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Late Summer American Mourning



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Weeping For Too Many Unnecessary Wars

Heartbreak is unpreventable; the natural outcome of caring for people and things over which we have no control.

– David Whyte

The afternoon of August 15, my wife Lou Ann got a call from her sister that their cousin Clara Lee had died in a freak accident with her car. We had just visited Clara Lee in early July in Raleigh. Her husband Tony died two years earlier; they were both academics with

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PhDs. This July was my fourth visit with Clara Lee and it was the one in which, in retrospect, I realize I fell in love with my 76-year-old cousin-in-law. Aretha Franklin died the day after Clara Lee's death, adding a national mourning spin that seeped into our states-of-mind. Death was close. I was already feeling rather mortal due to a diagnosis for prostate cancer. I liked to joke: "None of us get out alive." It wasn't funny now. Clara Lee wasn't a celebrity, but with her energy and empathetic heart, she was one of the best of us, an authentic peace- and joy-loving spirit. Her love of life was contagious, and I had caught it just on the cusp of her death.

Lou Ann and I drove down to Raleigh on Saturday August 25. It was a moving funeral ceremony, full of loving stories and tears; Clara Lee was affectionately eulogized as an Energizer Bunny known for an openness and warmth of heart that matched the headlong way she moved. She died, no doubt, in a characteristic flurry of things to do and to be done. That night, she was to lead a meeting of the neighborhood association that had voted her its president. That morning, she was headed to baby-sit for her two wonderful granddaughters. She started her car, a heavy old Mercury SUV, and began to back out of the driveway. She forgot something and ran to get it, leaving the car in gear. The heavy car rolled downward, gaining momentum as it dropped off the driveway toward the trees that surrounded her home. Somehow, attempting to stop it, she got caught between the door and a large tree. One can only hope the massive crushing of her birdlike chest was quick enough she did not suffer; those who saw her body said there was not a mark on her and she seemed peaceful.

John McCain died August 25, the day of Clara Lee's funeral. Occupied with our personal mourning, we missed the initial McCain coverage. Lou Ann and I got the first dose of McCain funeral-drama Sunday night in a Raleigh motel, a worshipping bio complete with McCain's "last words" taped especially for the American people. This led inexorably to the highly theatrical National Funeral on the following Saturday.

The fact is I've never liked John McCain. He was always too much the National Security State's darling war-child. That would be the National Security State created in 1947 by law following the US victory in World War Two. I was born in 1947, an early pop in the baby boom and a bit of a "war child" myself. My father wasn't an admiral, but he was a very proud Navy man who had skippered a PT boat around some of the worst battles in the South Pacific. He told his kids of pulling his PT boat into the mangrove to hide from the Japanese and being very scared; he told of torpedoing Japanese fishing boats and

other small craft. The Solomon Islands and Peleliu were a long way from suburban New Jersey, where his wife and my then infant older brother held down the hearth.

My father returned, I expect, a bit “Asiatic” — maybe with a bit of what today is called Post Traumatic Stress. He relished being a returning hero. One day in Bergenfield, NJ, an older man stopped to chat while he was working on the house. The man’s son had not served in the war. “He had internal problems,” the man said. “No guts.” My father cherished that story. PTSD would not come into fashion until my war, the morally problematic Vietnam War. My father taught his sons to expect a war every 20 years and that when it happened we would go; my older brother and I were of age and we complied. After one of us made some glib remark about World War Two, he said: “You know how it ended. At the time, we didn’t.” This always resonated in my mind as a profound reality about experience and history. Of course, it holds true for the Vietnam War: None of us who went knew how it would end or what it would mean. Some of us eventually decided it meant nothing good. With some rare exceptions, from the beginning American leaders were clueless about Vietnam. It’s hard to argue that the 30-year conflict that began with Truman’s decision in 1945 to support French re-colonization was, when you honestly distilled it down, anything more than unjustified aggression against a peasant nation seeking independence. There could be no glory in the Vietnam War.

As a youth, we’re told, McCain had aspirations to writing poetry, which suggests he had a mind attuned to lofty thoughts. Always aware of his grandfather and father as Great Navy Men, destiny seems the best word to describe someone like John McCain. We’re told he was a wiseass and a dud at Annapolis, an example of youthful recalcitrance, a Freudian response to a father’s worldly power. He sealed his destiny by becoming a Navy flier. When LBJ decides to bomb inside the city limits of Hanoi, on one such mission McCain is shot out of the sky, the ejection from the plane breaking his arms; he splashes down in a lake in the center of the densely-populated city. Among other abuses he’s beaten and stabbed with a knife by citizens of Hanoi overcome with their own violent patriotism.

