

# America won't stand violence much longer

**I**N AMERICA, anybody is game for an assassin's bullet, no matter how tight the security. If some dazed madman wants to get a leader, he can find a way. Security is neither the answer nor the best protection. All the security in the world, as Kansas Sen. Robert Dole says, can't cope with the "chilling impossibility of preventing such attempts."

WHEN THE WORLD is engulfed in such tragedy, talk of gun control abounds. People on the street say: "It's Reagan's own fault — he was so against gun control."

But the problem is more fundamental than gun control. It's an attitude and present state of our nation. People resort to using guns when they have problems. They lose sight of the value of life.

Wayne County Prosecutor William Cahalan claims more people are killed with guns in America

than in the rest of the world combined. On an average, some 150 people each week are murdered with guns.

Gun control might be one step in the right direction. But despite whatever laws are established, if someone wants a gun and is willing to pay the price, he'll have it.

It boils down to what many congressmen said Monday night: "There's really no way to stop a crazed gunman. Freedom for everyone makes no one free. We're all subject to murderers and other demented persons."

Gun shop owners and the gun lobby maintain that "the gun didn't hurt the president, the person did. It's people. You have to deal with the people and their problems."

**VIOLENCE IN AMERICA** — that's the problem. As Dr. Kermit Hall of Wayne State University says: Violence has come to symbolize America just

like the crack in the Liberty Bell. Local psychiatrist Bruce Danto blames our mental health system:

"Violence in our country is attributable to the failure of our mental health system. We have tragically ill people who are tragically inadequate. We have to get our mental health system back in shape. We have to start screening out people with problems."

**MOST PEOPLE** aren't going to take it much longer.

Grass-roots America is rallying around capital punishment and other such alternatives because people see them as ways of getting rid of these demented persons. Some will support capital punishment whether they rationalize the morality of it or not — it will become one solution to violence in America.

Others may well take the law in their own hands. Stricter penalties, changing attitudes so violence isn't synonymous with the crack in the Liberty Bell, harnessing crime by removing guns from those sick enough to use them, returning respect for law and order — that is the route grass-roots America will take to redeem the moral fiber of our society.

Farmington Hills-based attorney Robert Schrader is one of those grass-roots Americans. He sat in his office Monday looking out the window after he heard word of Reagan's attempted assassination. In his view was the American flag flapping in the wind outside his corner suite. It was a sad scene.

"I'm depressed," he reflected. "This is America. One damn idiot can wreck what it's all about. We can't sit back any longer and take this."

Ron Garbinski

## A nightmare that doesn't seem to end

The experience of serving in Vietnam still lives with an estimated 500,000 former Michigan servicemen. Many veterans living in Detroit suburbs are members of the local chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America; for example, Dan Montoy of Garden City is second vice president of the organization.

Today, two Observer & Eccentric editors recall their experiences in Vietnam and the aftermath.



# Vietnam's tragedy: People didn't care

The morning of May 5, 1970, came too soon. I had been dreading the day. On that morning I would leave my bride of four months for a 24-hour flight to Vietnam.

As I slowly ate my breakfast, the television was on. The announcer was talking excitedly about the events of the day before — we now call it Kent State. Protests over the Vietnam War had reached a peak, and four students had been killed.

It was not easy going to the war. Only a few months earlier, I had been on Michigan State University's campus as some of my friends vigorously protested the war.

This month I will celebrate the 10-year anniversary of my return from Vietnam. Even now it's not easy to write about my experience. It's not that it was so traumatic. I had an office job in Saigon. The greatest personal danger I faced was getting hit by a speeding Saigon taxi cab.

**BUT IT'S** difficult to talk about my experiences in Vietnam because I know most people aren't interested.

That's the tragedy of Vietnam: People don't really give a damn about the war or what happened to those who were in the war.

When I came back from Vietnam, many people would perfunctorily ask me what it was like. But I



**Nick Sharkey**

could tell from their expressions that they weren't interested in knowing: They were only being polite.

Perhaps it is just as well, because it's impossible adequately to describe to someone what Vietnam was like. It is something that must be experienced. Words just fail.

But there are so many memories that come back even after 10 years.

**SOMETIMES SOLDIERS** in Vietnam would talk about whether they would return to the country when the war was over. "Instead of flying to Europe this summer, what about a trip to Vietnam?" I knew I would never want to return, and I haven't changed my mind.

Much of my off-duty time was spent trying to have Vietnamese friends confirm that there was a purpose for U.S. soldiers' being in their country. I had to resolve my own doubts.

They told me they were glad we were there and that without the U.S. presence the Communists would take over their country (which later proved to be all too right).

During the period I was in Vietnam (1970-71), "Vietnamization" was the buzz word for what the United States was trying to do. Basically, it meant we were trying to build the self-sufficiency of the Vietnamese so they could wage their own war without us.

