

My Take on the War in Vietnam
Tom Hinnebusch (1966)

Interesting! I'm moved to see how much you were moved by the Burns' series. My reaction a few years ago when I first watched it was to cry, just as I did when I saw the movie *Platoon*.

Here's my contribution to your call for our reaction and experiences relative to Vietnam.

Until I read your email, I never gave much thought about Vietnam since the war ended — other than the inherent irony of the present-day rapprochement with the normalization of diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam in 1995. I never served in the military and never, never regretted that, by sheer serendipity, I avoided service. Moreover, I would never have considered it "service". After I left the novitiate, in the fall of 1961, I was almost drafted — it was the Berlin Wall Crises. As soon as I got home, as a loyal, law-abiding citizen, I notified my draft board that I no longer qualified for a divinity student deferment. I was reclassified 1A and before I knew it I was downtown Pittsburgh with a bunch of other guys, mostly working class high school kids, having answered a "call to arms", with our mouths open and our pants down being examined by a doctor. "But, but, but, I protested to the draft board, "I've already been accepted at Duquesne to do a MA in African Studies and Language; I should qualify for a student deferment." It was the last thing in the world I wanted: I DID NOT relish the thought of spending two or more years in a regimented environment, part of a military culture that I had little in common with. My reluctance to serve had little to do with Berlin, fighting the Soviets, let alone the Viet Cong in the jungles of southeast Asia! "But you are not in school, registered for classes," the lady told me, "if you are called up you'll have to report for service." Berlin cooled down and there was no mobilization, and I was off the hook. I started my first classes at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh PA; that was spring semester of 1962 and I had my student deferment.

Of course, I knew about Vietnam, French Indochina really. I was in high school, the nuns cajoled me into doing speech and debate. Indochina and the domino theory were among topics we prepared for at our Saturday tourneys. I hated those weekends during the season, always nervous as hell, having to get up in front of the debate judges and others to argue with students from St. Basil's and other Catholic high schools in the South Side and South Hills neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. But I learned a hell of a lot of current events. The siege at Dien Bien Phu was real, a modern Custer's last stand! And proof for that side of the argument supporting the domino theory. But once at Maryknoll I was consumed by my studies and daily seminary life. A very protective and warm environment, for me at least, and I flourished academically and socially. I don't remember Vietnam ever once mentioned. Surely, it had been!

At Duquesne I met my wife Claudia and we were married in August of 1963. So, I had a "second deferment" as a married man. Even before I finished the MA, a year later came the "third deferment" — a married man with children. Again, I don't recall ever thinking or being concerned about Vietnam, though by then we were getting more involved. The CIA came to Duquesne, recruiting; they were looking for area analysts, not covert agents. An upper-class man, who had already graduated a year before me, was working as a desk analyst in DC, so it seemed like an exciting career opportunity living in DC with the chance of occasional visits to Africa, so I signed up. Government service was a patriotic thing to do; the salary was decent and there were worst places in the world to live than in Washington DC. In the end, after two all-expenses-paid trips to CIA headquarters in Langley Virginia, I was rejected (after I took a lie detector test plus a battery of psychological exams — they probably thought I was a naive, overly scrupulous, geek). Talk about disappointment! But when one door closes, another opens, to quote a trite aphorism. (For many reasons, that rejection turned out to be a

blessing, but that's another story; though, I would argue strenuously that the US needs a robust intelligence service, but not the dirty tricks and black ops side of such services!)

After teaching Latin and English for 6 months in a local Allegheny County PA junior high school, I started teaching Swahili at Duquesne and working on a second Masters at the University of Pittsburgh in Linguistics. It was in December of 1964 that I was in New York for a Modern Language Association conference and took the opportunity to go up to the Knoll to visit my classmates, still two years from ordination. I left Ossining that day having made a three-year commitment to work at the Maryknoll Language School in Musoma Tanzania, and Claudia would be teaching at Maryknoll's junior seminary and secondary school there in Tanzania, beginning in August 1965 through to August 1968. It was a beautiful, quiet, almost bucolic, setting on the eastern shores of Lake Victoria, 500 kilometers or so from Nairobi and even further from Dar es Salaam. We weren't totally isolated and more or less knew what was going on at home and the rest of the world; we had a subscription to the international issue of Time and we listened to VOA and BBC news reports. The US involvement in Vietnam was growing; the US was getting deeply entrenched and US troops were doing more and more of the fighting; protests were growing at home. Locally, not much attention was being paid to the war; Tanzanians were confronting their own revolution: nationalization of foreign-owned companies, *Ujamaa* villagization, *Kujitegemea* (self-reliance), and Chinese outreach with "barefoot" doctors flooding the country. President Nyerere was bound and determined to build the country and improve the lives of peasant farmers, and I liked his brand of socialism, and policies of nonalignment. And some of the Maryknoll missionaries were sympathetic too if not downright supportive. I did my part: I got out on our local road from town trying to fill in the potholes, and scrape away at the high spots with a *jembe*, a hoe local folk used in tilling their fields. People would laugh when I told them "*Kujitegemea*". "That crazy *Mzungu* (white guy)", they were probably thinking. Not much was said about Vietnam, though, by anyone, as I remember, neither in our Maryknoll community, nor by our Tanzanian neighbors. When I visited my local friends in the surrounding homesteads, we never talked about the war. I do remember explaining about the satellites circling the globe that were quite visible on dark African nights in skies that were unaffected by big city light pollution.

