

WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR, DADDY?

by Michael Ventura

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...it is not possible that a bomb should explode in a texture of life foreign to it – all that means is that one has not understood, one has not been watching.

--Doris Lessing

The Four-Gated City

Who wants to hear about the Vietnam War?

Now don't all raise your hands at once.

How do you like your Oriental children? "Do you like children?" someone asked W.C. Fields. "Only when properly cooked." Ha ha.

But no, we know how America likes its Oriental children. We like them with fresh new American names, sitting with their foster parents in front of their foster color televisions watching Sesame Street. If Eichmann's sister adopted a Jewish baby, wouldn't you have sneered just a little?

I'm afraid of them raising those children. I just saw a film called *Hearts and Minds*. It makes you think we don't deserve to raise children.

"Do you think we learned anything?" an Oklahoma-born pilot is asked.

"I think we're trying not to," he says. And he begins to weep.

I wish it was because they felt guilt, but as a people I don't think we're that honest. Most Americans are more embarrassed than guilty.

We have the best-trained, best-equipped, highest paid soldiers in the world. They are backed by the biggest Air Force. But an army of runts, hiding in tunnels and not paid a cent, beat the shit out of us for ten years.

Apparently they had something we didn't have: they believed in what they were doing.

That's embarrassing. It eats at the nightmares of everyone who still thrashes in his sleep with The American Dream.

When a nation lost a war in ancient times the meaning taken was that their gods were losing power.

In God we trust. And we lost anyway. Either we weren't trusting God in the right way... or... the God we trusted blew it.

Either way, not a tranquilizing thought for your Average American.

We are primitives after all. No one watching a football game, a political convention or a rock concert could deny we are primitives. Whether they drive pick-ups or Cadillacs, the primitive sense of every American is that if we had been right in Vietnam we would have won.

That's how it is in the movies, isn't it?

That's not how it is in *Hearts and Minds*. And *Hearts and Minds* is the most important film Americans have ever had the chance to see.

Yet even *Hearts and Minds* has a bit of primitivism in its favor: it won an Academy Award. Which makes it the first American project of any kind about Vietnam that ever *won* anything.

If it had been up to Walt Rostow, America would never have seen *Hearts and Minds*.

Surely you remember Walt Rostow. He and Maxwell Taylor wrote the report that convinced Kennedy to commit to Vietnam. Then he was special advisor to LBJ, Lyndon's Main Man toward the end – wanted us to bomb and bomb and bomb, though the CIA reported again and again that our bombing wasn't doing a damn thing. Bombing never had done much except kill civilians, Intelligence reported. In World War II, the reports chirped, far from weakening the Germans it strengthened their will to resist. Well, Walt didn't want to hear about it. He had spent his youth sitting safely in England, picking targets for us to bomb in Germany.

But bombing isn't all Walt likes. He likes picking slogans. Walt was the one who came up with the slogan "New Frontier" for Kennedy. Little did we know that the New Frontier would be the Mekong Delta.

Nothing Walt likes better than picking slogans and deciding to bomb people who live far away from him. As recently as two months ago, with The Last Offensive well on its way, he suggested we could end it all by... doing it again to Hanoi! His mind can't make the jump that a tactic that hasn't worked for thirty-five years probably won't work this time either.

Dig this, from THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST [by David Halberstam]:
He could grab Dan Ellsberg in July 1965 and excitedly pass on the news about the bombing [which to most experts in the CIA had already proven itself a failure]: "Dan, it looks very good. The Vietcong are going to collapse within weeks. Not months, but weeks. What we hear is that they're already coming apart under the bombing." They did not come apart in a few weeks, but neither did Rostow, and Ellsberg went off to Vietnam, where for two years he became something of an authority on the failure of the Vietcong to collapse. Two years later, tired, depressed, and thoroughly pessimistic about the lost cause in Vietnam, he returned to Washington, where he found Rostow as upbeat as ever.

"Dan," Rostow said, "you don't understand. Victory is near. I'll show you the charts. The charts are very good."

"Wait," said Ellsberg, "I don't want to hear it. Victory is not near. Victory is very far away. I've just come back from Vietnam. I've been there for two years. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to see any charts..."

"But, Dan, the charts are very good..."

He's still that stupid. You can see for yourself in *Hearts and Minds*.

But he's starting to understand that he *looks* stupid. In Los Angeles Rostow obtained a restraining order, forbidding the film to be shown unless producers deleted a two-minute Rostow segment. Peter David, director, and co-producer Bert Schneider, decided against editing the film. They won a decision in January, Judge Dowds denying Rostow's petition.

Rostow claimed that the segment damaged his reputation.

That's almost funny.

Above are two photographs. [*A photo of typical-American-looking Walt Rostow and a photo of a gaunt Vietnamese, missing many teeth.*] The well-fed, confident looking fellow is Walt Rostow saying that the only thing he regrets is that we didn't make a stronger military showing in Vietnam.

The other man is a Vietnamese whose children were bombed. He makes coffins. He makes 700 small coffins a week for Vietnamese children. He tells you that the Vietnamese will fight to get the foreigners out of their country as long as they have rice. And if they run out of rice, they will plant more rice and fight for their country some more. Look at his face. That's who beat us. He wants Davis to go back and tell Americans what he says.

Walt Rostow doesn't want hear it, and he doesn't want you to hear it. He lives in a world totally removed from the consequences of his acts: he teaches at the University of Texas.

For Rostow's been recycled to the Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs. Now, when Rostow got the job of special advisor to President Johnson, Johnson said to a Kennedy man: "I'm getting Walt Rostow as my intellectual. He's not Bundy's intellectual. He's not Galbraith's intellectual. He's not Schlesinger's intellectual. He's going to be *my* goddamn intellectual and I'm going to have him by the short hairs."

He was Johnson's intellectual – though some may think that a contradiction in terms. Now Walt teaches "public affairs," your neighbor and mine, pulling a five-figure salary while all the Nam vets I know are unemployed.

What did you do in the war, Daddy?

I got away with it.

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