**Christina Lee**

**December 2020**

**The US-Vietnam War: Three Original Poems**

**Structure of my project:**

I have included a “mini-reflection” that will follow each poem. I have also included a longer reflection that intertwines all three poems to highlight the disconnect between these three parties and perspectives during the U.S.-Vietnam War. The language, the tone, the simplicity or complexity of the poems, and more has all been done with purpose. Some poems may seem less “deep” than others in language and tone but that has been done purposefully and I will explain my decisions below in each respective “mini-reflection.”

**Do You Really Know Who I Am?**

The boots that stomp over foreign lands

Leaving prints of the American Dream

Dropping off democracy and individualism at the front doors of the Vietnamese

As you fight for what you believe in, I ask, “what about me?”

Our children are crying. Our men are dying. Our women are lying

With American men. Was that also part of your plan?

As my hoarse breaths scratch my lungs, I wonder,

Do you really know who I am?

Like a lover in a fight, I scream, “what am I to you?”

Can I be more than just a kill count? To be more than just a gook?

Will you gnaw at me until I also start to spew red, white, and blue?

It seems you have forgotten, but

I am human too.

When this fight is over and when I rise, finally

You will fall to your knees. And as I drag that blade over your flesh

To prove that we are alike, droplets of blood will stain your skin.

And with a newfound conviction, I will say, “Do you see? You bleed red just like me.”

**Reflection: Do You Really Know Who I Am?**

Poem Structure and Meaning:

This poem is written from the perspective of the Vietnamese victims of the U.S.-Vietnam War. I purposefully made the language in this poem more descriptive and empowering because these were the individuals who had their basic human rights abused and endured countless acts of brutality all of which tore their dignity from them. I wanted my audience to understand that there was an air of superiority between the United States and Vietnam. The United States government did not view these Vietnamese victims as entirely human. Otherwise, the bombing, the napalming, the raping, the shooting, the massacring would not have happened (at least to the scale that it did). I wanted my audience to understand that the United States had priorities and the humanity of the Vietnamese population was near the bottom of that list. Maybe that priority was later quickly scratched onto the list with a few, hasty strokes of a pen. Regardless, the actions of the United States did not back up its sentiments it constantly spewed to the public to justify the war. What the United States wanted and what the Vietnamese needed did not align. The title of the poem is posed as a question from the Vietnamese to the United States government. Does the U.S. government really know who their “enemy” is? More importantly, does the U.S. government know who they are killing? The people that the United States has killed in Vietnam are not numbers nor statistics. They are human. I also wanted to portray remorse from the U.S. government which can be found towards the end of this poem. I wanted the U.S. government to feel that twinge of regret and panic knowing their hands were forever stained with the thick, hot blood of the Vietnamese victims they thoughtlessly slaughtered. I included this because I know in reality, the U.S. government felt little to nothing towards the damage they had inflicted on innocent civilians halfway across the world. The United States made no attempt at understanding the severity of their actions, so I will force them to understand instead.

**Not Worth Enough**

Standing in a line.

Looks like I’ve been drafted.

Sitting in a plane.

I’m being sent somewhere.

Running through a jungle.

To fight for America?

No. To Die.

How do I know, you ask?

Because I don’t know where I am.

I remember asking, “Where is Vietnam?”

I was told it was a few oceans away.

Because I don’t know what I’m doing here.

I remember asking, “What am I fighting for?”

I was told it was for democracy.

Because I remember asking, “Why?”

And they could not answer.

So as I prepare to die for a country that lies,

I wonder.

Where am I?

Who am I?

Somewhere in a jungle, someone not worth enough.

Not even to my own people.

