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graphics ADVANCE AUSTRALIA *πο* front cover, WEBB DOCK, FROM WILLIAMSTOWN *Rick Amor* back cover, ILLUSTRATIONS *Noel Counihan* 4, 7, 8, 9, & 35, *Gus McClaren* 48, *Lofo* 92, PHOTOGRAPH *Denise Fowler* 94

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150
autumn 1998
ISSN 0030 7416

Rowan Cahill

Vietnam Reading

In his 1995 mea culpa *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Times Books), former US Defence Secretary (1961–1968) Robert McNamara listed eleven major causes for what he termed the American "disaster in Vietnam". He explained how he and his associates in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations – "an exceptional group: young, vigorous, intelligent, well meaning, patriotic, servants of the United States . . . 'the best and the brightest', as we eventually came to be known" – came to be so tragically wrong about Vietnam.

According to McNamara, prominent amongst the mistakes he and his colleagues made were misjudgements regarding the geopolitical intentions of North Vietnam and its allies, and the dangers these posed to the US; under-estimation of the power of Vietnamese nationalism; misjudgement of the political forces within Vietnam; profound ignorance of South East Asian politics, history, and culture; and failure to recognize the limitations of modern high-tech warfare in response to "unconventional people's movements".

I reacted to McNamara's confession with elation and anger; elation because he had finally come clean, after all the Vietnam war has been called McNamara's war; anger because thirty years earlier I had been variously threatened, punched, spat on, arrested, fingerprinted, hauled through courts, incarcerated, spied on, and denounced as a traitor when, as an anti-war activist/radical student/conscientious objector, I had pointed to many of the 'misjudgements' McNamara was now being feted for admitting to. Thirty years too late I reckoned.

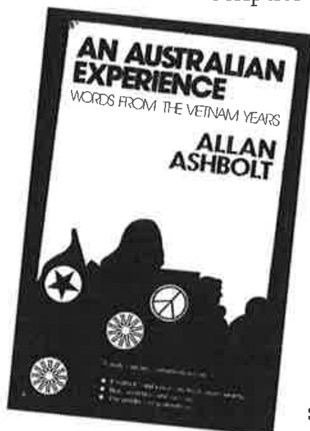
My anger increased during the media excitement that followed. Former Australian Prime Minister (1968–1971) Sir John Gorton, who had presided over crucial years of Australia's involvement in the war, went on record as saying that Australia's involvement in the war had been unjustified. Former Australian Defence Force chief (1987–1993) General Peter Gration endorsed Gorton's view. Gration went to Vietnam as a Lieutenant Colonel, 1969–1970. In his view Australia's involvement in the war was "on balance" not justified. But then one of the Australian warlords, Don Chipp (Minister for Navy 1966–1968), had broken ranks much earlier and beaten them all to it. In his 1987 memoirs *Chipp* (Methuen Haynes) he had written of "the tragedy of Vietnam" which in retrospect he believed he was wrong to have supported.

It seemed to me that McNamara had little excuse for claiming to be so spectacularly uninformed about the war; after all he had at his beck and call the awesome resources of the CIA, more spook outfits than you could poke a stick at, South East Asian experts ad nauseam in academia only too willing to enlist in the service of Uncle Sam, and tucked away the confidential *Pentagon Papers* (dramatically leaked to *The New York Times* in 1971). In Australia the contemporary information situation is best symbolized by the case of Lieutenant Colonel Warr, Commanding Officer of the Fifth Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment. When assigned to Vietnam in early 1966 Warr faced a lack of official information about the conflict he was about to enter. He was told by intelligence authorities to tell his soldiers nothing; resorting to his own devices he ended up making discreet inquiries to an ANU academic. Similarly the Australian people were no better served about the Vietnam war by either the government or the media.

Before 1964 I took little interest in the Vietnam conflict. Small wonder. Who did? I was sixteen when thirty Australian jungle combat advisers were committed to Vietnam in 1962. One of the few people who really pressed the Australian government for information about this commitment and the conflict was fiery Labor MHR Eddie Ward, whose questioning at the time appeared obtrusive, out of kilter with the

times. Vietnam was neither an issue nor a story.

My quest for understanding began soon after 10 November 1964, the date the introduction of a selective conscription scheme for twenty-year-olds, with provision for overseas service, was announced. I had a gut feeling then, which later proved correct, that I would be conscripted, and that it would all lead to Vietnam. My presentiment was perhaps due to the fact that the announcement came a few days after my nineteenth birthday. So far as I was concerned conscription did not come out of the blue; there had to be more to it. America had bombed North Vietnam for the first time; the Australian government had expressed support for America's actions; the first Australian protests against the war were taking place. It all fitted; America, Vietnam, Australia, conscription.



