

I Dodged the Draft, and I Was Wrong

By MARK HELPRIN

I am frequently asked how it is that I, an American, served in the Israeli Army and Air Force, and not in the military of my own country.

The first part of the question is easy to answer. I point out the long tradition of Americans serving in the armed forces of allies — the Lafayette Escadrille, Faulkner in the Canadian Royal Air Force, e.e. cummings and John Dos Passos in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, the Eagle Squadron, the Flying Tigers. I mention that before I served under another flag I reported to the Department of State and formally swore an oath of loyalty to the United States and to defend the Constitution. And I remind my questioners that Israel fought not only armies trained and equipped by the Soviet Union, but, sometimes, Soviet soldiers themselves. In that period, the United States and Israel worked very closely together.

The Vietnam Era

To the second part of the question, I reply that though the men in my family have served, since our arrival in this country, with Pershing in Mexico, in the First World War, and so many in the Second World War that the welcome home had to be held in a hotel, that despite this tradition in which I was certain I would have a place, I did not serve.

If you think that it is easy to stand here in front of thousands of officers and future officers of the United States Army and explain this, think again. But just as the heart of your profession is your willingness to give your lives in defense of your country, even, as the case has been, as you are mocked, reviled, and dismissed by those for whom you will die, the heart of my profession is to convey the truth.

Let me try to convey, then, what I have come to believe is the truth of a time that was over before many of you were born. I do so not to gain approval or to attain an end, but in service of illumination and memory.

My conduct in the Vietnam era can be expressed by stating that although in the Israeli army I later had, but for corrective lenses, a perfect physical rating for combat, here I was officially, legally, and properly 4-F. If I were Bill Clinton I would take 10,000 words to explain this and say nothing, but I'm not Bill Clinton, and I can get to the heart of it in eight: What I did was called dodging the draft.

I thought Vietnam was so much the wrong place to fight and that the conduct of the war was so destructive in human terms and of American power, prestige and purpose that I was justified in staying out. What the existence of the re-education camps and the boat people, and the triumph of containment have taught me is that my political assessment was not all that I thought it was. I have also come to believe that, even if it had been, I still would not have been released from honoring the compact under which I had lived until that moment, and which I then broke. I did not want to participate in a war the conduct of which was often morally ambiguous. Now I understand that this was precisely my obligation.

So you can imagine what I felt when I came to a passage in David McCullough's "Truman," explaining how Truman had volunteered in the First World War: "He

turned thirty-three the spring of 1917, which was two years beyond the age limit set by the new Selective Service Act. He had been out of the National Guard for nearly six years. His eyes were far below the standard requirements for any of the armed services. And he was the sole supporter of his mother and sister. As a farmer, furthermore, he was supposed to remain on the farm. . . . So Harry might have stayed where he was for any of several reasons. That he chose to go . . . was his own doing entirely."

Truman had five unimpeachable reasons not to serve, and he tossed them to the wind. Had he tossed them at my class

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at Harvard, I assure you, they would have been fought over like five flawless versions of the Hope Diamond.

His actions were all the more impressive when it is remembered that the First World War was far more brutal than the war in Vietnam, far more costly, and far more senseless. At least the war in Vietnam was fought in the context of a policy of containment that later was to triumph. Even were Vietnam not the best place to make a stand, it was the fact that a stand was made that mattered.

In contrast, the First World War was fought almost entirely for nothing. Though it is true that the country was more enthusiastic about it, that just drives home the fact, as did Vietnam, that you simply cannot know how things will turn out, and that a war may be right or wrong, opportune or inopportune, the proper time and place to make a stand, or it may not be, but that this is something to be determined in national debate and not in the private legislatures of each person with a draft card.

I am absolutely certain that in not serving I was wrong. I began to realize this in 1967, when I served briefly in the British Merchant Navy. In the Atlantic we saw a lot of American warships, and every time we did I felt both affection and pride. One of the other sailors, a seaman named Roberts, was a partisan of the Royal Navy, and maintained that it was more powerful than our own. As I was a regular reader of the Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute, and had almost memorized Jane's Fighting Ships, I quickly, let us say, blew his arguments out of the water.

And then, in riposte, he asked why I was not in uniform. I answered with the full force of the rationalizations so painstakingly developed by the American intellectual elite. Still, he kept coming at me. Although he was not an educated man, and although I thought I had him in a lock, the last thing he said broke the lock. I remember his words exactly. He said: "But they're your mates."

That was the essence of it. Although I did not modify my position until it was too late, I began to know then that I was wrong. I thought, mistakenly, perhaps just for the sake of holding my own in an argument, that he was saying, "My country, right or wrong," but it was not what he was saying at all. Only my sophistry converted the many virtues of his simple words from something I would not fully understand until much later.

Neither a man nor his country can always pick the ideal quarrel, and not every war can be fought with moral surety or immediacy of effect. It would be nice if that were so, but it isn't. Any great struggle, while it remains undecided and sometimes even afterward, unfolds not in certainties but in doubts. It cannot be any other way. It never has been.

In the Cambridge Cemetery are several rows of graves in which rest the remains of those who were killed in Vietnam. On one of the many days of that long war, I was passing by as a family was burying their son. I stopped, in respect. I could not move. And they looked at me, not in anger, as I might have expected, but with love. You see, they had had a son.

Soon thereafter, not understanding fully why, I was on my way to the Middle East, in a fury to put myself on the line. And though I did, it can never make up for what I did not do. For the truth is that each and every one of the Vietnam memorials in that cemetery and in every other — those that are full, those that are empty, and those that are still waiting — belongs to a man who may have died in my place. And that is something I can never put behind me.

'Why Am I Here?'

I want you to know this so that, perhaps you may use it. For someday you may find yourself in a terrible place, about to die from a wound that is too big for a pressure bandage, or you may find yourself in an enemy prison, facing years of torture, or you may find yourself, more likely, as I did, in a freezing rain-soaked trench, at 4 o'clock in the morning, listening to your heart beat like thunder as you stare into the hallucinatory darkness of a field sown with mines. You may speak to yourself out loud, asking, why am I here? I could have been someplace else. I could have done it another way. I could have been home.

If that should happen to you, your first comfort will be your God, and then you will have — believe me — the undying image of your family, and then duty, honor, country. These will carry you through.

But if, after you have run through them again and again, you have time and thought left, then perhaps you will think of me, and this day at the beginning of your careers. I hope it will be encouragement. For that I was not with you, in my time, at Khe Sanh, and Danang, and Hue, and all the other places, is for me now, looking back, a great surprise, an even greater disappointment, and a regret that I will carry to my grave.

Mr. Helprin, a novelist, is a contributing editor to the Journal. This is excerpted from an address he delivered at West Point yesterday.

I thought, Tom, you would want to see this. God bless you. Jacin