The national politician who was mourned under the capitol rotunda and in a National Funeral was born (or re-born) following his release from Vietnamese captivity. He was in no shape to continue as a flier in the Navy. He realized he wasn’t going to be an admiral, which would have been a trifecta in the destiny department. So militarist civilian politics became the vehicle of his destiny. In the mid-1970s, I published a satiric short story in

Penthouse magazine about an American POW who returns home to run for Congress; it seemed to me a natural plot. So it's not hard for me to imagine John McCain, an American prince with an incredible military pedigree, spending thousands of hours alone in a prison cell in Vietnam keeping his sanity by pondering his destiny and working out in his mind various scenarios his life might take. Ho Chi Minh was not the first person for whom prison provided lots of time to think; Ho even wrote poetry.

McCain tells us his suffering reached a point that he signed a confession to war crimes, a shame he said he would always live with. Such a confession naturally raises perennial arguments around torture. (McCain was publicly on the moral side of these arguments.) Is the Torturer seeking Truth or Compliance from his or her Victim? In this context, the question I have concerning McCain is this: In the greater scheme of things, how much of his torture-obtained confession to war crimes was Truth and how much of it was Compliance? Someone who knew him told CNN he felt McCain carried within him a strain of inner shame that helped moderate him as a militarist politician. Was it possible there was a voice inside him that questioned a war in which he was compelled to drop bombs on targets inside the city of Hanoi? This we'll never know. When his opponent in his first run for US senate in Arizona called him a carpet-bagger, he responded by saying the longest he'd lived anywhere in his life was in Hanoi. Born in the Canal Zone and raised a Navy brat, that was likely true.

Theatrical national events like the McCain funeral tell us a lot about the particular madness of our times. I'll never forget my dear mother in our living room in rural south Florida during the funeral parade for President John F. Kennedy. Like her husband, the handsome JFK had been a PT boat skipper. In shorts with no shirts due to the heat, the three Grant boys sat and watched the event on a little black and white TV. As the body of the murdered president passed by a reviewing stand my mother lept up in her version of attention. "Oh, mom!" I recall saying. Despite her middle son's phony worldliness, she was determined and continued to stand there absurdly in the middle of the room. I thought of that moment when I watched John McCain's funeral drama live, listening to the speakers and watching the scan-shots of Washington's political elite and the flag-draped coffin front and center. All I could think of was that the whole incredible affair, this whole indulgent exhibition of public mourning, had been choreographed, every stage-direction for the play written, by the dead man laid-out inside the spotlight coffin. It was as if the nauseating reality TV show centered in the White House was suddenly

broken into by a subversive, competing entertainment that was compelling because it was so obviously a political attack from the grave. John McCain had planned the show down to it's most telling detail, which was that Donald Trump was not invited.

One of the ironic high points for me was the aging and loathsome Henry Kissinger who had to be helped to the podium. Age had not blunted the man's intelligence or his arrogance. My wife spoke for many of us when she wondered aloud: "Why isn't he dead?" One had to give the killer of so many thousands his due: With his croaking voice, he was eloquent — that is, if you felt US Imperialism was/is one of the greatest forces working for humanity and that John McCain was one of its finest and most uncomplaining soldiers. For me, the presence of Henry Kissinger was a dramatic backspin. In this almost religious elevation of John McCain into sainthood, Kissinger represented the elephant in the room in the guise of a question: How does one deal with individual bravery, suffering and honor in an immoral war? More precisely, how does one justify a hi-tech, mechanized war that killed millions in a peasant nation that had never done anything against the United States, and in fact had fought as our ally in WWII? Why is this war not a moral shame? Or as some would say, a crime against humanity? When I periodically speak in high schools, the first and most important question I ask them to think hard about is: Can anyone in this room tell me what the Vietnamese ever did to us here in the United States of America to deserve what we did to them? The standard response is, "They were communists." "No! That evades the question. What did they do to us?"

The most obnoxious moment in the McCain funeral came from Joe Lieberman, the former Democratic senator McCain wanted to make his vice presidential running mate in 2008. Lieberman spoke of McCain's inclination to joke with him about the peccadillos of being Jewish. He told of being with McCain and pal Lindsey Graham on a junket in Jerusalem, the three of them relaxing on a veranda overlooking the Old City below. He said McCain loved to talk about all the religions and history that had played out in the streets below their veranda. He smiled as he told how McCain liked to query him whether he had made enough money now that he was no longer a senator to afford a house in Jerusalem with a veranda on which they could discuss international politics. I couldn't help it: the story triggered images of European colonialism. I half expected references to the happy wogs going about their commerce in the streets below the veranda. I'm sure Lieberman didn't mean it the way it sounded to me, someone who understands how the

Palestinian people have been given the shaft since the years synonymous with the 1947 creation of the US National Security State, which, incidentally, the State of Israel has become an adjunct of. Given the extremely volatile significance these days of Jerusalem as the US-recognized capital of a more and more expansionist Likud-Israel, I'm sorry, the image of these three US senators relaxing and chatting on a well-protected veranda overlooking so much painful and oppressive human history was especially obnoxious. The scene might have come out of the pages of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. If I wrote such a story, I'd quote Greene in an epigram and title the story, *The Odious Americans*.