After 3 years we returned to the States in August of 1968. It was hot and muggy when our flight set down in New York and even hotter when we got to Pittsburgh, and not just from the weather. The Democratic National Convention was just getting started in Chicago. The newspaper was full of it. There was a lot of talk from newscasters and commentators about possible anti-war demonstrations. Having had no TV for three years and used to reading and hearing often weeks-old news, to see democracy acting out alive on the screen in front of us in Mom's living room was a new and fresh experience. But we were absolutely appalled when Daly's cops began beating demonstrators, leaving many of the protestors bloodied and wounded. I was totally and completely radicalized. People often talk about such experiences as epiphanies. That was true for me. My world view was turned upside down. I became anti-war. America was no longer that shining light on the hill.

We got to Los Angeles towards the end of August, early September, 1965, and I got started on my PhD studies in Linguistics at UCLA. Academic-year 1968/69 was rough. I was not used to the competitiveness of graduate study at a world-class university, in one of the premier departments for theoretical linguistics and the study of African languages in the world; I had what I thought was a recurrent bout of malaria but the docs were never able to pin down anything definite; and above all, after 3 years in Africa it was a hell of a challenge adjusting to a city of 2.5 million people, unbelievable dirty air, and 100s of thousands of vehicles. And there was the ever-present distraction of Vietnam on the news. There still wasn't a 24-hours a day news cycle on the tube then, but it was everywhere, even more so on campus. Claudia and I were both deeply affected. That Christmas I used a photo I had taken around sunset of the VA cemetery close to campus, with rows and rows of white headstones and the sun filtering through the branches and leaves framing the photo, had it printed up with the

Christmas accolade "Peace on Earth" printed on the front. It was our Christmas greeting card for that year. Some of our relatives in Pittsburgh were not happy about it, thought it was in poor taste, and unpatriotic. But for us it stated perfectly what we were feeling and what we thought of the war.

However, I wasn't much of a protestor. I did participate in teach-ins when some of our profs would cancel class and we'd head out into the UCLA Franklin Murphy Sculpture Garden and sit around half-talking about the war and half-talking about Chomsky and linguistics, how he had both revolutionized linguistics and how linguists—not all for sure—thought of language, and also how many of us were beginning to think about the war. But for the most part, I was worrying about jumping over the steep academic hurdles the department put in our way before allowing us to proceed to candidacy, do our research, and write our dissertations; working to supplement my fellowship support; and spending quality time with the kids and Claudia. But one day, things shifted: the LA police rioted on campus, they ran amuck both on south and north campus beating, arresting students and professors. There had been an anti-war demonstration on Bruin Walk near the Student Union, and it got out of hand when chanters turned their anger towards the police, somebody rolled a concrete trash can down the hill towards the police lines and all hell broke loose. That was the excuse the police needed and they charged, dispersing the students across campus, chasing them down and night-sticking anyone who got in their way. Unfortunately, they did not stop there. From our office windows we could see students fleeing across campus with the police in pursuit. One of my professors, a world-renowned phonetician, was returning to our building after just teaching a class; he confronted some police who were beating a student, he protested, they turned on him and beat him unconscious. Later on, he sued the police and the city, and settled for an undisclosed sum. (Much later, years later, Claudia was, dismissed from a jury by a prosecutor for cause because I was a colleague of that professor!). That made the war personal and the next day I joined a rally that marched from campus to the Federal Building in West LA protesting both the war and police brutality. It was a strange day and even stranger time.

