

Born on the Fourth of July: The Long Journey Home

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By Ron Kovic, *AlterNet*.

The author shares the inspiration behind his classic antiwar memoir: 'I wanted people to know what it really meant to be in a war -- to be shot and wounded, to be fighting for my life on the intensive care ward -- not the myth we had grown up believing.' It was exactly 40 years ago this past September that I left my house in Massapequa, New York to join the United States Marine Corps and begin an extraordinary journey that was to lead me into a disastrous war which would change my life, and others of my generation, profoundly and forever. There are times in the lives of both individuals and nations when we cross certain thresholds where there is no going back, no return to the innocence we once knew; the change is utter and irreconcilable. We often sense these moments. I know I did that day.

I can still remember leaving my house that morning, saying goodbye to my mother, my father driving me down to the Long Island Railroad station with only a few words being said between us--Dad was always that way--and then that long and contemplative ride into the city, being sworn in at Whitehall Street, holding my right hand up proudly with all the other young men, taking the oath of enlistment, and swearing our allegiance to the Constitution of the United States.

The fall of 1964, September 2, a lifetime ago. That last bright and beautiful morning when everything was to change forever, that last moment of lighthearted innocence and youth, of Massapequa and the backyard before the shock, the chaos, and the deluge. I had just turned eighteen that summer, and there are some old black-and-white photographs of me from those days. It's amazing that I still have them, considering I have misplaced them many times over the years, thinking them lost forever, only to later find them in some unexpected place, like a deeply disturbing dream that I have been trying to repress.

I remember seeing those photos on several occasions after I came home from Vietnam and each time having terrible nightmares that shook me badly. I couldn't look at them, could not face that young man I had been before the war and my injury. I would always promise myself to never look at them again. My trauma was still very deep, and that beautiful boy, that body, had been destroyed, defiled, and savaged. My wounding in Vietnam both physically and emotionally haunted me, pursued me, and threatened to overwhelm me.

I wrote *Born on the Fourth of July* in the fall of 1974 in one month, three weeks and two days. It was like an explosion, a dam bursting, everything flowed beautifully, just kept pouring out, almost effortlessly, passionately, desperately. I worked with an intensity and fury as if it was my last will and testament, and in many ways I felt it was. I continued to suffer from nightmares, constant anxiety attacks, severe heart palpitations, and a powerful, almost obsessive feeling that I would not live past my thirtieth birthday. I was living each day as if it were my last, as if everything had been compressed together by the war, and now every second counted.

I wrote all night long, seven days a week, single space, no paragraphs, front and back of the pages, pounding the keys so hard the tips of my fingers would hurt. I couldn't stop writing, and I remember feeling more alive than I had ever felt. Convinced that I was destined to die young, I

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struggled to leave something of meaning behind, to rise above the darkness and despair. I wanted people to understand. I wanted to share with them as nakedly and openly and intimately as possible what I had gone through, what I had endured. I wanted them to know what it really meant to be in a war -- to be shot and wounded, to be fighting for my life on the intensive care ward -- not the myth we had grown up believing. I wanted people to know about the hospitals and the enema room, about why I had become opposed to the war, why I had grown more and more committed to peace and nonviolence.

I had been beaten by the police and arrested 12 times for protesting the war, and I had spent many nights in jail in my wheelchair. I had been called a Communist and a traitor, simply for trying to tell the truth about what had happened in that war, but I refused to be intimidated. I loved the night and I would write for hours as if no time had passed at all. I was exhausted and my back ached, but none of that seemed to matter. I felt wonderful inside, tired but completely consumed by my writing.

I would drink a couple cups of coffee and then with a new surge of energy work for another hour or so as the bright lights of the morning began to fill the room. I'd neatly stack all the pages next to the typewriter after holding them proudly in my hands, then go to my bedroom and transfer out of my wheelchair onto a mattress on the floor. I remember thinking to myself one morning that if I died in my sleep, someone would come into the apartment and find those pages next to the typewriter and know that I was not a victim, but someone who had been trying to move beyond his terrible tragedy and the terrible injustice of that war.

With the exception of that initial burst of writing and rare moment of stability in Santa Monica in the fall of 1974, I continued to be extremely restless back then, frantically moving from one place to the next, living on the edge, racing in cabs to the airport, flying from city to city on my monthly compensation check, suddenly showing up at friends' houses in the middle of the night and sleeping on their couches ... always carrying the manuscript with me and always frightened, desperately needing to escape the demons that were closing in on me.

