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Goodnight, Saigon

This lecture was delivered to cadets enrolled in the core Military History course at the United States Air Force Academy, April 27, 2000

It feels appropriate for me to be speaking here tonight about Vietnam. Three days from now marks the 25th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon—the end of the longest war in U.S. History, the fourth most costly in terms of American blood shed, and our most divisive conflict since the Civil War.

I covered the final weeks of the Vietnam War as a correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, and, as most of you know, I fought in it with the U.S. Marine Corps in 1965 and 1966. Tonight, I'm going to talk about my memoir of Vietnam, *A Rumor of War*, and about Vietnam's legacy—the lasting effects it's had on our society and culture. But I want you to understand that I'm no dispassionate historian. For me, the war has been and always will be a deeply personal, emotional experience. In fact, it was the most important thing that ever happened to me. Like thousands of veterans, I underwent a kind of death and re-birth in the rice-paddies and jungles. Sixteen of my comrades were not so lucky—their names are now etched on that stark, black-granite wall in Washington. Whenever I recall those names and the faces that went with them, I'm reminded of the words a French officer spoke years after the armistice ending World War One: "The war, old boy, is our youth, secret and interred."

Since *A Rumor of War* was published—23 years ago next month—I've made appearances like this one at high schools, universities, and military academies all over the country. My views about Vietnam have been aired on TV and radio, and in the newspapers. I've done an awful lot of talking about it, maybe too much, so I've decided to make this the forum for my valedictory speech on the subject. After tonight, I'll have no more to say about it. Like the old Billy Joel song, I'm saying "Goodnight, Saigon."

I started writing *A Rumor of War* in 1967, when I was 25 and still in the Marine Corps—a company commander at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I knew I had a story to tell, but had a devil of time figuring out how to tell it. Nearly nine years passed before I wrote the last line, in a small cabin in the town of Deep Creek, Montana. Not that I worked on the book day and night for all that time. I was earning a living as a newspaper reporter and supporting a family. I had to set the manuscript aside for months at a time. Complicating matters, I couldn't make up my mind what form the story should take. It began as an autobiographical novel and ended up as a memoir, and underwent several metamorphoses in between.

But throughout that long process—it was sometimes an ordeal—I kept one purpose in mind, a kind of literary mission, if you will. That mission was set out for me by Joseph Conrad, who said the writer's task is "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is above all to make you see." I wanted to write a book that would make its readers see the war as we warriors saw it, and by seeing it, to feel the heat, the monsoon rains, the mosquitoes, the fear; to experience the snipers, booby-traps, ambushes and firefights, as much as was possible on the printed page. More than anything, I wanted to communicate the moral ambiguities of a conflict in which no one on either side was completely in the right or completely in the wrong, a murky, miserable war where devils and angels traded places so often you could not tell one from the other, even within yourself.

The reason I had given myself that task has some bearing on what I'll say later. From the mid-60s through the early 70s, Vietnam, a place few Americans had heard of before 1964, was on everyone's lips. It was all over the papers, on the radio and the nightly news. Words, words, words—probably 1000 times as many words had been spoken about Vietnam as there were bullets fired in it. But the national discussion was really a debate of the deaf, hawks shouting at doves, doves at hawks, neither listening to what the other side had to say, because each side was convinced it monopolized the truth. For the hawks, the war was an altogether noble cause to save the Vietnamese from communism, for the Left, it was a mistake at best, a crime at worst. The people who were not heard from, or whose voices were drowned out in the din were the men who had been there. No one, it seemed, wanted to know about the tumults in the warrior's heart, no one wanted to hear the voices calling from out of the heart of darkness, the belly of the beast, because,

perhaps, such cries would confuse an already too-confusing issue. The two sides had settled comfortably into the bunkers of their ideological opinions, and neither was interested in venturing out into the emotional and moral no-man's land where we warriors dwelled.

My purpose was to put them there. *A Rumor of War* was designed to be a vicarious tour of combat duty for readers who had never been to Vietnam. When they came to the end, I hoped they would look into the mirror, or better yet, into their souls and, regardless of how they came down on the issue, ask themselves a few questions: "Now what do I think? What do I feel now? How would I have behaved if I had been there?"

I also had a further ambition: to write a book that would reach beyond its time and place toward the universal; a book that would tell a tale not only of that particular war but of war itself, and the truth of war, and what poet Wilfred Owen called the pity of war.

