OMNI VIETNAM WAR NEWSLETTER #3, September 25, 2012, Compiled by Dick Bennett for a Culture of Peace. (#1 July 24, 2011; #2 June 9, 2012).

My blog: War Department and Peace Department
http://jamesrichardbennett.blogspot.com/
Newsletters:
http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/
Index:
http://www.omnicenter.org/omni-newsletter-general-index/
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1. Remarks by the President at the Commemoration Ceremony of the ...
www.whitehouse.gov/.../remarks-president-commemoration-ceremon... Cached
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May 28, 2012 – Today is **Memorial Day**, when we recall all those who gave everything in the ... And today begins the 50th commemoration of our **war in Vietnam**. ... It was a **national** shame, a disgrace that should have never happened.

**STRUGGLE TO TELL THE STORY OF US WARS**

By Dick Bennett  
1,383 words 9-3-12

**Rise of US Imperialism Post-WWII**

WWII under President Roosevelt released not only indescribable, immeasurable destructive energy, but also an enormous wave of idealism for the future: workers union rights, the Four Freedoms, the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But soon, by 1946 the reaction swept in just as following WWI against the League of Nations. Instead of the dream of ending wars by nations united for peace and cooperation, nations resumed their old us and them. The United States empire, already established in the Pacific, took flight as the Leader of the Free World—Taft-Hartley legislation, Truman Doctrine, Cold War.

Following Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the US began to developed new nuclear weapons, most of them over several decades, each matched by the Soviet Union (US/SU), which innovated once or twice itself in the world’s most dangerous arms race. In 1947 the foundation was laid for the US National Security State: the Armed Forces united under the Pentagon, the War Department euphemized into the Department of “Defense,” the CIA and the National Security Administration established.

**Korean and Vietnam Wars**

NATO was formed for the “Free World” against the Soviets. The Soviets created their bloc against Western invasion—from Napoleon to Hitler and, they feared, to NATO. And the Cold War shifted into high gear. But Victorious WWII was not to be repeated by the US. The Korean War ended in stalemate. And then the Vietnam War torpedoed the US Imperial Ship of State. How measure victory and defeat? If your goal was body count, then the US won: between two and three million Vietnamese were killed; tens of thousands more if you count fetuses aborted. But by other measures the US lost, and retreated back to the mainland.

**Vietnam War Syndrome**

This defeat has rankled military leaders and the warrior patriots in government. It became important to them to regain the confidence commensurate to an Empire based upon armed force, invasion, and eventually occupation. Like football teams that play sure losers to start the season, the US began with victories in the 1950s—including overthrowing the elected Iranian and Guatemalan governments. But Vietnam surprised the imperial Pentagon, for how could an impoverished country withstand the firepower of the US of A?

The withdrawal was a humiliation for the gunslingers. They would not rest until the stain was erased. President Reagan invaded Nicaragua and Grenada. President Bush I invaded Panama and Iraq. President Clinton invaded Serbia. And President Bush II invaded Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan.

**President Obama**

Thus President Obama’s policy statement May 2012 was no surprise as much as it was a culmination of long Pentagon and other warrior pressures. In May, 2012, President Obama signed a proclamation establishing the “Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War” to begin this year, to
last for thirteen years (to Veterans Day 2025), and to be conducted by the Pentagon. (2012 is the 50th if you mark the war’s beginning in January 1962, when open combat by US forces began.) Why this attention? It is certainly not to acknowledge the deaths of several million civilians, atrocities like the My Lai Massacre, war-crime chemical weapons (Agent Orange: dioxin), or the use of twice the explosive tonnage as employed by all sides in WWII and against a mainly peasant people who had fought to liberate themselves first from French colonialism and then from US neocolonialism. No, for Obama, campaigning for the presidency, the “national shame” was failure of the US to fully honor our killed and surviving troops, and the commemoration is meant to assuage guilt fully and finally by commemorating each battle of the war (Hue, Khe Sanh, Saigon, and on and on) and those US soldiers who fought in each, whether guilty of atrocities or not. Thus it is an attempt to delete from the national memory, according to one historian, the “basic facts about the most horrendous imperialist (North-South) war of the twentieth century, as well as the most unpopular war in U.S. history.” Erasing the Vietnam Syndrome forever, Obama asserted, would make the US “stronger than before.”

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Chris Burden’s The Other Vietnam Memorial.
Obama’s effort to efface responsibility for massive US criminal behavior and to blame the victim is inseparable from the history of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (and similar memorials around the country). For example, in 1977 President Carter, who authorized the establishment of the Memorial, denied any US obligations to Vietnam, because the destruction, he said, was mutual.

