

## On John Patrick Shanley's *Defiance*

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Generally speaking, our students encounter the Vietnam War primarily through combat films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*, and thus have only a vague understanding of the war beyond the major encounters of combat units during the height of the war in 1968-1969 (the Tet Offensive, the My Lai massacre, Hamburger Hill, etc.). Most know little about the conduct of the war under President Nixon, including the shift from ground combat to air campaigns and the covert incursions into Laos and Cambodia, and while many are familiar with the photographic record of domestic social upheavals (e.g. flower-toting hippies, students burning draft cards, a slain protester at Kent State), they often do not fully understand the conflicts that underlie them. As a result, the final years of the war seem shrouded in a fog of indeterminacy and inconclusiveness, and this fog can prevent our students from engaging critically with a period of recent history that influences their attitudes about military service and their understanding of how the U.S. citizenry views the military.

Moreover, with the popularity of 'boots on the ground' accounts of wartime experience, including such recent films as *The Hurt Locker* and *Restrepo*, which use hand-held cameras to evoke "realistic" or "embedded" filming, our students tend to grant to the combat soldier singular authority in war accounts, thereby overlooking wartime issues outside the combat zone; as Michael Selig notes, "The consistent affirmation of the infantry veteran's perspective as the only truthful perspective on Vietnam tends to paralyze the nonveteran's voice, to silence those who weren't 'there'" (175). This narrow focus tends to valorize the combat experience, even in works meant to question its value and meaning. The untidy, sometimes unresolvable socio-political dimensions of the war are ignored in favor of its psychological impacts, a tendency that historian Richard Slotkin characterizes as "the redemption of American spirit or fortune... by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (12).

At first glance, John Patrick Shanley's *Defiance*, a play about the aftermath of a series of racial incidents at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in April 1971, seems narrowly focused on

military experience. Its characters are almost exclusively U.S. military (the only exception being Margaret Littlefield, herself a military spouse), and its setting is exclusively American (Camp Lejeune), with a particular focus on unit morale and social issues on the base. Yet the absence of combat violence and the paucity of references to the Vietnam War itself unsettle expectations; indeed, Captain King, a decorated combat veteran, seems at pains to avoid speaking about his two tours of duty (11). Shanley's play is a political allegory for the Vietnam War itself, with the interactions between characters representing conflicts within American society at home and abroad. Drawing on certain stereotypes—the careerist officer, the black soldier who drops the burden of race by joining the military, the naïve chaplain, and the neglected military spouse—Shanley enriches his characters and complicates the social categories they embody by having them struggle against their own stereotyped behaviors, indeed, often against the burden of their own names. Moreover, by not portraying the Vietnamese in the play, Shanley creates a sort of negative allegory, in which the absence of a foreign enemy ties these domestic conflicts to the outcome of the war itself, so that in the end, the play suggests that America's defeat in Vietnam was caused by itself: an instance of friendly fire.

Among the main characters, Lt. Col. Littlefield embodies the career-minded officer and classic Cold Warrior (his name recalls “Little Man,” the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki). Affable but egocentric, he is driven by professional ambitions that operate within a narrow and ever-diminishing field, his desire to find “that true opportunity for service” and wash out the “bad taste in my mouth since Korea” (32) having been subsumed by his desire to attain “full bird” (31). Moreover, he views the world within a ‘little field’ of cultural awareness, so that he struggles to understand the concerns of his subordinates, as when he misconstrues the black Marines’ use Magic Shaver and butter knives for shaving as “setting themselves apart” (22). In a sense, Littlefield typifies the ugly American who, as Richard Slotkin puts it, regards the (racial) other as having “a unitary racial character transcending differences of culture and nationality” (448). Yet as the play progresses, Littlefield ironically tries to move beyond the limited scope of his personal ambitions, first when he inquires into discriminatory housing practices off base (34), and later when, accepting his wife’s condemnation of his “lust... an obscene hunger to be top dog, the king!” (71), he reports his affair with the wife of PFC Davis and thereby sacrifices his career (73).

