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***They Marched Into Sunlight:
A Powerful Retelling of War and Peace in the Vietnam Era***

“How are we ever going to win?”
-Lyndon B. Johnson¹

Until recently, I believed that no other author could achieve what Tim O’Brien had done in bringing the realities of the Vietnam War to life with *The Things They Carried*. To me *The Things They Carried* was the quintessential Vietnam story, even with such worthy rivals as memoirs like *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*. Then I found David Maraniss’ *They Marched into Sunlight*, which is in some ways very different from the other notable narratives of this war. I can never know what it was like to be in combat in Vietnam, just as I cannot ever truly know what the late 1960s college scene or the anti-war movement were like, but this book brings the modern reader as close as one can probably get to understanding these things. *They Marched Into Sunlight* isn’t just a history of the war; it also encompasses the other side of the story, that of the anti-war movement. Radical students and ordinary Americans, wrestle with the traumatic events of the Vietnam War, both “over there” and on the home front.

Dramatis Personae

While the war in Vietnam serves as the focal point of the story, Maraniss follows a “cast of characters” including soldiers, students, professors, politicians, guerilla theatre mimes, and anti-draft and anti-war leaders on their respective journeys through hellish combat, dangerous anti-war demonstrations, and countless hours of domestic and foreign policy deliberations. The warriors and peace makers, the president, and anti-war protestors, student radicals, police officers, UW teaching assistants, university leaders, and hippies grace the stage, playing out their respective roles as that autumn of 1967 unfolds.

The principal actors in the Vietnam story are the men of the 2/28 Black Lions, the infantry battalion that marches into a fatal ambush on October 17. We first meet several of these men, as they sail to the white sandy beach of Vung Tau on the USNS *General John Pope*, most of them are raw recruits and draftees. Others are career soldiers such as Captain Jim George; all are members of a temporary unit called C Packet. Arriving on the beach, George and the others will be assigned to new units within the renowned First Division (the “Big Red One”) most will join a

¹ Lyndon B. Johnson to advisors, October 17, 1967 as quoted in David Maraniss, *They Marched into Sunlight*. (New York, 2004), pg. 204.

newly raised rifle company, commanded by Clark Welch, the only junior officer in the entire First Division under the rank of Captain with his own Rifle Company. The men in this story have diverse backgrounds, yet all will experience the chaos of battle in an ambush near a place called Ong Thanh. *Some of them died. Some of them were not allowed to.*² Perhaps the most well-known casualty that day was Lt. Col. Terry Allen, son and namesake of the famous Timber-wolf general who commanded the First Infantry Division during World War II, “Terrible” Terry Allen, Sr.

There are literally hundreds of minor actors in this story too. “Curly” Hendershot, a Dow Chemical Company College recruiter (who always keeps a ham sandwich in his briefcase for emergency situations) and other Dow Corporation executives make their appearance in the story. Miss South Carolina 1967 visits the men of the 2/28 Black Lions’ Delta Company in Lai Khe. Red Blaik the West Point football coach reminisces about a young Army football star Don Holleder, the First Brigade operations officer (who would eventually be cut down in the ambush at Ong Thanh). Maraniss gives biographical sketches, however brief they may be of nearly every individual he describes in this book, which is in itself a feat.

The occasional cameo is not unknown in the story by notables such as Abbie Hoffman, leading his flower brigade in an effort to ring the Pentagon; a young A-4 Skyhawk pilot named John McCain is shot down over White Bamboo Lake in Vietnam; and Dick and Lynn Cheney – the future vice-president and his wife- as graduate and doctoral students at UW steer clear of the disruptive anti-Dow protests on campus.

