

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Homage to Vietnam

PAT C. HOY II

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The present selection, like the Holmes speech preceding, speaks to the subject of national memory, but written in a very different time, it speaks in a very different way. While not explicitly about Memorial Day, this essay (from 1999; excerpted) powerfully raises crucial questions about the meaning of the holiday and the importance of remembering, for a nation fragmented by disputes over the Vietnam War. Pat C. Hoy II (b. 1938), award-winning essayist and professor of writing who has taught at Harvard, West Point, and (now) at New York University, graduated from West Point and served in Vietnam. His concerns remain germane for a time in which many Americans have grave doubts about any war and about the worth of risking one's life in combat.

What does Hoy mean by saying, "The cost of forgetting might just bankrupt us"? What is the point of his story about attending the funeral of George? What sort of wisdom is this "old soldier" seeking to grasp? Why are his students unable to see any cause worth dying for? What difference does the absence of conscription make for the impulse to serve and the sense of obligation to something larger than oneself? Why, despite his grave reservations about the Vietnam War and his appreciation of the efforts of the anti-war protesters, does he still endorse answering the call to serve? What is it that he wants his children—and all of us—not to forget? How are you moved by his argument?

I woke to consciousness against the echoes of the Second World War, so my earliest memories remain charged by a frenzy of national unity—my older sister at the Ration Board, dispensing stamps for sugar, gasoline, tires, shoes; my oldest brother in North Africa in the Army Air Corps; my other brother dying in the sky over Germany; the VE Day parade down Main Street in the small south Arkansas town where I was raised; the veterans who returned and found a place that understood *their* sacrifice and *their* pain—a place unified and preserved by the war.

I remember that time from the vantage post of a five-year-old whose life was unalterably affected by the sense of community engendered by the "war effort." I would not begin to lose that sense of unity for nearly 35 years—not until, a soldier of 40, I sensed deep in my bones the vast damage that my war in Vietnam was doing to the nation and to me.

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Now, at 59, as I sit here trying to figure out what drew us together during the earlier war, I fret about the splintering effects of Vietnam. But on rare occasions I catch fleeting glimpses of something deep inside that eases my mind, something about surviving that I suspect neither I nor the nation can afford to forget. The cost of forgetting might just bankrupt us.

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As I stood with Elizabeth on one side and my wife Ann on the other—sheltered from the hot August sun by a massive pin oak that cast a long shadow over the empty grave—Elizabeth took my arm, steadying herself as the minister began to speak. I tried to listen, but the high mound of fresh dirt and the resting shovels had more drawing power than God’s word passing through the warp of a Yankee pastor’s clipped accent. And so I heard little of the scripture he was reading as I gazed up into the pin oak and then down at the rough, pine casket suspended just in front of us, directly over the grave. In the background, across the road, workers hammered a new roof onto the old church.

The creaking of the casket yanked my mind back to the grave, and I saw that under his own dead weight Elizabeth’s father had begun to move himself down into the ground. It seemed to take a long, long time for George to reach bottom as the straps unrolled and the box eased its way through the irregular shaped hole, as if he had been practicing for this singular descent all his life. I stood there wishing that the movement would never end, that I could watch him going down forever and forever because during that long pause I could also hold him and Elizabeth together in my mind—her standing beside me, him just a shovel’s length away, both of them together warding off my own descent.

As her father disappeared into the earth, Elizabeth was holding on, as I could feel the press of her body against me—her arm cradled inside mine, her irregular breathing accentuating the haunting sadness of her struggle to find a composure suitable for the role she had been called to play. Supporting her, I was, of course, keenly aware that at my age I could be George and, in that case, had Elizabeth been there watching me going down into earth, someone else would have been privy to her body’s rhythmic tremors—someone else would have felt her confusion and her silent plea for help. But it was George and not I who was departing, and Elizabeth, who had once spoken out about heroism in my Harvard classroom, was calling me out of myself in the cemetery, making me attentive to duty and obligation as she tightened her grip on my arm, rejuvenating me. It was one more piece of an old, old story.