In a half-heard, little-understood way, I had been through some of this before. There were backyard childhood memories of my father and neighbours apprehensively discussing the possible widening of the Korean war. During November 1964 I tried to make geographic sense of the new conflict via my old school atlas; but it was an early 1950s publication, dog-eared, ink-stained, and Vietnam was still part of French Indochina.

When recalling the 1960s one needs to correctly cast the Australian atmosphere of the time, and not in terms of the carefree hedonism favoured by market forces. Other images are necessary, a point veteran broadcaster and foreign correspondent Allan Ashbolt grasped when he began his commentary on Australia's Vietnam years, *An Australian Experience* (Australasian Book Society, 1974), with an account of a 1966 anti-war meeting in a church hall on Sydney's upper North Shore, heart of Liberal territory. Addressed by legendary journalist Francis James, the meeting was violently disrupted by a coalition of right-wing forces – the Young Liberals, the DLP, Ustasha, the Defend Australia League, the Friends of Rhodesia, the Friends of Freedom, and the Nazis. That imbroglio symbolized Australia in the 1960s for Ashbolt; a society trapped in a repressive hysteria of fear and loathing.

Finding out about Vietnam from the media was not an option. Brain dead from years in support of Menzies the media basically took a passive approach to news gathering from Vietnam and accepted the government's position, which in turn reflected Cold War political assumptions and analyses.

So how did an unenfranchised student, aged nineteen and headed for conscription via the second call-up ballot, September 1965, find out about Vietnam? For me it was a complex and gradual process; people and events helped along the way, but much of it had to do with reading. And this, the time and space to read, think, and question, was a luxury virtually unique to tertiary students since they could, as I did, defer their showdown with – or submission to – the warlords until completion of the first degree (contingent upon satisfactory academic progress in the meantime).

Two libraries featured in my Vietnam education; Sydney University's Fisher Library and from 1968 onwards as I increasingly moved in leftist circles, the well-stocked Communist Party research library in the Sydney party headquarters. Both libraries had substantial holdings of current American newspapers and journals. From these I learned the Vietnam war was a major political controversy via journalism and analysis that did not accord with US government propaganda aims. I could follow the vigorous debate almost contemporaneously, a far cry from the Australian media wilderness.

Two bookshops were important. The Co-Operative Bookshop at Sydney University provided a discounted diet of Penguins. Bob Gould's joyously rebellious and encyclopedic Third World Bookshop, established in 1967 in Goulburn Street, proved a dissident's Aladdin's cave.

My Vietnam education began with an Australian edition of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament booklet *Vietnam Briefing* by John Gittings and Ajit Singh, a critique of a pro-war speech made at Oxford, June 1965, by Britain's Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart. The booklet's arguments were eye-opening, while sources referred to introduced further readings, in particular Bernard Fall, Edgar Snow, and Denis Warner. *Vietnam Briefing* owed its Australian incarnation, via Morgan Publications (Sydney, 1965), to young Oxford academic Michael Wilding who had recently taken up a lectureship at Sydney University. Stunned by the Australian lack of information and debate about Vietnam, Wilding teamed with bookseller Colonel Alex Sheppard and

Hugh Price of Sydney University Press to publish the booklet locally.

A couple of widely circulated and influential publications originating in Sydney helped fill the information void: *Vietnam and Australia* (1966) produced by the University Study Group, an academic outfit unofficially based at the University of New South Wales; and *Vietnam: Myth and Reality* (1967) written and published by Harold Levien. No newcomer to the business of comment and controversy, Levien had been founder and editor of *Voice* (1951–1956), the pioneering Sydney independent journal of current affairs.

In 1968 the Peter Wiles translation of Jean Lacouture's *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* (Allen Lane) became available, readably sorting fact from fiction and portraying key Vietnamese personalities as significant historical and political figures – a far cry from the dismissive racist treatment meted out by Australian propagandists.

As Robert McNamara eventually realized, understanding the Vietnam war demanded an understanding of the transformative powers of nationalism. The topics of nationalism and imperialism had been introduced to me as part of the school Leaving Certificate Modern History course, mainly as contributing causes of the First World War. Understanding was advanced by a Sydney University undergraduate course on nineteenth-century European nationalism. Readings went beyond the time frame and one of the texts, Hans Kohn's *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (Van Nostrand, 1965), portrayed nationalism as the determining political and cultural force in the post-1945 world. Later *The Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin, 1967) by Caribbean psychologist Frantz Fanon, who had been part of the Algerian struggle against French colonialism, explored the power, the undercurrents, the violence, the spirituality, the psyche, of nationalist struggle in Third World contexts. Nationalism had deep and subtle wellsprings. It was a force beyond high-tech bludgeoning.