**Reflection: Not Worth Enough**

Poem Structure and Meaning:

This poem is written from the perspective of the U.S. soldiers who were drafted to fight in the U.S.-Vietnam War. The language of this poem is simplistic, vague, and almost monotonous because these soldiers are being forced to fight and die for something they do not understand. They were robotically following orders and could not afford to care about anything else in the current moment because they were in a place where they did not even know who they were. They were lost boys. I wanted my audience to feel the confusion and hopelessness of these soldiers who were fighting for a country simply because they were citizens of it and not because they would actually help the war effort. It was vital for me to highlight the confusion in the poem because there were countless instances we have analyzed in class that touched upon the soldiers’ and their families’ inability to pinpoint exactly what they were fighting for. The title of this poem signifies the varying worth placed on these soldiers by civilians and the government alike with none of the worth being substantial enough. The soldiers drafted to fight this war were put in an impossible situation with the hostility of anti-war civilians on one side and the federal government handing out Medal of Honors while simultaneously cutting funds to veteran programs on the other. In that situation, what else could these soldiers do? Not much. The ending of my poem alludes to the helplessness these soldiers endured while also taking the reader a step deeper into the betrayal these soldiers must have felt from a nation that promised to protect them.

**So What**

“Send ‘em.

Keep sending ‘em.

Send ‘em all.

We have more than enough to go around.”

I say as I walk on velvet carpets and sit in plush mahogany chairs

Sipping on cold whiskey with no care to spare.

It is a tiresome job, being in charge and all that.

Hey, at least I’m not dripping sweat and tears.

Look. I’m not made for that muck. I’m intelligent and I burst at the seams with crisp dollar bills.

I’m meant to be preserved and I’m meant to lead. Don’t try to stop me.

I only have one job.

I have to save Vietnam. I have to bestow upon them the beauty of democracy.

It’s all part of my plan you see. Oh, and don’t worry. My boys will fight for me.

They’ll understand. They’re Americans. Who wouldn’t want to fight for their glorious nation?

To become inspirations for the next generation? To bathe in heroic admiration?

To receive the Medal of Honor? “Sir, you have brought peace to the world. Congratulations.”

I am certainly all for it.

And so what if a few die? I can just send some more.

After all,

There is more than enough to go around. That I know for sure.

**Reflection: So What**

Poem Structure and Meaning:

This poem is written from the perspective of the masterminds behind the U.S.-Vietnam war: Washington. This is not from the perspective of one single politician, although I am sure this poem could apply to any one of them. This poem is from the perspective of the U.S. government as one entity and it is helpful to think of the U.S. government as a person when reading this poem. The language of this poem is flippant and cocky with little to no empathy and emotion for anyone but themselves. I wrote the language with an intention of showing the privilege that cascaded from these few individuals who were able to avoid the draft and sit back. More so than dodging the draft, it was important to me that I highlight the hypocrisy and lies that Washington operated on during this time period. This is touched upon in the third stanza as the lines “I’m meant to lead” and “don’t try to stop me” imply that those in Washington were willing to take extreme measures to create a facade of goodness to further promote the necessity behind continuing the war. The title of this poem is a reference to the flippancy and lack of empathy from the U.S. government towards the drafting of soldiers against their will. Washington was willing to send planes after planes of soldiers to Vietnam because it was expected of male U.S. citizens to uphold their national duty. I believe Washington deduced through an illusioned logic that because U.S. men were expected to fight, there would be an endless supply of men. Washington took advantage of this and viewed the soldiers as mere playthings without acknowledging the humanities and identities of these soldiers who had families and friends in agony back home. I do not address Washington’s severe lack of empathy towards the Vietnamese because I address this in my first poem and because the atrocious behavior Washington exhibited lies in the tone of this poem throughout. If Washington could not spare a U.S. soldier’s life, what makes you think that they would spare the life of a Southwest Asian stranger who holds no significance to the U.S.? This poem illustrates an expectation that the U.S. has created for itself throughout its history: this is a country that will go above and beyond for their love of power at the cost of human life.

**Longer Reflection:**

The U.S.-Vietnam War brought many hardships to the Vietnamese victims and the U.S. soldiers who fought to their deaths. Would it be so outrageous to claim that these hardships could have been avoided to some degree had there not been such a vast disconnect between the U.S. government, the U.S. soldiers, and the Vietnamese victims? I answered ‘no’ to this question and I utilized poetry to address this abysmal disconnect. Many different factors come into play when explaining or expressing through poetry. One of those factors is language. I have used the language purposefully to further distinguish this disconnect beyond the context and substance that the poems offer. I focused on the simplicity and complexity of word choice and flow to give the reader a better understanding of personal experience and motives exhibited through each perspective.