Despite what was being said in Washington, it was apparent that Vietnamization was not working. We were not making the country self-sufficient, but only more dependent on us.

**ANYONE WHO** catered to Americans, no matter how menial the job, was affluent by Vietnamese standards.

Mama-sans (maids), prostitutes and beggars made more money than those who were working to build the country — school teachers and farmers. The Vietnamese had "street smarts" and realized that soon the GIs would leave and they should get as much money now as they could.

Mama-sans became so Americanized that they formed a union and went on a strike. This was a

phenomenon previously unheard of in this Asian culture. For us it was no fresh laundry or shined shoes until we forked over a few more piasters (South Vietnam money).

As my year dragged on, I made myself two promises: (1) I would never look back and say the year went fast, and (2) I'd never try to convince anyone that I was a war hero.

So far, I have kept my promises.

**ONE DAY** I returned from Vietnam, resumed my life and never stopped to explain to anyone what had happened. During that year I had not only been in Vietnam but also in Japan, Hong Kong and Hawaii. I felt like a different person.

In a few days I returned to visit my friends who were pursuing advanced degrees at MSU. A month later I was a reporter covering an anti-Vietnam War demonstration which closed Grand River Avenue in downtown East Lansing. Not much had changed. But I knew I would never be the same again.

Today, I must admit that I have not joined any Vietnam veterans organization. And I never will.

Maybe in 10 more years I'll feel different. But for now, I'd just like to forget.

# Veterans are caretakers of bitter memories

The Vietnam conflict, the winter soldiers' war, is a nightmarish collage of blurred images and muted sounds. For all time we will be the caretakers of the war that America lost.

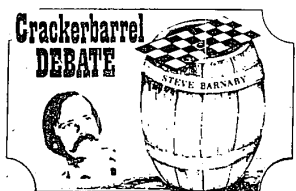
Only death will relieve us of the burden. The strains of an old '60s tune reverberates through our minds: "We gotta get out of this place, it's the last thing we ever do."

But the song is more a reminder of a bitter memory. It is the "Lily Marlens" of the Vietnam era. We sang it with comrades after chugging countless cans of warm beer. It helped to relieve the boredom, loneliness and death experienced daily in combat.

Today, those comrades' names and faces are buried deep in the recesses of our minds. However hard we strain to remember, they stubbornly remain buried.

But there are times when it all comes back, as if it were yesterday. Every year at this time my memory is jogged. It's like clockwork. Just about the middle of March I gaze at the calendar, and my eyes are drawn to March 26 — the first day I spent as an infantryman in Vietnam.

The year was 1968, the height of the war, my war.



a helicopter ride," yelled the Mexican-American sergeant in broken English.

I raced to the chopper pad, my combat gear haphazardly wrapped around my body. I was excited, like a kid who didn't know any better.

As the helicopter chugged through the tropical air, I looked out over the peaceful landscape. It was beautiful.

But within minutes, the serenity gruesomely changed into something out of Dante's "Inferno." I, too, was to change, never to be the same again. Upon landing, our company was attacked from

all four sides by a North Vietnamese Army battalion.

"Is it like this all the time," I asked the soldier next to me as we hid behind the security of a rice-paddy dike.

"Naw, it goes in spurts," he replied nonchalantly, lighting a cigarette.

"Say, you mind if I bum one of those?" I said after a bullet snapped by my ear and landed with a thud in the mushy soil next to me. I didn't smoke, but it certainly seemed like an appropriate time to start.

There was no answer. He was dead, the victim of a bullet through the chest. I was dumbfounded. One minute he was talking to me, the next he lay on the ground, all signs of life gone from his young body. I thought about his parents back home. They didn't even know their son was dead. They were still hoping he would come home alive.

**I WAS FATED** to see a lot of death for the rest of the year. But combat in any war is just about the same.

For Vietnam veterans, coming home was the most difficult part. It still is. Most of us are still coming home. We are, in the

best way possible, trying to readjust to this country which allowed us to fight America's first losing war. But after these many years, the pain grows instead of fading.

If anything, we feel more alienated and foreign than when first stepping off the "freedom birds" onto American soil.

Perhaps the mental wounds have been opened by all the books and movies that have hit the scene in the last few years.

Watching the boat people, refugees fleeing from Vietnam, makes being home even worse. But we can't help them.

All this talk about a week for Vietnam veterans and, yellow ribbons and parades really doesn't change anything. The persons who weren't there, and who haven't had to endure the eternal loneliness of coming home to a country where they're called "baby killers" will never change.

While this country willfully chose to lose this war, it is the Vietnam veteran's right to honor the experience among themselves. It really isn't anybody else's war to remember.

We fought it, we live with it and we shall die with it — alone.