

McNamara, Craig. *Because Our Fathers Lied* (p. 219-259). Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition.

18.

Vietnam

My father went to Hanoi in 1995. In the press the trip was described as his return to Vietnam. He had just published his memoir, *In Retrospect*. During his visit to Hanoi, he would meet with General Vo Nguyen Giap, the leader of the North Vietnamese military and his onetime nemesis.

I very much wanted to join Dad on this trip. Selfishly, I wanted to go on a journey of discovery, to experience a place that had indirectly defined so much of my life. As my father's son, I wanted to be there as he sought closure and attempted to heal the open wounds he helped create. As an American citizen, I wanted to learn and educate myself about Vietnamese perspectives on the American War.

The trip would be in autumn, and the harvest was approaching, our busiest time, and walnut prices were down. We were losing money on about 120 acres of land that I had painstakingly planted fifteen years prior. It was land I dearly loved, but I would end up having to sell it to my neighbors to stay in the black.

Anticipating the start of harvest at the end of our workdays, worrying about the health of the soil and the instability of our production, I felt defeated. This failing acreage was a problem I couldn't solve. Despite that, in the autumn of 1995, I was willing to put aside farming for a moment. For the chance to accompany my father to Vietnam, I would have left my post.

I called him up from my farm office. He was probably in his office at Corning Glass, where he sat at Kay Graham's old desk. It began like our other conversations. "How's the walnut crop looking?" I explained to Dad that it was going to be a tough year for us. I felt my throat tightening. Getting ready to make a request. At that time, asking people for things was very difficult for me.

Finally I gathered a breath and asked him about the Vietnam trip. I made it clear that I wanted to come. Then I asked, "Is Nick's grandson really going?"

I had heard this from John Katzenbach, my lifelong friend. Dad confirmed it. Nick Katzenbach was part of the retinue going to Hanoi, and his grandson was included. But I was excluded.

I told Dad that I really wanted to go.

"Oh, I don't really think it would be appropriate," he replied.

In 1995, Nick's grandson's presence felt like a usurpation. I had nothing against him, but I felt strongly that I too needed to be involved. Looking back, I think what I felt was the desire to

be with my father. I wanted to be there for him and with him. I wanted to say, “Just be with me, Dad.”

As we spoke on the phone, the physical distance between us grew tangible. After that he got quiet. We hung up. It was like a great exhale. I didn’t cry.

When he went to Hanoi, I went back to the harvest. I tried to recalibrate my energies around work. I turned to the land, over which the light of the season was changing and the temperature was dropping, creating a chill of nervous anticipation. To distract myself from the pain of rejection and the uncertainties of walnut prices, I put my energies into making the operation efficient. Every morning, I met with our farm team at 6:30. From there the day unfolded with pure momentum. I received the walnut truck coming in and pulling alongside our warehouse, and I directed the driver to park underneath the load-out conveyor belt. It was still dark in the early morning, so I turned the side light on and offered the truck driver a cup of coffee. As the day proceeded, I ran between various parts of the harvest, troubleshooting.

Two decades passed before I thought about traveling to Vietnam on my own.

Why didn’t I take the initiative sooner? Certainly I had traveled enough: to Mexico and to Chile, to Colorado for family vacations, to DC for visits with my father. There is no single reason why I didn’t go sooner. Among the many reasons were the pain of the war and the impossibility—for me as a noncombatant—of fully confronting its far-reaching consequences.

Maybe it was simply too difficult while Dad was still alive.

There was a turning point in January of 2012, when I was contacted for the first time by Sarah Botstein, who was producing a documentary on the Vietnam War with Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. A few months later, the documentary team arranged a trip to Winters to interview me. I went to therapy in preparation because I felt vulnerable and torn about what to say and what not to say. The interview might be a chance to distance myself from my father. My therapist reminded me, “It’s still important to protect yourself in this process.” Till then I hadn’t thought about it in that way. It seemed like my father’s story, not mine.

The camera crew set up their equipment in the hallway that leads from my bathroom to the kitchen. I sat between our kitchen and living room. The interview ended up lasting a few hours. When it was over, I immediately wondered if I had been honest enough, if I had said enough. The interview felt like the pendulum of my whole life—swinging between feelings that were radically charged and plain affection for Dad.

I watched every episode of the eighteen-hour documentary. As I viewed it, I became self-conscious about how I would come across in my interview segment. I also wondered how hard the documentary was going to be on my father.

