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The Vietnam War, Yet Another War Based on an Unquestioned & Discredited CIA "Intelligence"

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Written on Memorial Day 2016

Many of my generation who came of age in the 1960s and went to college were advantaged by student deferments, able to “dodge the draft” into military service. Three of my best friends did not go to college long enough to be deferred for long, so were drafted and after basic training, deployed to Vietnam. Thankfully Bobby survived, though I know with some trauma, the other two were tragically killed, as were 58,000 others who were killed in that war as well as four student protestors at Kent State University, and others paralyzed. Rizzo was shot by a sniper on a search and destroy mission. I never learned how Woody was killed, but as Joan Baez sang, “...it doesn’t matter anymore...” I still feel the anger I experienced at every funeral I attended at our government’s “March of Folly” --as war is characterized by historian Barbara Tuchman in her history of WWI, by that title.

Our nation marched into Vietnam with young men doing the marching into rice paddies, as the “best and the brightest”— presidential advisors, Congressmen, and Pentagon officers planned the order of battle, and commanded others to kill and/or be killed.

But let’s not forget, as in all wars, there is much profit to be made by the corporate-arms manufacturing ruling class, who eagerly engorged itself with the profits of that trillion-dollar 30-year war.

U.S. intervention and funding started in 1945, immediately after WWII, as the French, eager to regain their hundred-year-old colony of Vietnam--but it was not to be. They fought until their final ignoble defeat at the ill-executed Battle of Diem-Bien-Fu. Our nation then stupidly marched in as the captured French soldiers were marched out--defeated by their former “colonial slave labor coolies.”

It took another 30 years and 58,000 dead Americans for our Harvard, Yale and West Point educated armchair warrior leaders to finally realize it was a war we could never win because ***Vietnam was not our country to win!*** But we did win the “kill ratio” in every battle—the war planner’s formula that theorized that if we kill more of the enemy than they kill of our soldiers, then we are winning the war.

The final score: as we helicoptered off the American Embassy in Saigon in 1975, how many enemy did we kill? As Bob Dylan sang: “...you don’t count the dead, when God’s on our side.” For our final White House-CIA-Pentagon exit story line: ***Vietnamization***--a duplicitous turning over the war to the corrupt Vietnamese generals—who used the interval to amass ever-greater gold bullion and dollars for their luxury retirements.

So we draft-dodgers, draft lottery winners, and in my case—as a conscientious objector, survived that ignoble war based on lies, deception, stupidity and total misunderstanding of the cold war, containment strategy and the domino theory. We owe so much to those of our generation who suffered horrendous trauma, loss and death.

We must at least reflect on that war and its connection to the present wars, so many now that who can keep track of the morphing of the terrorists, their ever-greater brutality, and the front lines, now everywhere?

Certainly, none of us who did not go to that war, did not get burned with napalm as did as many as one million Vietnamese, and a number of our GIs caught in the fog of war, so-called "friendly fire" and "collateral damage," should reflect upon this harsh reality and **never forget our national leaders' shame of Viet-genocide; while at the same time, not blame our drafted brothers for the policies and orders they were forced to carry out.**

So, today we commemorate, fifty years later, four local women who courageously chose to stand up to war-machine to block the loading of napalm bombs, produced in Redwood City and more than 100 million tons of napalm bombs stored in Alviso, to be sent to Vietnam. The women were arrested, jailed briefly, and the jellied gasoline bombs made it across the ocean to burn our nation's "communist enemies" to what must be the most grotesque human-created hell on earth where human bodies burned at the same degree of heat as the World Trade Center towers melted into the ground in 2001, 26 years later! But the women's act of defiance against the U.S. war machine joins with every other courageous act by countless humans throughout history who say, "not in my nation, not in my name—I will not stand by, say nothing, as others are abused, tortured, or killed for profit, for hatred and always out of ignorance that we are all one human family, with the basic human needs, biology, and psychology.

What can we learn from this history of our nation, of our generation, of those we left in far-off rice paddies, and Napalmed villages?

As Harvard educated Spanish historian Carlos Santayana declared in 1905: "Those who fail to learn from their history, are doomed to repeat it." And so we are repeating our ill-fated history today on countless battlefronts, but the grotesque tragedy is that now--the whole world is a battlefront.

May 30, 2016

Hi Tom,

In response to your email about the draft, and protest at Port Chicago:

You are so right about the brutal purposeful punishment of anti-war protestor Brian Willson blocking a munitions train with “lethal weapons” for yet another two undeclared wars in Central America. Before this shameful event, I was active in the movement to stop our nation’s illegal wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Illegal, because as in Vietnam, Congress never declared these wars, and as our Constitution is written, only Congress can declare any war, upon petition from the president, with good cause and debate, and it is best if the citizens are in some degree of agreement, as after Pearl Harbor, and WWII.

But our never-declared wars against the people of these two tiny countries no bigger than most of our smallest states, Congress refused to even debate in open session, the ethics and efficacy of invading, as former CIA Director and later Secretary of Defense Robert Gates advocated that we invade Nicaragua, as we did at Normandy in 1944 (a two-day drive from Laredo, TX, through Mexico, supposedly a sovereign nation). The Senator Boland Amendment, passed by Congress, made it illegal to send “lethal aid” to Nicaragua’s Contras, Reagan’s so-called “Freedom Fighters” –who were in fact dictator Somoza’s former Death Squad members, who were his secret police and army torturers, defeated by the Sandinista people’s revolutionaries who fought on and off against Somoza’s father since the 1930s when the U.S. Marines installed Anastasio Somoza, the “butcher of Nicaragua” even after his army, death squads and secret police were defeated by the common people led by Augusto Sandino, who unlike George Washington, was assassinated after leaving peace negotiations, (alleged supported if not conducted by our Marines).

