

Comments at Yale Class of 1968 50th reunion “Quaker meeting” session on Vietnam, May 31, 2018 :

I am fairly certain that among all of us who spent extended time in Vietnam. I am the most fortunate. I was extraordinary lucky to be chosen to cover the war for the Los Angeles Times, even though that was my first full-time job in journalism and I knew virtually nothing about the military.

Yet over a period of 19 months, I became the first American journalist to enter and return from Viet Cong territory in South Vietnam— that was the most amazing day of my life. I witnessed Vietnamese women prisoners undergoing convulsions as the result of torture by electricity administered months earlier by South Vietnamese forces, and I interviewed prisoners whose legs had atrophied after being shackled for up to eight years in the most notorious prison in South Vietnam, the so-called “tiger cages.” I found a U.S. government source who over a period of several months handed me a stack of documents, some of them classified, that contradicted virtually everything the U.S. Embassy in Saigon was saying publicly about the war. And I uncovered an operation to smuggle used brass artillery shell canisters out of Vietnam by South Vietnamese generals, netting them as much as a hundred million dollars or more.

For all this, I was expelled from the country by the South Vietnamese government, and I then went on to Cambodia. I covered the war in Cambodia until a few days before the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, when I was evacuated from the capital in a U.S. Marine helicopter.

I went on to cover many other crises around the world, in India, Spain, and China, but I couldn’t shake Vietnam. I finally quit my job and spent many years writing a memoir about the war called *The Mark*. “The Mark” is a term that a few of us used to describe people who got hooked on the war, and it certainly applied to me. I hated the war and thought its prosecution was obscene, but I also loved its adrenaline rush, the intoxicating feeling of being on a mission to explain the war to American readers, the sense that I was covering the most important story in the world. Vietnam made me feel subversive, and it also made me feel I was touching what was most real, taking me to a deeper truth.

It wasn't until I came back home, and started telling my war stories to the woman who became my wife, the wonderfully named Leslie Leslie, that I cried over what I had experienced. I also got depressed, and dealt with depression on and off for the next ten or 15 years. What could I possibly do that would feel as vital as covering the war? It took me a couple of decades to find a satisfying answer to that question.

I'm intensely proud of the work I did in Vietnam. I feel privileged to have had this experience, to have been handed a license to ask virtually anyone any question I could think of related to the war. More than anything else in my life, more even than Yale and with the possible exception of Leslie, Vietnam has been my teacher.