

How Vietnam Came to Main Street

An all too dispassionate study of the war's effect on the fabric of community shows how Vietnam devastated a small town in Kentucky which lost 16 young men

BY BILL KOVACH

The Sons of Bardstown: 25 Years in an American Town

Jim Wilson, *Crown*, \$22

The American military involvement in Vietnam was insidious, beginning inconspicuously with a handful of military advisors in 1950. When it ended a quarter of a century later, Vietnam had reshaped our national life, exhausted our national confidence, and taught us finally to count the costs of power.

Our military hesitancy in Bosnia, despite recent cheap thrills in Grenada and Panama, is one of Vietnam's practical legacies. But only artists can tote the deeper costs to the American spirit. Like an untutored child confronting the algebraic unknown, solving Vietnam still tests the strengths and skills of writers and artists.

In *The Sons of Bardstown*, Jim Wilson joins the growing list of those who have tried to measure the full extent of those costs. Artistic ingenuity was required of the others who have also made the attempt. George Crumb, the West Virginia composer, reinterpreted the classical quartet form to produce "Black Angel." With a new collection of sounds he plumbs the depths of the war's disfigurement of the individual psyche in a work currently attracting a new generation to classical music. And Francis Ford Coppola had to reach back to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of*

Darkness to find a vocabulary powerful enough for his needs when filming *Apocalypse Now*.

Wilson's effort is much different. His approach is the same direct, reportorial style he used when writing *Retreat Hell!* in 1987. That book, his first, described the struggle of American troops when they first confronted the Chinese army during the Korean War. In it, he dwelled on military costs and consequences. But for his second book he has chosen to tell a story of the toll of the war on a single community: Bardstown, Kentucky.

Bardstown has the setting for such a story. A town of less than 6,000, where lives are intertwined by connections of kinship, friendship, and geography. A town with a fierce independent streak, illustrated by its tradition of manufacturing moonshine whisky (today, licensed distilleries still produce Maker's Mark and Jim Beam bourbons). And a town imbued with a martial spirit, symbolized by the nearby armored calvary center at Fort Knox.

Bardstown has the history for such a story. Though never a community of more than a few thousand, it has sent more than its share of men to war. Fifty men from Bardstown joined the volunteers who followed Sam Houston and Davy Crockett from Tennessee to help Texas win its independence. One man returned. Bard-

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stown's sons divided to fight on both sides in the War Between the States; its volunteers fought in Cuba, World Wars I and II, and Korea.

More important, beginning on April 11, 1968, Bardstown would produce the narrative for such a story. That was the day Lyndon Johnson's secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, announced a call up of 24,500 reserves and National Guardsmen—105 of them from Bardstown—10,000 of whom were to ship out to Southeast Asia immediately, since Tet had consumed the resources of our standing army and the country was being asked to give more. Wilson quotes the editor of

the town's weekly newspaper, the *Kentucky Standard*: ". . . [W]e supported the idea because we felt like it was the thing to do. After all, you have a national administration that has a lot more information than you have, so, more or less, you put your faith in your leaders."

The perversity of the summons in April 1968 is enormous considering the historical moment. For this call-up came *after* Clifford had decided the war was unwinnable; *after* the critical White House meeting of the Wise Men on March 26 that finally convinced President Johnson that we had to get out of Vietnam; and *after* LBJ had

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

One encounter at the Vietnam Memorial

Because it was our first televised war, the men and women who fought in Vietnam were individualized. No longer merely chess pieces in an abstract strategic game, soldiers appeared in our homes nightly, engaged in flesh-and-blood carnage. As with previous wars, when the killing stopped we felt compelled to remember those who died. Memorials to our war dead are, after all, a ubiquitous piece of the American landscape. But the war in Vietnam is the first from which we collected the names of the dead on a single roll call in a single place.

With a magnetic power, the black wall of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington draws visitors to it. For those who come, there is almost always a need to tell the story of a familiar name they find inscribed there. It is part of some lesson we seem to have promised ourselves to learn from this memorial. One of my stories is the story of Homer L. Pease, a big red-headed tackle on our high school football team in Johnson City, Tennessee. In 1950, when I met him, Homer was finishing a high school education interrupted by World War II. He had lied about his age and at 15 had survived the Battle of the

Bulge with the 101st Airborne. Homer pretty much controlled his side of the line in football games.

I left home the day I graduated from Science Hill High School to serve in the Navy during the Korean War, and then I went to college on the G.I. Bill. After college, on my first newspaper job, I uncovered a scheme to steal votes in an election. The stories led to several arrests, including that of Homer, my old teammate. Most of those involved were sentenced to jail, but because of his military record Homer was allowed to re-enlist instead. Later I heard he had a commission in the Green Berets, but then I lost track of him.

In the mid-1980s, when I worked in Washington for *The New York Times*, I paid my first visit to the Vietnam Memorial. The black wall seemed to grow organically out of the ground beside me as I slowly descended the path. Disoriented by the blur of names as I walked along, I stopped and tried to concentrate on the wall. Read a name, then a second. And then I found Homer again, etched there with the others in the polished black marble.

—Bill Kovach

withdrawn from the 1968 presidential campaign. These men—the boys from Bardstown and from so many other towns and cities—were innocents conscripted to die in a war their government, at the highest levels, had secretly decided was lost.