When it was completed, in the fall of 1976, the manuscript was sent to several publishers, and was rejected by all until it landed on the desk of Marian Wood, then a senior editor at Henry Holt and Company. Ms. Wood, who'd taken part in antiwar protests, candidly admitted to me that she did not want to read my story. It sat on her desk for, if I recall correctly, at least two weeks before her conscience needled her into picking it up. When she finished it, she was committed to it, and persuaded her boss to publish it. *A Rumor of War* came out in May 1977, a little more than two years after the Fall of Saigon. By that time, Americans were sick of Vietnam. It was not a subject you brought up in polite company—kind of like talking about sex at a Victorian dinner party. The country wanted to forget about the first lost war in its history; the war that had tarnished America's cherished image of itself as a nation that always was on the side of right.

Holt's editors and I expected the book to sell a few thousand copies at most, then sink out of sight. We'd made a happy misjudgment. It turned out that the American public was eager to hear from those who had seen the war first hand. We were stunned by the book's reception: it made the *New York Times'* and publishers weekly best-seller lists, was picked up for a TV mini-series, sold to fifteen countries abroad, and received reviews so praiseworthy that I was as embarrassed as I was gratified. To date, *A Rumor of War* has sold well over 2 million copies worldwide, and continues to sell about 20,000 copies a year in the U.S., which suggests that Vietnam, though it must seem as remote D-Day to

younger Americans, is not a subject that's entirely faded from American consciousness.

I don't, however, consider the book successful because it sold well and got a few raves from the critics. It was successful because it did what I intended—put the reader in the war. Along with several other works of fiction and nonfiction published at about the same time—Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* are two that come immediately to mind—it made the warrior's voice respectable and the war a legitimate subject for literature. All those early books, and those that came after, helped change the tone and direction of the Vietnam debate, from a stale exchange of ideological rhetoric to a more open and honest discussion of the war's meaning, its legacy, its effects on all of us.

There was a time when I believed that America would never come to terms with Vietnam. It hasn't yet, but it's come a very long way in the past 20-odd years, and I think the literature of the war, the novels, and memoirs, the works of literary nonfiction, poetry and drama, have been invaluable in that endeavor. History and journalism have played their role, of course, but facts are the province of those fields; truth is the province of art, not so much intellectual truth as emotional truth, the verities of the human heart, which are as important as facts; for in the end, the war was to our country what it was too me, a profound *emotional* experience. Beyond that, it was a national tragedy in the classical sense of the word—an event arising from a union of fate and human folly that ends in death—in this case, the deaths of 58,000 Americans and 3 million Vietnamese, North and South, military and civilian.

Before I touch on the war's legacy, I'll mention in passing that I've returned to Vietnam twice, once in 1990, and again last spring. I made peace with my former enemies on the first trip, when a poet who had served as a platoon commander in the North Vietnamese army in 1966 learned that I had been a platoon commander the same year in the same area, a valley southwest of DaNang. His name was Ngan Vinh and he read a poem he'd written, "After the Rain in the Forest." It was about carrying a wounded comrade to safety through a monsoon rain. I was stunned, because the first thing I'd published about the war, back in 1967, was a poem called "Infantry in the Monsoon." It was about carrying wounded buddies through the rain. After I read the few lines I could remember, Vinh filled two glasses with vodka and invited me to drink a toast with him. I did. When our glasses were empty, he embraced me with tears in his eyes and said, "You and me, Philip, we are brothers in

arms." That's when the war ended for me.

I made peace with myself on the second trip, one year ago this month. On an assignment for *National Geographic Adventure Magazine*, I spent two weeks walking over the battlefields where my battalion had fought and where those sixteen men whose names are now on the wall in Washington were killed in action. I looked some old devils in the eye and wrestled with troubling memories on that pilgrimage. Toward the end, I climbed a high mountain with another North Vietnamese poet, Nguyen Quang Thieu, a man too young to have fought in the war, but old enough to remember B-52s dropping bombs near his village outside Hanoi. Before we went to sleep atop that mountain—it's called Nui Ba-Na, and it's now a resort where tourists escape the stifling heat of Vietnam's lowlands—Thieu asked me to tell him what I dreamed. The next morning I told him that I'd dreamt that I was being crushed by a huge python; but I wrestled with it and broke its grip. Thieu said nothing at first. Two days later, as we explored a battlefield where my battalion had lost sixty men in a firefight with North Vietnamese regulars, he gave me his interpretation: "The python was the past. By coming here, you have broken its hold."

