

JAMES HOLBROOK: AN INTERVIEW

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Floor: Welcome to “In The Opinion Of,” a weekly public affairs program produced live in the studios of KRCL. I’m Ann Floor.

Hampton: And I’m Mark Hampton. And tonight our guest is Jim Holbrook, who’s a Salt Lake City attorney and a Vietnam vet who just recently, after 28 years, returned to Vietnam. He’ll be talking about his experiences in Vietnam and why he went back.

Floor: Welcome.

Holbrook: Thank you.

Floor: So why did you go back?

Holbrook: It’s something I’ve thought a lot about since relations between the two countries normalized in 1995. There was a trip planned this year by a Salt Lake City group that sounded interesting to me. And also, KSL Television sent a camera crew along. So all of these things came together for me this year.

Floor: It seemed to be the right time.

Holbrook: Exactly.

Hampton: So, had you thought throughout the years of going back? I know of some Americans who went back not too long after the war, although I know it took normalization before many went back.

Holbrook: I wouldn’t have been ready to go back right after the war. But, in the last few years, I’ve thought more about it. And this just seemed a good time.

Floor: Now, you say that you wouldn't have gone back so soon after. Why not?

Holbrook: I'm not sure that I was ready before to go back. For me it's taken a lot of thought and a lot of effort to get some perspective on the war and get a handle on my feelings about it.

Floor: Let's go back 28 years. What were the circumstances that led you to go? How old were you, and where were you in your life, and what were you doing? And, how did it all happen?

Holbrook: I was the atypical vet. I was 24 years old. I had two college degrees.

Floor: In which subjects?

Holbrook: A Bachelors and Masters in philosophy. I thought I wanted to be a philosophy professor. I was going to start a Ph.D. in philosophy at Yale, but instead I enlisted in the Army. It seemed to me like a responsibility that I didn't want to avoid any longer. So, I enlisted and, when I finally started Officer Candidate School, I didn't like it. I said I was going to drop out; the Army said, if you do, we'll send you to Vietnam. So, I did and they did. And that's how I got there.

Hampton: An interesting thing is that 28 years ago was the "Summer of Love." That was probably when unrest about Vietnam was at its greatest.

Holbrook: I agree. I think '69 and '70 were the two years when the country just went crazy about the war.

Hampton: What were your feelings about that kind of reaction to the war? And also, why were you so different, I guess, than what was popularly portrayed of those times?

Holbrook: Well, I was against the war, intellectually. And I thought a lot about either staying in school or finding some other way to avoid it. But for me as an individual, that just was not a choice that I wanted to make. Our country has been really good to me. I grew up in a working class family, and I benefitted tremendously from public education and public scholarships and fellowships. I felt I owed something, even if I disagreed with the war. Also, I was very curious about what it was all about.

Floor: Just for the listening audience, and for me as well, if you could just take a second to give us a little background on Vietnam and a short, short history on what led up to our involvement.

Holbrook: The Vietnamese have been fighting foreigners for centuries. From the mid-nineteenth century until World War II started, France had colonized Vietnam and the Vietnamese fought the French. Japan occupied Vietnam during World War II. After World War II was over, France was permitted by the West to go back into Vietnam as a colonial power. And so, the Vietnamese Communists, called the Viet Minh, fought the French until 1954 when the French army surrendered at Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam.

The Geneva Convention took place in 1955, and the Geneva Accords split the country along the 17th parallel, created the demilitarized zone, scheduled free elections in the North and South for 1956 and permitted free passage between North and South, especially for Catholics who wanted to leave the North.

Floor: The Catholics were there because of the French influence?

Holbrook: Yes. In '56, however, there were no free elections in the South. And the Vietnamese Communists created a military force, called the Viet Cong, who started to fight the South Vietnamese government. The Viet Cong were supported by North Vietnam. The United States sent advisors and military aid until '65, when we sent regular army troops. I think the initial U.S. force in 1965 was about 125,000 soldiers, and within a few years it had grown to over a half million.

