

HERB CAEN



Hoping Against Hope

AFTER ALL these years of despair, is it really almost over? Walk down the street and talk to the people and you get the same reaction, ranging from cynicism to apathy. "Politics," sneers the neat news vendor at Fifth and Mission. "An election gimmick," ventures the bootblack up the block. "It'll go on and on like the Thirty Year War," predicts a doctor. "From a business standpoint," chips in an Oakland businessman, "not too bad a war . . ."

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IT HAS BEEN part of our lives for so long now. You wake up in the morning feeling pretty good for a change and look out the window at the glorious city on a beautiful day — and a few seconds later something starts gnawing at you again, some grim and shapeless thought that removes the joy and darkens the sunlight. Of course: the goddam war. There are children 10 years old who've lived with it all their lives. There are young men who were 10 when it started and who died in places that aren't listed on map to this day. "The awful geography lesson," as Hans Kaltenborn once called it. Tonkin Gulf, Cam Ranh Bay, Long Binh, Ben Suc, My Lai — oh, especially My Lai — names that rose out of that dark-starred land to burn like napalm. But like Vimy Ridge, Kasserine Pass, Pusan and the other bloody lessons, they will be forgotten.

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PEACE AT LAST? Well, maybe that's asking too much, here near the end of the war nobody declared, few wanted and hardly anybody understood, but a cease-fire is better than nothing. Besides, "peace" is a tainted word, probably Communist-inspired. We who marched for peace as far back as 1965 were reviled as reds and traitors and spat upon. We who wore the peace symbol and gave the "V" sign got the middle finger in return from the 100 Per Centers. An American Flag decal on your possibly American car meant "I support the war and hate hippies." People who have never been closer to combat than a pro football game sported bumper stickers describing the peace symbol as "The Footprint of the American Chicken" — the peace symbol worn on the helmet of grunts in action. Black grunts more than half the time, in this losers' war.

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MILLIONS OF LIVES, billions of dollars, misery without measure, all this obscene spilling of blood and guts to turn the clock back to Geneva in 1954, to keep Ho Chi Minh from getting elected President of a unified Vietnam. That part worked. Vietnam will eventually get someone less civilized and intelligent than Ho, that is our great contribution. The memories that tear and claw: Mr. Nixon suggesting we send nuclear weapons to the French at Dienbienphu, Mendes-France vowing to end the Indochina War in 30 days if elected (and apologizing because it took a little longer), the Green Berets, the wild man with the Pedernales accent who called us "Nervous Nellies" . . .

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WE LEARNED a lot, we who are fortunate enough to survive this nightmare trip through Insanity Fair. The United States suddenly became Oriental and had to "save face." Dean Rusk became more inscrutable (and intolerable) day by day, eyes slanting and cold. McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow, Schlesinger—if history is fair and just, one shivers at the fate awaiting them. Anybody who wasn't a "Nervous Nellie" had to be crazy or drunk, preferably the latter but inevitably the former. After Tonkin Gulf, any depredation and degradation was permissible; to prove our credibility, we committed the incredible. The night air was filled with the roar of planes whose missions we learned about months later, if at all. Troop ships slipped in and out of port in dead of night, as if the United States was ashamed. The CIA's secret armies, Air America, heroin deals with tinpot dictators . . .

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IT MAY BE ending but the scars are deep enough to outlast this generation. On the most trivial local level, the old friendships that were scuttled over Vietnam are legion. "No amnesty!" cries the President, but we were all draft dodgers, all guilty. Those who spoke out against the war didn't shout loudly enough. Those who supported it were the good Germans in an experience that will receive history's harshest judgment. Many of those who went to fight — especially those who were out on the point — were the poor, the black, the friendless; not too many of the young men of rich and powerful families ended face down in a rice paddy. Around Pacific Heights dinner tables, 60-year-old hawks who flew desks in World War II drew expansively on their smuggled Havanas and said "Hanoi should be nuked out of existence." About the tortured Vietnamese people, they turned into Colonel Blimps, substituting "gooks" for "wogs." The new imperialists, a century late.

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ENDING, the strangest war, the war to "contain communism" as the President flew off, smiling, to the capitals of communism. A war without songs, without heroes, without troops marching off to glory or marching home to the kisses of pretty girls and the cheers of the patriotic multi-

tude . . . A war that nobody won and everybody lost: Only one haunting question remains: have we learned anything?