The eventual memorial as finally assembled offers mixed purposes and affects. The original Wall, designed by Maya Lin, does not heroize warriors; it is the antipode of the Marine Corps Memorial. It softens the divisiveness of the war by omitting opponents of the war, patriotic effusions, or signs of defeat and humiliation. Rather, by listing the names of the killed soldiers, the monument neutrally permits to each visitor their private reflection on personal loss. Ordinary people interpret the discourse of the dead without national intervention.

The Additions
Of course, such a monument for people, not nation, outraged many. One Pentagon officer wondered why “we” should build a memorial to losers. Like him, many saw Lin’s Wall as a counter-monument to national glory and soldiers’ heroism, some approvingly, others disapprovingly, some of those vehemently: they wanted a triumphal monument, like the Iwo Jima monument. The monument’s chronological, democratizing, equalizing (for Lin “the heart of the design”) differed from traditional hierarchical war monuments and the hierarchical orientation of officials. The conflict resulted in the present compromise: the addition of a sculpture of three combat soldiers and a US flag. Finally was added a sculpture of women, the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, another arrangement of three figures. In the opinion of some commentators, these additions, even the women’s memorial, obscured the Wall’s inclusivity and equality with “patriarchal demands.”

Awareness of Incompleteness, the Need for Further Addition or Alternative
But these debates and these additions do not grasp the disquietude many of us feel morally when we contemplate the immense absence the Wall displays. The Wall of Names, in its original spare design and especially with its additions, expresses the assumption that the US is the sole injured party, because it deletes reference to the devastation of Vietnam and the slaughter of two to three million Vietnamese, not to mention those killed earlier by the French with our financing. It is the Wall of US names. The Vietnamese youth killed for US anticommunism and Sovietphobia, the Vietnamese children lost and injured by bombs and dioxin for US nationalist and commercial expansion westward, deserved no remembrance, no pity. The arrogance of our leaders, their patriotic rhetoric and duplicitous justifications for mass killing made them incapable of perceiving the enemy’s children as victims.
Given all of these failures, Chris Burden’s sculpture, *The Other Vietnam Memorial*, takes its place as the great alternative to the Vietnam Memorial Wall and as the greatest memorial shaming of US nationalist barbarism. First shown in 1991 in the Museum of Modern Art, Burden’s art symbolically registers the estimated 3 million casualties by using a basic catalogue of nearly 4,000 Vietnamese names permuted by a computer. These names were then etched onto 3 by 6.5 foot copper plates sandwiched together in pairs and mounted into steel frames hinged to a 13-foot-high steel pole. Imagine a giant, Rolodex, symbolically listing the enemy’s casualties—names that US Pentagon and president after president would expunge from US collective historical memory.

Even more significantly, Burden’s great monument to memory and empathy reminds us not only of US Vietnam War crimes but of the similar crimes in the several dozen US invasions of other countries since WWII. Instead of the glorification of chauvinism, killing, soldiers, military glory, and jingoistic nationalism, Burden, by offering an alternative, inclusive vision of species unity, calls into question the past 70 years of fear-and-hatred-mongering and its product, permanent war. It does not offer consolation and closure, as does Maya Lin’s Wall, at least to some. Rather, it calls for sympathy and justice for innocent “enemies,” for the abolition of jingoistic monuments, for resistance to present and future US wars of aggression, and once seen it will not let us sleep.

References:
---For a list of recent books on US imperialism and militarism see the 46 references for OMNI’s US Imperialism Book Forum (Sept. 21, 2012). Especially recommended: Blum’s *Killing Hope* and *Rogue Nation*, Nicholas Davies’ *Blood on Our Hands*, and Chalmers Johnson’s Blowback tetralogy.


During the Vietnam war, Vietnamese peace activists made extraordinary sacrifices, including self-immolation - to try to end the fighting. This is the first study in English of this vitally important mass movement.

Topmiller examines the Buddhist objections to the war that ultimately led to the Buddhist Crisis of 1966. In one of the first in-depth discussions of an indigenous South Vietnamese peace movement, Topmiller explores the Buddhist led agitation aimed at installing a civilian government through free elections as part of a larger effort to end the fighting in South Vietnam. Based on extensive research and interviews with many participants, the Lotus Unleashed highlights the intense importance of Buddhist efforts, making clear the impact of Vietnamese internal politics on U.S. decision making and the missed opportunities for peace caused by Washington’s indifference toward South Vietnamese opinions on the war.
"Tells the story of how the Buddhist inspired Struggle Movement sought to challenge the legitimacy of the government of south Vietnam in the middle years of the 1960s."

Contemporary Buddhism.

Red Clay On My Boots
Reviewed by Karen St. John, VietNow Contributing Editor

With his family steadfast against his plans to enlist in the Marines and go to Vietnam, 17-year old Robert J. "Doc" Topmiller did the next best thing – he joined the Navy in 1966, under the Kiddy Cruiser Program, which permitted those under the age of 18 to enlist, with an out date of one day before their 21st birthday.

