

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Rich McGuffin – Life During Vietnam

By Rich McGuffin

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Oral Interview conducted by Richie McGuffin

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

RMIII: When and where were you born?

RM: I was born in San Francisco, California in 1950.

RMIII: How old were you when the Vietnam War began?

RM: Well, it actually began in the 1950's during the Eisenhower administration but, when I first became aware of Vietnam was in 1963 when students began protesting the war at U.C. Berkley. Then in 1964 when the Gulf of Tonkin occurred that really accelerated our involvement in Vietnam under the Johnson administration, and our build up of troops began a rather rapid pace.

RMIII: In 1963 and '64 approximately how old were you?

RM: Thirteen or Fourteen.

RMIII: During that time what political or patriotic influences did your parents have on you?

RM: Oh they had a strong affect, my father I guess you could say by today's standards was conservative, very patriotic man who served in the Navy during World War II, and he felt very strongly that we should support our government, so his influence on me was significant;

RMIII: How about your mother?

RM: My mom didn't express too many political views; it was mostly the influence of my father that affected my views.

RMIII: How about the influence of friends and the other people that you were associated with?

RM: Surprisingly enough, the Vietnam War was not discussed very much at school. I entered high school, I was going into high school about the time that the Gulf of Tonkin occurred, and it wasn't a subject in the high schools, at least not in my high school, although certainly on the college campuses it had become a very hot topic, and one that consumed a lot of peoples time.

RMIII: How did you feel about the presidents of the era, about Eisenhower, about Johnson, and about Richard Nixon?

RM: Well, Eisenhower was elected when I was about six years old, and I knew at that time that he had been a general during World War II. I really didn't have any political views at the time (laughing) I was too young to be very politically savvy. Johnson, I wasn't, you know and I am reaching back to some of my memories from a very long time ago, but I didn't particularly like him an awful lot. He was, his big thing was the,

his program called the great society, which was pretty much a social welfare program that is consistent I think with democrat politics throughout this last century. He was also the one who accelerated our involvement in Vietnam. I also, probably didn't care for him a whole lot because he was vice president when John Kennedy was assassinated and I recall my father feeling very strongly that Johnson had a part in President Kennedy's demise. Which I don't necessarily believe now but nonetheless that certainly colored the opinion of a thirteen year old boy. Richard Nixon I thought back then and I still think now was very strong when it came to international politics, but not real great when it came to the domestic side of things, but then again that has a tendency to be a republican trait as well. I was very disappointed with him in the Watergate deal although I think that the democrats probably pulled some unethical stunts themselves, this was quite a disappointment and I recall in 1974 when Nixon resigned I was going to work and I was actually sitting in my car in the parking lot of Sam Jose police Department getting ready to go to work listening to him resign. I thought that was a very sad moment for our country, and frankly since then respect for that office and the trust that the people have in the President of the United States pretty much evaporated at that point, and I don't think we've ever truly recovered.

RMIII: What was it like being in high school during the Vietnam War?

RM: Well, it was a very interesting time; the 1960's in general because it was truly a cultural revolution that was going on at that time led by my generation not all of which was commendable. With Vietnam it was something that was on the news every night, there was a body count every night on the news, it was protracted, there were people from my high school that were drafted went to war some of them didn't come back, some of them did. One example is there was a young Latino student who quit school and joined the Marines and one day I was out on the football field practicing and he came out to visit us in his dress blues, and he looked great. I remember how impressed I was with his uniform. A few years later I was working as a desk clerk at Palo Alto Police Department I was nineteen or twenty years old and I was going to school and I had a 2s deferment and he came in. He came in to get fingerprinted for something. He hadn't been arrested he was an applicant for some job that required fingerprinting, but he came in with only one leg. It really impacted me. It was a time of a lot of social upheaval there were demonstrations, there were riots, it seemed that the police were in the news every single day, and there was a lot of division in the country. There were those who were supporting their country, right or wrong, there was a bumper sticker that people would put in their cars that said "America Right or Wrong," and there were others that were vehemently opposed to the war, and I think that history will be more kind to them than those that supported it. It was a time of real social upheaval, division, a lot of emotion, a lot of anger, one side against the other.

RMIII: Did you have any close friends or relatives that were involved in the conflict, or that fought in the war?