Probably one of the most striking moments was a clip of my father in Vietnam, speaking before a crowd and grasping the hand of Prime Minister Nguyen Khanh. Dad, facing the microphone, tried to speak Vietnamese. He intended to say, “Vietnam ten thousand years,” a phrase used to wish long life—or in this case, “Long live Vietnam.” However, his pronunciation was off, and to Vietnamese listeners it sounded like he said, “Ruptured duck wants to lie down.” To me, this clip showed that Dad tried awkwardly to empathize with people he didn’t really

understand. He tried to speak the language, tried to deliver a message of unity, and he completely bungled it.

Besides the parts about my father, the film changed my understanding of the war's long history. Before I saw it, I had little knowledge of the history of the French occupation. Diem Bien Phu, General Giap, President Diem—these were names to me at most. Even my involvement in the peace movement as a young man had left gaps in what I understood. I didn't know the extent to which Martin Luther King opposed the war, and I had only a vague sense of the many connections between Vietnam and the civil rights movement.

I had wanted so desperately to learn about Vietnam from my father. Even in the last years of his life, when I prioritized his health and comfort, I think part of me never gave up on the idea of having that conversation—the one in which he would fully explain to me his role in history, and his own point of view.

I felt the grief of those lost opportunities, and I sought other conversations instead of the one I should have had with my father. After Dad's death, I was lucky to befriend Daniel Ellsberg, the whistleblower and historian who leaked the Pentagon Papers. Through conversations with Dan at his home in Berkeley, I learned things about my father's career that I couldn't have processed on my own, even if I had read them in a book.

Dan has given me the gift of conversations I once thought I would have with my father. Still, learning history from a primary source hasn't made up for the emotional unburdening I needed from Dad. I am not a historian or an intellectual; I'm a farmer. In my life I've gone away from my father's way of understanding the world and his interpretation of history. I crave to experience things and see things at the ground level.

I came very close to traveling to Vietnam with Rich Rusk, the son of Dean Rusk, who was the secretary of state and my father's colleague during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Rich was another person with whom I wanted to discuss history—our personal histories and our fathers' roles.

I met Rich over email in 2015. It was an unexpected message. Rich told me that he had interviewed Dad for a book he wrote with his own father, *As I Saw It*.

“For whatever it is worth,” Rich wrote to me, “I loved your father. Another good man who did his very best.”

We exchanged many emails, in which I learned Rich's life story. In 1970, having become estranged from his father over Vietnam, Rich moved to Alaska and took up fishing. His was a story not unlike mine—except that Rich didn't speak with his father for fourteen years.

It amazed me that I had never met Rich in person. We shared a common experience that few people have. In one email, he wrote to me about attending his father's swearing-in as secretary of state. We must have been in the East Room of the White House together. My father stood next to Dean Rusk at that event.

In 2017, Rich was preparing to travel to Vietnam with a tour group that included veterans. In one of his last emails to me, he shared a letter he had written to the organizers of the tour. He wanted me to edit it for him because he was anxious about how he would come across to a community of veterans.

Craig, any thoughts on a Rusk touring Vietnam with antiwar activists? My son Andy will be going with me.

Given the antiwar composition, agenda and mission of this tour, I thought it best to ask tour organizers.

Is it appropriate? Still wish you were going!

----- Forwarded message -----

It was Dean Rusk, the former secretary of state who, along with JFK, LBJ, and Robert McNamara, were primarily responsible for American policy during 1968, the worst year of the war, and the events—Tet Offensive, Khe Sanh, My Lai—we will be commemorating.

Question: would my presence on this tour have any negative or inhibiting influence on our band of brothers? I would hope not...but still need to ask.

We share a common bond in opposing the war. This includes the architects of 1968. I adored the man as his son, but many of us probably disliked—and some even hated—Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and the others. They have reasons for doing so....

We have all earned the right to our views, especially the veterans among us. As a tour participant, I will be quieter than most, bearing witness to it all. If ever called upon to speak, it will be from the heart with words of gratitude, respect and admiration to all who opposed the Vietnam War and did their best to end it. Thanks to Chuck and Veterans for Peace, now we are doing our best to heal from it.

Rich Rusk

Chuck Searcy, the organizer of the trip, was Rich's lifelong friend. He had served in Vietnam and joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War after returning home. His life has been dedicated to healing wounds and working toward peace. He had organized this trip for Vietnam veterans, their spouses, and peace activists. It was timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the My Lai massacre. My Lai, in many ways, epitomized the evil of the American War: the misguided objectives; the horror of the atrocities committed against Vietnamese civilians; the tragedy of the young Americans committing those atrocities, destroying a peaceful village and slaughtering unarmed families, fathers, mothers, and children. The soldiers' conduct would come to be seen through the structural lens of military policy, especially the body-count principle—the idea forwarded by war planners that we would win in Vietnam by killing more of their people than they killed of ours. Body counts, of course, were among the statistics demanded by the Defense Department.

