

Poster

What the Peace Is All About

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Until the man got on the air and said the words, until he made the announcement that on the nineteenth hour of the 27th day, the guns will fall silent, there was a black, joking suspicion he might have one more double-cross in him. He could have gotten on the tube to tell us North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked our destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin.

He didn't, so take the peace and run. He said it is peace with honor, but by this time the rest of us know that peace is honor. Yet for many who hated this war the most, who fought the fighting the most, the great and green fact that the war has stopped doesn't elicit joy. Partly this is so because after the blood bath of the last four years, relief and thankfulness is as happy an emotion as a sane person can feel.

Part of it is him, Nixon. After what he and Kissinger have done there are some who retch at the notion that they should be thought of as peace makers. It will take time for us to learn how to moderate our feelings toward our officials. For the better part of a generation now, some millions of Americans have looked on anybody and anything connected with the White House as war criminals.

But more than that, for many who found war and the men who made it despicable, the smug assumption in his speech that he was ending the war must have been slightly infuriating. In truth, he was forced out because he had next to nothing left to fight with. The war slid out from under him as it once slid down on top of us.

The Army had quit on him a couple of years ago. He claims he pulled half a million troops out as though he had a choice. Had he left them there, by now they would have been in a state of open opium addiction and naked mutiny.

Next came the fleet. Sabotage, race riots and desertion. The Pacific fleet was beginning to resemble the last days of the Imperial Russian Navy with the carrier Kitty Hawk as the American version of the cruiser Potemkin. A seagoing Watts.

The last to crack was the Air Force. They're the moral robots, the fly boys who tell you, "Look, I don't kill anybody. All I do is read these little dials and put numbers in this little book." It finally got to them, and they started cashing in their pilots' wings.

In his speech the other night when he was thanking people for being patriotic and sacrificing, he didn't mention them. But the deserters, the draft dodgers, the refusers, the defiers and the disobeyers served their country better than those of us who got drafted and went overseas and fought or who stayed home and paid our taxes.

It also takes more guts. A man like Capt. Howard Levy, the Army doctor who was court martialed for refusing an order to train Green Berets, has as much going for him as any POW, more maybe; because when Levy went to his federal prison camp here he had no President of the United States swearing he'd move heaven and earth to get him out. He was alone.

This war should not vanish on us without it being written somewhere that the real American heroes were not the ones decorated by this government but the ones detested by it. The marchers, the protesters, that rabble, they're the ones who served honorably. It will be a long time before you hear anyone in the White House say that. They will continue to repeat that the movement had no effect on them, that while the peaceniks marched they watched the Washington Redskins, but don't you believe it. They were peeking through the curtains.

Likewise, the late-joining, more conventional anti-war sorts will say that it was your Eugene McCarthys and George McGoverns who made the difference. McCarthy lent the movement respectability, is how the thought is usually phrased. Actually, it was the other way around. The only respectability in politics is power; and men like McCarthy got it by hitching on to the peace movement.

Nothing wrong with that as long as some of us remember that you don't need a United States senator or any sort of official approbation to work political miracles. The peace movement showed that it is still possible to challenge this government even in the bloody foam of a war frenzy.

That may be the only useful lesson that Vietnam has to teach. Certainly there are millions of us who will be just as marked by it as men like Nixon were marked by Munich and appeasement. Vietnam has gone on so long that we have come to regard the war there as a species of normality. The thought of an America at peace is almost unnerving. Count up the unnumber of people whose adult lives have been taken up with the fury and weeping of Vietnam. How much easier for them to see "another Vietnam" everywhere than for the Nixon crowd to be seeing new Munichs?

A better moral to extract is that as long as you have your A.J. Mustes, your Dave Dellingers, Paul Goodmans, Martin Luther Kings, Joan Baezes and all the rest on the enlistment registers of the movement, the government can make war, but finally, we can make peace.