RM: Well, my brother in law fought in the war, and he was killed. By that time my sister and my brother in law had been divorced, but his daughter was close to us, so it was a pretty sad moment. I had friends that went to Vietnam. I was dating a girl in High School whose boyfriend was in Vietnam. I know that sounds strange but we kind of had an agreement and I was very respectful of their relationship during that time. She was a good friend of mine, and he did come home intact. I had another friend who I played baseball with in high school, and when he came back from Vietnam he had lost an eye and he was very bitter about his experience there. He was a completely changed human being when he returned. So there were a lot of folks, everybody knew somebody who was in Vietnam.

RMIII: How did the draft affect you?

RM: I think that my experience was a little but unique. One of the things that I might add here is that, Vietnam, the tours of duty in Vietnam were for twelve months and we had over five hundred thousand troops there at any given time especially after the 1964 build up, and consequently every year we were bringing troops out and bringing troops in which vastly increased the number of people that were exposed to Vietnam. That is why I say that everybody knew somebody who was serving in Vietnam in one capacity or another. What was your question? Oh the draft right. Well, the draft was something that was in place when I became eighteen; there was not a whole of argument about whether the draft should be there, whether the draft shouldn't be there. The existence of the draft was a huge issue. I remember when I was eighteen, I went down to the selective service office in San Jose and did what I was supposed to do and got my draft card. For some reason I was never called for a physical, I was never drafted, and I'm pretty sure that somehow my information fell through the cracks somehow, because even if you had a 2s deferment which was a student deferment you still got called for a physical. Everybody who was of draft age was called to have a physical at the regional induction center, but that never happened to me. Now, there were a lot of demonstrations where people burned their draft cards in defiance of the law. There were those who chose to leave the country and we called them "draft dodgers," and there were those like me wanted to go to school and really didn't want to go into the military at that time and received deferments, and one of the reasons that I say that I think that my paperwork was lost is that after my first semester in college, and it is not unusual for new freshman to play more than they study, and I lost my deferment, and I became 1A and I never did get drafted, never got a physical.

RMIII: What does 1A mean?

RM: Oh, I'm sorry, it means that you are very draftable, and uh, and if you were 1A for any length of time at all, I mean if you were 1A for a month you got drafted. So the draft was a large issue and then along came in 1969, the lottery came about to replace the draft, and what happened is that based on your birthday during the year they put every day of the year in a basket and pulled out these little ping pong balls, and if you were, if the first ball out was January 15th and you were born on January 15th you

were in that first group. Everybody who was born on January 15th was that first group to be drafted. So it didn't really actually replace the draft itself it was just a different method of filling the draft quotas. So as it turned out my birthday came up number 296, and there was no way they were ever going to get to 296. In fact I think that they never really got past about 150, in the draft once the lottery system was implemented. So, the draft, you know, people responded in very different ways. Some people just joined, some people ran, some people stayed and got deferments, and other people were drafted, and after the lottery came out I remember going to school one day sitting around with some of my friends and one of my friends was looking very forlorn because his number was four, and he didn't really want to go into the military but he knew he was going to be drafted so he went and enlisted, and so that is the way that people dealt with it.

RMIII: During the war what were your personal feelings, both politically and emotionally?

RM: Well, I really didn't recognize the difference between political conservatives and liberals I guess, but I would have to say that I was probably politically conservative in that I felt that one needed to support one's country, and so I wasn't very sympathetic with those who were protesting against the war or those who were leaving the country, and basically abandoning their country. At the same time I felt that we weren't waging the war properly. That the war was being run by politicians in Washington and not by the generals. That is one of the reasons that I feel that we did not prevail, and of course when the war ended, it didn't end I don't think very honorably for the Americans I think we basically lost the war and left.

RMIII: When my generation learns about the war we often learn about all the protest and the people that were against the war. Would your feelings of support have put you in the minority or were there a lot of people that felt the same way that you did among your age group?

RM: Well, I think initially most people of my age group were supporting the war, they were supporting their government, they were being patriotic. Um, at least they were being patriotic as far as their value system defined that. But I think that as time went on, and remember that when I first became aware of Vietnam I was like thirteen years old, and by the time that we pulled out of Vietnam which I think was in 1972 I was twenty two years old, so I matured a great deal, and I think there was, that people's views evolved. As the war went on and became protracted and as people realized that this war was not going to be one, that more and more people began to oppose it, and to feel like you know what we need to get out of there. The whole premise for going into Vietnam was to stop the spread of communism, it was the domino theory. Pretty much the belief was that the communist philosophy was that they wanted to prevail throughout the world, and that they wanted every country, the communist wanted every country to become communist. We at that time felt that in order to stop communism from spreading in Southeast Asia we had to make a stand. As we look back on history that argument just wouldn't hold, it just wouldn't hold. So people

who were in support of the war, myself included, were buying a theory that frankly was flawed. I look back now and if I were to go back I would've opposed the war.