The turning point in the war was in 1968, beginning in February with what was called the Tet Offensive. The North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong fought battles simultaneously all over South Vietnam. Militarily, they were not successful, but politically they were. I think they demonstrated to the American people that there was no "light at the end of the tunnel," as Americans had been promised by military leaders for a number of years.

The war began to wind down a bit in '69 while I was there, especially in the Delta region of South Vietnam, which is the southernmost part of the country. By '72, most of the American military forces had been withdrawn, and the South Vietnamese Army was left to fight against the Viet Cong and the NVA. South Vietnam fell in 1975 with, as we all know, the overloaded helicopters taking off from the roof of the

American Embassy (which I walked past on this most recent trip) and an NVA tank knocking down the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon.

We normalized relations 20 years later, in 1995, and just this last week, we sent our first ambassador since the war, Pete Peterson, who was a prisoner of war for 6½ years during the Vietnam War. It's an exciting time, I think, for both countries.

Hampton: How would you say you changed as a result of that experience and also your views about international politics, war, the United States, those kinds of things? I suspect that even though you were 24 when you went in, you did a lot of growing up.

Holbrook: I think the greatest lesson that I've learned—I probably knew it intellectually, but I certainly learned it in a real way—is the sometimes tragic consequences of good intentions. For example, as a part of the war in 1970, the United States helped depose Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who was the head of state of Cambodia. We were very unhappy with Cambodia for staying neutral during the war. After Sihanouk was deposed, we invaded and bombed Cambodia and Laos. As a result, the Cambodian government was very destabilized. I think this led ultimately to the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975 and to the Killing Fields that caused the deaths of perhaps as many as two million Cambodians by 1979.

A lot of Vietnamese were killed or wounded during the war. After the war, many Vietnamese who worked for the South Vietnamese government, or who fought with the Americans, were horribly treated and many were forced into “re-education camps” which were really hard labor prison camps. A lot of these people later became the Boat People who suffered terribly trying to get out of Vietnam. That's in addition to the more than 58,000 American troops who were killed, the hundreds of thousands who were wounded, and their families who were affected. The war had tragic consequences for literally millions of people.

Floor: So, tell us what it was like to go back, and where did you go?

Holbrook: We went to Ho Chi Minh City, which now is the politically correct name of Saigon, in the southern part of the country. We were there eight days. We were involved in some service projects at a school and orphanage and at some health clinics on the outskirts of Saigon.

We were in Vietnam on Liberation Day, which is April 30th, 22 years after South Vietnam fell in 1975. As we were coming out of our restaurant after dinner, there was a huge crowd in a public square preparing to celebrate Liberation Day evening. I was fascinated because, instead of fireworks or political speeches, they had a rock concert. We stayed and watched several different Vietnamese rock bands play in this Liberation Day concert.

While the concert was going on, thousands of motor bikes were cruising around the square, like on State Street in Salt Lake City on a Saturday night.

I didn't see many people my age—I'm 52. Vietnam's population has doubled since I was there in '69, so there are lots of young people, with lots of small children, all riding lots of motorbikes. Probably half of the country's population was born after the war, so the war is simply not a part of their lives. They like Americans a great deal. They are extremely friendly, open people.

There are very few things that reminded me of the war. When we flew in, I could still see the craters in the rice fields from the 2,000-pound bombs dropped by B-52s. Occasionally, in the city and along the roads in the countryside—especially around old bridges—there were concrete bunkers left from the war. But otherwise there really is very little visible evidence of the war.

One day we went to see the Cu Chi Tunnels, which are northwest of Saigon. The Cu Chi Tunnel Complex has become a real tourist attraction. During the war, the Viet Cong dug literally miles and miles of tunnels with underground sleeping quarters, hospital rooms and command centers. The Viet Cong survived American bombs and artillery for many years and used the tunnel complex as a base to fight from. Today the Vietnamese are extremely proud of what they accomplished at Cu Chi. But it was a mind warp for me to listen to their take on what had happened there. I felt like a Britisher going to Boston and hearing about the Tea Party from the American perspective.