As an African-American and a Marine officer, Captain King straddles two worlds, often uncomfortably, for as he says, “I don’t want to be the ombudsman for black marines. I don’t want to be treated differently because I’m black. I don’t want to be a black officer. I just want to be an officer” (27). He exemplifies the man who would subsume his personal identity within the collective identity of the military. Thus, he accepts his role prosecuting black marines during the courts martial and attempts to reject what he sees as his racially-motivated promotion to XO: “I just want to disappear into my uniform. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. I don’t want to have my identity asserted in an individual way” (45). King longs to be part of the colorblind professional military Littlefield seems to promote when he tells his troops, “(I)t matters to me not at all if you’re black, white, blue or stupid. You are marines. You are green in the eyes of the corps” (9), yet ironically it is Littlefield who pushes King to accept that “like it or not, there’s a man in the uniform. And like it or not, it is one of your accomplishments that you are black and... hold the rank of captain” (27). Captain King’s name evokes the noble, self-sacrificing leadership he demonstrates throughout the play, from his service as judge advocate to his final confrontation with Littlefield over his conflict of interest in the transfer of PFC Davis. Yet it also alludes to Martin Luther King, Jr., whom Captain King tacitly seems to reject when he tells White, “Black Power’s against a black man. Martin Luther King to be exact. Martin Luther King was preaching nonviolence. And some black men said no: we want to fight for what’s ours. Now if you want to talk about a philosophy that doesn’t work for the military, I would think Dr. King’s nonviolence is your man. At least Black Power condones the spirit of aggression” (24). Yet while King might understand the rejection of MLK’s nonviolence, he understands his call for social justice during the civil rights era, and he expresses the frustration, disappointment, and cynicism felt when such justice is thwarted, saying, “My dream was shot down in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968!” (66).

Unlike Littlefield, who comes to engage with issues of racial injustice, and unlike King, who would reject all claims of identity aside from his identity as a Marine, Chaplain White ‘sees race’ but rejects it as relevant moral determinant, instead favoring a universal morality that is a conventional conflation of Christian and middle class American mores. As he says to Littlefield in response to the latter’s mention of the Black Power movement among the black marines, “(T)here’s only one Power and it don’t have a color. I’ve listened to these black leaders talk about Black Power. It’s seditious. There’s no place for it in the armed services. I don’t think

there's any place for it in the United States!" (21). At times, White seems a country bumpkin: he is southern (14); square, as shown by his 'aw-shucks' response to King's pointed remarks about race (15); naïve, as when he tells King that "I wish I'd been able to go [to Vietnam] so I could share that with you" (35); pious (and priggish), as when he tells Littlefield, "Sometimes a morale problem is really a morality problem" (20); and conventional in his behaviors and habits of mind, from his habit of eating the same meal for lunch every day (54) to his perplexity at the acts of male rape perpetrated by Marines (19). Yet he is a Lutheran pastor, not a Baptist, and he turns out to have been brought up by a father at odds with his own squeaky-clean nature: "He was a drunkard, but his advice was always sound. Just couldn't take it himself" (35). In addition, in pushing King defend PFC Davis against Littlefield, White enacts his own vengeance against Littlefield for his repeated snubbings, ironically manipulating the conscience of a black character to do so, while nevertheless analyzing King's character correctly: "You have the reluctant force of morality in you" (38).

Margaret Littlefield seems to be the conventional military spouse, a homemaker who devotes herself to her husband's career and to meeting his many needs (even rubbing his feet upon command (28)). Indeed, in a cast of characters whose names are so freighted with meaning, that she goes by her husband's name should indicate that she occupies a stereotypically subservient role. Yet as with the other characters, Margaret often works against the burden of expectations. She is clearly not a meek housewife, as shown by her frequent chiding of Littlefield's displays of bombast and pride. She is an active reader, and her choices of books—Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* and Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression*—suggest a mind interested in analyzing the social upheavals of the time. Littlefield himself acknowledges the irony of her social standing: "(S)he's a well-educated white-glove girl. She's fit for more than serving coffee to the likes of us" (27). And she is often the most incisive commentator in the play: she points out the danger of Littlefield's humiliation of White (29), notices how King "wants to slip away" from history (45), and identifies Littlefield's frustration with their son Joe's escape to Canada to flee the draft as his motivation to make his mark (45).