Looking to the present and the future, we have to ask ourselves, has America broken the grip of past? On both my trips to Vietnam, I observed that the Vietnamese, who suffered far more than we—recall those casualty figures: 3 million dead as opposed to 58,000—are far less obsessed with the war. Maybe that's so because they won. Lost causes seize the imaginations of the losers. You only have to look to our own South, where the Civil War lived on for decades after it had ceased to be even a memory in the North. In fact, it's still alive there—as the controversy over the flying of the Confederate flag in South Carolina attests.

But the shame of defeat does not alone explain the tenacity of the python's grip on our collective soul and psyche. Nor does the tarnishing of our self-image that I mentioned earlier.

Vietnam cannot be seen in isolation from the whole era that's called the Sixties though it really began in 1963, with the assassination of President Kennedy, and ended with the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. In this context, Vietnam was not just a foreign war, like, say, Korea or the Persian Gulf; it was the epicenter of a social and cultural earthquake that shook and, in some cases, destroyed, American institutions, customs, values, and beliefs. It created the America we live in today, for better and for worse.

I'm not going to discuss the fabled Vietnam syndrome—the paralysis that afflicted our military and foreign policies in the wake of our defeat. Military and foreign policy are not my fields of expertise.

My concern, as a writer, is with the impact it's had, and continues to have, on the way we live, the way we see ourselves in the world. My concern also is with its effects on our myths, by which I don't mean fairy tales or superstitions, but the sacred, fundamental tenets of faith that hold a society together, whether it's an Amazonian tribe or a post-industrial super power.

On this point, scholar John Hellmann has some cogent things to say in his analysis of Vietnam War literature, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam.*

Vietnam is an experience that has severely called into question American myth. Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a distinctly American story would unfold. When the story of Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the true nature of the larger story of America itself became the subject of intense cultural dispute. On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and our vision of the future.

I believe the disruption of our story began when the antiwar movement abandoned the argument that Vietnam was a grievous error in judgment and adopted the more extreme argument that it was, like racism at home, symptomatic of grave flaws at the very heart of American life. The core values of American society were called into question—self-discipline, self-restraint, above all, the belief that American ideals were exceptional and worthy of dissemination around the world. Authority, from the family to universities to the government, was undermined to the point that the very idea of authority was discarded by what was then called the "New Left." A silly, facile, solipsistic slogan became the mantra du-jour: "Do your own thing."

Most Americans—those whom President Nixon called the silent majority—by no means shared these ideas, nor did they approve of the antiwar movement's excesses. There were also people like me, who opposed American policies in Vietnam but did not doubt the validity of American values and institutions. But as the war dragged pointlessly on, the views of the New Left gained currency, at least in universities and in the media.

What had begun as a rupture between hawk and dove widened into a schism between a vocal radical minority and ordinary citizens, often

disparaged as ignorant hard-hats and bigoted rednecks by the former. I recall seeing that schism played out in microcosm, when I covered an antiwar demonstration at Northwestern University in 1970. Students, joined by some faculty members, were protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. The entire campus had been shut down. Flying an upside-down American flag alongside the black flags of the anarchists and the red banners of revolution, the demonstrators mounted makeshift barricades to shout epithets at the police, antiwar chants to whomever would listen. Suddenly, a stocky, dark-haired man in his early fifties waded into the crowd and seized the U.S. flag, declaring in a voice quavering with rage that he was an electrician and a former Marine who had fought for that flag on Iwo Jima, seen it raised on Mount Suribachi, and he was damned if he would allow a mob of long-haired, pot-smoking hippies to desecrate it. He was the Lone Ranger of Middle America amid the hostile Sioux of the New Left. A few demonstrators cried out that the man should be allowed to have his say, but the rest shouted him down, and then the cops waded in with nightsticks. Looking back, the whole scene was almost a cliché of the divisions that were then tearing the country apart.