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As I move into late middle age, I yearn to spin truth out of the yarns of my experiences. But I'm up against a powerful hindrance. Almost no one wants to hear an old soldier grasp at wisdom. Yet who else besides old soldiers have chanced to look into the eye of death and study it long enough to find a well of plenty—an enchanting realm brimming with secrets about the strange entangling rhythms that draw us out of ourselves into community, into irresistible relationships of promise—with those we love and even with the nation itself. Today, I wonder whether those rhythms still compel younger men—my sons and their friends—and the men and women they love. *Saving Private Ryan* seemed to rekindle awareness about the meaning and value of past sacrifices, but awareness does not necessarily compel men and women to set personal considerations aside and serve the general welfare.

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I can't seem to get wars off my mind, can't help wondering after three of them—my brothers' in Europe and North Africa, my own in Vietnam, and my West Point students' in the Gulf—what keeps us from understanding that as a nation we must be united enough, always, to answer war's hunting call . . . or what keeps us from knowing what we need to know to stop the killing and devastation when the time comes. I suspect the confusion stems from our quick and easy willingness to turn a deaf ear to the voices within us—some audible, some barely discernible—that suggest who we are and how we must be drawn together if we intend to last. Some of those voices well up from inside as if they've been waiting there for us to listen; others evolve out of our upbringing, giving us a sense of identity, suggesting our place in the world . . . or perhaps, our isolation from it.

* * *

My students at New York University, many of them bright, young aspiring writers and actors studying in the Tisch School of the Arts, have just written essays about the relationship between their own work and truth. To prepare for the assignment, they heard a lecture by Fred Ritchin, now a Tisch faculty member but once the photo editor of *The New York Times Magazine*. Fred explains how, in this digitized world, it is now possible to create pictures of things that never were—and to create those pictures so well, even on a home computer, that the viewers can't tell the difference between fabricated images and

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events shot with a camera. Fred wants students to think about what can become of a world that can no longer vouch for itself in its own images.

When we got back to the classroom and began discussing their essays, I asked students if they knew how to locate *themselves* against the demands of truth. No one said a word. I drew a triangle of words on the board—*representation* to the left, *truth* to the right—across the top of the blackboard—and then wrote the word *value* down below, halfway between the words higher up. I connected the three words with lines to form an inverted triangle. Inside the triangle, I wrote *YOU*. I asked the question again. Can you locate yourself against these concepts: representation, truth, and value?

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As we sat there during the awkward silence, I could sense their difficulty.

“What do you mean by *value*?” David finally asked. I was almost too surprised to answer.

“Let’s start with boundaries,” I eventually began. “Think about what it means to say, *No*, or to say, *I’m not going to do this in my photography because it violates what I believe*.” Heads began to nod in agreement, as if to say, okay, we’re beginning to see what you’re getting at. Say something else.

“Is there anything you’d be willing to die for?” I asked. It was an old-fashioned question that puzzled them. And they said so through their silence. It was a question they seemed never to have thought about.

David told me he found it interesting that I believed “*truth* and *death* were so tightly bound.” He was “curious as to where *life* fit in, if it did indeed fit in at all.” He concluded that young poets like him were essentially “detectives” trying to “solve the mystery with no clues”—equipped only with heart, soul, and pen. Inclined toward the romantic, David always extols freedom, unbridled freedom, as the essence of life. His own essay would eventually close with a powerfully rendered scene in which he and his friends draw sustenance from one another and from nature—*isolated, separate from civilization, feasting on Thoreau and the manna of a prelapsarian wilderness.*

For most of the students, the overwhelming question was, “How can one construction of reality be better than another? We’ve made all of them up anyway. How can any of them be worth dying for?” They persist in those questions because they haven’t yet had

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experiences of their own that could lead them to see how they can be bound up in the preservation of a community and a way of life they have inherited—because they have not yet acknowledged that deep within themselves there is a persistent inclination to belong, to be a part of something beyond themselves.

