



An Acute Lack of Forgetfulness'

By S, er Vanocur; S, er Vanocur, television columnist for the Style section of The Washington Post and reported on the Vietnam War for NBC News. January 23, 1977

GLORIA EMERSON was sitting with other journalists in a room at Duke University last winner, trying to explain to some professors and students the difficulty that a reporter has with editors.

She told of one such experience when she was reporting the Vietnam war for the New York Tinmes from 1970 to 1972: A platoon leader became weak and dizzy during an attack. Emerson thought the man was in a state of shock. The doctor thought he was merely suffering from hyperventilation and suggested that the soldier do breathing exercise with his face inside a paper bag.

Emerson reported this incident. It apparently never ran in the New York Times. When she cabled New York, asking why not, the answer from her editors was: "We don't think it take us very far."

THIS incident about the platoon leader is recalled in Winners and Losers . But Emerson does not relate what her editors told her. There is really no need for her to do so. We all understand the problem. Emerson is a journalist who insists, where the Vietnam war is concerned, in taking us very far.

That is what she has done in this absolutely brilliant impressionistic account of how the war looked to her when she was in Vietnam and how the war looked to those who had not.

Friends warned her not to make the attempt. Long after she had returned from Vietnam, she received a letter from her interpreter, Nguyen Ngoc Luong, saying that reporters in Saigon still talked about her. "All have this remark about you; you are the only one who cannot overcome your Vietnam experience. There is an acute lack of forgetfulness in you about Vietnam, we think."

It could not be better said. Emerson does have this "acute lack of forgetfulness" about Vietnam. But she is not naive about America's desire to forget Vietnam. She wrote this book because Vietnam still haunts her. Books like hers may not be popular. But they must be written. As she puts it: "Let the books be written so when all of us are dead a long record will exist, at least in a few libraries."

Lillian Hellman warned her how quickly this nation forgets. "We forget everything," Hellman told her. "I thing as a people we can remember almost nothing. That was one of the reasons I was sure the McCarthy period was going to be over , if one just had the courage to wait it out. Because we don't remember anything. We have no national memory . . . Maybe it's a good thing. May be it's a mark of a young and vigorous people. May be it has great virtue. The day he was over, he was over forever. I think we've already forgotten Vietnam. It's over there. It's a far back as Korea, except for the poor bastards who were hurt."

Emerson talked to a lot of the poor bastards who were hurt. She spent three years talking to them. She surprised a professor at M.I.T. who wanted to know her "methodology." She said she had none. "Most of the time I wandered about talking to those who would talk to me." The professor said he did not think this was a precise or serious way to go about writing this kind of a book.

The proffessor was wrong, Emerson was right. But in talking to those who fought in the war, those who approved it or protested it back in the United States, Emerson discovered something disturbing. People really didn't want to talk about the war.

"People could not talk for very long aboiut Vietnam any more then they could talk about the weather and the reasons for it. Asking them how they felt about the war, I have heard stories about termites, the evil of welfare, diets that did not work, poor bus service, abortion, the horrible costs of feeding cattle and teenagers, busing, crime, useless back operations, the evil of welfare, whether hair dyes cause cancer, how hard it is to pick tobacco by hand, the danger of eating certain fish, crime, the trouble with a car called Capri, beer, ugly marriages, crime, and even how liquid vitamin E and butter can be rubbed on the arm of an addict to get rid of needle tracks. Sometimes I do not sleep well at all, wondering what it is that I am finding out and why some people insisted that after Vietnam nothing would ever be the same again."

What Emerson is finding out is that since most of this nation's political leaders, most of their hired hands from Wall Street and the universities plus nearly all of the columinists and television commentators were wrong about the war in the first place, all of them are anxious to see it forgotten as soon as possible.

The tone is set by a President-elect (whose conversion on Vietnam came later than his spiritual rebirth) who reaches back into history to name to State and Defense two men who never, while in office, mounted a private or a public protest against the war.

It is a tone set by a city where men and womand stand in line to give going-away parties for a Secretary of State who lent his full support to a prolongtation of that war for four years in the process helped destriy a country called Cambodia.

That is the reason why Emerson does not sleep well. She obviously cannot understand how a society can honor and reward the very people who willingly aided and abetted the greatest tragedy this nation has experienced since the Civil War.

That is going to make her future career as a journalist somewhat difficult. She is not going to be able to shed her sense of outrage. That will make many of her colleagues uncomfortable. Journalists are not supposed to succumb to outrage. Detachment is highly valued and esteemed. On occasion, cheerleading is also helpful.

I hope Emerson continues to be outraged. I am glad that she was outraged enough to write Winners

and Losers. Above all, I am glad that she was not able to discard along the way her "acute lack of forgerfulness" about what Vietnam did to her and to others, the living and the dead.



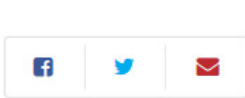
Book Club newsletter

Our monthly selection of book reviews and recommendations from Book World editors and critics.

E-mail Address Sign up

By signing up you agree to our Terms of Use and Privacy Policy

0 Comments



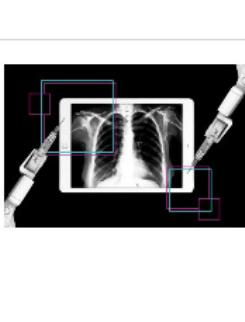
The Washington Post The story must be told. Your subscription supports journalism that matters. Try 1 month for \$1

The Post Recommends

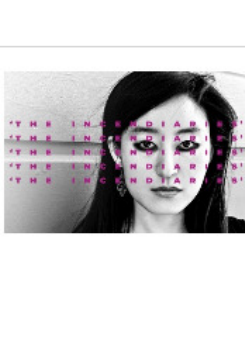
Opinion All the national monuments are bad, and here's why They have cluttered this land long enough. 4 days ago



TheJity In 'The Bleeding Edge,' Amy Ziering continues her focus on systemic injustice This time, it's the health-care system that's under the microscope 1 day ago



TheJity R.O. Kwon's insights in 'The Incendiaries,' her debut novel, are impossible to ignore The Korean American author tells stories about religious fanaticism you wouldn't expect 1 day ago



Most Read

- 1 Meet the theater specialists who show actors the right way to make out onstage
2 Popular ex-Yugoslavia singer Oliver Dragojevic dies at 70
3 Cleveland concertmaster suspended over sexual harassment allegations
4 Brazilian celebrities hold 'Free Lula' concert in Rio
5 Review British rockers Arctic Monkeys find their way to the Wharf

The story must be told. Subscribe to The Washington Post Try 1 month for \$1

Inside 'Trump Revealed' Read stories based on reporting for 'Trump Revealed,' a broad, comprehensive biography of the life of the 45th president. Reporting archive: Trump's financial records, depositions and interview transcripts

Book Club newsletter Our monthly selection of book reviews and recommendations from Book World editors and critics. E-mail address Add

- washingtonpost.com
© 1996-2018 The Washington Post
Help and Contact Us
Policies and Standards
Terms of Service
Privacy Policy
Print Products Terms of Sale
Digital Products Terms of Sale
Submissions and Discussion Policy
RSS Terms of Service
Ad Choices