

## **FRANK D. CASALE**

### **W. D. Ehrhart and the Extremes of Foreign Policy, Ideology, and the American Hegemony**

In their study “A Matter of Conscience: Resistance Within the US Military during the Vietnam War,” Bill Short and Willa Seidenberg report that, at first, new recruits for service in Vietnam were people who were, in one way or another, rather conformist in their world-view—in other words, most new recruits agreed with or followed mainstream American beliefs and values—and that “those ideals were taken at face value.... [B]y the time young men came of draft age, their sense of duty toward the United States was well-formed.”<sup>1</sup> As one of the veterans they interviewed recounted:

I'd grown up seeing the US defend itself against the Nazis and Japanese, watching John Wayne movies, and I felt very patriotic. Maybe I'd seen one too many Marine movies, but I felt, and it was supported by my father's patriotism, that what we were doing had to be right. I had volunteered to go, I wanted to be there. I thought it was the right thing that we should go over and protect democracy there. Yet, here were all these Marines coming back from Vietnam saying what we were doing was wrong. It really shattered, totally contradicted everything I believed in about the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this quotation brings us to the main ideological conflict of the Vietnam War.

Most of the young people entering the war, especially in its early years, operated as

subjects of the dominant American ideology, with its values of militarism, subtle racism, and the assumption that everything the American elite did was “right;” however, many soldiers were profoundly changed and radicalised by their experiences in Vietnam. The experience of the Vietnam War served as an agent in radically transforming the world-view, the ideology, of many soldiers.<sup>3</sup> As W. D. Ehrhart, the main literary subject of this study, stated in his essay “Stealing Hubcaps:” “It took a brutal war and a brutal homecoming and a brutal self-examination coupled with a brutal study of history to force me to see the world as I do now.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the war was such an extremely brutal event that it created fissures in the American hegemony. As Harry Haines has noted, “the Vietnam War’s ideological contradictions produced experiences which were fractured and seemingly disconnected from the ongoing story of America.”<sup>5</sup> The war presented to Americans an opportunity to experience and perceive an extreme version of reality: a reality that was in blatant contradiction with the ideology, formed by the American hegemony, which most Americans held. In reading through the literature produced by veterans, especially those involved in the protest movements, a common thread becomes apparent—the idea of the Vietnam War as a metamorphosing event which fractured the veteran’s world-view and resulted in a radical ideological transformation. The war presented reality in extreme contrast to American ideas about reality; in this way the war allowed American soldiers to examine their subjectivity, and more importantly, to call into question the system which created that subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

In *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War*, W. D. Ehrhart, one of the brightest, and most overlooked, writers to come out of the war, textualises the creation of his original “gung-ho” American mindset, and the rupture the Vietnam War

created within that mindset, that lead to his eventual ideological transformation.<sup>7</sup> The novel has three narrative frameworks. The first is an enclosing narrative which begins and ends the novel, taking place in 1974 with Ehrhart as an engine-room seaman on an oil tanker, playing cards with Roger, a shipmate. This narrative, in which Roger serves as a questioner, audience, and foil for Ehrhart, functions as an envelope for the other two narrative lines of the novel. This elder Ehrhart is the final product of the process of the novel; he is the ideologically-transformed radical narrator who presents Ehrhart-the-author's point of view. The next narrative level is that of Ehrhart as the 1969 college freshman, just returned from a tour of duty in Vietnam. Here we are presented with Ehrhart trying to readjust to civilian life, and trying to fit in with the quiet campus community of Swarthmore College. However, Ehrhart's attempt at integration is futile, as the third narrative line, the story of his experience in Vietnam, continually punches through his consciousness, fracturing both Ehrhart's subjectivity and the narrative line of the novel. Within this structure Ehrhart must somehow come to terms with the contradiction between his ideology and his experience of reality in the Vietnam War. Taken as a whole, within its three different time-lines, the book presents the transformation of Ehrhart from a young, naïve, gung-ho, militaristic patriot to the anti-war, anti-imperialist radical of the oil tanker narrative. As it explores the ideological change of one individual, the novel explores the composition and rhetoric of the American hegemony itself.

