

LI8-- "A NEW WAR STORY: IF TOM HAYDEN CAN SHAKE A DALEY'S HAND, WHY CAN'T WE PUT THE VIETNAM WAR TO REST?", SALON, 8/27/96

The Democratic Convention in Chicago has been preceded by a symbolically important event: a reconciliatory meeting between Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, son of the man who ordered police attacks on anti-war protesters in 1968, and Tom Hayden, one of the leaders of those demonstrations. There is talk of a joint appearance by the two at the convention itself.

America has few higher priorities than promoting a similar reconciliation on a nationwide basis, rather than continuing its present eerie silence on the war and its aftermath. New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd recently chastised Bob Dole at the GOP convention for "gratuitously rehash(ing) Vietnam, even though the country has blessedly put the issue to rest."

Dowd is wrong. America has no more put Vietnam to rest than a victim of childhood sexual abuse has healed because she is silent about it. On the contrary, refusing to deal with past traumas is a sign of torment in individuals --and in the collectivity of individuals we call nations.

In the case of Vietnam, America needs a revised National Story, one which incorporates the war in all its messy reality, if it is to emerge, healed, from the moral and cultural abyss into which so many Americans were hurled by that war. Only then can we once again find the kind of shared values and common language needed to revitalize ourselves spiritually as a society. Only then will the issue be put "blessedly to rest."

Many people felt betrayed by Vietnam. The loudest, of course, were the ANTI-WAR baby boomers, who had grown up in the rosy glow of the post-World War II years, with its attendant myths, only to have those myths shattered by a war -- waged by our parents -- that seemed at first inexplicable and then immoral. But the circle of those betrayed

grew much wider, and included the soldiers who actually fought in Vietnam. The war's opponents blamed the government, capitalism and "the system"; supporters blaming the protesters, with both sides squaring off ever more bitterly. The mutual sense of betrayal that drives such prototypical boomers as the two Olivers -- Stone and North -- is far more important than their differences over who was responsible for it.

Such divisions were not entirely negative. The anti-war movement, as part of the broader "counter-culture," resulted in a heady period of experimentation and creativity. The trauma of that period also lessened our propensity to wage war and CAUSED US to take a more sober view of our national leaders.

But it also fragmented the nation psychically -- the effects of which are still so apparent in our almost obsessive finger-pointing. Conservatives demonize liberal permissiveness and '60s peace protesters for the breakdown in societal values. Liberals blame conservative intolerance and selfishness. Meanwhile, problems that cry out for a consensual approach -- crime, drugs, economic and social injustice -- continue to fester.

If we are to move on, we have to revisit Vietnam and integrate three groups of people into a new National Story about that episode -- Vietnam veterans, anti-war protesters and the Indochinese.

Some of the work has already been begun. The shocking mistreatment of those who actually fought the war is being redressed. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington is one of the most moving and oft-visited monuments in the nation. Vietnam veterans like Sen. John McCain were elected on their war records. To say "I served in Vietnam" is no longer a source of shame and is, in many quarters, a badge of pride.

For those who actively opposed the war, the roles have reversed. A handful of conservatives have succeeded in caricaturing the millions who organized, marched and chanted against the war as "pot-smoking hippies" or "cowards who would not serve their country when called."

In the face of such accusations, the anti-war movement has remained silent, afraid perhaps to exacerbate the wounds.

So Bob Dole, the World War II hero, goes on coded attack against Bill Clinton when he blames our loss in Vietnam on domestic failure to support our soldiers, rather than the decision to intervene in the first place. Clinton, the anti-Vietnam war protester, has no response.

In fact, for so many, the decision not to support fellow Americans at the front was anguishing. Distraught over the senseless slaughter, protesters were often beaten and arrested. Careers and families were sacrificed. Some left the country altogether. That is not to discount the peace movement's excesses, its arrogance and narcissism: too many protesters romanticized the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, while demeaning U.S. soldiers as "baby killers." Their leaders were often as media-obsessed and dogmatic as those they criticized. Their gentle message to "make love not war" did not apply to those with whom they disagreed.

Still, it is time for conservatives to acknowledge that most anti-war protesters operated out of sincerity and deeply held beliefs. And it is time now for both sides to "agree to disagree" on Vietnam. Those like former Army Secretary James Webb will go to their grave believing that America acted honorably in Vietnam, just as anti-war protesters like myself will always believe OUR NATION acted criminally. Rather than repressing our disagreements or refighting the war, however, we need to acknowledge our differences and move on.

The third, and perhaps most difficult step, is to take responsibility for what we did to the people of Indochina. We can argue over whether our leaders' motivation was honorable or criminal in Vietnam, but we cannot argue over two basic facts:

More than a million Indochinese died -- the Senate Refugee Subcommittee estimates that 1.5 million Vietnamese died during the war -- and tens of millions more were wounded and made homeless.

U.S. military action CAUSED a majority of those deaths, and most of the other devastation that occurred.

If we can't bring ourselves to own up to the kind of guilt that the Germans acknowledged for World War II, which would involve at the very least the payment of massive reparations, we could at least hope that a U.S. government one day will encourage aid, trade and investment in Vietnam -- not merely to help American business, but as a small recognition of the human suffering we caused there. America cannot and will not become a more humanitarian society at home until it discharges its humanitarian responsibilities in Vietnam.

If the son of Richard Daley can sit down with Tom Hayden, perhaps other formerly divided sons and daughters can reach across the table and acknowledge each other's humanity -- a humanity far larger than politics, righteous anger, narrow identity, or the need to defend the past.

Fred Branfman was the head of the Indochina Resource Center in the early '70s and helped expose the US secret war in Laos. He is author of "Voices from the Plain of Jars" 1972.