At the time, the call-up changed the nature of the impression Vietnam made on many communities because it took men not individually but in unit-sized groups. On a small town like Bardstown, for example, taking 105 men in one blow was devastating. The fabric of that tightly woven place was suddenly ripped apart as young fathers, husbands-to-be, college students, craft apprentices, and entrepreneurs were shipped to Fort Hood, Texas. The men of Battery C of the 113th Artillery from Bardstown were suddenly on their way to fight in a war they hardly knew beyond the flickering images on television at the evening news hour.

Wilson describes it as a belated announcement of the war: “Bardstown would become a symbol of how deep into America the war had reached, and few, if any, communities in this land felt the impact of the war as did the people here.”

In Vietnam the 113th Artillery became known as a spirited and effective unit. But in time its men were bored with routine and became casual about security. On June 19, 1969, on a hill called Fire Base Tomahawk, Viet Cong troops attacked the base with rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47s. Explosions ripped the ammunition storage area, bunkers, weapons pits, ammunition carriers, trucks, and artillery pieces. In a matter of minutes in that furious melee in the darkness, 10 men in Battery C were killed and 45 wounded. Half of the dead were guardsmen from Bardstown.

Within days, first one and then another olive drab army car appeared driving slowly through Bardstown’s streets. Each carried two officers, one an Army chaplain. Word spread that something terrible was visiting the community.

“People actually positioned themselves at the

roads leading into Bardstown from Fort Knox, and if an Army sedan with two officers in it showed up, they’d call ahead and alert the townspeople that more bad news was coming,” one resident recalls. “Then someone would follow them to see where it stopped, and it wasn’t but 10 minutes later that the whole town knew about it.”



A Bardstown war memorial

Before the claim on Bardstown would be complete, Vietnam’s toll would be 16. Five of those died in the single action at Fire Base Tomahawk; by some accounts, that figure ought to be six—the mother of two casualties shot herself to death with a shotgun at home after the news came.

As Wilson writes in a defining vignette, a member of Battery C some years later “[S]tood before the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. As he made rubbing after rubbing of names on the wall, a woman ventured

forward and asked, ‘Sir, you couldn’t possibly know all those people.’

“‘Yes, ma’am,’ he answered, ‘I surely do. I know every one of them personally.’”

These elements and many more fill the pages of *The Sons of Bardstown*. As you can see, Bardstown would seem to have all the elements for a deeply textured and moral narrative. But for some reason the author does not work the material. Each incident is recorded with stenographic detachment, dutifully recording detail only. Wilson recoils from probing cause and effect, drawing a conclusion, or offering an insight. Although there are brief attempts to develop a dramatic tension in the book, the author is generally content to let events speak for themselves. But we come to retrospective works of non-fiction for more than a journalistic account. The writer has an obligation to help us to an understanding we might otherwise have overlooked. Maybe he thought the sons of Bardstown needed no interpretation. But the cost of the war individually and collectively demands deeper understanding when it is addressed. □

The Original Material Girl

How did a middle class girl from the British countryside become U.S. ambassador to France? According to a new biography, it took endless scheming and countless liaisons with rich and powerful men

BY SANDRA McELWAIN

Life of the Party

Christopher Ogden, *Little, Brown*, \$24.95

Trust me on this one: If you are a devotee of *Vanity Fair*, *W*, or the late, departed *Spy*, you will undoubtedly become hooked on *Life of the Party*, an unauthorized biography about the consummate 20th century adventuress, Pamela Digby Churchill Hayward Harriman.

If you wonder whether an obscure, well bred British country woman can find happiness in the beds of a slew of international power players, the answer is yes. But only if they are very rich, very social, and very, very, prominent.

The rise of the fair and notorious Pamela, born in 1920, begins more than 50 years ago in the promiscuous years of war-torn London with her brief, tempestuous marriage to Winston Churchill's son Randolph. A glamorous, single-minded, seductive 18-year-old, she quickly eschewed connubial bliss with her impecunious and volatile husband—whom she had married in 1939 just three weeks after meeting him—and set her sights on more celebrated game. Pamela then launched a dazzling career of sexual dalliances that terrified married women on both sides of the Atlantic and earned her the title “Courtesan of the Century.”

In an unusual disclaimer in the front of the book, the author, *Time* contributor Christopher Ogden, explains that he and Pamela set out to tell her titillating tale together, but she got cold feet when she realized that for Little, Brown's multi-million dollar advance, she would be expected to tell all. She subsequently backed out of the deal. Although Ogden had 40 hours of intimate tapes, he says he was happy to pull out, too, until the Queen Mother of the Clinton administration (as *New York* magazine calls her) imperiously refused to pay him a sou, not even expenses. So Ogden decided to press on without her, interviewing old lovers and their spiteful wives, former butlers and maids, disgruntled stepchildren, along with friends, unhappy relatives, and a raft of doting political allies.

The result is mirthless and heavy handed, but Ogden does dish, and he has allegedly engaged the multi-talented Pamela, who through guile and extensive political fundraising now resides in an opulent residence in Paris as U.S. ambassador to France.

How did this voluptuous young woman with a minimum of education propel herself from the drab countryside of wartime England to the lavish palaces of Europe to the pinnacle of power in the U.S.? To put it bluntly, through rat-like cunning and sex.

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