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Thoughts On The Movement

Who Does The Movement Move?

by JOHN McDERMOTT

Terry was 18 and a draftee. I met him and three of his buddies atop a machine gun bunker north of the "Iron Triangle" and it was there that we talked. Characterically for a Movement writer, I had spent my time so far in Viet Nam talking only to officers. They knew the same colleges I did, the same books, the same music. It was easier to talk to them and anyway they know more about the war. Finally, however, I determined to talk to some ordinary soldiers. I am glad I did. They taught me very little about the war but an enormous amount about our Movement.

Like most young combat troops I came to meet, Terry and his friends were at first more anxious to hear my views on things than to give their own, but eventually they talked a great deal about their own lives and about the war, and about the draft, Berkeley and the Movement. Terry was by far the most articulate of the four and as we talked on and on through they night, pausing only to watch some strafing helicopters to the south, to listen to outgoing howitzer rounds or to scrutinize the wire barrier 30 meters away, his role as accepted spokesman for the others became more marked. My admiration grew apace.

He had gotten married immediately on receipt of his induction notice. This is a common reaction among young draftees trying to retain at least some link to a familiar civilian world. For Terry, the well-being of his frightened 17-year-old wife placed a heavy burden on his already busy and dangerous life as a combat infantryman. Most U.S. casualties in Viet Nam are inflicted on the infantry battalions which, almost alone among American units, venture outside the mammoth fortified camps that now scar the Vietnamese countryside. Terry was generally aware that these battalions, which total only 75,000 men at

one time, were taking 85,000 casualties a year. More pointedly, in his own platoon only 17 of the original 35 GI's were left after 5 months of combat. Out on patrols and other operations for 3 days of every 5, battling the ever-present mines, mortars and snipers, Terry had very few "interesting experiences" with which the reassure his young wife, and even less time to write about them. Yet he understood that his daily letters were essential to allay the impotent terror she felt and thus he assumed the burden of making sure that every day—even in his absence—a letter of his would be mailed the girl, full of reassurance and affection and topped off with a fund of stories—entirely made up—of the dull rounds of his placid army life.

Of all the soldiers I met Terry was most unusual for his character and intelligence. But in one respect he was typical of the others. His life was dominated by his immediate problems and those of his family, just as it had been before he came into the Army. Then as now it was enough merely to try to do his job and take care of his family. Staying alive in Viet Nam was a new problem but not fundamentally different from the others. He had neither the time nor the inclination to reflect on the difficulties presented him by an incomprehensible fate (he called it "bad luck" and "the breaks"). Handling them was a full time job; he didn't always succeed in it.

What significance has the Movement got for people like Terry? Not just soldiers, though them too, but for all the people of this country whose names don't count in the *Times* ads and whose energy and attention are largely dominated by the demands of their daily lives?

Just before being shipped off to Asia, the Movement, in the person of some university peace demonstrators,

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approached Terry and his buddies in Oakland. The GI's were so disgusted with the "draft-dodgers" that they wanted to beat them up but were satisfied merely to push them around and curse at them. People who "weren't willing to fight for their country" were not worth trouble with the MP's.

The four suspected I was anti-war, deducing their conclusion from the fact that (a) I was a professor, (b) they hadn't heard of *Viet-Report* and, especially, (c) I had long hair. (Every unit I stayed with in Viet Nam coyly offered me the free services of its barber.) When my passionate disagreement about the demonstrators confirmed their conjecture, their friendliness was undiminished. In their eyes the fact that I was in Viet Nam and, for the moment anyway, at a forward defense post apparently entitled me to have any opinion I wanted about anything at all. They turned out to be anxious to talk about the war and our discussion soon ranged freely over the whole Viet Nam controversy but came back again and again to the draft.

They were very much aware of the inequities of the draft. They knew all the connections between being less well off than others, doing less well in school, marrying earlier, getting poorer jobs, earning less and having fewer opportunities for training and advancement later. They realized that others were making it at home while they chanced death or mutilation in Viet Nam—and yet they bore no anger for the lucky ones. Their anger was reserved for the "draft-dodgers."