In the midst of the Wisconsin story’s action emerge yet unknown figures like Paul Soglin, who would later go on to become a city councilor and then mayor of Madison, and a transfer student named Jonathan Stielstra, who angered by the violent police crackdown of the Dow demonstration impulsively cut down the national and state flags flying above Bascom Hall, only to find himself the center of a manhunt conducted by James Boll the Dane County DA and Jack Leslie, the Dane County deputy sheriff. The men and women of the diverse *dramatis personae* moved through the course of the story in their own way, each carrying a unique perspective of a truly complex story. In a fluid and fluent narrative that many critics have noted “reads like a novel,” Maraniss provides a detailed and riveting snapshot of this critical moment in time in America and Vietnam during the autumn of 1967.

Maraniss’ Thesis

The author masterfully interwove what appeared to be three very disparate stories and juxtaposed them in a manner that allowed them to eventually converge –powerfully and

² Bruce Weigl “Elegy” as quoted in Maraniss, pg. 139.

dramatically. Sometimes intersecting for a brief page or so, the three story arcs *do* revolve around one central theme: the war in Vietnam. The thesis of this book can be summarized in the authors own words: the people in these stories “lived in markedly different worlds that were nonetheless dominated by the same overriding issue,” the Vietnam War.³

The poem “Elegy” by Bruce Weigl inspired Maraniss, who read it time and again as he wrote this book. The opening line of Weigl’s poem provided Maraniss with the title of the book itself (which he simply inverted): “Into sunlight they marched.”⁴ Elegy is a poem about U.S. infantrymen in Vietnam marching into a lethal ambush. Maraniss states in what could be taken as a second thesis statement that in their own ways, all the people involved in this story “seemed to be marching towards ambushes in those bright autumn days of 1967.”⁵ The soldiers of the 2/28 Black Lions infantry battalion walk into a lethal ambush. Johnson and his advisors figuratively walk into an ambush of a political nature, and the student demonstrators and bystanders find themselves involved in what degenerates into an ambush involving nightstick wielding policemen and teargas.

Synopsis

The first tier of this overlapping three-part story follows a battalion of combat soldiers and support staff serving in Vietnam; the second tells the story of the younger generation of the college-going crowd challenging the older “establishment” generation in an ideological clash over what they believe to be an unjust war with an unjust draft and the “military industrial complex” which threatens the very meaning of freedom; and the third part of the story depicts President Johnson and his advisors “stumbling through the fog of war and peace,” as they debate the war’s strategy and policy, the future of the administration’s direction, and dealing with protestors who plan on converging on Washington.⁶

This book starts as a war story set in Vietnam, then shifts to become a story about challenges made against the UW campus’ policy of allowing the Dow Chemical Company, makers of Napalm B to conduct recruiting interviews. To radical students Dow is the embodiment of the very type of establishment that fuels the war; they conduct a peaceful and otherwise uneventful sit in. At the start of the next semester, Dow is invited back and the radical student groups have plenty of time to organize; likewise, the authorities at UW anticipate some kind of

³ Maraniss, pg. *xxvii*.

⁴ Maraniss, pg. 139. One other line from the poem appears as the title of the final chapter: “Until the angels came.”

⁵ Maraniss, pg. *xxvii*.

⁶ Maraniss, pg. 407.

light resistance from the more radical elements of the student body and develop a plan to deal with possible minor disruptions. Student organizations call for a more disruptive resistance to this second round of interviews planned for October 18, 1967. Things fall apart: what began initially a human barricade in the Commerce building eventually escalates into an angry protest against authority itself. With all order having been lost, Ralph Hanson, UW's chief of protection and security, orders the students to leave. They don't. Madison's chief of police William Emory calls in all available officers. A police cordon is created around commerce. Tear gas is used. Several students, initially trying to attend classes inside Commerce are trapped, bystanders in the immediate vicinity become caught up in action of "the spectacle" and many are beaten or gassed. Subsequently, several student bystanders and participants become radicalized in the wake of the violent upheaval that ensued on the University of Madison, Wisconsin campus on October 18, 1967.