As we have learned this past semester, the Vietnamese victims were at the receiving end of horrific abuse by the U.S. government and the U.S. soldiers were mindlessly committing this horrific abuse. This was evident with the many massacres that occurred in Vietnam, the senseless bombing of villages, the napalming of young children, the mass murder committed so as to reach the designated body counts, and the slew of lies told by a shady government. The many small details that we have observed that make the U.S.-Vietnam War worse than what is actually known, coalesce to form this larger disconnect which I believe comes from a lack of a desire to empathize. A majority of this lack of empathy comes from the U.S. government. There are four components that I have identified that I believe created this disconnect. The first disconnect was made clear to me as I read about the war crimes the U.S. government committed in Vietnam: Washington did not view the Vietnamese as entirely human. The second component is that the U.S. government viewed its own citizens as expendable, taking advantage of the citizens’ oath to uphold and serve the U.S and the citizens’ lack of knowledge. The third component was the inability of the U.S. soldiers to understand what they were fighting for. Washington simply told these soldiers that killing would eventually wipe out the communists and solidify a U.S. victory. For a U.S. soldier who is not given a purpose in a war, they will resort to killing and that is exactly what many U.S. soldiers did in Vietnam. The fourth component is the disturbing pattern exhibited by the U.S. government of exerting power for more power in the name of democracy over subordinate groups who are unable to fight back.

In order to tie these four components together, I would like to talk about motive. One reason I decided to base my project on this idea of a disconnect between these three parties is that I noticed early on a difference in motive. What the U.S. government wanted was starkly different than what the U.S. soldiers expected, and what the Vietnamese believed would occur. Such differences could only lead to a chasmic disconnect. In an effort to fight communism in Southeast Asia, the U.S. began by ignoring pleas from Ho Chi Minh who reached out to the U.S. in hopes that the Western superpower would stop France from impeding on the freshly won independence of Vietnam. The U.S. government then selected Ngo Dinh Diem as a puppet as a means to control South Vietnam with the goal of stamping out communism there and resettling those in North Vietnam to a communism-free home. The U.S. government, on the basis of its claims that the situation in Vietnam was worsening, began sending troops and bombing planes. This is when human rights abuses and war crimes began. It is here that we witness the ever-growing thirst for power by the U.S. government and it is here that I point out the U.S government’s view of non-Americans. I argue that if the U.S. government viewed the Vietnamese as at least human, there would not have been as much bloodshed and abuse. It was easier for the U.S. government to behave so abominably because they viewed the Vietnamese as “others” who were below the American status quo. By painting the Vietnamese as statistics rather than life, the U.S. proceeded in this war in an apathetic manner.

The U.S. troops also had a different motive that reflects the U.S. government’s lack of empathy. I believe that because these soldiers were not shown empathy by their government, many of them translated this lack of empathy to their victims, the Vietnamese. In this way, I suppose the soldiers had similar motives to the U.S. government as they were only following orders, but the fact that they had no given purpose signifies that they were in survival mode and were only operating to make it back home.

While I believe that the U.S. soldiers had different motives only because they were under incompetent leadership, my goal through the poems was to show that the U.S. soldiers and the Vietnamese were more similar than we might imagine. The experience of the soldier is different yet similar to that of the Vietnamese victims and I believe this highlights the disconnect between politician and civilian. Both groups held little to no worth to the U.S. government. The politician, only by the privilege of his power, was able to “sit this one out” while forcing many others to fight in his place. By doing so, he has disconnected himself from the soldiers who risked their lives daily. The politician will never know what risking their life means. The politician by watching from the sidelines also created a disconnect with the Vietnamese victims who were abused ruthlessly and killed mercilessly. The politician will never know what it means to die in vain with no dignity.

War in itself is a disconnect because wars are started by a small elite and expected to be fought by a larger, clueless majority. The majority serves as pawns to the small elite. I always wondered why the elite who start wars do not fight it out amongst themselves as they are the ones who truly believe in it. Why bring in a mass who could care less? I do not have an answer but I can speculate such a disconnect derives from greed and power. It is an unfortunate motive that more often than not comes with an incredible price.