Under the pressure of counter-arguments Terry made a very curious distinction. You had to accept the principle that it was right "to fight for your country." Terry couldn't understand people who didn't accept that; there had to be something wrong with them. But once you accepted the principle, he thought it was alright to weasel on the consequences. In fact, he admired those who did so and got away with it.

Only stupid guys voluntarily went into the Army. You tried anything you could to get out of it: trick knees, "going queer," playing at being crazy, influence, anything. But you had to accept the principle of fighting for your country and if "the breaks" went against you, you went to Viet Nam and fought—no questions asked and no complaints.

I tried a different tack; it was a dirty war and the Saigon Government a gang of cut-throats. They agreed with enthusiasm, rivalling one another with stories illustrating the point. They thought worse of LBJ than I did and seemed content that the real reason for the war was that somebody was getting rich on it. They weren't sure exactly who and didn't seem to care.

For most of 8 hours we went 'round these same points, but they wouldn't budge. Terry understood the alternatives just as clearly as I did. Draft-card burners showed more guts than "2-S Hawks"; the war was bad for America and for Viet Nam. Still, he didn't like "draft-dodgers" and "demonstrators" and you had to fight for your country. Terry seemed aware of the contradiction he was caught in. He accepted a principle whose consequences he knew were evil. Being an intelligent and reasonable man he found ways to mitigate the consequences: he called them fate. But the principle—and the contradiction—stood undisturbed. Why? Why couldn't he bring himself to oppose a war and a draft system of which he himself was a conscious victim?

Intellectually, Terry had a far closer grasp of the war's evil than a majority of Movement people. Morally, his courage in facing the life dealt him was not less than that of David Mitchell or Dennis Mora. If he couldn't break with the war system, we can't expect his friends and comrades to do so either, and that's the point. The roots of Terry's inability to oppose the war can't be found in his personal inadequacies. We have to look for them instead in the net

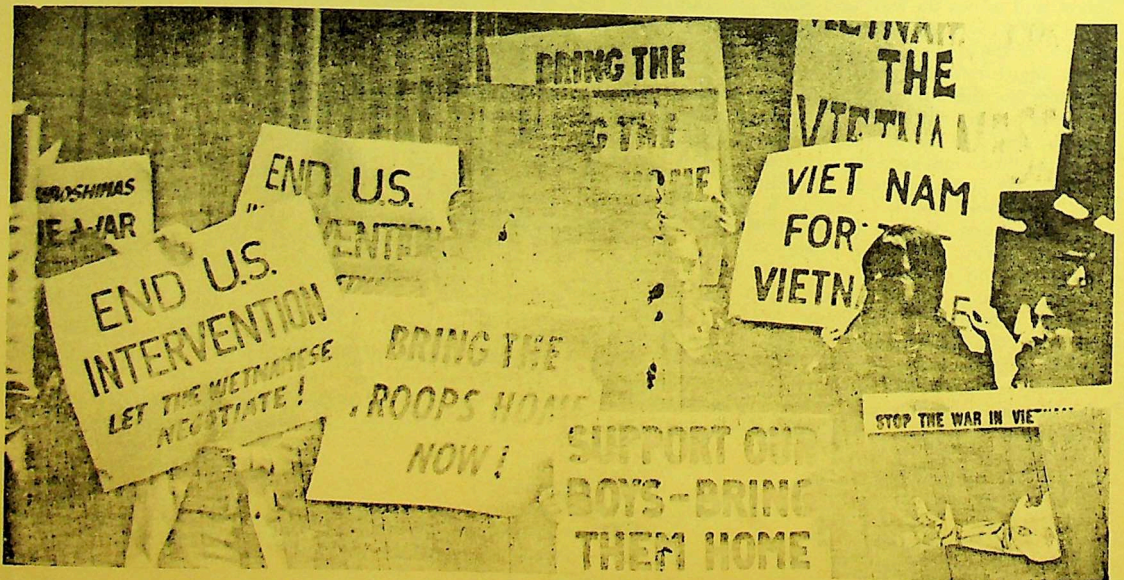


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of social relationships which bind him into a passive acceptance of his fate.

