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THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Jim Webb

Echoes of Vietnam, 50 Years Later

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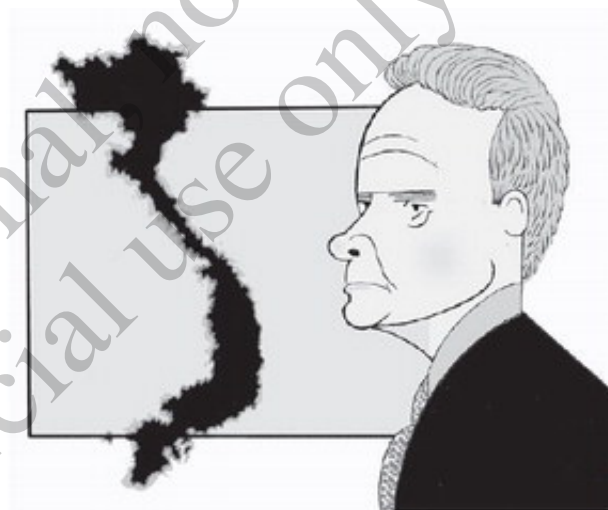
When I was a teenager in the 1980s, popular culture had basically one message on the Vietnam War: that it was conceived in American arrogance, was perpetrated by American savages, and accomplished little but psychological devastation and national disgrace.

Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now" (1979), Oliver Stone's "Platoon" (1986) and "Born on the Fourth of July" (1989), Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" (1987), Brian De Palma's "Casualties of War" (1989)—these and a thousand other productions, documentaries and articles told my generation that the war had been a gigantic fiasco that turned those who fought it into war criminals and frowning, guilt-ridden drug addicts.

The war ended officially on Jan. 27, 1973, with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. That's 50 years ago next Friday—an anniversary that will likely occasion a round of retrospective think pieces and cable-TV segments on the war's legacy. More will follow in 2025 to mark the final American pullout from Saigon in 1975.

The country has moved on since the '80s. The Vietnam War no longer elicits the sort of ostentatious regret it did a generation ago. To confine the discussion to Hollywood, "We Were Soldiers" (2002) was one of the first major films to portray the average American soldier in Vietnam as decent and valorous; more recently "The Last Full Measure" (2018), though indulging in the usual antiwar pieties, acknowledges the bravery and decency of American

From Saigon to Kabul: The ambiguous legacy of commitment and then withdrawal lives on today in American views of war.



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were from good schools, had important family connections," Mr. Webb says. "You could see it all coming apart."

Coming apart?

Mr. Webb describes a "divorce" between "upper strata" Americans and the military's base of enlistees. That divorce didn't begin with the Vietnam War, but the war accelerated and exacerbated it. "The military draws mainly from people within a certain tradition. It's a tradition of fighting for the country simply because it's their country." Mr. Webb's first novel, "Fields of Fire" (1978), is in many ways an imaginative portrayal of this fragmentation.

The book, which captures the war's brutality but carefully avoids criticism of its policy makers, follows the war experience of three American servicemen. One, a Harvard student, means to get a spot in the Marine Corps band as a horn player but

soldiers.

We've moved on in politics, too.

The great scourge of supposed American war crimes in Vietnam, John Kerry—the man who averred in 1971 that American soldiers serving in Vietnam perpetrated war crimes “in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan”—was the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee in 2004. He felt obliged to refashion himself as a war hero, and he lost.

The Vietnam War doesn’t lend itself to unambiguous interpretations in the way many wars do.

But with media-generated myths no longer dominant, and with the pain of losing 58,220 servicemen subsiding, are Americans ready to think about the whole thing anew? “Maybe,” Jim Webb answers after a thoughtful pause. Mr. Webb, 76, who served as President Reagan’s Navy secretary (1987-88) and a Democratic U.S. senator from Virginia from (2007-13), commanded a Marine rifle platoon in the Vietnam bush in 1969-70. “Maybe,” he says again, looking unconvinced.

The biggest myth, to my mind, holds that the ordinary Vietnam combat veteran was so scarred by the experience that he couldn’t get his life together back home. Think of Travis Bickle, the lonesome, deranged vet of Martin Scorsese’s 1976 film “Taxi Driver.”

Is there any truth to the stereotype? Mr. Webb recalls an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1986 claiming to find that Vietnam veterans were 86% more likely than everyone else to commit suicide. “I read it,” he recalls, “I broke down all the authors’ numbers and figured out how they came to this conclusion, and it was total bulls—.” The paper considered only men born during 1950, 1951 and 1952, and only those who died in Pennsylvania and California between 1974 and 1983. That didn’t stop the press from touting the study, “in essence claiming if you served in Vietnam, you’re probably going to kill yourself.”

In 1979 Congress hired the Harris polling firm to

winds up as a grunt. He begins his tour by viewing the whole conflict through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre (“Suffering without meaning, except in the suffering itself”) and ends, permanently maimed, shouting into a microphone at antiwar protesters back in Cambridge: “*I didn’t see any of you in Vietnam. I saw . . . truck drivers and coal miners and farmers. I didn’t see you.*”

The military’s present-day recruitment difficulties, Mr. Webb says, have a lot to do with this cultural stratification. When civilian political leaders announce they’re “going into the military to purge ‘whites with extremist views,’ do they know what they’re doing? A lot of the U.S. military comes from a certain cultural tradition, and right now a lot of parents are saying to their kids, ‘Don’t go. You want to have your whole life canceled because someone said you were at a meeting where there was a Confederate flag or whatever?’ ” Mr. Webb sought the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, although he dropped out before the end of 2015. At a CNN debate Anderson Cooper asked each of the candidates: “You’ve all made a few people upset over your political careers. Which enemy are you most proud of?” Others answered predictably: the National Rifle Association, the pharmaceutical industry, the Republicans. Mr.

