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Witness

“We Were Not the Good Guys Anymore”

Oliver Stone

I WAS BORN IN 1946, in New York City, at the dawn of the Cold War. My father raised me Republican and instilled in me a fear of the Russians and Communism. By the standards of the 50s he was right, but he never expected and was horrified when his son went to war to fight for those beliefs he had been raised with. I arrived in Saigon in June, 1965, at the age of 19—the day the My Canh floating restaurant blew up. The Marines and First Infantry troop were drinking in Tundo Street, carrying weapons at that time and firing them off in the air in the first blush of our victory. We were the good guys, we *were* going to win. It was the war of my generation. It was *glorious*. When I returned in 1967, as a combat soldier, the first thing that struck me was that it had all started to change for the worse. The Vietnamese who had welcomed us in 1965, had now started the slow process of taking our dollars and hating us for it. Corruption and prostitution were rampant. PX supplies were being ripped off by South Vietnamese and American Lifer Sergeants, who were later implicated in scandals over this war. Many people came home in body bags while others made millions of dollars. There were six or seven noncombatants for every combatant, many of them eating steak and lobster dinners each night at Da Nang or Cam Ranh or Saigon or Quin Hon or Quang Tri or Bien Hoa and the many other pig heavens. The situation in the rear in fact began to resemble, to the boonie rats and grunts, a Las Vegas or a Miami Beach. We brought a corporate Miami beach/Las Vegas mentality to Vietnam. When Johnson pulled out in March, 1968, it was metaphorically over. The grunts sensed it right away, we were never going to win but we had to withdraw with a semblance of dignity. That semblance of dignity took four more years of deceit and death, and in the moral vacuum

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there was never any clear reason to us why we should die. Dissension and mutiny grew in the ranks between draftees and officers and Lifer Sergeants. Fraggings on a scale never seen in modern war occurred, black/white relations grew worse with King's assassination. The use of marijuana and eventually heroin engulfed a portion of the troops. The ultimate corruption was, of course, President Johnson sending only the poor and uneducated to the war—in fact, practicing class warfare wherein the middle and upper classes could avoid the war by going to college or paying a psychiatrist. I am sure to this day that if the middle and upper classes had gone to Vietnam, their mothers and fathers (the politicians and businessmen) would have ended that war a hell of a lot sooner; in fact, politicians' sons, if not politicians themselves, should be sent to every war first. So I think that ultimately we were destined to lose this war even before we started; or to paraphrase Sun Tzu, "every war is won before it is ever fought." We were destined to lose because this war had no moral purpose and it was fought without any moral integrity. And we did lose because basically, as a character in *Platoon* says, "We were not the good guys anymore."

I walked away from that war, 21 and benumbed, and something of an anarchist in my thinking. It took me several years to recover some form of social identification, and when I did, in the mid 1970s, I thought that the nightmare was behind us. The Pentagon Papers had come out, then Watergate . . . we were on a roll. Never did I expect to see these events occur again. But they did. The combined weight of the three great shocks of the 1970s had shaken America to its core. Watergate, the defeat in Vietnam, OPEC and Japanese economic power were blows to our political, moral and economic confidence and sent us reeling back into a desire for escape and reassuring Reaganism. By 1979, liberalism was dead or dying, murdered by the fact of the hostages in Iran. Whatever resolve Jimmy Carter had, had been killed off. And with Reagan's election, the nightmare in Salvador climaxed. An archbishop, 18 other priests and 4 nuns were murdered by death squads, founded, as I pointed out in my movie, *Salvador*, by people like Jose Medrano and Rene Chacon, who studied with our Green Berets in Vietnam and the International Policy Academy in Washington and at The Jungle School in Panama. But this was the time of the Jeane Kirkpatrick school of thought that manages to distinguish between authoritarian and totalitarian government, and in the

crusading name of anti-communism, from 1980 to 1985, we poured 1.7 billion dollars worth of military and economic aid into a military mafia that was, in fact, a death squad responsible for some 30 to 50 thousand civilian deaths. All in the name of anti-communism.

