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On Reaching Profundity

By D. Randall Olson

I was sitting at the kitchen table, pen in hand, trying to think of something to write. I had begun jotting down some fragmented thoughts several times, but each effort had been only a feeble try at saying something of meaning. I wanted to reach profundity, and felt very near to it in fact; but for the moment, anyway, it seemed just beyond my grasp.

I soon found myself staring out the window into the wintry cold. Perhaps I could write about the November scene I was viewing. There were certainly enough backyard objects to observe, to ponder, to illustrate with appropriate descriptives: a mighty but barren oak; two unclothed apple trees; the frozen white carpet of snow; the meager birdbreader looking very much out of place in the otherwise natural environment; and the dull-grey sky. But the scene was anything but inspiring, and I turned my attention elsewhere.

An old magazine lying on the table in front of me caught my searching eye. A bright red band slicing diagonally across the upper right-hand corner of the cover boldly stated, “China’s Vietnam Gamble.” This reminder of past international hostilities covered a portion of the magazine’s title, NEWSWEEK, printed on the cover was a photograph of a young Chinese soldier, pictured from the knees up. His uniform consisted of a Mao jacket, heavy pants and cap and was dead drab-green in color. In his arms he held a bayonet rifle, which he was pointing directly at the viewer.

His stance was one of firmness, readiness, and apparent fearlessness as he was preparing to thrust his weapon toward his adversary. But his foe was only imaginary; he had been part of a Chinese unit which had been photographed while on a training exercise.

Nonetheless, the image of this young soldier was making a definite impression on me. As I sat looking at the picture, I couldn’t help but wonder who he really was. What kind of man was behind this military facade he was so valiantly trying to show forth? What were some of the thoughts going through his mind as he acted out this temporary role of assault-trooper?

I could only speculate, but perhaps he had come to the army from a rural area — perhaps he was a young rice farmer. Or maybe he had come from a city where he spent his workdays assembling bicycles for the urban masses. I wanted to talk to him, to ask him these things myself. I wanted to know why he was in the army — whether he was a draftee or a professional soldier. And if he was a conscript, what did he really think of being trained to fight for his country and defend its political ideology? Was he a true patriot, inflamed with the zeal of the revolution? Or was his chief concern this year’s rice crop, or the latest handlebar production quotas?

Did he agree with his superiors that it was now time to teach the obnoxious Vietnamese a military lesson? Or was he disappointed that the new army alert status meant no more weekend walks in the park with his young fiancee? And after I had wondered about all these questions, I realized that I had not yet considered the most important queries of all. I wanted to ask him if he felt comfortable being a soldier. I wanted to ask him if he was really a fighting man at heart. And I most wanted to ask him if he hated the thought of wars and killing as much as I did.

It seemed very unnatural to me that my young friend was exhibiting a facial expression so cold, so angry, so provocative. Was this his normal state, or was he being taught by the teachers of war to subdue his more civilized nature and play the role of a murderous animal? The more I looked upon this young man, the more I felt that the real man that he was, was far different than this picture of him so sensationally presented to me by this magazine. And suddenly it struck me how incongruous this young Chinaman and war really were. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of defiance at this brash attempt by the teachers of the war to convince me that this was my enemy. For despite appearances to the contrary, I knew that this was a man far different from this alarming photo-image of him.

The teachers of war would have us believe that our enemy is some man who is swayed by an ideology and dead-set on converting the rest of the world to his point of view. And because his ideology is wrong, he must be considered our enemy. His ideological mistake constitutes justification for ending his life. This is the philosophy of the teachers of war. But is this so?

What, I asked myself, was the real enemy here? Was my enemy a geographically and ideologically foreign man, like this young Chinese conscript? Or was my enemy, our enemy, the nature of man so willing to make enemies? — the nature of man so willing to fight wars? — the nature of man so loveless that it would attempt to rob another of his most precious possession — life itself? The real question to be considered here was not which ideological side we were on. The real question was which side of man were we on?

Not I really wanted to meet my newfound Chinese friend. I wanted to reach out and clasp his strong hand to demonstrate to him what side of man I was on. I wanted to prove to him through the example of my friendship that all that he had learned from the teachers of war was wrong. I wanted to have a long talk with him about life. I wanted to meet his fiancee, to share in the joy they would feel at seeing each other again. I wanted to meet his family, to sit and sup with them in peace, and to be a living example to them of the side of man which is a rebuke to every foul thing on this earth.

And late at night, when the world lay asleep and the stars were revealing their unparalleled brilliance, my friend and I would go for a long walk. We would discuss war. We wouldn’t speak in terms of guns, or bullets, or bombs. We would speak in terms of making holy war on carnal war. And we would lay out an invincible strategy by which carnal war would be defeated. Our battle-plan would look something like this:

If war requires hate, we will love.
If war required intolerance, we will listen.
If war requires selfishness, we will sacrifice.
If war requires mad dash, we will be patient.
If war requires nationalism, our scope will be universal.
If war requires technological skill, we will study literature.
If war requires fanaticism, we will be wise.
If war requires fear, we will be courageous.
If war requires guns, we will make bread.
If war requires death, we will live.

I suddenly found myself staring out the window into the wintry cold. Somehow the frozen scene didn’t appear so bleak, despite appearances to the contrary. I turned to my pad with one sentence I had reached the profundity for which I had been searching:

WAR: THE ULTIMATE DENIAL OF THE POSSIBILITY OF GOOD.