Webb’s response: “I’d have to say the enemy soldier that threw the grenade that wounded me, but he’s not around right now to talk to.” The liberal commentariat disparaged him for boasting that he’d killed a man, but Donald Trump won the general election by appealing to the sort of swing voters who weren’t offended by Mr.

Webb’s remark.

Max Hastings, in “Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy” (2018), writes of the Paris Accords that the U.S.

“eventually settled on the only terms North Vietnam cared about, whereby its own troops remained in the South, while the Americans went home.” Mr. Webb, who speaks Vietnamese and has visited Vietnam many times as a civilian, agrees: “We did the same thing there as we did in Afghanistan: We cut our

survey Americans on what they thought about the war and its veterans. At the time Mr. Webb was counsel to the House Veterans Affairs Committee. “Of Vietnam veterans,” he recalls, “91% said they were glad they served in the military, and 74% said at some level they enjoyed their time in the military. And 2 out of 3 said they would do it again.”

Was the war worth fighting?

Mr. Webb thinks on balance it was. He recalls a meeting with Lee Kuan Yew, founder of modern Singapore. “I asked him a similar question,” Mr. Webb says, “and in his view, America won—only in a different way. We stopped communism, which didn’t advance in Indochina any further than it reached in 1975. We enabled other countries in the region to develop market economies and governmental systems that were basically functional and responsive to their people. That model has stayed, and I like to think it will advance, even in Vietnam.”

But clearly a lot did go wrong between 1963 and 1975. In his autobiography, “I Heard My Country Calling” (2014), Mr. Webb writes of “the arrogance and incompetence of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his much-ballyhooed bunch of civilian Whiz Kids whose data-based ‘systems analysis’ approach to fighting our wars had diminished the historic role of military leadership.” He repeats the same criticism of the war’s civilian leadership, and he insists the military tacticians in the field—American and South Vietnamese— did their jobs superbly.

Mr. Webb describes two problems the U.S. military was largely powerless to solve. First, the North Vietnamese government’s policy of sending assassination squads into the South. “Bernard Fall, a great French journalist, writes about this in ‘The Two Vietnams,’ ” a book published in 1963, Mr. Webb says. “It had been happening since at least 1958. The Vietminh started sending these squads back into the South, particularly central Vietnam. They were extremely smart and ruthless about it. These guys would go in and execute anyone with ties to any part of the South Vietnamese government—government

allies out of all the important decisions.”

“In 1972”—here he becomes animated—“ the South Vietnamese military was really starting to grow and become a lethal fighting force.” In the Easter Offensive, the North Vietnamese “ hit the South with everything they had.”

He picks up some nearby papers and reads figures: “14 divisions, 26 independent regiments and several hundred Soviet tanks hit South Vietnam. The Americans— we were nearly all gone by then. South Vietnam lost 39,000 soldiers; the communists admitted in their own records that they lost 100,000. They tried to take the South, and the South beat them.

And then, at Paris, we cut them out.”

Soon afterward, Richard Nixon resigned, Congress cut off funding, and Saigon fell.

“Then, of course,” Mr. Webb goes on, the communists “did the Stalinist thing—they put hundreds of thousands of the South Vietnamese finest into re-education camps. Two hundred forty thousand stayed there longer than four years. I have a good friend who was in a re-education camp for 13 years.”

Recalling a visit to Vietnam in 1991, Mr. Webb describes a night when hundreds of South Vietnamese Army veterans who had spent years in re-education camps gathered in a park near Saigon’s old railway station. “My Vietnamese friend told me many of these guys had been high-ranking officers. We could see some of them shooting heroin through their thighs. I thought to myself, ‘Wait a second— these were our people.’ ” Mr. Webb pauses for a moment, then recovers.

What have we learned from Vietnam? Not much, if the Afghanistan pullout is anything to go by. “The way they left was horrible, disgusting,” he says. “People said it looked like the fall of Saigon. No, it did not.”

As a military procedure, “the evacuation from Saigon was brilliant.

officials, teachers, social workers, anyone.”

Over time, these murders sapped the population’s loyalty to the government in Saigon, and there was very little the U.S. military could do about it.

The second problem was the one many readers will remember well: the radical left’s successful use of the war, with the news media’s complicity. “Take Students for Democratic Society,” Mr. Webb says. “They were founded before there *was* a Vietnam War. The Port Huron Statement of 1962” — the document that founded the SDS — “doesn’t say anything about Vietnam. The goal of these revolutionaries was to dissolve the American system, and they thought they would accomplish that through racial issues. They didn’t get any traction — until about 1965 and the Vietnam War.”

Mention of the news media raises the subject of class.

The journalists reporting on the war, interpreting events for the American public, “were articulate,

In 1975, we had refugee camps all over the place ready to take people in — Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Operation New Life in Guam.

These places were ready to go before the fall. We got 140,000 people out of there. What this administration did was a disgrace. There was no excuse for it.”

Before I leave, Mr. Webb shows me various pictures and artifacts in his office. The leg injured by that grenade still troubles him; he walks around the office with a slight but discernible limp. One black-and-white photograph he particularly wants me to see.

Taken in 1979, it shows a much younger Jim Webb with two pals from his rifle platoon. Tom Martin, who enlisted in the Marines while a student at Vanderbilt and served as a squad leader, is in a wheelchair. Mac McGarvey, Mr.

Webb’s fifth radio operator — three of the previous four were seriously wounded — has no right arm.

All three men in the photograph are smiling.

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