So the Boland Amendment prevented the export of lethal aid to the Contras, but all other war material (boots, uniforms, weapons without bullets (sic), vehicles, etc. were being shipped from Port Chicago (site of the infamous 1944 WWII munitions explosion, where 200+ all Negro sailors were killed, after reporting dangerous conditions on the loading dock. See SJ Mercury News article of Sunday, May 29, memorial dedicated in 1994, fifty years after the surviving Negro sailors who refused to return to those docks were court martialed for cowardness, treason, and dereliction of duty—the sentence to execution, but reduced to hard labor imprisonment.

When we learned that lethal weapons were being shipped out, the Labor Committee Against War in El Salvador (and Nicaragua—which had already won their

revolution) planned to blockade the train delivering war material from the Concord Naval Weapons Storage to Port Chicago. Willson, a Vietnam War vet, and dozens of others, including women and teens vowed to lay their bodies on the tracks just outside the Navy base on public land between it and the Navy land of the port. All protestors expected to make their peaceful statement by being arrested and prosecuted for trespassing.

The railroad workers, conductors, asked navy officers what to do about those on the tracks. Navy officers said, "Keep going, they'll move!" Tragically, realizing the train was not slowing down to stop, but actually speeded up, in disbelief, protestors scrambled to get off the tracks; all did except Willson, older than most others, and the train severed both his legs, thigh level. He survived by quick action by his fellow protestors, but remains a paraplegic. He was arrested never the less, and later sued by the train operators for emotional distressed, who won a judgment against him.

I did not attend the protest that day, as I recall it was a Saturday, and during that time, I taught a Saturday morning class for working students. After the horrible incident reported with video on the TV news, there was a call for a massive protest the next day. Early Sunday morning, I drove to the site. The protest was massive and peaceful with veterans from many past and present wars, the peace movement, the psychedelic SF Flower movement, labor groups from the 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s. Joan Baez, on a flatbed truck sang, a cappella, her songs as well as Dylan's—it was Woodstock Nation joining with Berkeley Free Speech, Vietnam peace movement, and anti-Reagan movement. So all day, we had eloquent speeches, sharing of food and joints, beautiful music about peace and harmony, with families, children, face-painting, flowers passed out.

By late afternoon, people were leaving for the long drive and Sunday traffic back to the bay area cities. As many left, I noticed gradually more younger women and men, many dressed in black, with early version of punk rock appearance with face piercing, tattoos, some with black flags, etc. But there were still many vets of the peace movement, my age, older, younger, and families, but no more young children or babies. As the sky darkened from clouds, but not yet sunset, an incredible action took place, incredible to me: men and some women came to the protest prepared for action—to disassemble railroad track with guerrilla rail track-worker's tools (3-5 foot long wrenches made to unscrew and lift rail spikes, with cans of liquid wrench, sledge hammers with long handles, etc.).

These were people who knew how to do what they had planned to do—take apart RR track and were joined by most others, including me, even as I took photos in disbelief, and then in joy. We became a guerrilla army, self-conscripted by the joy of fighting back against the brutality of the day before.

As spikes were lifted, and the bolts holding rails together unscrewed thanks again to quarts of liquid wrench, a tool I use in my minor home and car repair tasks, as many as 100+ plus men, women and teens lifted 50-100 feet of solid steal rails up and threw it down the granite rock (some with Willson's blood, as attested by his comrade vets), embankment of the track. With each rail thrown, joyous cheers from all.

Meantime others lifted up the rr ties, heavy wooden 4-6 foot long planks upon which the rails are laid, and stacked them atop each other two-by two to form towers,

some more than 20 feet high, with abandoned protest signs put, some by me on top, the sides and everywhere of these impromptu towers, looking like oil derricks.

It seemed that we disassembled almost one city block length of track leading right up to the gate separating the weapons base from the Port Chicago public land. On the other side of the gate stood sheriff deputies, navy officers, etc. watching this all, grim faced and helpless to do anything beyond photo graphing all, with the instigators, leaders, guerrilla foremen and women, many with bandanas covering their faces like the bandits of the wild west.

It was only the just-recruited peaceniks like me who did not cover our faces, even myself who I always have a red bandana in my pocket (only to clean my glasses, laptop, wipe my nose, or clean my kids hands after playground play). I did not care if I was photographed, proud to join in the civil disobedience/destruction of government property, eager to argue moral necessity if prosecuted.

None that I know of were prosecuted, arrested, or shot as we reveled in our afternoon of joyous action, some would call it insurrection. Of course, the next day the rr track was replaced and the weapon trains roared along to deliver their lethal cargo to central American wars and other regions of our nation and 700+ bases around the world, no doubt necessary now that the world is a battlefield, much to the pleased military-industrial complex.

See the Forward pasted below to Willson's book on the incident:

Fort Chicago protest against war against Nicaragua, El Salvador

“After serving in the Vietnam War, S. Brian Willson became a radical, nonviolent peace protester and pacifist, and this memoir details the drastic governmental and social change he has spent his life fighting for. Chronicling his personal struggle with a government he believes to be unjust, Willson sheds light on the various incarnations of his protests of the U.S. government, including the refusal to pay taxes, public fasting, and, most famously, public obstruction. On September 1, 1987, Willson was run over by a U.S. government munitions train during a nonviolent blocking action in which he expected to be removed from the tracks. Providing a full look into the tragic event, Willson, who lost his legs in the incident, discusses how the subsequent publicity propelled his cause toward the national consciousness. Now, 23 years later, Willson tells his story of social injustice, nonviolent struggle, and the so-called American way of life.”