The Vietnam narrative begins with eighteen year-old Ehrhart, fresh from boot camp, coming face to face with the material conditions of Vietnam. The more of the war he is exposed to—recounted to the reader in grisly detail—the more confused and cynical

he becomes. As the young Ehrhart begins to lose his idealism he thinks, “back in high school it had been easy to imagine myself a hero. But over here, well, most of the heroes seemed to be dead, or likely to be dead soon. My fantasies had never included me among the dead.”<sup>8</sup> Here we begin to see effects of the contradiction between the reality of Vietnam and the cultural myths and illusions which filled Ehrhart’s head in America. The material experience of Vietnam is beginning to produce cracks in his ideology. Other chapters narrate the horror of the war in Vietnam, as Ehrhart sees first-hand the instruments of American foreign policy, like “Puff the Magic Dragon,” a flying gunboat with firepower that Ehrhart describes as “18,000 rounds a minute my man... three hundred bullets per second... chops up anything and everything like mincemeat: fields, forests, mangroves, water buffalo, people, everything.”<sup>9</sup> In this image, the illusory dragon of psychedelic culture takes on real fire-breathing form, just as the abstract plans of Washington policy-makers become a horrifying reality. American idealism becomes American firepower laying waste to Vietnam.

The extreme violence of Vietnam becomes more and more personalised for Ehrhart as the war-level narrative moves on. Several members of his squad are killed, and in two pivotal scenes, Ehrhart depicts shooting a sixty year-old woman because she ran across a field, and then executing an old man on the order of his commanding officer. After the latter incident Ehrhart, for some still-inarticulate reason, begins to recall bullies who beat him up in high school, and then thinks:

Ask a marine, the recruiting posters had said. Tell it to the marines. I thought of the old man lying a few hundred meters away, his hands still tied behind his back, the small hole in the back of his head, and half his face blown off. I thought of the old woman back in the rice field in June and the young girl with the AK-47.<sup>10</sup>

The material events of the war are in clear contradiction to the identity he had constructed both for himself and America. Rhetoric fails in the face of reality, opening a fissure between ideology and experience. That fissure provides space for beginning the process of change.

As Ehrhart's tour of duty in Vietnam draws to an end, the events he witnessed, and the things he did, eat away at him, leaving him in the state of mind depicted in his poem "Hunting:"

Sighting down the long black barrel  
I wait till front and rear sights  
form a perfect line on his body  
then slowly squeeze the trigger.  
The thought occurs  
that I have never hunted anything in my whole life  
except other men.  
But I have learned by now  
where such thoughts lead,  
and soon pass on  
to chow, and sleep,  
and how much longer till I change my socks.<sup>11</sup>

Ehrhart is not yet at the stage of development to deal with "where such thoughts lead" but the cracks in his previous belief system are now in place. The events of Vietnam lead him to wonder:

In Vietnam, I'd read the same newspapers and magazines filled  
with official statements and explanations that people back in  
the states were reading. The difference was that I had  
something against which to evaluate what I was reading—  
395 days of something, actually.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, fractures appear in the wall of American myths, but Ehrhart does not yet push through. He sees a pattern of "headlines versus the truth" but he still refuses either to disbelieve the headlines or face the truth. He still interprets his experiences as a

member of the American hegemony, albeit a slightly cynical one. The struggle between what he sees, and what his military and cultural training tell him, leads to a comatose-like state of mind during the remainder of his service time. The engine-room scene can be read as a metaphor for that state of mind:

You didn't steer from the engine room, of course. The people on the bridge did that. Deep in the belly of the ship, there were no windows or portholes. You had no idea where you were going or why you were executing a command. All you could do was provide the power—forward or backward—and hope the guys on the bridge knew what they were doing. And what power those engines generated.... It was a real rush. Like riding a steel elephant pell-mell through the jungle.<sup>13</sup>

This level of realisation about Vietnam continues upon Ehrhart's return to America, an America in which he feels out of place. The college-age narrator is willing to admit that the war was a costly blunder, but his condemnations do not go much further. "God almighty," he laments, "I'd only tried to do my duty as my duty had been taught to me by my parents, teachers, and elders of every stripe. I had done what my nation had asked of me."<sup>14</sup> He is still trying to deal with his Vietnam experience as an American, still trying to explain his experience in American terms, and still trying to ignore the answers to the deep questions that Vietnam posed.