Just as Shanley allows his main characters to stand for (and complicate) different social groups, he also allows conditions on Camp Lejeune to represent issues affecting the U.S. military at large in 1971. In one brief dialogue, in which Littlefield explains White the causes of low morale on base and of King's backlog of court cases, Littlefield notes that "half the men rotating

back from combat at this point are just sludge in the pipe” and that “(t)he recruiters are bottom-fishing, sending us riff-raff, hooligans and worse” (17). The conditions Littlefield describes accurately reflect problems facing the U.S. military at this time. Troop rotations dictated that soldiers moved in and out of units individually, rather than the units rotating uniformly in and out of deployment, weakening bonds between servicemen and causing problems for command. When King explains to White what Littlefield means by “sludge”— “Lots of drug problems. Resentment” (17)—he is not only alluding to the prevalence of drug use, particularly among units assigned to rear duties, but also to the feelings of discontent among enlisted soldiers, many of whom were from lower class backgrounds and lacked the necessary means or information to secure deferments or preferential service placements. Littlefield’s reference to the soldiers sent by recruiters reflects the precarious status of the draft in 1971, when Nixon was inquiring into the possibility of an all-volunteer military (having made it a campaign pledge) and Congress was seeking to filibuster its extension (a failure, though the draft ceased in 1973). As Stanley Karnow observes: “To court voters, Richard Nixon had ended the inequitable and unpopular draft. He later regretted the move.... Volunteers were also attracted mainly from among the underprivileged and the undereducated—youths least qualified to handle a contemporary army’s sophisticated technology. Antiwar sentiment had roiled college campuses, devastating reserve officer programs... an important source of bright innovative leadership narrowed, and unimaginative bureaucrats took over much of the army’s management” (32).

Likewise, the play reflects the progress of the war in Vietnam. The absence of combat scenes, whether on-stage or described secondhand, is not only a result of the stateside setting, but also an allusion to the decline in U.S. ground combat in Vietnam at this time; as King says to PFC Davis, “(W)e’re out of Vietnam, basically” (48). Starting in 1970, U.S. participation in ground combat in South Vietnam decreased as South Vietnamese forces assumed increased responsibility for defending against North Vietnamese border incursion (the number of U.S. combat deaths dropped by more than half from 1969, from approximately 9,400 to 4,200; combat deaths in 1971 decreased by two-thirds to approximately 1,300). While American forces still engaged in firefights on patrol and still dealt with the problem of booby-traps, they were no longer facing the intense, protracted combat that marked the height of the war (1967-1969). More relevantly for the play, in the early months of 1971, South Vietnamese troops engaged in a heavy offensive aimed at disrupting NVA supply lines from Laos (the Ho Chi Minh trail).

Owing to recently passed legislation, U.S. military advisors were not allowed to accompany South Vietnamese forces on the ground; U.S. participation in the offensive was mainly in the form of air support. By March, South Vietnamese forces began retreating from Laos, with the offensive ending in April.

The morale of both South Vietnamese and U.S. forces in the wake of the thwarted 1971 Laotian offensive was very low. Describing the morale of South Vietnamese forces who had retreated from Laos, Gloria Emerson opens her 27 March 1971 *New York Times* article “They All Became Dust” by declaring that “The morale of many soldiers in South Vietnam’s finest military units, who fought the North Vietnamese in Laos, is shattered” (*Reporting*, 512). In his 19 September 1971 *New York Times Magazine* article “Who Wants To Be the Last American Killed in Vietnam?” Donald Kirk writes of the experience of war “for the last Americans in combat in Vietnam”:

It is, in reality, a desultory kind of struggle, punctuated by occasional explosions and tragedy.... It is a limbo between victory and defeat.... For the average “grunt,” or infantryman, the war is not so much a test of strength under pressure, as it often was a few years ago, as a daily hassle to avoid patrols, avoid the enemy, avoid contact—keep out of trouble and not be “the last American killed in Vietnam.” (*Reporting* 523)

This state of morale is mirrored by many characters in the play right from the opening lines, when the Gunney Sergeant preparing a platoon for review declares “This is the most sorry unsquared-away field exercise I have participated in for the term of my enlistment” (7). Soon thereafter, Lt. Col. Littlefield announces that “We are having an attitude problem, gentlemen. Due to some bad apples. Fully one-third of this battalion is composed of men who have returned from service in Vietnam. I want you to know. I don’t care. It don’t make you special” (9).

