

BOSTON COLLEGE
Third Annual Veterans' Reception
June 1, 2013
Keynote Address by
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Father Monan, Colonel Harrington, Lt. Colonel Gallahue, Mr. Sherwood, Mr. Delaney, Fellow Veterans, Classmates, and friends. Good morning.

I am especially honored to be here with my fellow Veterans, who have lived the teachings of our faith and our Jesuit traditions; recognized our duty of service to God and service to country; and volunteered to serve. I am also humbled with respect to the ultimate sacrifice of 29 of our alumni in Vietnam who are remembered on the memorial behind me. The 60's was a time of deep divisions among our elite educational institutions, but Boston College heeded the call to serve.

Last year, Marine General Jack Sheehan, class of '62, was the keynote speaker. His theme was the Vietnam War. I will continue his theme because Vietnam had such a profound impact on us and on our successors for over two decades.

Fifty years ago, we knew very little about Vietnam or what was to become the Vietnam War. Today, it is remembered by those who served, but is not taught in our classrooms to any significant degree. This morning, I will recount the origins of the war, and hopefully, supplant with facts and truths the many myths about our servicemen and women, their battles, and the outcome of the war.

After World War II, Asia was in a power vacuum. Japan had lost its *de facto* control over most of Asia, and the European countries had lost or were losing their colonial empires. During the War, most countries and colonies had multiple indigenous underground resistance groups (often supported by our OSS) opposing the Japanese. They often joined forces against Japan, but after surrender, they pursued their own agendas and civil wars frequently erupted. Communistic doctrine and theories were espoused by groups in most countries, and they asserted their power and influence within this vacuum. They often found themselves competing against various nationalist groups and former leaders and colonialists attempting to regain power.

China's civil war between Communist and Nationalist groups ended on October 1, 1949 with Mao Tse-Tung prevailing over Chang Kai-Shek. Communist and Nationalist factions in Korea were partitioned North and South of the 38th Parallel

by U.S. and Russian forces in 1948. In June 1950, Communist North Korea invaded South Korea; in October Chinese Communist troops entered the war on the side of the North. The U.S. and the U.N. defended South Korea, and after several losses, setbacks, and reattacks, eventually pushed the Communists back to the 38th Parallel. In July 1951, peace talks started, a truce was negotiated, and an armistice was finally signed in July 1953. Malaysia's civil war lasted almost ten years; with the help of the British Army, the Nationalists prevailed over the Communists in 1965. Similar civil wars occurred in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The French attempted to reclaim their colonies in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and they were resisted by a number of indigenous factions, including a Communist one led by Ho Chi Minh. The French asked for assistance; the U.S. provided material help, but no troops or air support.

After the start of the peace process in Korea, the Chinese were able to withdraw their soldiers and artillery from much of Korea; they moved them to Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam. In 1954, the artillery was used to overcome France's "impenetrable" fort at Dien Bien Phu, and the French lost their Indochina colonies.

Under the auspices of the U.N., the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954, and Vietnam was divided into a Communist North under Ho and a Nationalist South under Ngo Dinh Diem. A vote to unify the country was scheduled for 1956, but never took place. Ho withdrew 90% of his troops to the North, but left about 10,000 troops in the South to infiltrate South Vietnam, disguised as farmers and fishermen—the genesis of the National Liberation Front, popularly called the Viet Cong ("VC"). He ordered these troops to start a civil war in late 1957, which included assassinating village chiefs and leaders of various Nationalist political parties.

Eisenhower became concerned in 1957 that, under the influence and support of Russia and China, all of Asia might fall to the Communists as Cuba in fact did in 1958-1959. If Vietnam fell, he feared that other countries in Asia would follow—the Domino Theory. In 1959-1960, 750 advisors were sent by the U.S. to train the South Vietnamese Army ("SVA").

Kennedy followed Eisenhower's lead and incrementally sent more advisors, such that by December 31, 1963, 16,000 U.S. troops/advisors were in South Vietnam. North Vietnam and the VC committed numerous hostile and aggressive acts against U.S. forces and South Vietnam. On August 2, 1964, the U.S. Destroyer *USS Maddox* was attacked by North Vietnamese PT boats in Gulf of Tonkin near Haiphong. Two days later, a second attack against *USS Maddox* and *USS Turner Joy* was alleged. On August 7, Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution,

which is cited as giving President Johnson the authority to order attacks upon North Vietnam; no formal Congressional declaration of war was ever enacted. Although not publicized at the time of the Tonkin incident, Commander James Stockdale was flying fighter cover over the destroyers during the second event and saw no PT boats, war vessels, torpedoes, or any firing from North Vietnam; to him, the destroyers appeared to be steaming in panic circles, with their crews firing at waves. He sent his report up the chain of command; it contradicted the reports of the two ships and was ignored.