When I arrived in Honduras, Guatemala, Salvador and Costa Rica in January of 1985, I had a flashback on the order of a *Back to the Future* Spielberg movie. I thought I had returned to Vietnam, 1965, Saigon. It was hot, wet and the American kids were 19 again in green uniforms. Except this was Tequigalpa, Honduras, and I was 38 years old. I talked to the young G.I.s in uniform, technicians many of them, and they were gung ho, no doubts about it, they were fighting communism once again in Nicaragua. We were "saving" Honduras. Some of these people were women now and I suddenly felt like a forgotten older man who was wandering around wondering how this could happen again so quickly in his lifetime. Yet when I went out on the streets with my rascally journalist companion, Richard Boyle, who was played by James Woods in *Salvador*, I was hearing and seeing a different story from the official one: how the dollar, as in Vietnam, had inflated the Honduran economy, how female law students and female members of the middle class were turning to prostitution in bars just to make ends meet, how the Contras had become the corrupt South Vietnamese of 1968, how the Hondurans, who used to like America, now hated us or at least wanted to steal from us, how we are militarizing Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica. And when I asked these kids in uniform, "Do you remember Vietnam?", they looked at me with a kind of vague, disturbed "Why are you talking about this?" look. The fact was they did *not* remember Vietnam, it's that simple: moral amnesia has set in, because the guys who run the country don't remember Vietnam! They don't remember what war means, in terms of suffering, to the body and the soul. The power of forgetting, I have found out as I have grown up, is *not* to be underestimated—ever.

Well, I've gone around in my head and tried to sum all this up, and at least in this stage of my thinking, the only systematic explanation I can derive from all this is the concept of ideology versus, for want of a better phrase, the "Six Inches in Front of My Face" theory. It's a term I came up with from Vietnam where I had to stop being this cerebral educated creature from New York and start dealing with the six inches in front of my face in the jungle, to

start really using, for the first time, sight and smell and sound to deal with the world the way it *is*, not the way it ought to be. The ideologues like Khomeini and Hitler, and on a smaller scale, Reagan, can justify repression and killings because they're not there, they don't feel and taste and smell it.

When the legitimate left wing of Salvador was dragged out of a meeting in a schoolroom in November 1980, tortured by a death squad and were left by the side of the road with their balls stuffed in their mouths, Jeane Kirkpatrick's reaction was "those who live by the sword shall also die by the sword," ignoring the fact that these men, Juan Chacon and Kiki Alvarez among them, were unarmed. This act of horror is, I would say, the equivalent of dragging out the Jesse Jackson wing of the Democratic Party in this country and killing them. The ideologues will tell you it's okay if we do it south of the border. When the nuns were killed, Alexander Haig made some comment about their packing pistols and running a blockade. What Jeane and Ron and Al really need, I think, is to rub their noses in Nicaragua. To talk to people. To deal with the "Six Inches in Front of *Their* Faces." But the ideologues never do. They point their finger at communism as a monolithic evil, but they never settle on the specific. So I guess what I'm saying is let's praise the practical man—the man who negotiates his way through life, who values peace as the supreme domestic virtue, and is willing to make a few compromises and sacrifices to achieve it. The man who can sit down and negotiate with the Russians and the Nicaraguans. Being in the movie business, I've learned only too well that *everything* is negotiable in life—and certainly human lives.

The Cold War has governed my generation's lifespan; has given us Korea and Vietnam and a defense industry that, like a black hole, takes thirty percent of our budget and creates nothing with it and justifies our financial neglect of education, health and welfare; has given us cities with the highest crime rate in the world; has let us decline to eleventh place in the world in per capita income, to 46th in literacy and has put us 2 trillion dollars in debt. It now has actively involved us in a sinister repression of revolution in Salvador and made us wish to destroy another in Nicaragua. It has led us to disregard all legal sanctions and mine harbors in violation of the World Court and, more heartbreaking to me, to defy our own Declaration of Independence which calls for the right of revolution and the right of self-determination. We are now—no question about it—fighting an illegal war financed by our shady arms deals

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with Israel and Iran and the even shadier drug deals of the C.I.A. with the Cuban right wing mafias and contras. With such minds as Ed Wilson and Ted Shackly, with the government now run by people with gangster morals, who have totally forgotten truth—who have totally forgotten the meaning of our own revolution as defined by Jefferson and Washington—what are we becoming? What has happened to us? Where is our sense of outrage?

We have lost our sense of outrage because, in fact, we are becoming as rotten and corrupt as the Russians once were and seem now to be trying to do something about. It is time for a change, it's time for a corporate raid, it's time for a buccaneering spirit to take over the corporation called the USA and unload the fat cat management. The Cold War has eroded America and will *most certainly* ruin it unless my generation brings forth a new voice of reason and intelligence—possibly a political cadre of Vietnam Vets hardened by the sad truths of Vietnam—that can release us from this Cold War mind set and take us beyond existing definitions of left and right in true anarchic fashion (anarchy defined as redefinition). We must redefine communism in its many forms; “rectify the language that declares a city saved by bombing it to pieces,” as Confucius said; attack shibboleths like the defense industry; say “no” to tyrants, left or right; pull our troops out of Europe and Korea. We have to redefine our goals and remember that our own constitution was conceived in a spirit of revolution and self-determination.

Then we may begin the 21st century with a spark of hope and a true and generous revival of the American spirit of liberty for all.