The Left, arrogantly convinced of its moral superiority, and often unrestrained in its passion to transform American society top to bottom, deserves a great share of the blame for fostering those divisions. But the establishment cannot be let off the hook. What was the establishment? Basically, it was the same elite that had run the country since its founding: almost exclusively white, male, protestant, and northeastern—a kind of Ivy-League aristocracy. It was also liberal. You should remember that—Vietnam was a liberals' war. Robert McNamara. McGeorge Bundy. Dean Rusk. They too could be morally superior, arrogant, and unrestrained in their methods, defoliating Vietnam's forests with Agent Orange, dropping on that impoverished nation a tonnage of bombs several times greater than the tonnage dropped by both sides in all of World War Two. What was worse—and the historical record now shows this—these leaders knew from the very beginning that the war probably could not be won, and yet they went ahead with it, because they had become so trapped by the orthodoxies of the Cold War that they could see no alternative. And yet—here's one of the tragic elements—the Cold War was a just and necessary crusade. At the same time, it blinded our leaders to certain realities, like the kind encountered in Vietnam. They compounded the consequences of that first step into the quagmire by withholding the

facts from the American people, except when they lied outright. The American public, no less than the Vietnamese communists, became the victims of a disinformation campaign that eventually broke the covenant of trust between the government and the people.

Pursuing an impossible strategy, unable to figure out how to win the war or how to get out of it, the establishment lost its legitimacy, its right to rule. It also lent credibility to the radicals' assertions that none of the establishment's values were worth anything. Not that average Americans joined the New Leftists in the streets. No, they saw the figures of the establishment and of the antiwar movement as two faces of the same elite, each pursuing its own agenda while sending the sons of the working class to do the fighting and dying. It's no wonder that millions rallied to populist demagogues like George Wallace.

Today, American society is far calmer than it was then, but it would be dangerously inaccurate to say that the disruption of our story has been ended. Rather, it has been covered by the cozy blanket of our unprecedented prosperity and by the collapse of the Soviet Union that brought a close to the Cold War.

Modern America is far more tolerant—or far less bigoted, however you want to put it—than it was thirty or forty years ago. That's one of the good things, indeed, the best thing, to come out of the Vietnam period. I am 58 years old, and I remember seeing Colored Only signs hanging over drinking fountains in Virginia in 1964, the year the civil rights act was signed into law. But America is at the same time a more balkanized place. The schism opened during the Vietnam era has spread and spider-webbed, like the cracks in a windshield, so that the great American tribe is now divided into several adversarial sub tribes: Hispanic versus Anglo, gay versus straight, pro-choice versus pro-life, and on and on. Political correctness, which a friend of mine described as the fascism of the Left, has poisoned our universities and our politics with dangerously utopian visions of the future and revisions of our history that transform Columbus and the Pilgrims into villains, and the whole saga of America into a shameful rather than an inspiring narrative. Distrust of government, one of the worst legacies of Vietnam, not only persists; it seems stronger than ever, aggravated by a blood-thirsty media intent on exposing every flaw it can find in every American leader unfortunate enough to attain national prominence. I heard very loud echoes of the Sixties in the hearings to impeach President Clinton, echoes that told me that the "intense cultural

dispute" mentioned by Hellmann is not over.

At the risk of sounding like some tin-pot Jeremiah, I'm not as happy with post-Vietnam America as I would like to be. There is something dreadfully wrong with a country in which school shootings occur roughly every two months. I think that the undermining of authority, by which I mean the authority of a moral code that everyone agrees on, contributed to horrors like the massacre at Columbine High School. I think that the left-wing radicals who exploded bombs on college campuses in the 1960s opened the gates for right-wing extremists like Timothy McVeigh to come marching with their bombs. And does anyone really believe that the plague of smack and crack on our inner-city streets has nothing to do with the fashionableness of drug use in the 60s and 70s? When old myths are discarded and old convictions are lost, it shakes a society to its very foundations. The Left that grew out of the antiwar movement, now in positions of power in politics, law, and education, has largely succeeded in re-shaping America but I believe that the baby was thrown out with the bath water. Today's neo-conservatives, many of them neo-Leftists who converted, don't deserve a pass either. They seem to confuse conservatism with materialism, as though freedom means nothing more than the freedom to make millions on the NASDAQ with a minimum of government interference.

What I hope to see is an America in which the idea of service, to country and to one's fellow man and woman, is valued once again. An America with renewed faith in the uniqueness of its ideals, but tempered with humility and common sense, which were lacking during the Vietnam era. A less cynical America with the bond of trust between government and people restored. An America that stops making savage partisan battles out of events like, say, a custody dispute over a Cuban refugee boy. We need leaders in this country less interested in fighting antiquated culture wars and more interested in finding a common agenda, in pursuing a common endeavor. It may be up to your generation to build that America. If and when you do, then I'll know we have emerged at last from what Henry Kissinger calls the "long shadow of Vietnam," that we have finally come to terms, not only with that now distant war but with its aftermath as well.