

Vietnam: We could still win the peace

by William Jones

Brothers in Arms, A Journey from War to Peace

by William Broyles, Jr.
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The last 10 years have seen a plethora of books on Vietnam, many authored by the participants themselves. There is a great deal of repetition involved in the reams of paper spilled by innumerable Vietnam veterans who wanted to say something about events which were important to their lives—for better or worse.

It is a fact that the Vietnam War remains ingrained on the conscience of this nation, and not only for those who participated. The literary ambitions of the Vietnam veterans is probably also an attempt by them to figure out what the Vietnam debacle was all about. Most of the literature of this genre gets rather boring after awhile, since the details, as gory as they may have been, do not leave much room for variation.

The only way to successfully make sense of that war, is to transcend the war as such. *Brothers in Arms* is somewhat unique, in that its author, who served in Vietnam, was able to return there after the war, to see for himself what had become of the country he had fought so hard over.

He was able to talk with many of the veterans from the other side of that war, including those who had been commanding the units who engaged in action against his own. The book thus has a certain amount of irony in it, and a great deal of truth.

A unique experience for a war veteran, returning to the place where one has waged war after peace has settled in. More unusual for Vietnam veterans, as this was a war that the United States lost, and Vietnam has been, until quite recently, pretty much off limits to Americans.

Broyles's return to Vietnam was, indeed, something of an effort to find out what the war had been all about. The wounds of war are by no means healed—at least not physically—as the country is still in a state of economic turmoil. Economic mismanagement, combined with the devastation of the war years, has helped to keep the country in a general

state of misery. Whatever aid the Soviets have been providing, as is invariably the case with Soviet aid, has not been sufficient to significantly improve the situation.

North-South contrasts

The author depicts the contrasts that still exist between North and South Vietnam, even after unification. Hanoi and the North, whose character was shaped by the austerity of “war communism” and the simplicity of the Ho Chi Minh regime, seems to retain something of the drabness and the impoverished look characteristic of even the more colorful cities of the communist East bloc.

This contrasts sharply with the culture of Saigon, still heavily influenced, 12 years after the war, by the rock-and-drug culture transplanted there when 2 million or so U.S. soldiers passed through there during the long period of war. Much remains the same: the black market, the prostitution, the drugs, most of the military equipment still U.S. government issue, rather than Russian as in the North.

Broyles almost waxes nostalgic over the scene. Not much of a legacy to be proud of, one would think.

Also of interest is the great suspicion and dislike on the part of the Vietnamese for the Russians now stationed in Vietnam. If Broyles's observations on that question are correct, as I believe they are, the Russians have not exactly been treated as conquering heroes, not even in the North. Anyone familiar with the Vietnamese would know that this would be the case. In a very real sense, the United States itself opened the door for the Soviets in the area, through our own blundering.

Broyles's meetings with old foes, his discussions with the commanders of the Vietnamese forces, and his general reflections on “what it was all about” can be thought-provoking, although they raise more questions than they answer. We must place the question in a somewhat broader perspective, dealing with the overall purpose of U.S. foreign policy, in order to come up with an answer. But this is not Broyles's concern.

America has indeed been living too long with a “Vietnam syndrome.” But the mistakes of that era have to be faced up to and dealt with, if we are ever going to realize again what America's responsibility toward the rest of the world can and must be. Perhaps re-establishing some form of even limited diplomatic relationship to Vietnam, as has been proposed by Senators McCain and Pressler, is a step in the right direction. If we can find a way to a rapprochement with what became an enemy, then maybe we will learn to deal more effectively and diplomatically with our traditional friends. In this way, we might just begin to successfully “contain communism”—by making it irrelevant in areas where we have an influence. Perhaps even as a nation we may have more in common with Vietnam than we realize—bonds cemented on the battlefields of a long and bitter war. We lost the war—but perhaps we can win the peace.