Over the next year and a half I wrote several additional chapters of *Born on the Fourth of July*. Some of the stories were ones I had told my mother when I first came home from the hospital and would lay on our couch in the living room when I couldn't sleep, which was often back then. Night after night I would repeat the story of how I was wounded that day in Vietnam, describing every single detail. My dear mother would sit patiently in her chair, listening to her son who had come home paralyzed from the war, trying her best to understand.

I attempted to write at my friends' place on Mohegan Lake, in their laundry room, but couldn't seem to get started. I wrote most of the chapter about my childhood at a little hotel not far from Sproul Plaza in Berkeley, and the ambush chapter, the most painful but one of the best, at Connie's apartment in L.A. I wrote the Memorial Day chapter one afternoon in San Francisco at the Sam Wong Hotel on Broadway, just down the street from Enrico's Caf? in North Beach. I can still remember the open window of my hotel room and the noise of passing cars and trucks in the street below, the fumes, the honking horns, but that became a very beautiful chapter and I still enjoy reading it to this day.

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I dictated the very first page of the first chapter to my friend Roger at the Chateau Marmont Hotel in Hollywood, and the remainder of the chapter up in Mendocino where he and Mary were living at the time. I had driven all the way up in a used car I had just bought in L.A. and later abandoned in their driveway. It was deep in the woods, quiet and peaceful, so very different from the war and the hospitals and all that I had been through. The air was fresh and there was a pond behind their cottage where I dictated to Roger, and I remember feeling exhausted as he held me in his arms and I began to cry in the midst of all that stillness. It was a painful but beautiful birth.

I am extremely grateful to Akashic Books and its publisher, Johnny Temple, for bringing out this new edition of *Born on the Fourth of July* at such a crucial moment in our nation's history. For the past two years we have been involved in a tragic and senseless war in Iraq. As of this writing, over 1,500 Americans have died and more than 11,000 have been wounded, while tens of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians, many of them women and children, have been killed.

I have watched in horror the mirror image of another Vietnam unfolding. So many similarities, so many things said that remind me of that war thirty years ago which left me paralyzed for the rest of my life. Refusing to learn from our experiences in Vietnam, our government continues to pursue a policy of deception, distortion, manipulation, and denial, doing everything it can to hide from the American people their true intentions and agenda in Iraq. The flag-draped caskets of our dead begin their long and sorrowful journeys home hidden from public view, while the Iraqi casualties are not even considered worth counting ... some estimate as many as 100,000 have been killed so far.

The paraplegics, amputees, burn victims, the blinded and maimed, shocked and stunned, brain damaged and psychologically stressed, now fill our veterans hospitals. Most of them were not even born when I came home wounded to the Bronx V.A. (hospital) in 1968. The same lifesaving medical-evacuation procedures that kept me alive in Vietnam are bringing home a whole new generation of severely maimed from Iraq.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which afflicted so many of us after Vietnam, is just now beginning to appear among soldiers recently returned from the current war. For some, the agony and suffering, the sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, and awful bouts of insomnia, loneliness, alienation, anger, and rage, will last for decades, if not their whole lives. They will be trapped in a permanent nightmare of that war, of killing another man, a child, watching a friend die ... fighting against an enemy that can never be seen, while at any moment someone -- a child, a woman, an old man, anyone -- might kill you. These traumas return home with us and we carry them, sometimes hidden, for agonizing decades. They deeply impact our daily lives, and the lives of those closest to us.

To kill another human being, to take another life out of this world with one pull of a trigger, is something that never leaves you. It is as if a part of you dies with them. If you choose to keep on living, there may be a healing, and even hope and happiness again--but that scar and memory and sorrow will be with you forever.

Some of these veterans are showing up at homeless shelters around our country, while others

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have begun to courageously speak out against the senselessness and insanity of this war and the leaders who sent them there. During the 2004 Democratic Convention, returning soldiers formed a group called Iraq Veterans Against the War, just as we marched in Miami in August of 1972 as Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Still others have refused deployment to Iraq, gone to Canada, and begun resisting this immoral and illegal war.

For months leading up to the invasion of Iraq, citizens here in the United States and around the world marched and demonstrated in growing opposition to our government's reckless plan to launch an attack. I proudly participated in protests in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., doing countless interviews and speaking out wherever people would listen to me. Many prominent world leaders, including Nelson Mandela and Pope John Paul II, began to raise their voices against the terrible and ill-fated foreign policy. This extraordinary opposition culminated on February, 15, 2003, when more than 30 million citizens in over 100 nations participated in the most massive demonstration on behalf of peace in the history of the world. Never before had so many human beings come together before a war had even begun to say no to the insanity and madness.

