

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Mary Rice

### Give Peace a Chance

**M**y first awareness of Vietnam came in 1963, when I was in junior high school -- not from anything at school, but from newspaper accounts. Buddhist monks in South Vietnam were publicly setting fire to themselves, to protest the South Vietnamese regime.

It got a lot of attention. Buddhists, I was dimly aware even then, are committed to non-violence, to never killing a living thing. And yet here were Buddhist monks killing themselves. Something must be really wrong.

The response of South Vietnam's First Lady was hardly reassuring. She accused the monks of being cultists and Communist sympathizers. She called the protests "barbecue shows." That also got a lot of attention.

An AP article I read about her was headlined "Mrs. Nhu: Asia's Kittenish Wildcat." That was typical of the attitude toward women then, trivializing even those with public roles. *Look Magazine* that same year titled an article about UN Ambassador Marietta Peabody Tree "Our Top Girl at the UN."

Mme. Nhu, Tran Le Xuan, was beautiful as well as outspoken, so she was presented more as feisty than ruthless. But ruthless she was, and a power in South Vietnam. Her husband Ngo Dinh Nhu was the head of the secret police. His brother, Ngo Dinh Diem, was president.

These were the people who were supposed to be America's allies. It didn't matter that North Vietnam was led by a long-time Vietnamese patriot who, after fighting the Japanese occupation of his country in World War II and resisting the French for eight years after that, wanted his country to be unified, as proscribed by the Geneva Accords of 1954. While South Vietnam was led by a dictator who imprisoned political opponents and persecuted monks. Ho Chi Minh was a Communist; Diem wasn't.

In the Cold War, that was all that mattered. Communism was Bad, and Communists were out to get the Free World. So Communists had to be opposed, and anti-Communists had to be supported, regardless of the morality or even legality of their particular governments.

That was the thinking. Or, at any rate, the policy. Vice President Lyndon Johnson had even called Diem "the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia."

Even so, the repression that the monks were protesting, and the government's violent response to those protests, did give people pause. In September 1963, President John F. Kennedy said in a television interview that Diem had "gotten out of touch with the people." Significant US financial support ended -- a signal, in that enduring political parlance, of Kennedy's unhappiness with the South Vietnamese regime.

For the first time, aid to South Vietnam had decreased rather than increasing. For the first time, the future of US involvement in Vietnam was in question. On November 2, Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated in a coup, along with his brother.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

And then, on November 22, Kennedy himself was assassinated.

It was a sobering thing for an American president to be killed. Most people were stunned. Walter Cronkite, the most popular news anchor on television, was moved to tears when he reported it -- this at a time when men weren't supposed to cry.

The images of those days have reverberated ever since, inhabiting a collective consciousness: the motorcade gone horribly wrong; the widow in a blood-splattered suit, and then behind a long black veil; the little boy saluting his father's coffin.

But the situation was not unprecedented, as Jacqueline Kennedy's use of Abraham Lincoln's caisson reminded people. There was an orderly transfer of power to the vice president, Lyndon Johnson.

Most people weren't thinking about Vietnam then. But Johnson was. Shortly after he took office, the New York Times reported much later, he received overtures of peace from Ho Chi Minh, via United Nations Secretary General U Thant. Instead of starting negotiations, Johnson reaffirmed his commitment to military support of the South Vietnamese government.

The next year Johnson was elected to his own term as president. Ironically, he was elected as the alternative to unbridled militarism. The most effective image of his campaign was a mushroom cloud, that unmistakable sign of a nuclear explosion. That, the television ad implied, would be the result of voting for Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate. People overwhelmingly voted against that cloud.

A few months later, in February 1965, Johnson ordered US bombing of North Vietnam. The war kept escalating. And it returned to public consciousness.

There was an episode in my high school, I think junior year. A former student, now a Marine, was back visiting, and my social studies teacher decided it would be a good idea for students to hear him. But things took an unexpected turn in the first-period class. The guy talked about killing people, how that didn't really bother him, how he was trained to kill without a weapon.

It sounded so appallingly matter-of-fact. "Was it hard to come back and not kill people here?" I asked him.

"No, ma'am," he said, "that's a different situation. I'm very law-abiding."

But he wasn't asked to speak to other classes.

In the summer of 1966, I saw an alarming article in *Ramparts* Magazine. It was about napalm being made in a small California town.

"Redwood City," a protestor was quoted as saying, "will become known as a place where flaming death is manufactured." She was photographed, this older woman, holding a sign that said, "Would napalm convert you to democracy?"

Where a few monks had burned themselves to draw attention to

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

injustice, now all sorts of people were now being burned to death, by the thousands. Death rained down from the sky. From American planes. This time, you could watch it on television. And people did.

There began to be anti-war demonstrations. People chanted "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?" Potential draftees began to chant, "Hell, no, we won't go." And to burn their draft cards, to keep from burning children.

But Johnson had defeated Goldwater in 1964 by a proverbial landslide. He had instituted the Great Society and the War on Poverty, pushed through the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. No Democrat wanted to risk opposing him.

And then came Eugene McCarthy.

The most famous poster of the McCarthy campaign featured a drawing by Ben Shahn of a dove, the symbol of peace. But my favorite poster was a black-and-white photograph of McCarthy. It wasn't the typical politician's smiling close-up, or, another standard, a shot of him surrounded by admirers.

