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Final Paper

Yearning for an Anecdote

Reflecting upon the year 1968 leaves us with salient questions like “What can we learn from that era?” and “How can we incorporate that lesson to our present times?”. In my view, the most worthwhile lesson we ought to extrapolate from 1968 is the importance of storytelling. Julien Bourg reminded our class that 1968 was a time when “everyone spoke to everyone”, and this environment is conducive to much more meaningful and substantive relationships. We seem to have lost touch with that. Today, society has become exponentially more compartmentalized: people choose who they follow on social media, which cyclical news narrative they adhere to, and which activities they pursue. Anything outside of these regimented pathways is virtually unknown. I think these attitudes are precisely why change in America is so much more difficult than it used to be. We're bombing eight different countries right now, our middle class is crumbling, and we're spiraling closer and closer to climate catastrophe each day; yet we lack a united and widespread effort to combat these devastating problems. There's a dire need to listen to each other again. In 1968, Walter Cronkite was regarded as the most trusted man in the country. Today, information that confronts and challenges people's narratives is considered fake. In 1968, people questioned our involvement in other countries, what victory could come from such actions, and which alternatives there were. Today, an all-too-large portion of our nation's populace caricatures anyone who questions our military industrial complex as unpatriotic and ungrateful. In 1968, people willingly put their safety on the line to storm the streets in protest of police brutality. Today, we struggle to find an 'appropriate' way to protest. The simple act of

kneeling has been deemed unacceptable by many. These differences are from a lack of listening to other's stories: we no longer have the same vested interests in our neighbor's well-being. Ken Burns *Vietnam War* documentary, David Greenway's *Foreign Correspondent* memoir, and Michael Herr's reporting in *Dispatches* each effectively narrate the perils and immorality surrounding our involvement in Vietnam, and it's evident that a willingness to listen to stories like these is precisely what got us out of that horrific war.

Media coverage of the Vietnam War, and of the LBJ administration collectively was paramount to a widespread understanding of our war operatives, and consequentially to an ending of our involvements in Vietnam. Ken Burns documentary avails 21st century viewers to the domestic political climate surrounding our war affairs. As facts and information pile in, hope and enthusiasm around the war decadently decays. Johnson's narrative did not coincide with reality, and the latter held more worth than the former back then. We can see Johnson's frustration with the media grow as its power grows. Burns shows us footage from the war that would be broadcasted on television—quite literally bringing the war into people's homes. Johnson and his administration pitched this war as a just, necessary, and winnable one—but the facts suggested otherwise. A narrator explains in the documentary “The president was besieged by problems he could not solve”, and Cronkite famously told the nation “To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past”. These claims are corroborated by the war footage—to the average citizen this violence is evidently excessive, needless, and endless. After TET, a mission supposedly putting victory in sight, the Johnson administration demanded 206,000 troops. People could see that things weren't adding up—why would we need to deploy so many more troops if victory was so

close? In *Foreign Correspondent*, we are reminded that public relations officials were working overtime to put a positive spin on the events: they were “inviting you to join in a conspiracy of wishful thinking” (Greenway 59). We see the same administrative efforts being made today. President Trump has said “What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening... We’re making this country great again”. Given the magnitude and multitude of the political struggles we’re immersed in right now, it’s evident that this is merely an attempt to coalesce people under an ideology--and the act of convincing people that things are okay has superseded the actual deed of making things better.

Aside from the dishonesty regarding the war’s potential outcome, the stories we received from those reporting in Vietnam clearly conveyed our nation’s involvement as morally degrading. After TET especially, communities were ravaged, more troops were continuously drafted and deployed, and there was simply no rational way to observe what’s happening and remain optimistic about it. Greenway tells us that he “once saw some Americans set dogs on terrified suspects”, and that gratuitously cruel act epitomizes how inhumane our operations went. It reminded me of a clip from the Burns’ series—with a general mercilessly shooting a handcuffed and captured Vietnamese man. Johnson accused the media of being deceitful during his phone call with Jack Horner of the Washington Star “your press is lying like drunken sailors everyday...how can we win and fight the press’s lies...I’m trying to protect my country and they blame me; they don’t say a word about Ho Chi Min”. The reason Americans talked about LBJ and not Ho Chi Min is because we were on the offensive, literally. We entered their country, we tried to change how they live, and we could reasonably have left at any point. People saw right through this narrative—what was LBJ protecting them from? What would victory look like in

Vietnam? Over time these questions became harder and harder to answer: an ocean of information drowned out an administrative narrative.