When we visited Clara Lee in July, I noticed on her coffee table the book from Ken Burns' series on the Vietnam War. I said something negative about the series, which intrigued her; I think she assumed I would like it. I told her it was a fine piece of pop documentary — but that Burns had morally copped out when, in summation, he claimed the war had been tragic but rooted in good intentions. The roots of the war are so corruptly mired in ignorance, fear and arrogance that it's an immense moral evasion to say it was well-intentioned. For the Japanese, was Pearl Harbor a tragedy rooted in good intentions? This is the sort of delusional logic that allowed the war to go on for ten years after McNamara and LBJ knew it was un-winnable. The same was true in Iraq. Because we didn't know what else to do, we continued the futile mechanized killing. Shock and Awe as a tool of corrupt desperation. The metaphor that explained for me Clara Lee's death was the idea of an "Oh Shit!" moment: the instantaneous realization that one has been done in by circumstances and it's too late to do anything. There were many Oh Shit! moments in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, lots of stupid decisions and unforeseen consequences. The discovery in 2003 that the invasion had flushed out a noxious insurgency in Baghdad and the evolution of ISIS out of the McChrystal "surge" in Anbar Province; both were classic Oh Shit! moments. In this case, the response to the first Oh shit! moment led to the second and much worse Oh shit! moment. This is the root of the Veterans For Peace mantra that wars are easy to start and difficult or impossible to stop. So try not to start them.

If you look around the globe — or make a scan of the Monday September 3 NY Times — you'll see how the US National Security State is faring in the world. One, US ally Saudi Arabia is being forced to admit "mistakes" in its ruthless bombing of civilians. Two, the US is about to remove its troops from Niger and other African nations after an October

scandal involving four dead soldiers. Three, the Syrian army is massing to pounce brutally on the last holdout of the confusing insurgency supported by President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, while the Russian Navy is massing off the coast in support. This fits into a pattern when you realize a couple months ago Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu met in Moscow with Vladimir Putin and agreed, when the dust settled, Israel would accept Assad as the ruler of Syria. And four, after 17 years, the Taliban is back and the US is pulling out of Afghanistan. The Times described the war in Afghanistan as "a narrative that is increasingly lost on much of the public." Could it be the public was lied to and that there was too much patriotic bullshit in the mix? "Whose voices are important?" Commanding General John Nicholson wonders in the Times. "The outsiders who are encouraging you to fight, or the voices of your own people who are encouraging you to peace?" I'm not sure how the general meant that exactly; but it could be read to explain too many US military debacles in the post-WWII era, wars run from Washington DC, while the foreign bodies stacked up and the war on the ground went to hell. For instance, why do US leaders 75-years after the war's end continue to balk at supporting a formal peace treaty between the two Koreas? The leaders of the South and the North both want it. In Vietnam and in Iraq, US decision-makers were "outside voices" overruling any and all local voices that sought peace. Karl Eikenberry, a former US commander in Afghanistan, sums it up nicely: "We continue to fight simply because we are there."

McCain's Dead-Man-Talking National Funeral amounted to an operation in the current struggle between the Trump Administration and the metaphorically slippery Deep State. While Trump played golf, members of the Deep State gathered in the National Cathedral for an obligatory anti-Trump pep rally boosting for more bi-partisanship and less polarization. The show was designed to goose the midterms. In his remarks, President Obama hit often on the idea of "working across the aisle", something McCain no doubt wanted him to do. Personally, I wish President Obama had narratively juxtaposed himself vis-a-vis his 2008 opponent by comparing their personal realities back in 1967. While John McCain, the son of admirals, was flying a supersonic jet and bombing Asians from the sky, six-year-old Barry Obama was being taught by his step-father, Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian surveyor, how to handle himself among the Indonesian kids in his school and on the street. One gets a sense of Obama's familiarity and comfort with Asian street life in a CNN interview Anthony Bourdain did with him in a pho-noodle shop in a Hanoi street market. It's this kind of early-childhood worldliness

that Dinesh D’Souza, the conservative hack pardoned for corruption charges by Donald Trump, turned into a subversive quality in a book and a documentary. It’s an interesting conservative idea: Worldliness as a subversive force threatening the American Way. One can know too much it seems. The great preacher in Ecclesiastes put it this way: “He who increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow.” This may explain the New Know-Nothing Party that rules Congress.

If a people insist on remaining blindered in the state of exceptional patriotic stupidity and narrow-minded arrogance that launched and sustained the Vietnam War — McCain’s war — then in the future one should expect more debacles like the one George W. Bush blithely launched in Iraq. Unfortunately, it took John McCain five years of hell and suffering to understand something about the Vietnamese people he was bombing: The SOBs were no less human than he was. Power mixed with stupidity is an eternal human problem that tends to lead to more suffering and, then, more hero worship . . . and so forth ad nauseum. The Kingston Trio had it right so many years ago:

Where have all the soldiers gone?
Gone to graveyards, everyone.
Oh, when will they ever learn?
Oh, when will they ever learn?