If as McNamara claimed, he and his bright young things were ignorant of South East Asian histories and cultures, then how much more so babyboomers raised in the Yellow Peril humidicrib of the Menzies era? Eventually, as part of my attempt to establish status as a conscientious objector, I would try to argue in an Australian court that the militaristic role of Australia in Vietnam was to the long-term detriment of the Australian people; that I believed in living with Asia, and understanding the people, cultures, and histories of the region. This blending of nationalism and internationalism owed debts to *Living with Asia* (Lansdowne, 1965) by left Labor MHR Jim Cairns, and to New Zealand geographer Keith Buchanan (first encountered in Helen Palmer's journal *Outlook*) who wrote prolifically about Asia and the Third World, the peoples, cultures, their human environments and moral and emotional patterns. A collection of Buchanan's writings on these themes was later published as *Map of Love* (Pergamon, 1970).

To understand the Vietnam war one had also to think about America. Ultimately there was no end of scholarly and propagandist material available, no end of critiques, no end of American contributions to self analysis. For me one book had significant impact – *An American Experience* (Gollancz, 1966) by Australian journalist Allan Ashbolt, special American correspondent for the ABC from 1958 to 1961.

Written from a left perspective, *An American Experience* was a confident, lovingly crafted foray into political and cultural analysis. At home with American history and culture, Ashbolt wrote sensitively and perceptively, disappointed "at the contrast between America's original democratic aspirations and the practice of democracy in America today".

I recently returned to Ashbolt's American and Australian *Experience* volumes and found them still relevant. Together they lay claim for Ashbolt being regarded not only as the journalist and broadcaster he is usually described as, but as a significant Australian democratic radical and bearer of the flame of individual social conscience.

Community ignorance and fear of communism was orchestrated by the Menzies government during the 1950s and sixties, underpinning conscription and involvement in the Vietnam war. I was part of this mindset, coming from a politically conservative family. The

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

DRAFT ONLY.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR AND NATIONAL SERVICE

National Service Act 1951 – 1964

APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION AS A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

To The Registrar,
National Service Registration Office,

Sydney

Rowan John Cahill (full name) of 36 Waugoola Street

East Gordon (registered address) in the State / Territory of New South Wales

Student (occupation) in pursuance of Regulation 31 of the

National Service Regulations hereby apply:

* (a) to be registered as a person exempt from liability to render service under the National Service Act, on the ground that I hold a conscientious belief that does not allow me to engage in any form of military service, whether combatant or non-combatant:

* (b) to be registered as a person who is liable to be called up for service under the National Service Act, but who is not required to engage in ~~duties of a combatant~~ nature, on the ground that I hold a ~~conscientious belief~~ that does not allow me to engage in military ~~duties of a~~ combatant nature, but allows me to engage in military duties of a non-combatant nature,

and I submit the following facts in support of my application: The limited space given in which to state reasons for conscientious objection is ridiculous, as is the system by which conscientious objection is decided. However in spite of this I have tried to list briefly some of my reasons.

I am opposed to War. Wars exist because men want them to. They exist because Man in general has made no seroius attempt tp study its causes and the reasons why people are willing to kill each other. I believe that the glorification of war, the worship of things military as is apparent in Society, is obscene. I will not aid in the spread of this obscenityby lending my body, mind or soul in any way to anything military. (2) Wars exist because people are willing to fight them. Wars are based on ignorance cultivated by nationalism, patriotism; respect for, and reverance of, things military; fears and hatreds---partly conveyed from generation to generation through educational institutions, the mass medid and Governments. I will not surrender my mind to these debased forces.

I am opposed to ~~the~~ intervention ~~of part of~~ the West in Vietnam. I believe that the military intervention of America in Vietnam is uuwarranted. I will not aid any military machine which helps perpetuate this intervention or supports the imperialist policy of American capitalism be it in Asia, Africa, Latin America. (2) America's presence in Vietnam is due to that nation's policy of imperialism, one that has its roots in American history. As a socialist I am opposed to this policy and pledge solidarity with all peoples, wherever they are, who are resisting and opposing it. (3) The Vietnam war is essentially racialist in nature. I will not aid nor encourage this racialism by participating in it or aiding it in any way. (4) The action of the 'allies' in Vietnam, the decimation of the people and the land represents a crime against humanity. I will not be party to this crime. If the West once had something to offer to the Vietnamese people it no longer has.

Signature of Applicant

initial breakthrough to new understandings originated from the collection of essays *The Disintegrating Monolith* (ANU, 1965) edited by J.D.B. Miller and T.H. Rigby. For me this book destroyed the Menzies-era spectre of a threatening monolithic communism, demonstrating instead divergent, often mutually antagonistic, communisms, an understanding later enhanced by a reading of C. Wright Mills' *The Marxists* (Penguin, 1963).

