

Commentary by Susan O'Neill

The Song of the Pawn

I know I'm not alone in cringing at the coverage of war on T.V.; I know I'm not the only human being alive who doesn't feel that national grudges are best settled with shiny new video games where the targets live and breathe.

However, in the United States these days, those of us who are truly, to-the-bone pacifists, those who feel that a powerful, well-armed nation is dangerously, morally wrong to play Goliath to an enemy whose major defensive slingshot is the righteousness of the embattled ground on which they stand—well, we're seldom invited to the podium. There isn't room for us up there. All the space—the floor and the very air—is taken by a word that calls to mind crumbling towers and exploding strangers in a crowd: *Terrorism*.

And it is a very frightening word. You can do so much in the name of fighting Terrorism; the word is so scary that it makes other, older words and concepts obsolete—words like Morality, concepts like Situational Ethics. *Terrorism*—so simple. Black and white; a great “sound bite” bugle call to war.

Some thirty-plus years ago, we in the US followed a different, equally frightening, equally simple, call to battle: *Communism*. Viet Nam was a small but vital domino that had to be held up, or we would find the Communists hammering at our gates. And so we were called. And we went, many of us. Some of us went willingly, fired with patriotism; some of us went skeptically, because we were drafted and didn't have a good excuse to turn away. Me, I went for a complicated variety of reasons—financial incentives, curiosity, naiveté. I was a woman, so I wasn't drafted; the Army needed nurses and promised to help pay for my education and send me someplace safe to replace a nurse who wanted to go to Viet Nam.

Whatever the promises, the motives, the personal philosophies we had, there were many of us who found ourselves in Viet Nam.

Pretty much everyone knows, by now, that what we did in that far land was not glorious. That our efforts did not further Democracy; it did not create order in the world; it did not save Civilization. In the end, in the final analysis—if any analysis of Viet Nam can be said to be final—we killed a lot of people on their own soil, created an economic chaos that only war can foster,

and lost many young men and yes, a few young women, whose lives might surely have been spent much more productively elsewhere. As in the case with any untimely death, these created ripples of grief that engulfed a great sea of the living.

And those who survived—we, too, mourn for those lost, for the destruction and our place in it, and for ourselves and the fact that we carried out the orders we were given by the leaders of our nation. This, even at a distance of thirty-plus years.

And where are those leaders now? The politics change; the leaders change. The world moves on, and the damage done is left at the side of the road, to be cleaned up by the damaged and their kin.

So I watch the TV images of war. And I see a temporary, deadly political game, and know that those who are most affected by it are simply pawns. We—those sent to war and those warred upon—are expendable. It is not a house that is being torched, it is a logistic; it is not a young man or woman who is killing another young man or woman, it is a soldier destroying a rebel. And when it is all finished—if it is ever all finished—the politicians will move on. Oh, yes, they might lay a wreath on a grave. But their tears will be temporary.

Susan O'Neill worked as an army nurse at three hospitals in South Vietnam (1969-1970). She married an American soldier she met during the war. She is the author of *Don't Mean Nothing: Short Stories of Vietnam* (Ballantine, 2001).