

Brian Lamb
C-SPAN

3 September 92

Dear Mr. Lamb:

This comes from the same person who wrote in May, reminding you of the editing that so distorted the Rodney King tape. I didn't see any C-SPAN follow-up on that item, but it has appeared in a couple of other corners. In fact, on 6 July the headline on the Dear Abby column was, "Viewing Whole Tape Brings King Verdict Into Better Focus."

(I would also add that I'm a veteran journalist now working for Times Mirror and in the early '80s I scored a rare double: I was picked up by the KGB deep inside the Eastern Bloc and treated to their patented welcome, then just two months later I was in a group of three captured by Red Brigade terrorists in Italy.)

Closer to the present, this letter has two sections. First, do you think C-SPAN was "had" by Republican activists during the evening following the end of their convention?

Your coverage of the convention was followed by two call-in programs designed to gauge the reaction of the television audience. The moment the first one began I dialed the number on the screen to describe my disgust with the mean-spirited litany of fear-mongering, hate-mongering, gay-baiting and race-baiting. Then I sat on "hold" until the end of the program, and all the way through the next program, too.

The calls that did get through were remarkably alike: "I've always voted Republican, but this time I was sort of unhappy with the way things have been going, so I thought I'd go with Ross Perot. But wow -- after that great speech George Bush gave tonight, I'm back with him for keeps!" Or, "I've always voted Democratic, but after I heard the great vision Bush has for our country's future, I'm switching." Or, "I'm a first-time voter and I really hadn't decided which way I'd go. But after the great programs the Republicans talked about, they've got my vote for sure!" There were virtually no exceptions to this theme.

It was almost as if Republican activists had passed around the C-SPAN number with instructions to begin calling before the last speech ended, thus clogging the switchboard before the follow-up programs had even begun, and had suggested a message as well. Then I thought, "Would the Republicans stoop to such a thing? Would the party of Watergate and Iran-Contra scheme to clog the public airways?" Perish the thought!

The weekend provided a useful test. CNN ran a program with the same format, and only two calls supported the Republican convention themes. On Sunday, Jim Gately was the host of a C-SPAN program with Sarah McClendon and Mel Elfin and to the best of my recollection not a single caller supported the Republicans.

The longer matter concerns C-SPAN's discussion of Vietnam. This was an extraordinary piece of work for your network, but I was struck by the absence of what I feel is one of the most compelling questions to come out of that war.

Vietnam has been an enduring theme in America for a whole generation; twenty-five years after the last soldier was out, veterans beyond counting describe the horror and despair of their time in Vietnam, television rarely misses an opportunity to show grieving veterans at The Wall, it is portrayed as one of the defining agonies of the modern era.

This always amazes me. Why don't veterans of other wars behave that way?

Has General Sherman been expunged from military textbooks? He said, in two contexts, "You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it... War is at best barbarism. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell." Didn't Vietnam-bound soldiers understand that?

My family has been in every American war from the colonial era to Korea -- we missed Vietnam because no one was the right age. The truth which my forebears and relatives would quickly acknowledge is that Vietnam was the easiest war Americans have ever had.

Given the fact that all war is terrible, that war is supposed to be terrible, that suffering is what war is for, it's useful to consider the objective reality of Vietnam -- what it was like to be there. In comparison to every other war we've fought, Vietnam was a tidy little affair in which combat soldiers had pinpoint communications and mobility, served limited tours of duty, had fresh uniforms dropped to them and were rotated to reserve rest areas. They were within minutes of medical care which hardly existed in the best Stateside hospitals during Korea and was not even imagined during World War II. For many of the wounded in World War I, the most they hoped for was to have someone keep them company while they died.

The Vietnam Wall in Washington is certainly a brilliantly conceived monument, but I've never known anyone to comment on how small it is, the fact that it only takes a few minutes to walk along it and see the names of everyone who was killed in Vietnam. During the ten years of Vietnam about 58,000 Americans were killed and a little over 153,000 wounded. Consider some contrasts through history:

During Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, 250,000 of his men starved or froze to death.

There were regiments of Civil War soldiers which suffered 100% casualties in one day of the frontal charges favored by the tacticians of the time. Total killed is about 810,200.

During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-'71, Prussian troops met the breech-loading rifle for the first time; they suffered 8,000 casualties in twenty minutes.

In one campaign of World War I, it cost the Russians 1,000,000 men to advance 60 miles. So many fathers, husbands, brothers and sons were sent to the front that women hitched themselves to plows to make the new crop.

At the Battle of the Somme, the Allies lost 60,000 men in one day. Nine days after the American troops entered combat it cost them 8,000 men to advance two miles at Belleau Wood.