Australia has a strong martial tradition, from colonial campaigns against Aborigines, involvements in the Maori Wars, the Sudan, the Boxer Rebellion, the Boer War, to nationhood during the First World War, and on through the Second World War to Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam. Colonial and Federation poets yearned for a blood sacrifice to help forge Australian nationhood; war memorials tend to be religious sites as the Calvary and Anzac sacrifices mesh.

My opposition to this martial spirit and 1960s conscription did not come pre-packaged, but developed piecemeal. Martin Boyd's anti-war novel *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962) was an early and powerful in-

fluence, read by chance simply because a friend had an association with the Boyd family and I was curious to find out about 'the Boyds'. An undergraduate American history course introduced me to Transcendentalism, the nineteenth-century New England intellectual movement that included Thoreau and Emerson. Thoreau's essay 'On The Duty Of Civil Disobedience' was a significant personal encounter. A European literature course required from me a tutorial paper on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; in the process of preparing this I discovered Tolstoy's writings on civil disobedience, especially his Christian anarchist foray *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, a much unused copy of which I found in Fisher Library. In 1966 *The Pacifist Conscience* (Penguin), edited by Peter Mayer, was released. A wide ranging collection from Lao-Tzu to Albert Camus, analyzing violence, war, and the individual conscience in relation to the State, Mayer's book accessed a moral and ethical world totally out of step with Australian Cold War conservatism.

Conscription and Vietnam did not radicalize me. I was a rebel-in-waiting. While the state school system had exposed me to teachers who made the class copy out reams of mimeographed notes in dormouse quietness disturbed only by the scratching of pens, there were others – men who had swapped uniforms and weapons for university training and teaching; young post-war idealists, some of them communists; and talented renegades passing through the system, on the way to future literary and academic successes. Tediously bored by some of my teachers, I absorbed from others a sense of education as excitement, and as a transformative personal and social process.

In Leaving Certificate English I got a solid dose of the Romantics, a glimpse of Jacobin intellectual circles of the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries, and from this an inkling that protest and rebellion were perhaps okay. A new Modern History syllabus aimed at linking the social, economic and political in the context of world history from 1750 onwards, and gave the notion of social class a run. I picked up the idea that revolution was maybe an historical necessity, and found that in spite of Empire/Commonwealth Day and 'God Save the Queen' it was hard to be in love with imperialism. One English teacher, and later psychologist, introduced me to John Anderson's 1943 essay 'The Servile State'; he helped me with its complexities, the recognition of history as struggle, the rejection of reform, and the idea of permanent protest and opposition.

Anzac and Remembrance days were major school events. However in 1960 my French teacher stood in front of our class on the eve of the Anzac Day holiday; he was one of those many older men recalled from retirement in the late 1950s to cope with teacher shortages and the babyboomers. Wearing his medals and a sprig of rosemary, with quiet anger and tears he told us fifteen-year-olds of the horrors of the Western Front, of his Somme experiences, and explained why Anzac Day should never glorify the martial spirit as it tended to in those school days.

By the time I completed my schooling I had critically questioned an army recruiter about logical inconsistencies in his spiel to an assembly of the senior school, my action earning us an afternoon's detention; and I had delivered an anti-imperialist Commonwealth Day address. I left school with real, if basic, intellectual tools and with a belief that life could be understood and that it was possible to make sense of bewildering data. I left too with the knowledge that not everything passed on as historical fact and wisdom was what it claimed to be. Itching to engage with the wider world in a critical way I tried to contribute to the satirical magazine *Oz*, the first issues of which my school-bound mates and I had excitedly purchased on railway stations in 1963 from Richard Walsh's band of attractive female distributors. But I never mastered the genre, and my juvenilia was rejected. Menzies and his warlords took care of the rest.

NOTES

1. For a report of the 1995 comments by Sir John Gorton and General Peter Gration on the Vietnam war see Cameron Stewart, 'New Wounds From An Old War', *Weekend Australian*, 22–23 April 1995, p. 22.
2. The quest for information by Lieutenant Colonel Warr is reported by Greg Lockhart, 'Into Battle. Counter Revolution', in Gregory Pemberton (ed.), *Vietnam Remembered*, Lansdowne, Sydney 1990, p. 44.
3. The dissenting life and times of Alex Sheppard MC are outlined in his obituary, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 1997.
4. A fictional memoir of the period by Michael Wilding titled 'Vietnam Protest' is in Mabel Lee & Michael Wilding (eds), *History, Literature and Society: Essays in Honour of S.N. Mukherjee*, Sydney Studies/Manohar, Leichhardt and New Delhi, 1997, pp. 227–241.
5. For an outline of my dealings with the National Service Act see Rowan Cahill, 'A Conscription Story, 1965–69', *The Hummer*, Winter 1995, pp. 17–22.