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Now, for the first time in the nation's history, we can imagine that young men and women may never face an experience that will call them out of themselves into the larger community. Vietnam changed all that, and the change is still affecting us. Young men no longer have to reckon with service so demanding that they may be asked to lay down their lives. And neither young men nor young women consider such compulsory service an inherent part of their growing up.

In the past, that call could stiffen the backbone of the privileged as well as the needy. It demanded that all of us, somewhere in the recesses of the soul, hold ourselves accountable. Today, soldiers are no longer conscripted in the national interest. They enlist for a fee, and we call that “volunteering.” The Volunteer Army. But it is not a representative army; it is not a national army; it is not, in fact, a volunteer army.

The Revolution that made us has receded into the mythic past. The more recent war in Europe that set the world free from the domination of a tyrant remains primarily an idea for most Americans younger than 40. Those of us who have a different perspective are becoming the old folks, easy to dismiss because we seem too romantic or too encrusted in our own past to trust. Even our memory of World War II has been clouded by those other conflicts—Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf. Of those three, only Vietnam engaged the nation, and its significance had to do with failure rather than victory, with diminution of trust, with the loss of national consensus and political resolve. It clouded our memory of ourselves as Americans.

By now almost everyone is keenly aware that the nation's leaders led us astray in Vietnam. Yet there is more to the story. What of the rest of us—ordinary citizens who sat by watching, out of harm's way, silent; boys who fled to Canada, or, taking advantage of education and privilege, remained at home; soldiers who went because they had to; women who sat in rooms of their own, shook their heads in despair, and found no voice; veterans who knew better, having long ago learned war's lessons the hard way, but said little? Where are all of us now? What have we resolved?

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The ghosts of those 58,000 dead who served in Vietnam haunt the entire nation and are likely to do so until we can once again decide what it means to have peace and honor and community. Those ghosts, the ghosts of young soldiers who went to Vietnam and died—most of whom believed in the obligation to serve or were spurred on by some inherited sense of glory or were simply afraid not to answer the call—those ghosts remind us what it once meant to have to measure up as an American.

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But those ghosts remind us too, that no American, man or woman, can ever again accept freely *the obligation to serve and die* unless the nation can assure its soldiers that it will not, having asked them to serve, abandon them when they come home. That commitment will take some doing.

Our confusion about the contractual obligation may eventually turn into a blessing, but we will not know, for sure, until we know more about what happened to us at a moment in history when we revealed to the rest of the world how our well-founded self-assurance had turned into national arrogance and divisiveness, when the earlier call to make the world safe for democracy had been transformed into a call to preserve, no matter what the cost, the sanctity of a bad idea.

Those of us who fought in Vietnam should long be grateful to those who did what they had to do to stop the war. Many stayed home, resisted, and faced the consequences. One who did, would become a good friend. A few years ago, at a writing conference, our talk turned to Vietnam for the first time.

After hearing his stories about police brutality at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, I said to him, “I suspect you may have been in more day-to-day danger than I was most of the time in Vietnam.”

My judgment seemed to tip the scale of nostalgia in Eric’s favor, and he told me the story of a friend who resisted the war with him. As they worried over whether they would die or go to prison, Eric’s friend laughed about wanting burial in the Baltimore Harbor. He wanted to be buried at sea, close to home. He had one other wish.

“If I die before this war is over,” he told Eric, “and if Ho Chi Minh wins, I want you to tether a balloon to an anchor near my burial site in the harbor. And on the balloon I want it to say, *Here Lies a Happy Motherfucker.*”

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When Eric told me the story, I laughed. But I have been haunted by the story and my laughter ever since. I remain grateful to Eric and his friends for helping bring the war to an end, but they too remain culpable—not for cowardice in the face of physical danger but for the unacknowledged indulgence that accompanied their flight from national service.

