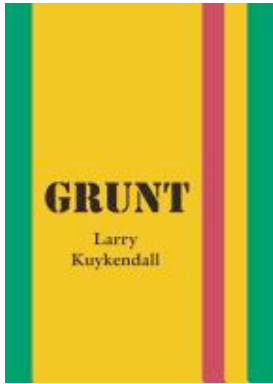


GRUNT

Larry
Kuykendall



The book "Grunt" is a tale of an infantry platoon and its leader over a 12-month period during the Vietnam war. Grunt is not a war story. It is a story about men and the impact of war during their tour. The book reveals the constant barrage of fear, death, racial conflict, boredom, and uncertainty that will scar the souls of these men for the rest of their lives...

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Grunt

A Tale of Men and War

Larry Kuykendall

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Preface

This book tries to be more than a story of the war fought by the United States for more than a decade in a place called Vietnam. It is a tale about some of the men who fought there. These were men who didn't want to be there; and, men who should not have been there. But, in spite of their political and personal feelings about the Vietnam Conflict, they were there. And, the majority of them did as well as any might expect in a war like Vietnam. The true cause for their bravery and steadfast duty was neither country nor flag. They fought for deeply personal reasons – reasons that never made the news. It is to these men, the grunts, that I dedicate this book.

Vietnam was another of a series of undeclared wars entered into by America beginning after World War II. It produced nothing of value. Vietnam was, in the end, fought for no good reason. This new type of conflict was created by the Cold War America chose to fight mostly with threats against Russia and China, the communist world powers. Wars such as Vietnam would be labeled in future

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years as “proxy” wars as they never seemed to be fought against the nation claimed to be the real threat to America. The methodology of these wars was to purposely invade a nation to keep another world power or its surrogates from gaining control of this same nation. Seldom could the nation we chose to invade tell the difference between “us” and “them”.

The official reason for our decision to move US ground troops into Viet Nam was – and may be seen as suspiciously similar to our current justification to be in the Middle East - “national security”. However, after our retreat from Saigon in 1975, the result of the war was to reduce our nation’s security, divide our populace, and reveal the United States as an unpredictable and hypocritical threat to the rest of the world. The cost of the war was stacked upon LBJ’s ill-conceived social programs, beginning the debt cycle we currently lament. For the most part, the poor fought the war. And, it was the poor who became stagnated for the “New Society.” It seems always to be the poor that suffer war more than others.

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While America called this war the Vietnam conflict, it was known as the Second Indochina War by the rest of the world, lasting from 1961 to 1973. The people of Vietnam called it the “American” war. Eisenhower coined the term “domino effect” in 1954 when discussing communism in Asia. This became the “hot button” slogan used by the American “hawks” when justifying the purpose for our occupation of South Vietnam.

The hawks in the US government could no longer use the slogan “domino effect” after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. This effectively brought an end to the Cold War. Our nation would have to find another “enemy”. However, in 1968, these words were in vogue. 1968 was the year I became part of the Vietnam story when drafted that summer. The rest of my life from that year forward would be in so many ways a product of Vietnam.

By the time I landed in Vietnam in the early summer of 1969, our government had been printing my ticket for decades.

In 1947, the US congress passed The National Security Act, creating the Joint Chiefs of Staff - and

the NSA. These agencies were empowered to run our nation's military and monitor our national security. The Joint Chiefs – and many in the civilian government – did not want to lose the American war time military strength and return to a peace-time army after World War II. We had become “the” world power. But, it would take a substantial amount of the US budget to maintain such a world force. The American voter would need to be sold on such massive spending. The voter had anticipated “peace” dividend to accrue to American society after the war. The government's purpose was to constantly create, in the eyes of the people, enemies which threatened our security and which would continually justify such war time military spending.

The purpose of the military was to fight wars – constantly.

It was also decided in 1947 by military insiders and the Joint Chiefs - behind closed doors - that this enemy would be Communism. The Soviets were blocking Berlin. The Chinese communist had toppled China's nationalists. The US government's message to Americans was that these communists

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would topple the rest of the world in a domino effect if our nation's defense was compromised or reduced.

The “hawks” in the US told the people that if our military was not at full strength, “the people” would face major security risks. The US military needed to more money spent on weaponry – not less. From this point forward, we began to measure our military strength by how much we spent on – not how efficient was - our military. From this point forward, if any in government attempted to cut military spending, they would be said to be threatening national security and the very fabric of what defines America.

The lack of honesty of these claims lay there right before our eyes. But, no one chose to look. No communist – or other - government on Earth would come anywhere near matching the strength and spending of the United States military after World War II, even in peacetime. The war had destroyed these other countries ability to manufacture and carry on war. In spite of this, we continued to tell our citizens, until 1991, that we were trailing the Russians and Chinese and would

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lose the Cold War in a fiery inferno if we didn't increase our military strength. Our school children were drilled in "duck and cover" within their classes. The Hawks had created a national paranoia.

These false, bellicose statements were counterproductive to our nation's economic and national security. In the end, the United States would spend about 56% of all world military spending on its military. This spending, as stated, was part of a creation of a growing national debt. Vietnam would be the most significant expenditure of such spending. It bought our nation nothing more than a lot of debt and death from a war with an enemy whose crime was nothing more than fighting for nationalism and self-government.

In 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, communism no longer could be justified as the risk it had been. Russia was bankrupt. China was inviting corporate America into its economy. The Joint Chiefs and the other hawks would need to find another cause for the huge expenditure on defense. They managed finally to identify a familiar "threat" – radical Islam. We knew the Middle East

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well as we had been meddling in the governments of nations of Islam since the fall of the Ottomans in 1923. And, the hawks could keep using most of their “national security” slogans with minimal editing. From 1991 forward, we would focus our attention on the spreading “terrorist threat” festering in the Middle East. The lives lost and money spent by this incursion is still being totaled. It deserves its own narrative aside from this book.