RMIII: Having supported the war during the war, you now almost thirty years separated from the war if not more, in retrospect, how do you look at the war?

RM: There's no question history provides perspective that sometimes we don't have in the heat of the moment, I think that those who truly protested the war I mean there was a lot of people who were involved in protest and riots and things who frankly I think were involved just to be involved they were, they enjoyed the excitement they enjoyed being rebels, but those who truly opposed the war knew why they opposed the war were correct. So when you look back, when I look back, I go man I was backing the wrong horse. It was bad for the United States it was bad for us as a nation it created an absolute turmoil in this country that changed us forever. In some ways that was good and in some ways perhaps that weren't so good. But yeah looking back I feel that the way I viewed the war the way many people like me viewed the war was wrong and I would be willing to bet that a lot of folks feel the same way I do as we look back on it.

RMIII: Do you feel that the way the we went into war, like you said the politicians were in control, we went into war never actually declaring war in congress like we should have, do you feel that that has set a negative precedent that has carried on into this generation and continues to carry on, and were not doing things as we should?

RM: Well the precedent was really set in Korea, because we never declared war in Korea either, the last declared war was World War II. The Korean War was called a conflict, I suppose by all except those who had to be there and to fight. Same thing Vietnam was called a conflict, it was an action, well you tell that to the people who had to wade through rice patties and get shot at and bombed and everything else, and I think that they would have a different view. So Vietnam did not set the precedent, Korea did, but it was a precedent that continued, persisted. I think that we are going to see it persist in to the future as well, and to try and answer your question, I don't know if declarations of war are even part of the landscape anymore. I don't know exactly how to evaluate that. I think declarations of war certainly made things more clear, and I think that we need to be very careful about the wars that we become involved in, or the conflicts if you will. I mean Iraq is another good example, we didn't declare war on Iraq, but the terrorists didn't declare war on us, I mean if you want to link those two, some people don't, but we are in a new, the world has changed. Wars are not going to be fought like they were fought before, I mean in the Civil War if you recall the opposing armies would line up a rather short distance from each other, they would all point their guns at each other, and start killing each other. It didn't make an awful lot of sense, right? I sure wouldn't want to fight a war like that. Then World War I came along with trench warfare, World War II came along and things progressed if that's even a good term to use, but warfare changed. Warfare has changed again with terrorism, this whole idea of preemptive actions, preemptive strikes is new to society it's new to our culture it's new to our way of doing things, it actually, I think

preemptive strikes fly in the face of what most Americans feel what is right, is honorable, and is appropriate. Then again our view of warfare is changing as the world changes. Does that answer your question or is that pretty evasive?

RMIII: That answers my question. Another question that I had kind of going back a little bit, I was thinking about this earlier, you mentioned that while you were in high school the topic of the war wasn't brought up that much, however, while you were in high school the universities were very active. When you were in college did you have times where the war was discussed in class?

RM: Absolutely it was a constant topic of conversation. In fact it was interesting because when I went into college a friend of mine had a job, a part time job with the campus police. In fact he was my best friend and he talked me into going to work for the campus police, and I recall hundreds of protesters marching right by our office, and I am sitting there thinking "holy smokes this looks kind of threatening." I also attended some protest at Stanford University, and I was there not as a protestor, but as one who was curious and just wanted to see what was going on, but once I got out of high school the whole ball game changed, Vietnam became the topic of conversation, demonstrations were common place, and so were drugs. That's the first place, first time that I truly encountered drugs on a large scale, and that seemed to go part and partial with this whole Cultural Revolution that was going on. I don't think that you can separate the war from the change, the dramatic changes in our culture. You can't separate it from the drugs, you can't separate it from the new sexual roles the gender roles that were emerging at the time either, it was all kind of one package.

RMIII: Since Vietnam there has been many lingering affects on our society, in your view, what are some of those affects both negative and positive, if there are any?