The trip was a unique opportunity for Rich. After writing a book with his father, it must have been deeply moving for him to think about traveling on a mission of peace with his own son. I spoke to him by phone several times in the weeks leading up to his trip. I was touched that he wanted me to come with him, and I was excited by the idea of one day meeting him in person.

Our phone conversations were the closest contact we ever had. On January 28, 2018, just weeks before he was scheduled to travel to Vietnam, Rich committed suicide by jumping off a bridge. When I heard the news, I thought about the enormity of the loss for his son and the rest of his family. Chuck Searcy wrote to me afterward, saying, "Rich had tried for so many years to figure out a schedule and finances to allow him to come to Viet Nam. He told me many times, 'I really need to do that. I've got to do it—for me and my dad.'"

It's not possible for me to know why Rich killed himself. I only know that he was one of the few people on earth with experiences comparable to mine. Sons of controversial historical

figures, we were linked by that war even though we didn't participate as soldiers. Not meeting Rich in person is something I profoundly regret.

I didn't think of it this way at the time, but it's possible that my conversations with Rich finally pushed me to prioritize traveling to Vietnam. I discussed a trip around the dinner table in the farmhouse, and Julie supported the idea. When the dates were set, my daughter, Emily, was able to take some time off work to accompany me.

In preparation for our trip I read Philip Caputo's devastating account *A Rumor of War* and Tim O'Brien's heartbreaking book *The Things They Carried*. I also read Nguyen Qui Duc's eloquent tale *Where the Ashes Are*, a book recommended to me by my friend Nhu Miller. Compared with my awareness of the many books written by American historians or veterans, I had very little knowledge of the landscape of accounts by Vietnamese writers.

I spent time meeting and speaking with friends in California who had served in Vietnam. I relied very much on the help of Nhu and her husband, Tom Miller. Over the phone and at their home in Berkeley, the Millers connected me with relatives in Vietnam who could be my hosts. Nhu introduced me to her Vietnamese in-law Le Nuoi, who lives in Hoi An, a city on the central coast of the country.

I felt I needed a guide in Hanoi, and for this, I relied on the help of my friend Bob Mulholland, who served in the war and whom I'd met through my leadership work in California agriculture. Bob connected me with Thao Griffiths. At the time we were planning our trip, Thao was helping to organize an international conference on economic development that Vietnam was hosting. She had also been there for my father's trip in 1995. As a diplomacy student, she had been called upon to serve as a "protocol girl," dressing up to welcome Robert S. McNamara, holding flowers as his entourage passed by on the way to meeting General Giap. Now Thao would be my guide and teacher on a trip I was making with my daughter.

I felt one of the infinite circles of life, containing myself and that far-off place, being closed. When Emily and I arrived in Hanoi, Thao swept us up. On our first morning, she met me at 5 a.m. outside the Metropole Hotel, riding on a scooter. She wanted to show me the street culture, and I was happy to ride along. We went to the French Quarter and visited Ly Thai To park. In the park, hundreds of people were doing morning exercises, such as laughing yoga and tai chi. Kids were playing soccer. Couples were practicing ballroom dancing. As Thao and I strolled through the crowd, a middle-aged woman grabbed me and started dancing with me for a minute. I had no thought of withdrawing or shrinking back.

Beyond the park, the hum of Hanoi was everywhere. Street vendors laid their wares down on cloth coverings on the sidewalks and side streets. Thao and I ate varieties of street food, sitting on plastic stools and dipping our fingers into fish sauce. While we ate, I watched women from the countryside carry baskets of greens on their backs, and I pondered the difference between the agriculture I was witnessing and my farming experiences in the United States.

This all took place in the first few hours of my first morning in Vietnam. Watching the street economy, I understood Thao's predilection for getting up early. The day soon became overpoweringly hot and humid. Everything I saw in these early hours of our trip suggested a sense of life lived at a frantic pace, of life crowding around me, an unknown traveler. Walking

the streets was a strong contrast to the black-and-white images of Hanoi from the Burns-Novick documentary and newspaper photographs of war-torn countryside.