In the Washington story President Johnson and advisors deliberate on the course of US foreign policy in Vietnam and the overarching military strategy there. Through intermediaries such as Dr. Henry Kissinger and his French counterparts in Vietnam there had been limited communication between Johnson and the political leadership in Hanoi about the possibility of a bombing pause and even peace talks. In subsequent exchanges during later meetings, Johnson and his men voice their concerns that the war is eclipsing their domestic agenda. They receive intelligence briefs that a sizeable anti-war, anti-draft demonstration will be marshalling in various states, converging on the National Mall. Johnson later receives word of the terrible ambush at Ong Thanh, though the report describes a meeting engagement rather than an ambush, and a decisive US victory rather than a bloodbath. The Washington story concludes with the march in Washington and the Johnson administration's rather subdued reaction to it.

The common thread found in all three stories is Vietnam, which is more than just the physical setting of one of these stories; it looms there like a Damocles sword over Johnson's head, it creates the environment of disaffection and rebellion at the University, and provides a temporary focus for disparate groups to work together in challenging the established order, the government they blame for bringing about this war.

Use of Evidence

In composing this book David Maraniss used his renowned skills that made him an associate editor at the *Washington Post* and won him the Pulitzer Prize for journalism. During several months Maraniss was hard at work around the country tracking down documents -using a

small squad of researchers- in several military and library archives.⁷ Besides the use of records, he conducted interviews with one hundred eighty people involved in this story. He divided this undertaking into two distinct phases: one for the states side (the Wisconsin and Washington) of the stories and the other for Vietnam.

To research the Vietnam story, he delved into documents that were relevant to the ambush: after action reports, service records of deceased and surviving participants, and Captain Cash's report. Within two days of the fight Captain John A. Cash (working for the Office of the Chief of Military History) methodically pieced together the narrative of the battle by interviewing and re-interviewing thirty of the survivors; he then built his own timeline of events, used official logs of radio communications and drafted his report based on all three.⁸

Beyond the official history of the battle, Maraniss also relied on testimony; he connected with several survivors of the Ong Thanh battle by networking through a cadre of "old soldiers," surviving members from the 2/28 Black Lions like Tom Hinger, Fred Kirkpatrick, and "Big" Jim Shelton, who "took him in" during their annual gathering and observance of Ong Thanh.⁹ From there he was able to meet and speak extensively with former Delta Company commander, Clark Welch, with whom he eventually travelled to the battlefield of Ong Thanh. On this odyssey through Vietnam he and the "Vietnam Seven" (his travelling companions) were able to meet and interview two of the men who attacked the Black Lions in the ambush at Ong Thanan: Vo Minh Triet, the VC First Regiment's deputy commander and Nguyen Van Lam, commander of C-1 Company of the Eighty-third Rear Services Group.¹⁰ Maraniss had at his disposal the expert testimony of reliable eyewitnesses from both sides of the battlefield.

The author could not interview every participant from the day of the Dow riot, but he provided what I believe to be the most fair and balanced representation of the participants, their attitudes, and their actions. David Maraniss had some personal involvement in the Madison story, though he doesn't reveal this to the reader until the book's epilogue. He was *of* Madison: he grew up in Madison and was a student at UW Madison, when *Dow II* (as the second anti-Dow Chemical Company demonstration came to be called) went down. In one sense *They Marched Into Sunlight* is contemporary history: the author observed the Dow demonstration "from the edge of the crowd and felt the sting of tear gas."¹¹ Maraniss was able to witness the long-term effects

⁷ Maraniss, pp. 558-559.

⁸ Maraniss, pp. 412- 415.

⁹ Maraniss, pg. 516-520.

¹⁰ Maraniss pp. 505-507, pp. 522-528.

¹¹ Maraniss, pp. 505-506.

of *Dow II* in the years to come, covering further campus demonstrations in his radio and newspaper reports and the conservative backlash they seemed to create.