By June of 1972, after surviving 4 years of doctoral education and having been advanced to candidacy, I was back in East Africa, this time in Kenya doing my field work, collecting data for the dissertation. Claudia and kids joined me in August and she began teaching at a somewhat privileged primary and secondary school run by a congregation of Irish Catholic priests for the children of wealthy white settler families and the children of the new African elites. (The school, St. Mary's, was just up the road in Westlands, a suburban area of Nairobi, from the Maryknoll Fathers' Nairobi House.) The Irish Fathers were good enough to rent us a brand-new teachers' house, but at a monthly rate that was virtually equivalent to Claudia's salary. We had little choice but to pay it. Even though we were living on campus we were not able to send our oldest son David to the school; the tuition was beyond our means—we were barely surviving on the fellowships that my department back at UCLA cobbled together to support me, so each morning I drove him over to a Nairobi City Council school in Westlands. For us the school fees there were negligible and David was happy and content there, even though he was the only *Mzungu* in the school. But then one day the headmaster asked Claudia about this and she explained our financial situation and he agreed to lower the rent and enroll David for a nominal fee in St. Mary's on the condition that I help out the sports master in coaching and refereeing the field hockey team. He gave me a book on the rules and said, no problem, it's just like American ice-hockey (which I knew absolutely nothing about). Well it was a disaster; I did OK supervising the intramural games, calling off-sides and enforcing other arcane rules, but when the team played their first real game the parents from both teams were up in arms and ready to lynch me, I swear. Under pressure, I had no idea what I was doing. I went to the headmaster of St. Mary's and told him the deal was off: I could not survive the abuse and humiliation heaped on me by these parents. Well, he wasn't ready to let me slip out it that easily and told me, instead, I could help the games master in other

ways, unspecified at the time and mostly unenforced. But there was one thing I did, and I don't remember doing anything else the whole year we were at St Mary's, was to play chaperon on a field trip the coach was taking the upper-form boys to Mt. Kenya for a week-end camping trip and hike up the mountain, at last to the first glacier. It was fun but a challenge because I was out of shape. The second day as we worked our way up a scree slope to the first accessible glacier, I found myself taking a rest-break with one of the other chaperons, a white Kenyan farmer, the father of one of the boys. Invariably, I don't remember how, but we got talking about American foreign policy and our continuing involvement in Vietnam, which I was adamantly against, and said so. He did not think we were serious about winning the war and we should be making greater efforts in defeating these Asian Communists, the "yellow peril" (he actually said this) who would soon take over all of Asia if we did not stop them in Vietnam. It got heated and ended in a stalemate; he went off with one group of boys and I followed another group that took a route to the glacier that took us much higher but more directly to our target. Our track looked down on the trail, a hundred yards below, where the guy I had been arguing with was hiking. The group of students I was with was really not on much of a trail, and the walking was difficult and treacherous as we made our way along the steep scree slope. Then, of all things, I stepped on a large loose rock, dislodged it, and it went careening down the slope directly headed to where he had stopped to rest. Everything literally went into slow motion, I was yelling "rock, rock, rock falling, get out of the way!" When both groups reached the glacier, I apologized, he only glared at me! I can see it all happening today as if it just happened yesterday. The large rock tumbling end over end, him looking up and dodging to the high side of the trail, the boulder flying by him with inches to spare. I never think of Vietnam without thinking of him and seeing his angry face. Both while we were arguing and after I apologized for nearly killing him. That was a debate whose ending could never have been predicted. I was angry, ironically, both because he was criticizing America and because he based his support of the war on an idiotic, silly, racist, assumption. He was angry, I could not blame him, but the thought occurred that maybe because I was also one of those damn anti-war, American, ex-colonial hippies.

It's not quite true that I never thought about Vietnam again, after the war ended. Every once in a while, as the country opened up, and the US established relations with the Vietnamese government, I thought what a waste the war was on all counts. As wars go, it was sort of a proxy for the cold war. Maybe if we hadn't fought there we might have been entangled in an even more disastrous one with China or the Soviet Union. Years later, I went to the only UCLA Academic Senate meeting in all the 35 some years I was active at UCLA as a university teacher and researcher. Bush, numero dos, was talking about going after Saddam. This was after 9/11 and the country was burning with revenge. The neo-conservatives were dead set on building democracy throughout the middle east. This was their chance to put into practice their ideology. The UCLA meeting had been called to decide if, as a faculty, we could take a united stance and send a letter protesting the impending invasion. In spite of some opposition we passed a resolution and the letter was sent. No one really believed it would do any good; I certainly did not. We had already forgotten about how Vietnam had dragged on for years. And I knew the neo-cons could never overcome the Islamic sectarian divisions that historically fueled many of the conflicts in that part of the world, nor the political legacy of western colonialism.

Now, Biden, is pulling us out of Afghanistan. I wonder how much Vietnam resides in his subconscious? That's a discussion for another time.