Of course, nobody on the street knew my identity. I had the feeling of being embraced, but maybe that was only because of my anonymity. How many people in the park had relatives on either side of the war? I don't want to see every person in Vietnam as a victim; yet there persists a sadness about the remote possibility that I danced in the street with someone who had lost a family member to bombs dropped by Robert McNamara.

Hurrying to keep up with Thao, I thought about the trip I didn't make with Dad. Of his time in Hanoi, I've heard that he appeared haunted, and that his presence was haunting. People stared, but he didn't look back. This is only what I've been told. Walking the streets and surrounded by an entourage, he wasn't open to people. I think about him heading to his office in Washington in his old age, how he warded cars off with a newspaper, barreling through the streets without regard for other people, yelling at motorists and grumbling to himself. Maybe he knew more about the war than I did, but Dad didn't allow himself the joy of being in Vietnam as I did.

One day, Thao was leading Emily and me through a crowded area along the bank of the Red River, full of motorcycle and bicycle traffic. Thao stopped us and said, "I really want you to meet a friend of mine."

She didn't say who it was, but I could tell that it meant a lot to her, so Emily and I agreed to go along. In seconds, Thao waved down two motorcycles and persuaded their drivers to take us to her friend's house. We jumped on the backs of the bikes and rode on a train trestle in the wrong direction, going against traffic, skirting the edge of the street. At a certain place above the river, the bikes jumped off the train tracks and went down a steep embankment through thistles and scrub. Thao led us along the shore to a small houseboat, constructed mostly out of driftwood, with a chicken coop outside made from the same material. She rang the doorbell, and the three of us entered the houseboat together.

The woman who lived there was formerly homeless and looked old. She served us tea and spoke in Vietnamese with Thao. She lived on the boat with her husband, Thao explained. Through some means, Thao and her friends had procured the boat and also arranged for the two of them to get married.

Thao didn't explain to us exactly what this friendship meant to her. Only that she wanted to share it. I thought it showed her love for the people of her country, a sense that even anonymous citizens on the streets and riverbanks mattered to her. After the short visit, thanking her for the tea, we left the woman's house. We walked back up the bank, got on the trestle, and returned to the busy street.

On the morning we met Vo Hong Nam, I awoke at 4 a.m. to rendezvous with Thao. The traffic was just beginning as we made our way to Hanoi's largest flower market. As we motored along the dike separating the Red River from the city, I could make out the most exquisite ceramic mural I have ever seen. Its rich color and design reflected the complexity and vibrancy of Hanoi. Thao told me that it was the world's largest ceramic mosaic, at four kilometers long.

Arriving at the flower market, we sidestepped through aisle after aisle of gorgeous tropical flowers. I picked out four dozen of the freshest long-stemmed roses. Each tiny rosebud was wrapped in tissue paper. At first I thought this was a waste of someone's labor; later I appreciated it as we sped through Hanoi on motor scooters, with the wind jostling forty-eight rosebuds held tightly in my arms.

When we arrived at the house, we were met by Nam and his wife, Rose. They asked us to join them in the garden. They had a peaceful patio behind one of the oldest residences in Hanoi, originally occupied by the French governor Henri Hoppenot. It was a stucco villa, faded yellow with green shutters. Ho Chi Minh had given this home to General Giap after he defeated the French at the battle of Diem Bien Phu.

Nam is the youngest son of General Giap. I am just a few years older than him. We are two sons of two fathers involved in the same struggle. His father came to be revered; mine came to be hated. He was in Vietnam for the American War. I was in America during the Vietnam War.

The garden was welcoming, with the general's koi pond at its center. Surrounding the pond, a tall trellis supported baskets of deep green ferns and climbing roses. Nam explained to me that the gray canisters supporting the trellis were casings from US bombs dropped on Hanoi. I didn't ask whether the bombs had struck close to the home where he now lived. Together, the four of us—Nam, Rose, Thao, and I—squatted on our haunches on the patio tile, trimming rose stems and placing them in large brass urns. Our conversation was that of new acquaintances, curious about the past and present, filled with kindness and respect. Had the roles been reversed, with Nam and Rose arriving at our farm in California on a summer day, I could envision us greeting each other in the same way, peacefully accepting a gift.

I followed Nam and Rose up the steps into a room of their home that housed the shrine of his father. As we entered the shrine, we removed our shoes and lit incense, placing it on the altar adorned with fresh fruit. We placed our roses on the altar. Nam took my hand. Together, we bowed in silence. On the wall behind me was a large portrait of the general in uniform, a warm smile on his face, made from a collage of over three thousand smaller photos of him. We then crossed the patio to the general's formal meeting room. The walls, bookshelves, and tables—every square inch—were covered with photos, statues, medals, banners, plaques, and memorabilia from the general's long life. In this room, Vo Nguyen Giap had met with hundreds of leaders from around the world. I saw statues of Uncle Ho and Chairman Mao, as well as photos of Fidel Castro, Leonid Brezhnev, Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, Brazilian president Lula da Silva, Jacques Chirac, and so many more.