He corroborates all of his evidence; oral histories from participants caught in the maelstrom of the Dow demonstration mingle with Marshall Shapiro's WKOW radio news coverage of the event. Rival newspapers such as the liberal *Connections* and the conservative *Capital Times* in Wisconsin serve as useful "first drafts of history" in recording Dow II. Even North Vietnamese newspapers, the propaganda organs of the war effort provided coverage of the UW riot, however distorted the reporting by communist editors. Maraniss not only succeeds in proving his thesis, but additionally gives the reader that rare insight into the contemporary mindsets of the soldier, the student radical, the politician; perspectives that promulgated across the populace.

Lessons from *They Marched Into Sunlight*

If the anti-war sentiments of the liberal professors and students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison are exemplary of the time period, then the anti-war movement was far more factionalized and splintered than I had previously believed. Madison is a mirror to the nation's views on Vietnam. I would use the faculty, student, residents' and politicians' views as described by Maraniss to show just how polarized these anti-war sentiments were even in the sphere of liberal academia at what was regarded as a liberal institution. Chancellor Sewall and others clearly opposed the war. Sewall and many of his colleagues questioned the wisdom of inviting Dow and other corporations associated with military production to hold interviews on campus. Yet these authority figures and professors were regarded as opponents by radical student leaders like graduate students Evan Stark and Robert Cohen; even though they were philosophically in agreement over the big issues, these men were still authority figures and thus the enemy.

My knowledge of the US military structure in Vietnam has been enhanced by the author's description, which was straightforward. This is worth explaining to students; on the next occasion that I teach the Vietnam War, I plan on explaining the entire US chain of command ranging from General Westmoreland and MACV to the structure of an infantry division like the Big Red One or a battalion like the 2/28 Black Lions, down to the company and platoon levels, ending with the individual soldier at the squad level. Maraniss serves the reader well by explaining slang and military jargon when it appears. Before reading this I couldn't exactly tell you what an S-4 was or did (battalion operations officer), or what a command and control helicopter looked like (it's has a bubble shaped cock-pit) or what "clover leafing" was (a dispersed patrol formation used by reconnaissance squads when moving through a forward position). I learned what the acronym DEROS meant (Date Eligible for Return from Over Seas), and this would be important to

remember as “every soldier knew what his DEROS was,” and “when he left” Vietnam he was “*derossed*.”¹² Maraniss adds one more layer from which the reader may develop their understanding of the Vietnam War.

Another thing I had learned from Maraniss’ writing was just how convoluted the power structure of North Vietnam was in actuality; political, military, regular, irregular -somebody was ultimately in charge of sustaining the war effort and doing the actual fighting, but sometimes it wasn’t exactly clear where that responsibility ultimately lay: COSVN, the NVA, the NLF, the Rear Services Groups, the Viet Cong, provincial committees, the Central Committee and Politburo of the Loa Dong Party (the leadership in Hanoi), the was it Ho Chi Minh himself? Maraniss gives a concise and understandable description of North Vietnam’s organizational structure.¹³ This would be worth educating our students about as well. It is not easy to illustrate the decentralized nature of the Vietnamese military and political hierarchy; Maraniss’ description would perhaps alleviate that confusion.

I plan on using some direct quotes from Lyndon Johnson’s war council wherever possible, especially those concerning the “bombing pause.” I also think LBJ’s almost obsessive concerns over anti-war protestors and their possible communist connections are worth informing students about.¹⁴

Lastly, in addition to parts of Maraniss’ book, I would like to introduce students to Bruce Weigl’s haunting and powerful poem “Elegy,” as I believe it captures the helplessness that was probably felt by the majority of soldiers in Vietnam at one time or another. After reading and rereading the poem I began to understand some the horrible sense of helplessness that some of these men must have felt, knowing that every day these soldiers did everything in their power to stay alive, to survive the tragedy of war. Knowing they could not speed up time, each man awaited his day of departure, longing to be *derossed* at last. This was the helplessness felt by the doomed soldiers of Terry Allen’s command as they march into sunlight towards an enemy, laying in wait for them to spring their deadly ambush.

¹² Maraniss, p. 39.

¹³ Maraniss, pp. 201-202.

¹⁴ See especially pp. 189-190,404 and 190-1, 314, 400 respectively.