The college-level narrative depicts Ehrhart as he tries to fit back into American campus life; we see him studying, pledging a fraternity, dating, partying, and trying to leave Vietnam in the past. However, the experience of it is not easily repressed. During his first week on campus the memories of Vietnam begin punching through his consciousness, preventing him from forgetting what he saw. The narrator recounts:

I had several more shots of whiskey before I finished the reading. I usually stayed up until the alcohol and exhaustion made it impossible to keep my eyes open any longer. When I shut them, the nightmares would be waiting: the old woman in the rice field, the small boy with the grenade in the crowded marketplace at Hoi An, the old man on Barrier Island with his hands tied behind his back.<sup>15</sup>

At first, the memories only emerge in his dreams, but as the story develops, the memories strike into his waking consciousness, at first only upsetting him, but later with devastating results. The more he tries to ignore the lessons of Vietnam, the more violent these flashbacks become. Soon, Ehrhart becomes subject to nearly uncontrollable fits of rage, which are always either pre-empted or followed by a flashback of the violence he committed in Vietnam. In one scene, right after he has just exploded at his girlfriend, he sees “the running figure in black... the single shot punching a hole in the boredom of a hot afternoon... and not a shadow of remorse anywhere under that scorching Asian sun.”<sup>16</sup> This violent and self-destructive behaviour leads Ehrhart to question his identity. “What kind of person could shoot down old men and women for—for what?” he wonders: “what the hell had happened to me over there?”<sup>17</sup> Ehrhart’s realisation that his problem is not what happened to him over there, but resides here, in America, almost comes to him in the false climax of Chapter 17. This chapter depicts the 1970 invasion of Cambodia; Ehrhart sits in his dorm room while his girlfriend goes off to an anti-war rally. As he sits in his room, shocked at the American invasion and the war, which seems without an end, images of his wartime atrocities begin to float before his eyes. At that moment, his girlfriend walks in, and he flies into a violent rage, striking her. She stares at him with a look of abject terror in her eyes, and he is forced to confront the brutal truth about himself:

Oh god almighty, what have I done? Here it was at last: Pam's eyes were the same eyes I'd seen in a thousand faces in a hundred villages, staring up at me in mute hatred as I towered over her, my whole body cocked, ready to explode again. And this time there was no rifle, no uniform, no Sergeant Taggart barking orders, no mines, no snipers, no grenade ready to explode, no juggernaut momentum of a vast military bureaucracy out of control and bogged down in human quicksand, not a single excuse with which to defend myself. So this is what you are I thought.<sup>18</sup>

In a flash, Ehrhart realises that he has been bred for violence, that American society has trained him to react with violence towards any situation, and that the war was simply that fact on a grander scale. But Ehrhart quickly loses this historical perspective and slides back into the grip of the American hegemony, because he still identifies himself with American cultural myths. This false climax continues as Ehrhart, reeling from his confrontation with Pam, is told of the murder of the four students at Kent State University by the Ohio National Guard:

And then I was crying. Dreams, dreams, broken dreams....  
Why, why, why, dear god, please somebody. Was there no end to it? I must have cried for a solid half hour, maybe longer. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore. I cried until there was nothing left inside and my mind was more lucid than it had ever been before.<sup>19</sup>

However, here the false nature of this "transformation" is revealed, as Ehrhart responds to his vision in the cultural forms of the hegemony which had indoctrinated him. He admits that it is time to "face up to the cold hard, utterly bitter truth I'd tried to avoid for nearly three years. The war was a horrible mistake, and my beloved country was dying because of it."<sup>20</sup> His values are still the values of American culture, as he still sees the war not as the foreign policy of an imperialist power, but as a policy mistake. He still values American lives more than Asian lives.

However, Ehrhart has made progress, and he begins to research the history of the conflict in Vietnam. As he begins to learn the historical truth, he wonders “Had people been so ignorant, or had I been lied to deliberately?”<sup>21</sup> He receives the answer to his question during the real climax of the novel, which occurs in Chapters 35, 36, and 37. Ehrhart travels to Washington D.C. to protest against the war and joins a group of peaceful demonstrators in front of the Justice Department, when suddenly the police, dressed in riot gear, launch a bloody and violent attack on the protestors. Ehrhart describes the scene in brutal honesty, culminating in his true revelation:

It was just like the war—only this time I had no weapon, no flack jacket or helmet, no way to defend myself, no protection of any kind. Was this what it felt like to be a peasant in Vietnam, I wondered, wanting to throw up.<sup>22</sup>

Only here does Ehrhart finally see the nature of the American way of life. Only by identifying himself with someone outside the American hegemony, only by identifying with the innocent victims of American imperialism, only by experiencing the repressive force of the American elite, can Ehrhart finally break out of his false consciousness and experience a true ideological metamorphosis. The process which began with the contradictions presented by the War resulted in ideologic change, creating the radical Ehrhart, who views the war through new eyes:

A mistake? Vietnam a mistake? My god, it had been a calculated deliberate attempt to hammer the world by brute force into the shape perceived by vain, duplicitous power brokers.<sup>23</sup>

Ehrhart’s new consciousness continues to grow however, as he engages himself with American history, discovering the hidden and dirty secrets of American history, from the genocide of the Indians, through the American rape of Mexico, Central and South

America, the Philippines, as well as all the brutal crimes committed against American citizens themselves, all in the name of profit. Ehrhart's historical research allows him to see reality no longer in mainstream American myths, but in class terms, as he states:

Greed for land, greed for gold and silver, greed for timber and iron and copper, greed for anything you can make a buck on... business basically. Dollars and cents... the power brokers give the rest of us enough to think were in Fat City while they live like kings... shit Vietnam's just the tip of the iceberg. The United States doesn't give a big rat's ass about freedom or democracy for anybody, and never has.<sup>24</sup>

As Ehrhart begins to formulate a historical totality to explain his experiences in Vietnam, he begins to be able to see the American hegemony for what it is, a cultural process that impregnates its population with the militaristic values of the dominant class. Ehrhart is now able to understand his fascination with war from an early age, why he volunteered to go to war, and why it took so long for him to realise what was happening. As the novel draws to an end, the now alienated, radical Ehrhart is offered a job at a summer camp, teaching children marksmanship. He turns it down, declaring "I couldn't take the job see... I made a connection between Vietnam and stuff like teaching kids how to shoot. You know what I mean, our whole cultural affair with guns and violence and martial glory?"<sup>25</sup> Ehrhart now exists outside the American hegemony, as a cultural and ideological counter-hegemonic force, symbolised by his retreat at the end of the novel to the oil tanker, serenely floating outside the United States.

Ehrhart's body of work does not let us forget the what has been done in the name of America, nor the price the "other" has so often had to pay for American foreign policy; he refuses to let us slip back into the comfortable dream world of mainstream American myths and illusions. He refuses to let America rewrite its sins. His voice has refused to

accept silence. In the conclusion of his essay “Stealing Hubcaps,” Ehrhart explained why he felt the need to write: “I do believe that we have to keep trying because if our voices fall silent, the only voices left will be those of people like Oliver North. I have to keep trying because it’s the only way I can live with my self, knowing what I know.”<sup>26</sup>

While Ehrhart has received most critical renown for his poetry, his prose deserves as much attention to help understand his project of bearing witness and recording experience which resists integration into dominant or hegemonic cultural myths about the Vietnam War. His three memoirs, *Vietnam-Perkasie*, *Passing Time*, and *Busted* chronicle both the transformation of his perspective, and the experience which prompted it.

---

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bill Short and Willa Seidenberg, “A Matter of Conscience: Resistance Within the U.S. Military During the Vietnam War” (*Vietnam Generation* 2.1, 1998), 82.
- <sup>2</sup> Short and Seidenberg, “A Matter of Conscience,” 83.
- <sup>3</sup> For information on soldier radicalisation, see *Vietnam Generation: GI Resistance: Soldiers and Veterans Against the War* 2.1 (1998), a special issue edited by Harry W. Haines.
- <sup>4</sup> W. D. Ehrhart, “Stealing Hubcaps” (*Vietnam Generation* 2.1, 1998), 105.
- <sup>5</sup> Harry Haines, “Hegemony and GI Resistance: Introductory Notes” (*Vietnam Generation* 2.1, 1998), 3.
- <sup>6</sup> For studies of Vietnam Veteran Writers see Philip D. Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982); Philip D. Beidler, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Subarno Chattarji, *Memories of a Lost War: American Poetic Responses to the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Vince Gotera, *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading and the Literatures of Trauma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- <sup>7</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, perhaps the leading authority on Vietnam War and Veteran writing has called Ehrhart “one of the foremost figures in the literature of the Vietnam War” and “the preeminent anthologist of Vietnam War Poetry” in H. Bruce Franklin, ed., *The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 250. In his “Foreword” to both *Passing Time* and *Busted* Franklin makes a compelling case for why Ehrhart’s work is not known to readers outside the circles of Vietnam-specific Veteran and War literature.
- <sup>8</sup> W. D. Ehrhart, *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 64.
- <sup>9</sup> Ehrhart, *Passing Time*, 114.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.
- <sup>11</sup> W. D. Ehrhart, “Hunting” in W. D. Ehrhart, ed., *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1985), 95.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ehrhart. *Passing Time*, 228.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-181.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>26</sup> Ehrhart, "Stealing Hubcaps," 109.