An upper middle class boy is nurtured by his family and school experiences to think himself capable of dealing with the decisive components of his life. Terry isn't. A privileged boy gains sufficient confidence in himself, in his social place and in his judgment of events so that he comes to assume a competence to control his own destiny. Within a university environment which, for all its faults, exaggerates this competence, and within a social world made up of others like himself, it is not strange to find students of average intelligence and character able to pierce the veils which surround government behavior and with courage enough to oppose it.

By contrast the family experiences of lower middle class and blue collar boys are proverbially authoritarian. Their school experiences emphasize the value of "staying in line" and out of trouble. The likelihood of early marriage, uncertain job prospects, the great certainty of being drafted and the pressure of like-situated friends all combine to teach them the same lesson. Thus, even gifted boys like Terry bend before a social system whose oppressiveness they early learn they cannot effectively control.

These are matters of common knowledge even for college freshmen but not, apparently, for our Movement. Terry cannot accept principles of behavior, however noble sounding, which do not have sanction from the authorities which dominate his life. That is the path to certain trouble and all his life he's been taught to avoid such trouble. He knows, for example, he has not been properly trained to deal with political questions, and he knows he and his buddies haven't the skills and resources for political organization. His own limited experience leaves him believing that politics must be either a racket or nonsense; a racket he can't master, or nonsense with which he wisely had better have nothing to do. Thus, for boys like Terry, not to have anything to do with the Movement is a sign of intelligence and good sense. And, when Movement people preach politics at him, like rich men urging paupers to grow rich, he has a perfectly natural and commendable reaction to them; he wants to beat them up.

There is no place for Terry in the Movement and it isn't his fault. That's the point which must be driven home for when we realize that then we'll realize how much the Movement is still a preserve for the children of the over-privileged and a vehicle for their social vision and social ambitions. Rhetorically, the Movement is democratic and humane but socially, and therefore fundamentally, it remains the preserve of the few.

This conclusion may appear at first strange and unfounded. If anything has characterized the Movement it has been its resistance to manipulation and standardization, the central thrusts of our national life. Under slogans such as "participatory democracy" or, more crudely and colorfully, "Do Not Bend, Fold, Spindle, or Mutilate," the Movement has tried to assert the primacy of people and their wishes against the needs of an increasingly rational and mechanical system. Noble words, however, are belied by ignoble deeds. From the fact that the Movement has no place for Terry we must see that its noble

demands have only the *intention* to be an *avant garde* political program for the whole country. In their *social character* they consist so far merely of a defense of the traditional life style and values of the old professional middle class.

The narrow class character of the Movement asserts itself in other ways. The high status assigned the "organizer" has managerial overtones in spite of the disclaimer on manipulation. The propensity for organizing only the poor and the black smacks of the settlement house missionary mentality of the Progressive Era among the young ladies of the best families. Currently the writing of Regis Debray is all the rage because it suggests that small bands of revolutionary intellectuals, largely unrelated to mass organization and effective political analysis, can carry off a successful revolution. In context this must be seen as a flimsy attempt to make a virtue out of our social isolation. Most convincing of all perhaps is the Movement's dogged defense of its peculiar life-style against the needs of its politics. The virtues of a revolutionary are more akin to those of the soldier than of the hippy, but a hippy life style for all remains near, if not quite at the center of the Movement's working political vision.

There is no doubt at all that, squarely faced with a choice, the Movement would opt enthusiastically for the "masses" and against any variant of elitism. It remains the only organized group in the country which would do so, but how can we put flesh on these thin bones? How can the Movement relate itself to people like Terry and become a vehicle for his aspirations?

In the first place, it has to learn that without a privileged place for him, the Movement has no right to its rhetoric. Where Terry actually is, is the home, good or bad, of democracy. The task before the Movement is not to create an ideal democracy for those who "know where it's at." The task is to take people like Terry, the real life Terry with all his inadequacies, distractions and prejudices, and shove him down the road which leads to political power.