Stockdale is my great hero. A month later, he was shot down, imprisoned, and tortured for 8 years. He never disclosed his judgment that the August 4 Tonkin Gulf incident never occurred, which would have been of great propaganda value to North Vietnam.

After General Westmoreland was placed in command of MACV in June 1964, U.S. troops were increased over time to 543,000, as were ships and aircraft which could hit targets in North and South Vietnam. Rather quickly, the U.S. took over the fighting for the SVA and applied a war of attrition, search-and-destroy strategy. The SVA was then assigned to pacification and did not receive much combat training or modern equipment. Starting in 1965 and continuing to 1971, our Army and Marines fought numerous ground battles: Ia Drang Valley; Cu Nghi; Kim Son Valley; Cedar Falls; Battle of the Hills; Con Thien; Dong Son; Khe Sanh; Hill 43; Dak To; Tet (including Battles of Saigon and Hue); Mini and Post Tet; Hamburger Hill; Cambodia Campaign; Operation Jefferson Glen; and numerous others. We lost 58,267, including eight women nurses; 153,299 wounded and hospitalized; 75,000 severely disabled; and 23,214 totally disabled. Amputations and crippling wounds were 300% higher than WWII. After the war, General Giap admitted that 1.1 million North Vietnamese Army ("NVA") soldiers were killed in action, 300,000 were missing and presumed dead, and there were about one million civilian casualties. Ho once said that for every American he killed, he would lose 10 NVA soldiers. Giap's strategy resulted in losing 24 NVA soldiers for each American killed.

In fact, our soldiers and Marines never lost a battle in the field. These facts were not reported by the U.S. media, who often had us losing. For example, Khe Sanh and Tet, in January to April 1968, were reported as defeats for us and as substantial victories for the NVA and the VC. In fact, the NVA and the VC attacked with 88,000 troops, had some initial successes in Hue and Saigon and breaching a wall at our Embassy, but they were beaten back in a few days and suffered over 50,000 killed—almost eight times that of the U.S. and South Vietnam losses; more importantly, the entire leadership and most of the rank and file of the VC or Viet

Minh were killed. After Tet, the war was no longer fought by any indigenous VC fighters but only the NVA in both guerilla and main battle campaigns. At Khe Sanh, after losing thousands of soldiers, the NVA was never able to dislodge the Marines.

Atrocities happen, unfortunately, in every war. When the tragic Mai Lai incident occurred in March 1968, it was heavily covered by the media. Although U.S. soldiers were guilty of atrocities there and elsewhere, they paled in comparison to those of the NVA, which, for example, executed 2,000 civilian prisoners in Hue during the Tet Offensive and were given medals for it by their government. Atrocities are crimes. Calley and others who committed atrocities were court-martialed—not honored.

These battles were fought bravely and well by U.S. forces. The combat and the battles described were no physical or mental cakewalks. Our combat troops saw over 240 days of combat in their one-year tour. Their World War II counterparts saw about 40 days of combat in a four-year period.

James Webb, USNA 1968, a Marine platoon and company commander in Vietnam, was awarded the Navy Cross, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart; he later became a writer, Navy Secretary, and U.S. Senator. Webb articulately described his troops' performance in battles and firefights in the article "Heroes of The Vietnam Generation" (*American Enterprise*, September, 2000) as follows: "When I remember those days and the very young men who spent them with me, I am continually amazed, for these were mostly recent civilians barely out of high school, called up from the cities and the farms to do their year in Hell and then return. . . The salty, battle-hardened 20-year-olds teaching 19-year-olds the intricate lessons of that hostile battlefield. The unerring skill of the young squad leaders as we moved through unfamiliar villages and weed-choked trails in the black of night. The quick certainty with which they moved when coming under enemy fire. Their sudden tenderness when a fellow Marine was wounded and needed help. Their willingness to risk their lives to save other Marines in peril. To this day, it stuns me that their own countrymen have so completely missed the story of their service, lost in the bitter confusion of the war itself."

