

## A Personal Remembrance

by Joel L. Swerdlow

In early August 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson was scheduled to dedicate the Newhouse Communications Center. I had a pre-freshman summer job then with the grounds department, and we were all very excited—we would get the morning off with pay to join the crowd.

One day before the president's scheduled visit, he came on television to announce that the U.S. Navy had been attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin and that U.S. warplanes were taking revenge on North Vietnam.

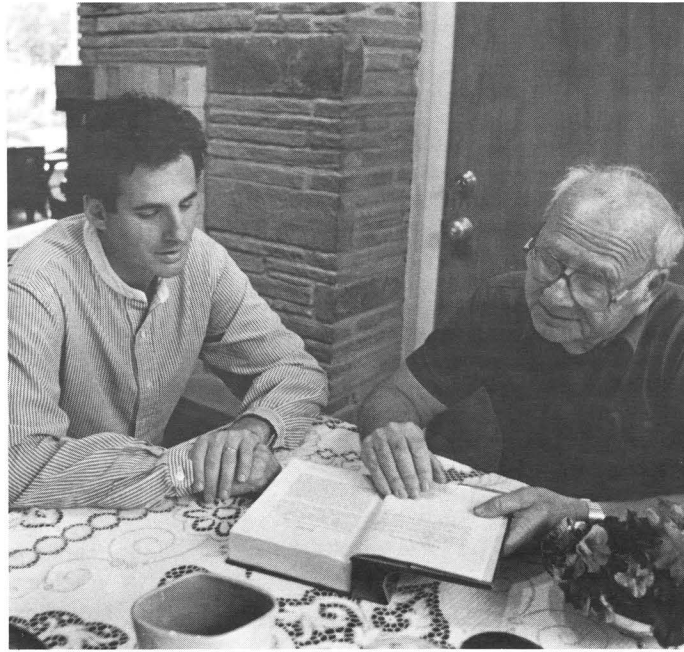
We saw our easy morning disappearing. How could Johnson come to Syracuse with a war on?

But he did. My friends and I cheered his promise that America would stand tall against aggression. We were most excited, however, to see the Secret Service agent who had been in Dallas less than nine months earlier when John F. Kennedy was shot. We were very much believers in the Kennedy mystique. America was a great country; its young people could do anything.

As we returned to work on that bright day, none of us said one word about Vietnam.

Four years later, as my class—1968—prepared to graduate, Vietnam was just about all we talked about. And less than 48 hours after we said good-bye to SU, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. For many of my classmates, his shooting, coming so soon after that of Martin Luther King Jr., killed much of their remaining idealism.

In the years between LBJ's visit and RFK's death, the war crept across campus and into our consciousness. In 1965, I went from fraternity house to fraternity house circulating a petition in support of the war. Most of the guys just changed the subject. The next year, Vietnam came up in a class discussion in the Maxwell School of Citizenship. "There's no war going on," someone said. I raised my hand.



A student at Syracuse during the Vietnam years, Joel Swerdlow is now a writer living in Washington, D.C. *To Heal a Nation* is his fifth book. Swerdlow's father, Irving, is a professor emeritus at Syracuse and a former assistant dean of the Maxwell School.

My contribution: "Just tell that to the widows and children of the men killed today." There was an embarrassed silence. Later, I felt foolish.

During those years, I remember a few demonstrations—such as sit-ins blocking recruiters representing Dow Chemical, one of the manufacturers of napalm. About a dozen people chanted, "Dow kills, Dow kills." The indifference shown by most other students was misleading. As more people focused on the war, they concluded—often with a deep sense of betrayal—that it was unconstitutional and unwinnable.

In 1967, indifference became activism because graduate deferments ended. Suddenly, Vietnam was no longer someone else's war. You could get killed there.

Crowds started to appear in dormitory TV rooms when Walter Cronkite reported body counts. For many students, classes became less important than a desperate search for future draft deferments. Girlfriends recited antiwar arguments and offered sympathy.

I remember one acquaintance who often argued that the war was wrong, yet never worried about receiving special greetings

from Uncle Sam. "Why isn't all of this affecting you?" I asked. He wouldn't answer, and for months I persisted. Eventually he explained, "I have hemorrhoids. I'm exempt from the draft."

My freshman roommate in Kimmel Hall was Peter J. Hagan. P.J. didn't wait for the draft law to change. In 1975, he read a *Life* magazine article about the first landings of American combat troops in South Vietnam. "I'm going to go," P.J. said, and he did.

He died in 1978, killed, not during any of his three tours as a combat Marine (one on the ground and two as a pilot), but by a slow cancer that may or may not have been related to Agent Orange.

The key fact I remember about men like P.J. and their relationship to SU is that they left silently. Dow demonstrators got headlines; P.J. got strange looks.

Even in the midst of antiwar turmoil and widespread worry about the draft, I remember only two professors who made Vietnam part of regular classwork. One professor told us that the Viet Cong were freedom fighters; the other, an Army Reserve officer, expressed strong prowar

views. But both taught the same lesson: We should seek facts and have confidence in our own opinion.

The incident which taught me the most occurred in freshman English.

We had been assigned Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. (All SU graduates surely know this story of Gregor Samsa, who awakens to find he's a cockroach. In the end he dies, and his terrorized, overburdened family enjoys a celebratory ride in the country.)

"What did you think of the ending?" our instructor asked.

He pointed to one of the class's smartest members.

"It was very happy."

The instructor did not change his facial expression. "How many of you agree?"

Most of us raised our hands.

He was on his feet, his voice low and level. "Don't you realize," he said, "that this is one of the most profoundly sad endings in all of literature?"

To me, Samsa became a symbol for what happened to Vietnam vets. Fear, frustration, and anger about the war made the vets seem dirty and disturbing to many Americans. Even while the war continued, people sought comfort by rejecting those who fought it. But the country learned, as Gregor Samsa's family certainly discovered during their day in the country, that denial only increases pain.

While working on *To Heal a Nation*, I often thought about the men who shared those years with me. I saw them around HBC between classes, in the Day Hall lobby just before curfew, and walking along M Street. How many wore the uniform? How many still feel pain? How many are remembered with tears in the middle of the night?

P.J.'s face floats through my memory. It is so clear, so unworried, so young.

In the Memorial, in all its visitors, and in the only-in-America magic that made Jan Scruggs' dream come true, I see a promise to such faces. This promise must be kept at Syracuse University and on campuses across the nation:

To remember. To learn.