To be certain I would be drafted by the army in 1968, our government made other amazingly bad decisions 25 years before, virtually guaranteeing a future Viet Nam Conflict.

The French had occupied Indochina from the mid 19th century in their role as one of the world imperialist powers. One of the political/cultural seeds the French planted in Vietnam was communism, imported by the French communist party. In 1945, to restore the French control of Vietnam lost after driven out by the Japanese in 1940, the United States agreed to a plan that would allow the British to govern South Viet Nam while the Nationalist Chinese governed the North. This would give France time to recover from the

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devastating impact of the Second World War. When they had recovered, they could again take control of Vietnam as part of France's continued occupation of Indochina.

It was also in 1945 that Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh party took political control of Vietnam from the previous royalty, Bao Dai. Ho Chi Minh, formally Nguyen That Thanh, had been working to gain self-governance in Vietnam since 1919. The Nationalist Chinese government had fallen to the communist, leaving a vacuum in North Vietnam in 1945 after the defeat of the Japanese. The Viet Minh had been one of several domestic groups competing for control of Vietnam. The communist Minh party became the most powerful. Their action against their political opponents was harsh.

In 1946, Ho Chi Minh tried to establish an independent government for all Vietnam. He used the American constitution as a model for Vietnam's constitution. He wrote a letter to President Truman in February 1946 requesting assistance in creating an independent nation. Even though he was our ally against the Japanese in the recent world war, Truman turned his back on Ho. He was one of

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those nasty Communists identified by the Joint Chiefs as the “enemy”. Instead, America would choose to support the French and its puppet government in Saigon. The first Indochina War began in December 1946, when the Viet Minh attacked the French in North Viet Nam. President Truman began to send military aid to the French in response. In September, 1950, the United States sent the first military advisors to Saigon.

In 1954, after the French were badly defeated at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Conference created two Vietnams – one in the South under the Saigon puppet government, the other the North under Ho Chi Minh’s government filling the government vacuum left by France. Within a decade, the United States, through a mandate to stop the communism which had spread in North Viet Nam, began to escalate the war in Viet Nam. Our first combat troops arrived in March 1965.

Eisenhower and Kennedy had not wanted to get involved in Vietnam. Eisenhower had said it would create a “great tragedy”. Kennedy had intended to withdraw American forces by the end of 1965. But, his assassination in 1963 freed Lyndon

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Johnson to escalate the war to the approval of the Joint Chiefs and the Pentagon. There are many today that believe the desire by some to escalate this war may have been the cause of Kennedy's assassination.

This war ultimately would become an embarrassment to the United States. It had to fully withdraw the last contingency of personnel in April 29, 1975. The North Vietnamese waited with tanks into Saigon's suburbs. The United States already withdrew the last combat troops in March 1973 after the Paris Peace agreement was signed. This agreement was the "peace with honor" that President Nixon sought. The peace agreement, however, allowed the North Vietnamese to keep their army in the South. After America cut back aid to South Vietnam by 75% in 1973, the ARVN had no resources to hold back the North – if they had any ability to do so at all. When we removed the last Americans in 1975, we took very few of the South Vietnamese that supported us. We left millions to suffer retaliation. There was no peace with honor. It was all for naught.

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The 1973 date was said to be official end of the Vietnam War. But, this end did not come before hundreds of thousands were drafted to fight the unpopular war; and tens of thousands of Americans died. The war became so unpopular that a draft had to be instituted by Congress to keep up with the manpower needs of this growing conflict. It was almost serendipity that this very unpopular draft would also help end the Vietnam War. This selective service conscription gave young men very personal reasons to hit the streets of America with the passion of protest. Due to the magnitude of civil disobedience created by the Vietnam War, America has not used the draft since Vietnam. The government no longer seems to want to create such personal connections that created the protests of the 1970's. They would prefer citizens to stay more detached from war.

Sadly, The United States had many chances after World War II to become a central ally and economic beneficiary in Asia through alliances with China, Korea, and Viet Nam. Both Korea and Vietnam had political vacuums created by the withdrawal of the defeated Japanese army. The United States held all the political cards in 1945

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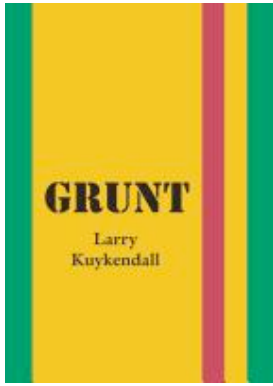
necessary to unify and support both nations. But, we chose to pursue a course that allowed others to fill the vacuum, ultimately causing the death of more than 2,000,000 Vietnamese and, nearly, 60,000 Americans. (The losses in Korea were 1.5 million and 33,000.)

The following is a story of events and experiences of good men fighting a bad war. The sequences may not be always accurate as only memory served this writing. The events are true, however. No names were mentioned in this book as many of the events in this story are very personal and, in some cases, attempt to place blame. The author tried hard to resist the subconscious urge to ignore certain inconvenient truths that may still create pain to some when reminded

This tale is both a common one and still unique. It is the story of any infantryman that served in Viet Nam. But, it is also the story of the experiences of just one person – I. Others with similar experiences might describe them differently. As such, some may hold different opinions or memories on event described by the author.

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For all those men, whether they agree or not, this is my story. And, it is to some of these men – the grunts - that I dedicate this story.



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