

OUR “PRE-SPONSE”



**A SUPPLEMENT
TO**

**RICE UNIVERSITY’S
BAKER INSTITUTE**

CONFERENCE ON

THE VIETNAM WAR:

FIFTY YEARS ON



The information below was provided in the announcement of the event. The organizers, for whatever reason, decided not to broach the issues raised therein, so we have done so in this booklet.



"The Vietnam War: 50 Years On"

(Open to the public)

Rice University's Baker Institute, Houston, TX

Wednesday, September 9, 2015 from 5:00 PM to 7:30 PM

Event Details

Join the Baker Institute Roundtable Young Professionals, along with Rice University's Veterans in Business Association, for a panel discussion commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War. Four critically acclaimed writers who served in the war — Philip Caputo, Larry Heinemann, Tim O'Brien and Tobias Wolff — will use literature as a lens to explain the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War and will discuss its relevance to the post-9/11 era. The event will spotlight the growing presence of military veterans in the Roundtable Young Professionals and at Rice's Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business.

5:00 pm

Reception

6:00 pm

Panel Discussion

Philip Caputo

Author, "A Rumor of War"

Larry Heinemann

Author, "Paco's Story"

Tim O'Brien

Author, "The Things They Carried"

Tobias Wolff

Author, "In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War"

**Our Pre-sponse to Rice University's
Baker Institute Conference
On the Vietnam War: 50 Years On
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***Dedicated to all those who served
in the noble and valiant effort to turn back
the forces of aggression and tyranny
in Vietnam and Southeast Asia,
all the men and women of our armed forces –
and the many civilians too
who played important roles,
and of course our South Vietnamese allies
and those of other nations who joined in that effort,
and – perhaps especially – all their families.
Thank you, my brothers and sisters.***

And just one thing more: It didn't have to end that way.

Lewis Sorley, October 28, 2014

Adapted from an address at the Army Navy Club

INTRODUCTION

“Nor is the people's judgement always true; the most may err as grossly as the few.”
John Dryden

The traditional phases of a war's written record start with contemporaneous reporting, followed by the personal accounts of individual soldiers (often fictionalized). Then comes memoirs of their commanders and a culminating flow of volumes of historical analyses of events shaping the era. Vietnam follows this pattern, with some variations.

Tonight's event is an opportunity to meet four of the more accomplished soldier-authors of the Vietnam war, to share their insights into the creative process, to hear their stories about the “business” of authorship and with luck, we'll hear about stories that did not make the final edit. We might also hear how their works provide lessons for the future...or the present.

Phil Caputo arrived in Viet Nam in 1965 as a U.S. Marine platoon leader with the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. Larry Heinemann was an enlisted draftee with the 25th Infantry Division in 1967-68. Tim O'Brien was a Sergeant (E-5) with the 198th Light Infantry Brigade of the Americal Division in 1969-70. Tobias Wolff describes himself as a Special Forces trained officer who served as an advisor to an ARVN artillery unit in the Mekong Delta in 1967-68 [which included the Tet Offensive].

The four served their tours over a 5 year span. Viet Nam was not the same in every province, nor was it the same in '71 as it was in '65. Caputo and O'Brien were in the northernmost military region, MR I, while Heinemann and Wolff were several hundred miles to the south. One common factor applies to all four: there were in four of the most lethal areas of the entire country, as measured by allied combat fatalities. All have written highly praised books describing their tours, the ups and downs, the misery and death they were exposed to and endured. There is no whitewashing, no cosmetic literary anesthesia. These works clearly and expressly describe war's diabolical horrors, the descent of one's soul into near-madness.

What then can be said about these works, and, more importantly, the inferences drawn from, particularly on the part of younger people with no military experience and no basis of comprehending Viet Nam's war? Students could read other factual narratives, leaving a completely different impression from that which these authors depict.

The website for this event suggests that we can “use literature as a lens to explain the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War and ... its relevance to the post-9/11 era.” It is characteristic of events like these to prefer an impressionistic approach to the Vietnam War, assuming that it can best be understood by “feelings,” “impressions,” and “drama.” It is the difference between an oceanographer who needs to know chemistry, hydrology, geology, ichthyology, and marine biology to properly do his job, and a seascape painter using ink, water colors, brushes canvas and an easel.

The approach is evidence that many in this country not only do not comprehend the Vietnam War, but do not want to comprehend it objectively. The attendees, the speakers, the organizers, and Rice University will all “feel good” about this symposium, but they will go out the same epistemological door they came in, because they prefer historical fiction to objective, factual history. Many others share that preference, we don't.

Any young attendees with first-time exposure to things Viet Nam will emerge more ignorant than before. Remember the phrase about the omnipresence of opinions. We like ours and we share it with you here, with our apologies for not having done so earlier and louder. We trust the budding wordsmiths in the audience will not take offense and those who can, in response to the proffered understanding of the War that Never Ended, will find some enlightenment in these pages. **We, like the conference organizers, hope that this conference, rather than the authors’ works, will be a lens to through which the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War and its relevance to the post-9/11 era in America can be accurately viewed.**

**Bill Laurie**

“Any event that uses the word “relevance” is a sure sign of an English Dept at work.... I rarely, if ever, read Vietnam or other war fiction.... Fiction is kind of like masturbation--while somewhat satisfying, it’s just not like the real thing.... From a historian’s point of view, fiction is what people write who are too lazy to do proper research (and poets are those who cannot write complete sentences).”

Michael Lee Lanning