Many of us promised ourselves long ago that we would never allow what happened to us in Vietnam to happen again. We had an obligation, a responsibility as citizens, as Americans, as human beings, to raise our voices in protest. We could never forget the hospitals, the intensive care wards, the wounded all around us fighting for their lives, those long and painful years after we came home, those lonely nights. There were lives to save on both sides, young men and women who would be disfigured and maimed, mothers and fathers who would lose their sons and daughters, wives and loved ones who would suffer for decades to come if we did not do everything we could to stop the forward momentum of this madness. We sensed it very early and very quickly. We saw the same destructive patterns reasserting themselves all over again as our leaders spoke of "bad guys" and "evil-doers," "imminent threats" and "mushroom clouds," attempting to frighten and intimidate the American people into supporting their agenda.

The Bush administration seems to have learned some very different lessons than we did from Vietnam. Where we learned of the deep immorality and obscenity of that war, they learned to be even more brutal, more violent and ruthless, i.e., "shock and awe." Sadly, the war on terror has become a war of terror. Where we learned to be more open and honest, to be more truthful, to expose, to express, to shatter the myths of the past, they seem to have learned the exact opposite--to hide, to censor, to fabricate, to mislead and deceive--to perpetuate those myths. Instead of being intimidated or frightened, many of us became more outraged and more determined than ever to stop these ignorant, arrogant men and women who never saw the things we saw, never had to grieve over the loss of their bodies or the bodies of their sons and daughters, never had to watch as so many friends and fellow veterans were destroyed by alcoholism and drugs, homelessness, imprisonment, neglect and rejection, torture, abandonment and betrayal, in the painful aftermath of the war. These leaders have never experienced the tears, the dread and rage, the feeling that there is no God, no country, nothing but the wound, the horrifying memories, the shock, the guilt, the shame, the terrible injustice that took the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and over two million Vietnamese.

We had to act. We had to speak.

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I am no longer the 28-year-old man, six years returned from the war in Vietnam, who sat behind that typewriter in Santa Monica in the fall of 1974. I am nearly 60 now. My hair and beard are almost completely white. The nightmares and anxiety attacks have all but disappeared, but I still do not sleep well at night. I toss and turn in increasing physical pain. But I remain very positive and optimistic. I am still determined to rise above all of this. I know my pain and the horrors of my past will always be with me, but perhaps not with the same force and fury of those early years after the war.

I have learned to forgive my enemies and forgive myself. It has been very difficult to heal from the war while living in America, and I have often dreamed of moving to neutral ground, another country. Yet I have somehow made a certain peace, even in a nation that so often still seems to believe in war and the use of violence as a solution to its problems. There has been a reckoning, a renewal. The scar will always be there, a living reminder of that war, but it has also become something beautiful now, something of faith and hope and love.

I have been given an opportunity to move through that dark night of the soul to a new shore, to gain an understanding, a knowledge, an entirely different vision. I now believe I have suffered for a reason, and in many ways I have found that reason in my commitment to peace and nonviolence. My life has been a blessing in disguise, even with the pain and great difficulty that my physical disability continues to bring. It is a blessing to be able to speak on behalf of peace, to be able to reach such a great number of people.

I saw firsthand what our government's terrible policy had wrought. I endured; I survived and understood. The one gift I was given in that war was an awakening. I became a messenger, a living symbol, an example, a man who learned that love and forgiveness are more powerful than hatred, who has learned to embrace all men and women as my brothers and sisters. No one will ever again be my enemy, no matter how hard they try to frighten and intimidate me. No government will ever teach me to hate another human being. I have been given the task of lighting a lantern, ringing a bell, shouting from the highest rooftops, warning the American people and citizens everywhere of the deep immorality and utter wrongness of this approach to solving our problems, pleading for an alternative to this chaos and madness, this insanity and brutality. We must change course.

I truly feel that this beautiful world has given me back so much more than it has taken from me. So many others that I knew are gone, and gone way too young. I am grateful to be alive after all these years and all that I've been through. I am thankful for every day. Life is so precious.

Ron Kovic, Redondo Beach, California
March 2005

*Editor's Note: Ron Kovic served two tours of duty during the Vietnam War. He was paralyzed from the chest down in combat in 1968 and has been in a wheelchair ever since. Along with Oliver Stone, Kovic was the co-screenwriter of the 1989 Academy Award-winning film based on his book, *Born on the Fourth of July* (Akashic Books). The above is the introduction to the new edition of the book.*