Such dissent could only grow from a willingness to intake information. We must surrender to uncertainty in the pursuit of truth, and 1968 protestors did precisely that. Aside from the war, LBJ had a robust and popular agenda: he tackled poverty, civil rights, and education issues, among other things. He had the largest share of the popular vote since the 1820 election, and yet 63% of the nation disapproved of his handling of the war. This tells us that people's perspectives were malleable: citizens were open to listening to reports, learning from them, and rallying against injustices. LBJ's popularity plummeted because he bungled our foreign policy—the Vietnam War undid his legacy. I recently heard a Trump supporter on the news proclaim, “I don't care what he (Trump) says; I'll support it”, and I think that quote is emblematic of the paradigm shift we've witnessed in American politics. There's not enough galvanization behind ideas and convictions—instead our political system consists of various cults, often leaving people as propagandists for one group and vehemently against anything outside of that group. Broadcasted footage and objective news reporting used to be a keystone in our society, and we've completely lost that. Our military industrial complex, climate issues, socioeconomic inequities, and racial injustices will likely persist if the cult mentality continues to be prioritized over collective accountability.

Love can change the world in a moment: if you love your neighbors, you want to serve their best interests. A lack of compassion and empathy is what got us into Vietnam in the first place, it's what made getting out of Vietnam so difficult, and it's fundamentally the reason our social issues have augmented today. These events seem far more complicated than this, but when

boiled down it entirely encapsulates our nation's perils. We didn't treat the Vietnamese with care. Greenway, in his lecture, reminded us "you have to be able to live life knowing that your neighbor may be different from you". One does not have to be pro-communist to see that we mismanaged relations with Vietnam. We see a lack of compassion not only in the government's dehumanization of Vietnam, but also regarding its very own soldiers. For LBJ and company, American citizens were treated explicitly as assets—persons that they felt comfortable deploying to serve their interests. Per *Dispatches*, it seems that those fighting in Vietnam felt distant from those in charge: "somehow most of the official expressions of grief have about them that taint of Presidential sorrow, turning a little granny around the edges". The administration sounded insincere and apathetic towards what the war costed, which was largely what detached the public from the government.

These are complicated systemic issues that offer us no single encompassing solution, but that shouldn't leave us hopeless. Our course has taught me that there a bevy of actions we as individuals can take to (at least partially) reobtain components of the 1968 counterculture. Greenway, for one, articulates that print journalism was valued more in the past: it was considered informative and responsible—it was the mediator between the public and the government. Today that delicate equilibrium has vanished: we need to get back to a group of people that values reading and learning. This relates closely to John Cage and Sister Corita's "10 Rules for Students, Teachers, and Life": they implore us to "read anything you can get your hands on". Doing so will bolster our society—we will become better informed and more open-minded. Another reason we feel subdued to the plethora of issues our time faces is from a lack of immediacy. A large portion of our population can live a routine life without directly facing the

life-threatening impacts that our military, the climate, income inequality and inadequate healthcare pose to others. That means our circle of concern needs to expand, and it needs to cover those we do not even know. To be fair, this may have been easier in 1968: technology didn't compartmentalize citizen's lives, and there was also the concrete and imminent threat of being drafted (or losing a loved one to the draft). Though the difficulty of instilling a widespread vested interest in global health is undeniably a monumental challenge, it should not deter our attempts to do so. Our military is supporting genocide in Yemen right now, and at least 85,000 children have died from it, yet the average citizen feels subdued and distant to this humanitarian crisis. I've barely heard this catastrophe mentioned in public, or even on the mainstream news. We must be good neighbors and global stewards. We can make change in the same way 1968 citizens did: by telling the government they're failing at their job. Publicizing the unpopularity of the war is precisely what ended it, politicians follow the opinions of the American people. Barack Obama was against gay marriage until polls showed unanimous support for it, for example. We too can show our leaders that how they've been addressing issues poorly and negligently. I end with a "Dispatches" quote: during a conversation with a General, Herr explains "he (the General) worries about me...about my sanity. I have what he refers to as 'this thing about death' an unhealthy fascination with so much of what I've had to see here. He respects it intellectually but finally he finds it morbid and unprofitable. Worst of all, he finds that I have a tendency, when discussing the dead, to not only dwell on them, but to personalize them as well. What the General views as reprehensible and insane is precisely what I find imperative for social change: personalization, storytelling, and consideration for others (whom we may not even directly know, and whom may even be dead). Despite when others paint our concerns as

inefficient, unreasonable, and time-wasting, we must heed that burden and continue pursuing justice. Often, those are indeed the times when continuing to fight is most crucial. Apathy is the most dangerous threat to our world today; it ought to (and can) be replaced with hope and persistence. We start by rediscovering our ability to listen.

Works Cited

Burns, Ken. *Vietnam*, 12 Apr. 2017

Greenway, David. *Foreign Correspondent*, 19 Aug. 2014

Herr, Michael. "Hell Sucks." *Esquire*, 11 Oct. 2017

*All other quotes and facts come from either course discussion, or from my own general following of current events.