The valor and bravery of these young men are reflected in their citations. The Medal of Honor was awarded to a petty officer medic on a Navy SEAL patrol mission to an enemy-held river base. The team came under heavy fire in which it was believed that his senior officer was killed. Returning through a hail of fire, he located the seriously wounded officer, killed two of the enemy, and then returned

to the patrol team. Forced to swim, he towed the officer for two hours until they were picked up by a support craft.

The Medal of Honor was awarded to an Army Master Sergeant who dropped from a helicopter to assist a team pinned down by the NVA. He reached the team, despite receiving multiple wounds. He began carrying the wounded back to a helicopter. As the craft took off, he ran alongside, providing cover fire. The pilot was suddenly killed by enemy fire, causing the helicopter to crash. He pulled the stunned survivors from the wreckage, formed a defense perimeter, and began calling in air strikes. Before all were removed by another helicopter, he was wounded several more times, once in hand-to-hand combat. These heroics by young American soldiers were seldom reported by our press.

I would also share with you Jack Sheehan's summary last year of why Americans fought and risked their lives for each other in Vietnam: "Under fire, men are not moved by the call of country or the rhetoric of a cause. They fight to survive; they fight for their comrades. . . We shared rations, slept under the same ponchos, marched for months at each other's side. It does not take long for strangers to turn into comrades. . . In a fight, when you are laying there wounded, there are some basic truths that become crystal clear. The first is that there is a God and He is there with you. The second is that wounded or dead comrades are never left behind. Whatever the cost—no matter how many men were killed or cut down trying, you came after your own. We marched out into the killing zone not because we were ordered to—we went instead because each of us believed that if he was lying in the mud, others would come for him. These men are your brothers and your family." Jim Webb and Jack Sheehan knew that Shakespeare had it right in *Henry IV*: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. . ."

Nixon won the election in 1968 with promises to bring the troops home and to end the war. In 1969, he started his troop withdrawal with 50,000 troops and established a policy of so-called "Vietnamization"-- turning the war over to the SVA. Unfortunately, during Westmoreland's time in command, the SVA were assigned to pacification and received little combat warfare training; had inadequate supplies; and were given World War II M-1's, garands, and tanks. They did not receive assault rifles until 1968-1969. The Paris peace talks started in 1971 and resulted in the signing the Peace Accords in January 1973. As we trained the SVA, they fought better and better with our assistance in artillery and air backup. They beat the NVA in several pitched battles in Cambodia in 1970, Laos in 1971, and the NVA's Easter Offensive in 1972. By December 1972, our troops were down to 24,008, and by 1973 they were withdrawn almost entirely. In order to gain South Vietnam's support for the peace, on three separate occasions prior to signing the

Peace Accords on January 27, 1973, Nixon promised South Vietnam in writing: (i) continued financial and material support (ii) training on, and replacement supply of, modern weapons; and (iii) air support, and reinforcement with U.S. troops, if the NVA broke the Accords. However, in November 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Act, forbidding any resupply of money, weapons, troops, air support, interdiction fire, or any other assistance to South Vietnam. Russia and China continued to resupply the NVA with modern weapons, tanks, and aircraft, in violation of the Accords. The South started to run out of supplies, ammunition, and weapons. In December 1974, the NVA invaded the South with 15 of its 16 divisions of well-trained regular soldiers. The U.S. did nothing. The NVA constantly forced the now nearly defenseless SVA to retreat. In March the NVA started its final offensive, and took Saigon at the end of April 1975—leaving us with that haunting vision of defeat of our Marine helos evacuating Americans from the roof of our embassy.

After the fall of Saigon, the North captured, imprisoned, and “re-educated” hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese, quickly executing approximately 65,000, and killing as many as 250,000 more in the re-education camps in the years following the surrender. The NVA then invaded and took over Laos and Cambodia.

In reality, our soldiers won every battle they fought on the ground and in the air, but lost the war—not in Vietnam, but in Washington.

Our fighting men came back in the late 60’s and early 70’s to a country dominated by anti-American solidier media, several groups opposed to the war, Jane Fonda, and the Hollywood of *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Platoon*. There were no parades. Heroic Americans in uniform were demonized; jobs were hard to find; the GI bill was anemic; and the VA was hostile and denied treatment to those suffering from PTSD, brain injuries, hepatitis C, and exposure to Agent Orange. Those who sought help were classified by the VA as malingerers and turned out onto the streets. Some turned to alcohol and drugs and became homeless and still received little medical or housing assistance for a decade or two.