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And yet I know that I may well be alive today because of them, just as I know that they were driven to do what they did, and could justify doing it, because, *and only because*, the government that was sending men and women out to die in service had lost the confidence of its people, and had diminished its sacred power to enlist people to preserve it. By war's end, it had become very difficult for any American to negotiate the boundaries between self-service and national service.

Now, years later, we've almost stopped trying to figure out what we really believe in, what it is *we might be willing to die for*. Only Clinton's bizarre example of adolescent selfishness seems to have the power to renew a spirited debate about whether we have moved into an age of amorality, whether underneath the surface of our national life there is something that binds us, whether we can still identify together, once again, what we consider to be our bedrock values. But we are not likely to know again what we're trying to preserve until we know more about ourselves, more about what it is that prompts each of us to serve or to turn away, seeking shelter inside a smaller, more personal world of our own making.

The voices within that urge us to independence and also into relationships have something to do with national character, but I suspect that they draw from a deeper, human source. They are not American, even though America was once a place that asked us to respond to them. Those voices speak to the need to belong and to serve. They correspond to that invigorating urge I felt at George's funeral—with Elizabeth by my side and death in my sights—when standing there, I was once again roused to duty.

* * *

At 19 I left that small town in south Arkansas to begin a life of soldiering. I did not leave under the spell of romance. The calling was deeper. My two older half-brothers had already been to war; one lived to come home from Egypt; the other, blown to bits in the sky over Germany, enjoys the honor of an empty grave in Luxembourg. News of his death on Jan. 1, 1945, came to me outside my first-grade classroom, when I was six.

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My father also disappeared around that time. Patrick Cleburne Hoy, named after his own father's commanding general from an earlier war, fell under the compelling influence of a woman he carried around in his head; she set him on a chase, and as far as I can tell, he never found a real woman to match the specter in his head, never guessed that what he was searching for was deep inside himself, muffled in the whispers he never came to understand. He was unable to deal with the destructiveness that accompanied the chase, yet I suspect that the losses he suffered mattered less to him than the relief he occasionally won over loneliness. He sought communion on a level that was strictly personal; the nation, like his family, played no part in it.

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My mom left me a different inheritance—a love complicated by her own need to compensate for her considerable losses. It was she who sent me off to West Point—she, who had already lost a son to war. Now, 40 years later, I can see that she justified her earlier loss against the nation's needs, that having sacrificed her flesh and blood, she could still believe in an idea of community that bound her to the nation and to all those others in the small Arkansas town where she rests today under the warm spring breezes, secure in the 90 years she lived to enjoy the community's blessings.

But I know too that sending me off to a life of soldiering was tainted by her own need for compensation. In her mind, I would represent her. I would serve, and she would be honored. We sacrifice one thing and get another. National service is particularly complicated, because when we first enter into it we are so young that we have to trust those enlisting us. We have to sense that they are not misusing us, just as they have to do everything in their power to earn our trust. And always, we look back—all of us do—for a reckoning. . . .

* * *

I look back on my life and wish, in the words of Bob Seger's song, "I didn't know now what I didn't know then," almost 40 years ago when I embraced a life of soldiering. But service called me at 19. And it could call me now, as the ocean does.

I could never wish for my own sons a life of soldiering, but I want them to sense deep in their bones a commitment strong enough to call them beyond self-interest. At the same time, I want them to be spared the higher costs of self-abnegation. I wish only to leave them a legacy of knowing, along with a heightened awareness that will permit them to attend the whispers—to hear in those ancient promptings within themselves what I could

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barely discern at their age about adventure and community and the will to survive. I want them not to forget, as I want us all not to forget, what it takes to create a nation's character and unity. For in that creation we still bind ourselves, one to another—even when in the binding there is danger, and excitement, and sometimes death.

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