As we sat and talked, Nam presented me with a recently released book celebrating his father's life. As we leafed through the pages, I found on page 165 a photo of General Giap and my father taken on November 9, 1995. The caption read: "The most brilliant Vietnamese general was the Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese nation. The Americans were defeated by Viet Nam because they did not yet understand that general." Those words caught my eye, and I said to Nam, "Both of our fathers were called to duty without a significant military background." And yet my father was synonymous with the war in the minds of Americans. I mentioned this to Nam.



With my counterpart, Vo Hong Nam, the son of General Giap, at the general's home in Hanoi with his wife, Rose (standing), and Thao Griffiths

He replied, "I think that when my father met your father, he said, 'Americans didn't understand Vietnamese culture and history.' And he was so right."

As Nam and I sat together privately, somewhat formally but without presumption, I thought of the intimacy of our meeting. No cameras were there, other than Thao snapping some friendly photos. There were no articles written about our meeting. We met, we talked; we saw each other. Then we made our way back into life.

Emily and I traveled to many parts of the country after Hanoi. We traveled together, then separately, and we had many hosts and guides. In Hue, the second major city on our itinerary, Chuck Searcy was my shepherd. He was preparing to lead the My Lai commemoration trip that Rich Rusk was supposed to go on.

One afternoon, Chuck and I were driving on a road through a forested area, and he told me that we were going to pass something called the McNamara Line, an installation in the former DMZ where my father had conceived of dropping a series of electronic sensors from planes in order to pick up enemy troop movements. It didn't work, Chuck explained to me, because the cutting-edge sensors frequently picked up the sounds of animals and other ambient noise. Chuck said that there was a carved stone slab in the jungle somewhere commemorating this folly of Robert McNamara.

As we were driving, I spotted something off the road. "Wait," I said. "Is that it?"

Chuck hit the brakes. We got out of the car and went off the road, hacking through a few feet of jungle with a machete. There was a plaque not unlike the marker I had made for my mother's grave. It read, according to Chuck's translation:

The "Magic Eye" of the McNamara Electronic Fence,
an evidence of the humiliating defeat of the U.S. Empire in 1975

In Hue, Chuck had done a lot of work to commemorate the victims of ordnance explosions, past and present. He took me to a museum that he had helped construct that contained several exhibits about the effects of Agent Orange. As I recall it, we had also planned some visits with families whose adult children were affected by chemical warfare, but the plan fell through. I wanted to feel that pain, to know what my father's actions continued to deliver.

Looking back on my trip, I realize that I saw little evidence of physical destruction in the landscape. In fact, I saw a country that had done much to heal. The beauty of Vietnam—its mountains and rivers and vast green spaces—stood in contrast to what I knew about the history of the war. This made me happy as a farmer and an environmentalist; it made me uncomfortable too, because I felt a responsibility to get closer to the pain and the suffering. On the other hand, I wondered if it was my place to do that. Maybe the magnitude of the suffering is too great for me to properly acknowledge.

In Hue we stayed in a colonial hotel. The architecture of that city is largely French. My North American mind reacted positively then, and still does, to colonial columns and baroque spirals—ornate things, the pretty artifacts of conquest. Later, in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Emily rejoined me. We arrived there during a downpour and visited a house that had belonged to Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., the US ambassador to South Vietnam in the early years of US involvement. Our hosts there ran a large tour company. Stepping into the house, we stepped back into 1965. The homeowners had restored a part of the house as a kind of museum of the period. There were pictures of my father on the wall with General Maxwell Taylor. In our socks, we climbed to the second floor of the house and peered into the small guest room where my father slept during his many visits to Saigon.

I don't think I cried much on this trip, and I don't think I had many nightmares. Still, I felt my father's shadow. The plaque, the photos. He was there, I thought, in the eyes of people I met: a dragon-fruit farmer who had been a member of the Viet Cong; two young artists who made replica uniforms of North and South Vietnamese soldiers; and others I don't remember. In my limited time in the country, I felt the absence that defined our relationship. So much of being my father's son has been contained in that feeling of a missed connection and the inability to mark certain tragedies, so they linger.