In spite of this hostility from institutions and the press, the Vietnam Veteran met and mastered these challenges.

In the 1980’s, books such as Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff* and Timberg’s *The Nightingale's Song* and the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Washington changed the public’s view of the Vietnam Veteran. The hostile media had to contend with research and a multitude of facts that disproved their core myths. Polls and

surveys demonstrated this change in attitude, such as a 1980 Harris Poll which found that 87% of Americans had developed a favorable view of the Vietnam Veteran. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association recognized PTSD as an illness. In 1992, a test for Hepatitis C was approved. In 1994, Congress ordered a review of the effects of Agent Orange by the National Institute of Medicine which linked the defoliant to lymphomatic cancer, and later extended the link to prostate cancer, spina bifida, multiple myeloma, and respiratory cancers. Veterans are being assisted, and damages are being awarded. Even my law colleagues started to thank me for my Vietnam service!

Extensive research data and the statistics gleaned from it has demonstrated the falsity of the mythic views of a biased press, Jane Fonda, anti-war groups, and Hollywood towards the Vietnam Veteran. We were not hostile draftees, criminals, uneducated minorities, druggies, or misfits. About 3.4 million active-duty personnel served in or offshore Vietnam during the war. 83% were Caucasian; 10.5% African-American; 5% Hispanic; and 1.5% other. 75% were volunteers; only 25% were draftees (66% of World War II veterans were draftees). Of the 58,267 killed, 73% were volunteers.

About 25% were low income; 23% came from families with professional, managerial, or technical occupations; and 52% were middle-class. 79% were high school graduates (63% in Korea and 45% in WW II).

A 1980 Harris Poll found that 90% of Vietnam Veterans who saw heavy combat were proud to have served; 74% enjoyed their service; 66% said that they would serve again if called upon; and 89% agreed with the statement that "our troops were asked to fight a war which our political leaders in Washington would not let them win."

Vietnam Veterans' income has averaged over this period 18% higher than their non-veteran counterparts. Only one-half of one percent of Vietnam Veterans have been convicted of a crime—significantly below the average of the non-veteran population. Unemployment of Vietnam Veterans has been 3% lower than for non-veterans. All told, over 85% of Vietnam Veterans adjusted well to civilian life and became solid, loyal, educated, and successful citizens.

We also must remember that the same Vietnam Veterans who earned their stripes in Vietnam went on to become the backbone of our military services that defeated the USSR and won the Cold War without firing a shot.

As we learned more about the war (and those who opposed the war learned more about themselves), there have been numerous instances of former anti-war figures recanting their former views and actions. One of the more public and well-known is Pat Conroy, an accomplished author who wrote *The Great Santini* and led anti-war demonstrations at the gates of his father's Marine fighter base in Beaufort, SC. He made a public confession in his 2006 book *My Losing Season* (about his college basketball team at the Citadel) stating that he used his good mind to support the argument that it was a "wrong" war, conceded that one does not get to choose a "right" or "wrong" war, and admitted that his true motivation was a personal fear of being killed; he publicly dubbed himself an "American Coward."

Mark Halperin, noted journalist, frequent contributor to the *National Review* and *Time* Magazine, and a Senior Fellow at Claremont Institute, confessed in a speech to the West Point cadets in October 1992 that he dodged the draft. . . that he was not with them at Khe Sanh, at Da Nang, and at Hue; that he was wrong not to have served his country; and that he would carry these regrets to his grave.

Interestingly, with the change in our country's perception of the Vietnam Veteran, in the 2000 US Census, when there were approximately only 1.5 million Vietnam Veterans still alive, 13.5 million men claimed that they served on active duty and further identified themselves as Vietnam-era veterans. I am not sure what conclusions to draw. Is it an apology for not serving? Is it a confession? Is it an attempt to share in the honor and valor of those who served? Is it a repudiation of the Woodstock generation? Or were they confused by a poorly-worded question? I don't know—and I won't judge.

In closing, as I reflect back upon my graduation fifty years ago, I recall both the truth and the prophesy of President Kennedy's welcoming remarks to the Naval Academy's Plebe class at the start of their careers in 1963:

"I can imagine a no more rewarding career. And any man who may be asked in this century what he did to make his life worth while, can respond with a great deal of satisfaction: " 'I served in the United States Navy.' "

I thank you for your service, and for your great legacy to Boston College and the United States of America. God bless.