Secondly, we have to learn that achieving political power is not a matter of "building consciousness." Terry has all the consciousness he needs. He knows exactly how bad things are because he is the one on the receiving end of this society's injustice, the best vantage point for building consciousness. What Terry needs are direct and familiar ways out of the trap he knows he's in, ways that he understands, ways that are neither nonsense nor a racket. In his eyes, electoral politics is the biggest racket; demonstrations the worst nonsense.

Thirdly, strategies which emphasize "creative disorder" and other scattered forays against established authority are of no use to Terry. The view that the creation of social disorder and chaos will lead unjust authorities to make improvements is not very compelling to anybody. But, for Terry, whose life is a continuous struggle, frequently unsuccessful, to maintain a creative order among family, job, mortgage and other responsibilities, any disorder, creative or Debrayan, can only be seen as a threat to the thin fabric of his life.

This last fact gives us a clue as to how the Movement can be of use to Terry. The everyday life of

ordinary Americans has been struck disordering blows by the political and economic history of the years since World War II. Families already hard-pressed to meet the exigencies of daily life have been forced to adjust to an enormous number and variety of corrosive changes. Television and the schools have created alien and often dismaying social models which their children ape. The intricacies of specialized training and the draft system leave them unable to assist their grown children except by inadequate finances and excessive fatuous advice. New consuming, residence and working patterns disrupt the old harmony of family, neighborhood and civic life, and the disruption is confirmed and deepened by an alien culture purveyed through incomprehensible and uncontrollable mass media. Lurking nearby are recurring racial and international crises whose threat

is sharpened rather than obscured by the murkiness of their origins. Most important of all, the fundamental impulse of all these disordering novelties stems not from the inner needs of people's lives and aspiration but from the evermore insistent demands of an industrial-political-military system bent on creating the same disorders on a world-wide scale.

The distorted and fear-ridden politics of post-World War II America is a projection of the distortion and fear which afflict ordinary Americans as they try to bring life-serving harmony to their daily activities. Even Terry's seeming mindless clinging to a vague patriotic slogan is evidence of this. It is an attempt to impose harmony and value over chaotic circumstances which threaten his family, his future and his very life itself.

It is at the level of fundamental social relationships, rather than in electoral "racketeering" or Debrayan fantasy that the Movement must locate its fundamental tasks. Social organizing among the Terry's of our country rather than political missionary work among the totally poor should be the main, though not the exclusive thrust of our work. We have got to help manipulate social environments so that individuals can learn to be free. Schools must be forced into educating children in how to deal with their neighborhoods, not just the national job-market. High schools should prepare boys and girls to deal with city councils, school boards, police chiefs and draft boards, not just college entrance exams. Neighborhoods have to be recreated and the fundamental services they can perform for families, such as child supervision, mutual self-help and broader social recreation, must be brought into life. People's job lives have to be re-understood and the values of comradeship and craftsmanship re-asserted against the boss's "efficiency." A new people's culture has to be developed, aimed at enhancing the values of life and work and at diminishing the effects of the acquisitive, exploitative and largely sterile culture of the national elite.

For a start we should examine organizations like the VFW, volunteer fire departments, church bowling leagues, the Boy Scouts, PTA's and Rotaries. For all their seeming fecklessness they enter into the real life of our people and provide essential relationships and irreplaceable services for them. Even the American Legion, with its rich fraternal, social, civic, athletic and young people's programs, has ten times more day to day value in the life of our people now than the Movement itself. Can't we do better than the Legion?

No more important or difficult tasks face the Movement than these: to close the immense gap between itself and the direct and immediate concerns of our people, to learn in all their concrete detail the social problems which beset them, to trace out their sources, to play a creative role in developing new ways to contend with them, and to fuse these ways into the democratic folk tradition which still persists so strongly among our people.

A Movement which saw these things included among its primary tasks could lay claim to representing the fundamental aspirations of our people. Its voice would be the voice of the American people and the power of its politics irresistible.