At Great Lakes Naval Station, north of Chicago, he entered the training for "Hospital Corpsman" (medic). After completing his medical training stateside, Topmiller found himself in two months of intensive field training on Okinawa, and then arrived in Danang, Vietnam, in mid-January of 1968, and immediately continued onward to the Marine base at Khe Sanh. In between treating serious wounds and rat bites, Topmiller filled sand bags and dug bunkers.

Then, in the wee hours of January 21, the enemy began an assault of mortars, shells, and rockets that varied in intensity and damages for 77 days, until April, when the siege was finally ended. In June of 1968, General Westmoreland no longer needed the Khe Sanh base for defense, and approved its abandonment and demolition.

"Doc" wastes no time in describing the results of the Khe Sanh battle. He lists the casualties of Khe Sanh, and describes his troubling emotional reactions to the experience: “... a lifetime of profound alienation from the society around me.”

"Doc" doesn’t stop with the assault on Khe Sanh. He is critical of the current administration’s attitude toward war, and has nothing but disdain for the "neo-conservatives" who are always ready to attack the patriotism of Vietnam veterans.

Red Clay On My Boots is a busy book – bouncing from Khe Sanh in 1968, to any of “Doc’s” 11 trips back to Vietnam. We read of the religious persecution that now exists in that country, references to the military tragedy of My Lai, and, the devastating and long-lasting effects of Agent Orange.

Several interesting photos document “Doc’s” trips to Vietnam, and some will
cause uneasy reactions: a U.S. helicopter on display as a trophy at the Tà Cón Airport Monument, bodies strewn along a water point, the author drinking beer and toasting with members of the Peoples Army of Vietnam, and the children who suffer the effects of Agent Orange.

“Doc” writes well, and with candor. He is articulate, logical, thoughtful, and insightful. Because of his educational rather than emotional approach, Red Clay On My Boots more often reads like a social studies lesson than a personal story. The reader might feel grateful to “Doc” for that, though. His slightly detached, intellectual style in presenting an account of one of the worst battles of the Vietnam War makes it easier to absorb the harsh statistics of that horrific assault.

Instead of assailing the senses with vivid descriptions of the sight and smell of blood, death, and tears, the facts are put gently upon the reader’s mind to absorb, calming a heart that starts to beat too fast over the account of the siege, or clearing a throat that starts to feel choked over the loss and destruction of so many lives.

Red Clay On My Boots is an excellent reference book for the historic events leading up to the Vietnam War, and our country’s misguided approach to the conflict. It’s hard not to make comparisons to the current conflicts in the Middle East, and feel apprehension.

You can learn a great deal about the Vietnam War from this book, and you will also learn a great deal more about “Doc” than he may have intended. Even he could not escape the very good job he does of placing himself upon each page of his narrative.

“Doc’s” inability to resist the pull of the Vietnam War is evident in the broken promise he made to his wife not to visit Khe Sanh in 1996, and the repeated visits to Vietnam. He takes the weight of the war upon his own shoulders, apologizing for the destruction to the innocents – even apologizing to the enemy. He seeks forgiveness for himself and for our country, in the hope of receiving the healing forgiveness in return.

The red clay of Khe Sanh isn’t just on “Doc’s” boots. It’s under his skin, in his air passages, and in his hair. He walks around in a psychic layer of red clay dust, like the sweet character on Charlie Brown, unable to shake the dust off or move out of its cloud. He breathes it in through his survivor’s guilt and flashbacks, through his multiple returns to “in country,” and even through his teaching.

May “Doc” and other veterans living with the red clay dust of Khe Sanh, find their breath of fresh air soon. Heaven knows they certainly deserve it.

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Binding Their Wounds: America's Assault on Its Veterans

Description
It is in the nature of our naiveté about war that we prepare for combat but rarely for its aftermath. Vietnam vet and historian Robert “Doc” Topmiller began Binding Their Wounds while he was still struggling with his own PTSD but died before he could finish the book. Completed by his friends, the book provides an engaging account of America’s attitudes and treatment of its veterans, from the revolutionary war forward. Major chapters focus on the failures of the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs (and its predecessors) to address the needs of vets exposed to radiation in post–World War II military experiments, vets suffering from Gulf War illnesses, and vets exposed to Agent Orange during Vietnam. Particular attention is given to the persistent issues of trauma and suicide in soldiers and veterans. This volume documents strengths and shortcomings of military and VA responses to the needs of our servicemen and women and suggests ways that we can do better, including the avoidance of armed conflict. Rich in personal accounts of veterans, Doc’s own story is compellingly woven into the narrative.

See detailed rev. in The Catholic Worker by Bill Griffin (June-July 2012).