RM: Oh, I'm not sure that I can totally answer your question, but the affects, I think, have been dramatic. I think probably the most obvious affect is that people lost faith and trust in their government. There are a lot of people including myself who feel that the government lied to us, lied to the people about why we were in Vietnam. The fact that Vietnam went so badly eroded the trust of our leaders. The way the war was politicized eroded trust in government. The fact of the matter is, is the people who were opposing the war were opposing their own government, and on a scale probably, that since the Civil War had not been seen, so that was a dramatic effect. Our involvement on the world stage was affected by Vietnam; I think that in some respects we lost credibility with other nations. Internally we had an atmosphere that was one of accusations suspicion, and manipulation. Let me give you an example, J. Edgar Hoover was the director of the FBI, at that time the FBI was engaged in activities that would be considered intolerable today, investigating citizens for less than legitimate reasons, keeping files on people. For instance Martin Luther King, Martin Luther King who we view today with a great deal of respect, and some people absolutely revere the man, back then was more of a controversial figure. He was not as well thought of by a good portion of the population as he is today, and the FBI followed him kept files on him and probably dispensed information, propaganda kind

of information about him, and others that is frankly not worthy of a free society. So those kinds of things became apparent, and there was just a great deal of distrust between government and the people, and especially between government and the younger generation. Those kids, those kids who are now, the baby boomer generation about to retire, had a completely different view of their government than their parents did. Especially in the aftermath of Vietnam. Even today in the Presidential campaign that's now getting to role Vietnam is an issue with one of the candidates, John Kerry. There are folks who are going back and drudging up his involvement in the war, both from the standpoint of his participation in the military, and afterwards he was a prime mover in veterans against Vietnam, and testified before the congress. So Vietnam is still with us. I have heard comparisons although I think that they are not, in most ways it is comparing apples to oranges, you hear comparisons between our involvement in Iraq and Vietnam. I think what people are really focusing on is getting bogged down in a war that we can't win. I think that is the concern that most Vietnam era adults are concerned about. One was our entry into the war legitimate, was it founded on good intelligence, and that has been as you know a subject of debate. Should we have gone in, is this another Vietnam, and by that I think most people say that we went into Vietnam for less than legitimate purposes, that the government espoused a theory that most people, at least initially, bought into, and that history is telling us was not legitimate. So any time that we become involved in a military conflict now people from my generation and certainly our children will ask that question, should we be there? Frankly that is a question that Americans have been asking since very shortly after we became a nation, because we almost went to war with France. Some people wanted to go to war in 1800, 1776 wanted to go to war with France and some didn't. John Adams, and before him George Washington kept us from going to war. The whole idea is that we don't belong in other people's problems. Well the world has become much smaller now, and so that question will be asked every single time, and the credibility of the government hinges on having solid good reasons to go into a war, to send our military any place in the world, and those reasons have to hinge on national security.

RMIII: After you mentioned Senator Kerry, how did you feel about the veterans that returned from the war that made accusations, some of them true and some supposedly false?

RM: Well the carried much more credibility with me than the student who had not been to war and was criticizing those who were going to war. You see it was more than just a protest against the government, people who were protesting the war were also treating those who joined the military very badly, I mean I have friends who came back from the war and were treated very shabbily by our own citizens; spit on, cursed at, called murderers, baby killers, and they were simply serving their country, and they went over there experienced the horrors of war, came back changed people. I mean if they weren't affected physically they were affected emotionally and psychologically.

RMIII: I guess part of my question is exactly that, we have soldiers such as John Kerry that come home and basically make accusations that many of the soldiers are murderers, and were baby killers, and rapists, so how do you think that impacted how the American public viewed the war?

RM: Well, I'm it did, those who came back from the war carried a stronger voice because they were there. They fought and many of those who were speaking out against the war had fought very honorably, and in war bad things happen, I mean things that should not happen, you know in terms of the conduct of the war we expect our soldiers to behave in a certain way. But in the context of the war itself, people get bent they get twisted, and sometimes they do things that they shouldn't do, which doesn't make it right, and is usually actionable against individuals. I mean there was Mai Lee, there were investigations into misconduct by our military personal, there were scandals if you will, but I think that the affect, and you asked me what affect these men had on me. Well I had to listen to them I had to give them more credibility because they are the ones who went where I didn't go, they are the ones who were there and saw it. There were many who came back who felt they had fought at war that their government did not provide adequate support to fight. They didn't get the support from their government, they weren't getting support from a good portion of the population which makes it very difficult on moral it makes it very difficult to fight a war when there's no support, and they're over there questioning why they are there, and they came back, some of these guys came back, like I said I had a friend who came back feeling very bitter, very bitter. He went over to Vietnam I believe he probably did a few things that he's not very proud of if I remember the stories pretty well. We heard all kinds of tales and I'm sure that some of them were true, but in the context of battle it's a little bit difficult to judge although we do have a responsibility to do that. So those guys carried more credibility, and some people called them traitors, I don't think that they were traitors I think they went over and served their country and came back with an opinion.