Vietnam is literally—in terms of economic development—just exploding. Saigon is a hustle-bustle city, with lots of foreign investment, lots of new projects, lots of new hotels being built, also lots of motorbikes, traffic congestion and air pollution.

Hampton: Why would you say they are so welcoming of Americans? Did you detect any hostilities, or is this just that maybe it's a new generation and they'd just as soon put the past behind them?

Holbrook: Well, they won the war, so they don't have any negative feelings about that. They also have a lot of affection for the French, whom they fought for almost a hundred years. They like American pop culture—like the Saigon Hard Rock Cafe, for example. There are lots of obvious Western influences. Television is a big deal, especially CNN and MTV. They like American money. They like Americans who come back who are really interested and curious about what's happened. And a lot of GI's who go back have genuine affection for the Vietnamese people as a result of what we experienced there.

Floor: What about personal relationships this time when you went back? Did you have an opportunity to sit down and have conversations with some of the people who live there?

Holbrook: I did, with at least a half a dozen people. I had a chance to talk to them for more than just a few minutes.

I took my GI dog tags back with me to leave there this time. I wanted this to be some sort of symbolic closure for me. I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do with the dog tags, or where I was going to leave them. As it turned out, one of the waiters at our hotel in Saigon was old enough that it was obvious that he had experienced the war. I never found out whether he had been a soldier on the other side, but we had a chance to talk about the war. He was 11 years younger than I am. He was born just west of My Lai. He was old enough to remember the American troops coming ashore in '65 at Danang. His mother and sister had died in the war. He had four brothers who fought in the war. He was in Saigon on Liberation Day in 1975.

I really liked him. He seemed like a nice, decent man. I gave him my dog tags and asked him to pass them on to his children and grandchildren. That felt really good to me—like I left a piece of myself there in a way that may be remembered well instead of remembered badly.

Hampton: Why don't you tell us a bit about your experience the first time in Vietnam, and maybe some of the experiences that may have changed you, and just give us a sense of what it is that you were taking back there when you took your dog tags and left them.

Holbrook: People probably don't remember that the war was fought by soldiers who did not train together. It was very different from World War II. Tours of duty in Vietnam were only a year. After I completed training in the States, I was sent over to join a unit and people I didn't know. I remember flying over in 1969, being frightened and very anxious about what was going to happen to me, where I was going, who I was going to serve with. I was assigned to an artillery unit in the 9th Infantry Division in the Delta in southern South Vietnam. We saw a lot of combat—not as much as an infantry unit—but we got mortared and rocketed a lot, and we fired our guns virtually every day.

My recollection of the experience was like a bad dream, like living a low key nightmare. Some of the psychological studies I've read say that, when you're under that kind of stress, your life closes in around you and the center of your focus is not very far away. There really was a sense of sur-reality about the whole experience for me. I did not develop close friendships with the people I served with. No one did. Everyone's task was just to get their 365 days behind them and get home without getting hurt.

I was in the first division that Nixon pulled out, so I was only in Vietnam eight months. I had a choice to be assigned to another unit in Vietnam or go to Hawaii. I thought about that for about half a second and decided I'd had all the war I wanted. I didn't want to take any more chances about not getting home.

Floor: What was the climate like over there for you? I mean, was it difficult to get used to or was that a problem?

Holbrook: It's very hot and humid. They have two seasons, a wet season and dry season. In '69, I was in the boonies from January through April, which was the dry season. Then I got assigned to the division base camp in a clerical position from May until August. So, I was lucky enough to avoid the rainy season by having a desk job, under cover, out of the rain.

Hampton: One of the stereotypes, I think, of the whole Vietnam experience as a country is, obviously, the surreal experience you described when you were actually in combat. But I think, too, in the last couple of decades this country has come to terms with it. And often times, I don't think we as a populace have been particularly kind to Vietnam veterans. Did you experience any of that unkindness, or did you notice it among your peers who'd served with you?