Instead, this poster had an overhead shot of a solitary, standing figure casting a shadow on the arcs of paving stones that surrounded him. And the slogan read: "He stood up alone, and something happened." That was the essence of McCarthy's appeal: the power of conscience.

In 1967, the senator from Minnesota had been in politics for 19 years --longer than I'd been alive. He was popular in his state, and respected in the Senate, but not all that well known nationally, although he had written several books. He was a liberal, in a time before that became a dirty word. He was a Democrat, a thoughtful supporter of his party, at a time when a fellow Minnesota Democrat, Hubert Humphrey, was vice president.

But he was also deeply opposed to the war in Vietnam, a war which had never been declared and yet had escalated for so many years. In the fall of 1967, Eugene McCarthy decided to challenge the sitting president for the Democratic nomination.

When he announced his candidacy, McCarthy cited Johnson's plans for "continued escalation and intensification of the war" with no likelihood of "a compromise or negotiated political settlement." His words were measured and dry; he was no orator. But some of those words had an ironic relevance for decades, when fewer and fewer people voted. "I am hopeful," he said:

that a challenge may alleviate the sense of political helplessness and restore to many people a belief in the processes of American politics and American government. . . [I]t may counter the growing sense of alienation from politics. . . reflected in a tendency to withdraw in either frustration or cynicism.

And so it did -- at least for a while. Young people flocked to New Hampshire to help with his campaign. Then, as now, New Hampshire was a place where a politician with a different perspective could get national attention. And votes. Because it's traditionally the first primary, the media

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

attention is disproportionate.

It was said that McCarthy volunteers knocked on every door in New Hampshire, braving the harsh winter in their determination. People from top ad agencies in New York also volunteered their talents, as did financiers.

Then, as now, media pundits liked to tell people what was going to happen before it happened -- as if they knew. Their estimates were that McCarthy might get as much as 11% of the vote in the New Hampshire primary. Instead, he got 42% -- within 230 votes of beating Johnson.

The New Hampshire primary was on March 12, 1968. On March 16, Robert Kennedy announced that he, too, was running for president. On March 31, Johnson announced that he wasn't.

Just after winning the California primary, Robert Kennedy was killed. With his death, Vice President Hubert Humphrey became the choice of Democratic party regulars.

When I got back to Kentucky in the summer of 1968, after my freshman year in college, I went to McCarthy headquarters and signed up to help. Most of what I did was stuffing envelopes and making phone calls, the nitty-gritty of politics. But there was another opportunity as well.

In those days there was no presidential primary in Kentucky. Instead, delegates to the national conventions were chosen at a state convention. I was asked to run for delegate to the Democratic state convention.

A lot of campaign workers didn't get to do that, ironically because of where they lived. In Louisville's affluent East End, there were so many people who wanted to be McCarthy delegates that only the highest-level supporters were chosen. But in my district, which included the South End as well as my inner-city neighborhood, they could barely fill the slate.

I had just turned 19. But since the voting age in Kentucky was 18 and I was a registered Democrat, I was eligible.

We had a strategy session and showed up at the delegate selection caucus. This was usually a small group of party regulars, and the meeting was held at one of their houses, in the back yard. A bunch of newcomers showing up -- much less an organized group with its own agenda -- was unexpected, and not welcome.

But we were also in the majority. Despite heated words and one scuffle over a campaign sign, we prevailed. Democracy ruled (unlike, say, in Florida in the 2000 presidential campaign). I was elected a delegate to the Kentucky Democratic convention, pledged to support Eugene McCarthy.

So I went to the convention -- all of it smoke-filled, not just the proverbial back rooms -- and cast my vote. Or, as it turned out, votes.

McCarthy supporters were in the minority, and the traditional way to allocate delegates was winner take all. We pushed for representation proportional to the vote, which would have meant 11.5 McCarthy delegates to the national convention. After protracted floor fights and back-room

### Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

negotiations, we ended up with five delegates.

In retrospect, that seems a not unreasonable compromise. It was basically splitting the difference -- almost. But for newcomers to politics, it was an outrage. We McCarthy delegates walked out of the convention hall in protest. For me, that was the most satisfying part of the convention.

Hubert Humphrey got 41 of Kentucky's 46 delegates, and went on to win the Democratic nomination in Chicago. And to lose the election to Richard Nixon.

The Democratic national convention in Chicago that year was a turning point for many people. We had always been told, good little '50s children who happened to be white, "The policeman is your friend." It was an article of faith in the established order. And then suddenly some of us were being clubbed by policemen, for simply exercising our rights to free speech and freedom of assembly.

This had always gone on for some people, blacks in particular. But this was the first time many of us saw it happen. Or, in some cases, experienced it.

It was a shock and an outrage. And it drove Humphrey's poll numbers down. Until he lost, narrowly, to Richard Nixon in the fall election.

While McCarthy lost his bid to be president, he achieved his objective: reversing the course of the war. Even as Johnson withdrew from the presidential campaign, he announced a cutback in the bombing of North Vietnam. Peace talks began in May 1968. In January 1969, just after Nixon took office, the peace talks were expanded.

It was another four years until a peace treaty was finally signed, and the last American troops left Vietnam. In the meantime, the war sometimes escalated again. There were larger and larger demonstrations, marches on Washington, and a national Moratorium when Cambodia was invaded in 1970, what Howard Zinn called the first "general student strike" in US history. But the course was set.