

While attending a panel discussion on the final day of the extraordinary *Waging Peace* exhibit, an older gentleman beside me kindly struck up conversation. He had served in Vietnam, he told me, working for USAID. It was the first time I had spoken to a veteran one-to-one before, and it struck me, speaking with a man around my grandfather's age, how simultaneously close and far-flung the Vietnam War is from my own experience.

As a twentysomething Pakistani-American Muslim woman in 2019, I am the product of a different war, a different strand of transnational American history.

I was born in Lahore soon after the Cold War ended, and my family moved to the United States just one year before the towers fell and changed everything. The world that 9/11 made— of endless wars on terror, the data-hungry security state, the 24/7 pundit shows paid to debate the humanity of my identity— is the world that I know and recognize as creating me, structuring the dangers and possibilities, the priorities and absurdities, of my life. It is the world I sought to make comprehensible by abandoning my immigrant-parent-approved ambitions of pediatric medicine in order to study American empire. I am currently writing my dissertation on private military contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, because I see these wars as emblems of the politics that define our times: wilful manipulation by leaders who face little lasting consequence; the rapaciousness of private, unregulated capital enabled and emboldened by perpetual war; the utter devastation of land, water, air, and body that result, sullyng our collective humanity as well as the biome we share with all living things.

It is this perspective, this orientation of being, that engendered continuous pangs of recognition in me throughout the *Waging Peace* events. In the documentary *Sir! No Sir!*; in the discussion on teaching the history of the war; in the panel about the lingering environmental effects of Agent Orange and land mines, over and over I kept experiencing a sense of eerie familiarity. A deep horror I was already carrying around with me, which was now refracted across space and time, with people I didn't yet know and a history I was still learning. I was aware intellectually that the history of the Vietnam War factored into the more recent past I was deep in the middle of researching, but the connection became so much more visceral when I was confronted with the primary sources, the documents and archival footage and living veterans who attended, told their stories.

The issues of that period are, in fact, urgently entwined with issues of this moment. I see it in the brutal war crimes against people and landscapes unfamiliar to most Americans. I see it in these asymmetric conflicts cloaked in ideological hyperbole, in which there is a market for those who win the contracts for state-building. The draft abolished due to the work of the anti-war and GI movements, is a large part of the reason the contractors I study ended up in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first place. In these important, institutional ways, the Vietnam War set the stage for the wars that have scaffolded my life and work.

I have felt not a small amount of grief, sitting with such continuities and legacies of violence. Though I am a twenty-first century immigrant, navigating my fraught Americanness in the post-9/11 era, the United States is my home and thus I am, however obliquely, a product of the Vietnam War too. This country is bound in blood to many places around the globe; but Vietnam, with all that was wounded and lost beyond redress, looms especially large. Despite the victories of the GI movement— an important story anchoring

the sprawl of topics explored by various events— I nevertheless found myself haunted by the temporality of protest, the way we could only learn of the horror and fight back when so much damage was already done. So, when I heard veterans on camera testify to the wasteful senselessness of war, when I witnessed the human cost of chemical warfare, it was this I thought about. The crushing, inarticulate helplessness of losses so vast I could barely wrap my mind around them. The bitterness of knowing similar evils would be repeated a generation later in the Middle East, with ugly reverberations around the world.

As the unofficial emcee of the exhibition, Ron Carver insisted multiple times that the story of the GI movement was not a sad one— that it was a story of people coming together to make a difference. This is indeed a compelling frame to think about an underappreciated nook of history. But what I want to dwell on a little longer, is in fact the despair— the ways in which moral lessons must be learned, not once, but again and again, at the expense of the marginalized, the innocent. It is a productive despair, I think, more than a paralyzing one. In listening to the stories of hope and despair from the weeklong exhibition, I was reminded of Judith Butler's conception of grievable life; how some lives are deemed more grievable than others. The events' push for the excavation of a usable, grassroots history struck me as a way of trying to redress the inequality of grievability, elevating every life at stake as a worthy weight to bear together. Even if it had to come after the fact, it has come. Grief restores us our humanity to each other. It is what exposes the stakes of everything we do, and everything we are.

There is still work to be done in the American consciousness around Vietnam, as well as the more contemporary Middle Eastern wars. But the hope embedded in grief— that people matter, that their loss must be made meaningful, that we have the capacity to learn and eventually, somehow, do better— is what I will try to carry with me along with everything else.

After telling me a little bit about working with USAID, my conversation with the gentleman sitting next to me at the panel turned towards myself and my work. He asked me what I hoped to do once I got my PhD. In the moment, with the emotional charge of the panel still sparking inside of me, I wasn't especially articulate. But what I would say now is: I want to be a professor, not just so I can keep researching the questions that haunt my spirit, but so that I can teach young adults. So that I can tell them what I know, what others have taken the trouble to teach me over the years about the way the world works. So that I can show them how the world they've inherited came to be— what it cost, what was debated and rigorously contested.

The Vietnam War is a fraught but essential human story. This exhibition provided a rich, provocative, and deeply moving opportunity to remember both the horror we are capable of inflicting on one another, and our simultaneous potential to empathize across time and borders, and grapple with what kind of world we might create, if only we are wise and brave enough to create it.

