

**Buried but not Dead**  
**by**  
**Daniel E. White September 25, 2023**

“Good morning, Vietnam” shouted the leader of the band at a live music performance where the music of the 1960s and 1970s was featured. Between songs, the narrator sprinkled his banter with stories about USO tours that visited Vietnam, seemingly always organized by Bob Hope. In the narrator’s words, those shows brought a few hours of connection to home for the soldiers, the long distance notwithstanding.

Before long, I realized that I was getting angry. Why? Certainly not at the performers. They were talented and entertaining, and I liked all of the tunes they played. It took me a while to realize why.

For men my age, we were thrust into a situation not of our own making where we might well be called upon to go to war in a distant land most guys would not find on a map. That war was for an idea that didn’t animate very many of the soldiers: to oppose communism taking over in a foreign land.

As a generation of young men, we were divided. More men enlisted than were drafted although those who enlisted may have done so to avoid the randomness of assignment for draftees. Resistance to the draft was widespread, sometimes violent. Well-to-do people were more likely to find ways around the draft which meant that the war was mostly fought by those economically less well off. (That is hardly unique in history.)

As a Political Science major who had studied history, I knew that Vietnam’s leaders, Marxists though they were, had tried to align themselves with the United States against the French after World War Two. They had taken seriously one of FDR’s Four Freedoms—the freedom of self-determination. But the US backed the French, worried about the situation in Europe where communism was a strong movement. In the ensuing war between the Vietnamese and the French, the French were defeated decisively.

Following that defeat, the international community proposed an election so that the Vietnamese could choose their own leaders. The U.S. opposed the election, probably because they knew the Marxist, Ho Chi Minh, would win. Within a decade, the US was the foreign power fighting the Vietnamese.

I believed that my country was asking its young men to get involved in the civil war of another country. I could not see the sense of that.

All of the emotions I felt then, I tamped down. I proceeded through the Selective Service System, holding five different classifications, not unlike many of my peers who knew

how to work the system. Ultimately, I failed the physical because of an ulcer, likely caused by the 18 months of worry, and then moved on with my life.

When the narrator talked about the separation, fear, anxiety, injury and death brought on by the war, not to mention the psychological costs to countless men and women, those tamped-down feelings erupted.

It didn't have to be that way, I lamented. That's why I was angry. And, that national misadventure had personal ramifications.

Happily, the music washed away the anger. When the band closed with "Let the Sunshine In," I was back to my cautiously hopeful self.

That unexpected ten-minute emotional journey was a caution signal for me. Something I thought I had buried was not dead. I am certain that, about that war I am not alone, and that that war would not be the only catalyst for people burying unpleasantness in order to move on with their lives. It is a common coping mechanism.

People of a Certain Age, how many times have you and I observed some cataclysm or tragedy, whether it directly affected us or not, and lamented, "it didn't have to be that way?" If we believe we have some agency over our lives, is anything ever inevitable?

Some religious traditions believe in pre-destination, the idea that your eternal fate is sealed, not to mention your fate on earth, at birth. That thought trivializes any deity, of course, by viewing the deity as little more than a puppeteer. More common in western faith traditions is the idea of free will. If one exercises free will in an acceptable way, adhering to certain principles, the outcomes in this life and the next are likely to be favorable.

Assuming that individuals can exercise free will, cannot nations do so as well? Given free will, how come our species seems to choose to form a fist more often than offer a hug? Why do nations, on the big stage of international relations, and everyday people in the everyday world, ever believe that killing whomever we define as adversaries will do anything more than set the stage for the next conflict?

How wonderful it would be to "Let the Sunshine In!" Maybe one day our descendants will figure out how to make that happen.

Meanwhile, we might all do well to be aware of that which is buried but might not yet be dead.

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