Holbrook: Fortunately, I was not one who was spit on or called a baby killer when I came back, though I'm familiar with what happened to others. It was a very isolated experience for me after the war. I have talked very little about the war and usually only with other veterans. I think that isolation helps perpetuate the sur-reality. It helped perpetuate the feeling that the war was still in me in some way or another. That was one of the reasons I wanted to go back—to have a real experience, a hands-on visual experience, that the war was over. And I did.

There was an irony there this time, which I found interesting. The 9th Infantry Division base camp was located at a small town in the Delta called Dong Tam. There is no sign anymore that the base camp ever existed, but there is in Dong Tam now a snake farm where they raise poisonous snakes for medicinal purposes. I was really struck by the coincidence—28 years ago at Dong Tam there were helicopter gun ships called Cobras and now the Cobra gun ships have been replaced by cobra snakes. And the cobra snakes now produce venom for medicinal purposes.

Hampton: At least it's a healing purpose this time around.

Holbrook: Yes, absolutely.

Floor: Have you been to the Vietnam Memorial?

Holbrook: It took me many years to get up enough courage to go. And I didn't go until about three years ago.

Floor: Did that fuel your desire to go back to the country?

Holbrook: It did. When I went to the Wall, I realized that I wasn't overwhelmed by it. I was touched by it, but I wasn't overcome by it. I realized then that I could probably handle going back to Vietnam.

Floor: What are your thoughts now about this whole idea of Western aggression?

Hampton: And as she says that, I remember what it was I was going to ask. And that was, you know, we, as a country, went to war not too long ago. And I wonder how a Vietnam vet, or how you as an individual, reacted to the United States getting involved in, although very different circumstances, still, something like that.

Holbrook: This is really the most important question about the war, I think. I thought a lot about this on the return trip. I don't think we had a realistic objective in fighting the Vietnam War. I mean, there are all the articulated reasons about trying to stop Communism and so on. But if you are ruthlessly honest about it and look carefully at the centuries of Vietnamese history of them fighting foreigners, we would have had to kill most of the Vietnamese people in order to be able to "win." And that is not a real objective for Americans to fight for.

So, that leads to the question, why did I serve and why did 58,000 Americans die? What was the purpose for their deaths? I don't see a purpose for all of the death and suffering in Vietnam. But I do see that our experience has changed things, like the Gulf War and Bosnia and Somalia. I think that because of the terrible sacrifices that were made in Vietnam, American military and foreign policy is radically different. We will not again fight that kind of incredibly stupid war of attrition, where we traded American lives in a body count ratio for foreign lives—which was really what the Vietnam War was all about. So, the Gulf War, which made sense to me for political reasons, was fought in a very different way. In a military way, that made sense to me.

Floor: So that's the lesson that was learned from Vietnam? Is to not to do it again that way.

Holbrook: I think we as a country should be deeply grateful for Vietnam vets who served and who died, because I think they made it possible for us to avoid repeating the tragic mistakes of Vietnam. Now, many young American men and women will not have to die in war without a realistic objective. I think that's the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Hampton: We've got just a second, and this is a big question. But, having seen Vietnam in wartime and peacetime and learned that war is in fact Hell, do you think that we as a species are actually capable of global peace?

Holbrook: No. I don't think so. I think, unfortunately, it's a part of our makeup as human beings to not get along with others, and when we do not get along, we act as aggressors. I think that's terribly sad. But I have seen too much in my lifetime to be persuaded otherwise.

Hampton: It's kind of a down note to end this show on, but I think it's important that we recognize that in ourselves. That aggression is part

of us, and if we can find good ways to channel that aggression, then perhaps we can do good. But if we let it build up to national proportions and take it out on another group of people, it can be very ugly.

Floor: I wanted to mention, too, that Jim is very involved in conflict resolution. And you may want to just comment on that very briefly because we are almost out of time. But you've pretty much dedicated your life now to mediation.

Holbrook: Mediation and the efficient, effective resolution of disputes. I think that is a direct consequence of my time in Vietnam. I just strongly believe that to be true.

Hampton: So it's the old "think globally, act locally" in action.

Holbrook: Yes.

Floor: Jim Holbrook, thank you very much for being our guest tonight.