following the combat manuals of the People's Army of Vietnam.

Plan the operation in detail. Conduct reconnaissance. Rehearse in detail. Use the three-pronged attack. Maintain complete security during movement. Conduct a sudden assault with maximum firepower. Retain a reserve element. When the enemy believes you are attacking from the west, attack from the east. When he believes you have stopped, attack again. Where he believes you are advancing, stop. Plug the ears and blind the eyes of the enemy, the generals in Hanoi would say. Create surprises. Walking in the middle of the night, a man is deadly frightened if he is struck from behind. It is the same in the military field. (295)

The result was that 58 Americans lost their lives and many more were wounded. The 103 casualties listed for the enemy were never substantiated.

The feeling that we were in a tragedy was expressed by General Gavin, by Senator Fullbright, by some of the soldiers in the field and by the anti-war protestors. Madison High School senior Jonathan Lipp was a demonstrator at the October 1967 March on the Pentagon. He said he had started out the day thinking of soldiers as “monsters and baby killers”, “but as he looked into their eyes, he realized that they were his peers, only a years or two older... He had never thought of soldiers as people before, but it all changed in that moment. They were victims too, he suddenly realized. They were all victims.” (465)

David Maraniss would certainly say “Amen” to that. *****

Teaching They Marched into Sunlight

I already have included a lot in my teaching unit on Vietnam. I was lucky enough to travel to Vietnam with the East-West Center’s Asia-Pacific Program during the summer of 2005. We visited Hanoi, Danang and Hoi An, Can Tho, Tay Ninh and Ho Chi Minh City. I brought back items to show the class, including sandals made from American tires and inner tubes. I tell them about the incredible heat and humidity and the tunnels of Cu Chi, about the beauty of the country and about the fact that the Vietnamese seem to have gotten over the war much better than we have. I tell them about visiting Ho Chi Minh’s coffin and about a nightclub in Saigon (HCMC) called Apocalypse Now. I talk about visiting the American War Museum in HCMC and seeing large scale pictures taken by war photographers who lost their lives in Vietnam. And I tell them about seeing deformed fetuses preserved in jars, victims of Agent Orange. I’ve also seen propaganda in Hanoi about how “well” POW’s were treated. And I tell them that American money is still more than welcome there.

We also have the daughter of a POW at Nauset who gives a talk about her father’s experiences and about how her family coped with first the MIA, then the POW experience. She gives this talk every year.

I also set up a party where students assume various roles taken from the book Patriots by Christian G. Appy.

I also use footage from “Chronicle of a War”.

What I’d like to add from They Marched into Sunlight is three chapters. 1/3 of the class will read Ambush, 1/3 will read Johnson’s Dilemma and 1/3 will read Moments of Decision. Instead of providing them with questions, I’ll ask them to take notes of the most important points and then come to class and brainstorm within their groups about the events and POV in their chapter. They will then present their findings to the rest of the class and come to an overall conclusion about what Sunlight had to teach us about Vietnam.

Works Cited and Consulted

Maraniss, David. *They Marched into Sunlight War and Peace Vietnam and America October 1967*. First Edition. 1 in number line ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003. Print.

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