At the Meuse-Argonne, the Americans lost 45,000 men in four days. At Passchendaele, it cost the Allies 300,000 men to gain five miles of mud.

In 1917, the French sent wave after wave over the top into the German machine guns. Their losses were running at 100,000 per week and finally the soldiers actually baaa'd as they went into battle -- sheep to the slaughter.

My father and uncle both went to France for that war. My uncle was an ambulance driver; the medic's entire equipment kit consisted of gauze pads and winding bandages.

Some soldiers fought in the trenches for years; they were routinely attacked with poison gas, the artillery barrages lasted for days on end, they lived in mud from early fall until late spring and they only had one uniform.

When I was a child, my neighbor was one of the tens of thousands of soldiers who were gassed in France; he never spoke clearly again and fought for every breath, but he didn't spend a minute indulging himself in what a later generation might call Post Gas-Attack Stress Syndrome. He just went home and got a job teaching school.

I had a friend who was an American flier in World War I and he'd been hit in the jaw and elbow by large caliber German machine gun bullets which were made of wood -- dum-dums. Can you imagine what effect that had?

In World War II, the Russians lost 900,000 men in the first push of the German blitzkrieg. The siege of Leningrad lasted 900 days, the civilian ration was one slice of bread a day; later they ate sawdust. 600,000 starved to death.

When fliers reported to their squadron during the Battle of Britain, they knew they had a life expectancy of three weeks.

By the end of the war, the Russians had more than 6,000,000 killed in battle, more than 14,000,000 wounded; their total casualty count is currently estimated at 27,000,000.

It is estimated that 97 of every 100 "college age" Russian men did not come back from the war and 20 million were left homeless. In 1945 terms, their losses equaled one-third of the total population of the United States. They still have 7,000,000 MIAs from WWII.

The Germans lost 130,000 in a single raid on Dresden; we killed 140,000 with two atomic bombs.

One of my friends spent his years of 7-13 in Auschwitz; one of his jobs was loading the ovens -- as a child!

This litany could be extended almost indefinitely. I have known a great many veterans of the First and Second World Wars and of Korea, which was the war of my generation. Every veteran I knew and also my friend who spent his childhood at Auschwitz came back from the war and just went to work. Of course they had memories, of course they suffered, but they did not indulge and prolong their pain as seems to be the fashion now -- they went home and got their lives going again.

One of the very interesting questions of our time is why Vietnam veterans seem to feel that they were uniquely singled out, why they so often seem to dwell on Vietnam, practically make a career out of their suffering, and why we give them so many opportunities to do so. I am not aware that this happened with the veterans of any other American war. In fact, Korean war veterans don't even have a memorial in Washington even though we had a much higher casualty rate there: 54,000 killed in three years compared to 58,000 in the ten years of Vietnam.

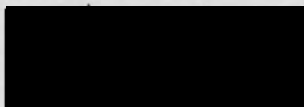
One insight is found in the words we use. From 1763 until 1950, we fought wars. During Korea we were told it was a "police action," now the events of 1950-1953 are often called "The Korean Conflict." Our references to 1964-1974 in Southeast Asia hardly describe what was going on at all -- it's "The Vietnam Experience." A war, evidently, is something you win. But do the German and Japanese veterans dwell on World War II the way our veterans dwell on Vietnam? My experience suggests that they don't.

A slender bit of videotape contains another insight. It was widely shown in the days after our navy troops shot down the civilian airliner in the Persian Gulf and it provides a most revealing glimpse into the military mind of the late 20th century in America. As the men on the bridge see the plane go down on the radar screen, the words you hear them say and their shouts and yells are exactly the same as the ones you hear from teenagers in video arcades. Later, the Pentagon explained that the shooting and the sailors' reaction happened because the troops in the Persian Gulf "had not been prepared for the stress of combat."

What an astounding statement! Is that why they sounded as if they were playing a video game? Are we to believe that what were described as highly trained combat troops in a war zone went to pieces in just a few moments? Were those troops really led to believe that war does not contain stress, that it is not essentially different from entertainment? Is that the military heritage of a generation which grew up on a television diet of painless gunfights and war movies that always have a happy ending? If so, then the reactions of the Vietnam veterans may be easier to understand.

I certainly do not mean to belittle the suffering of soldiers in Vietnam -- a buddy with his intestines hanging out is the same for every soldier who ever lived, tears are the same in every language. But why is our attitude and the attitude of the veterans so different for Vietnam compared to every other war? Will anyone ever say, right out loud, that we had it easy in Vietnam?

Sincerely,



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