The most important reason why Shanley foregoes scenes or even protracted descriptions of combat is to revise popular associations of the Vietnam war with combat and combat alone; as Donald Rignalda puts it (writing about Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*): “(G)etting Vietnam right is not a matter of amassing facts; it is a matter of interpreting facts, of using both short and long range lenses, of seeing the facts in the context of America’s history, and, finally, it is a matter of looking at his own accustomed way of remembering, with suspicion” (66). To paraphrase Rignalda, by ‘getting it wrong’ according to conventional Hollywood narratives about Vietnam, Shanley comes closer to ‘getting it right.’ According to Michael Selig, “Hollywood’s Vietnam

films are something like a ‘talking cure,’ implementing a metaphorical psychoanalytic discourse to resolve the open-ended and unsatisfactory conclusion (for U.S. interests) to the historical Vietnam” (174). As a result, Selig claims, Vietnam is never confronted in terms of its political ideologies, but only in terms of its impact on personal identity (174-75). (This ‘personal’ focus is a risk in other media as well, including stage drama.) As Selig notes, in many Vietnam films, “the ‘authentic’ view of Vietnam [is] that of the foot soldiers. The consistent affirmation of the infantry veteran’s perspective as the only truthful perspective on Vietnam tends to paralyze the nonveteran’s voice, to silence those who weren’t ‘there’” (175). Captain King resists both the ‘talking cure’ and the veteran’s authority in his conversation with Chaplain White about his two tours in Vietnam (35), saying only that “It was all right” (35).

While it is possible to view King’s curtness as the struggle of a traumatized character to articulate his experience, his reticence derives less from combat experience than from the internal conflicts caused by the social injustices he is regrettably compelled to acknowledge. His short answers, motivated by a desire to “disappear into [his] uniform” (45), ironically serve to deflect the discussion from the personal to the political. By avoiding the expected topics and details of a conversation about combat, King is pushed to talk, albeit obliquely, about other politically salient matters, including the nature of his enlistment (36), which calls up the issue of irregularities in African-American enlistment during Vietnam; his visits to prison (36), touching on the impact of incarceration on African-American communities (his mother signed him into the Marine corps, which should make us ask if this was a betrayal or a desperate attempt to save him from worse conditions); and the role of fathers in the African-American community, given that King does not offer any stories about his own father after White and, earlier, Littlefield, relate their own.

While the lack of overt violence in the play echoes the significant decrease in U.S. ground combat operations in Vietnam in 1971, thereby providing a space for the consideration of political issues of race and poverty, its general absence from a play about the war, even in characters’ conversations, is conspicuous. At the same time that issues of race, class, and gender are now out from behind the screen of combat and are free to be considered, they take on new importance *vis à vis* the conclusion of the war. The lack of violence in *Defiance*, staged or described, forces us to see American failure in Vietnam not as the result of enemy success, but as

a result of internal conflicts; that is, the play forces us to view the U.S. failure in Vietnam as an instance of friendly fire.

Katherine Kinney identifies friendly fire as the essential organizing trope of Vietnam narratives: “The idea that we fought ourselves, literalized in the repetitious image of Americans killing Americans, is, I would argue, virtually the only story that has been told by Americans about the Vietnam War” (4). In countless Vietnam narratives, she argues, “Americans are portrayed as the victims of their own ideals, practices, and beliefs, while the ostensible enemy, the regular forces of the NVA and Viet Cong guerillas, remain shadowy figures glimpsed only occasionally” (4). Kinney argues that depictions of friendly fire incidents are not particular to Vietnam War narratives, but she does assert that the trope of friendly fire organizes the latter in a way that it does not the former, particularly when the incident is not incidental but intentional, the breakdown in discipline known as “fragging,” the murder of superior officers by their subordinates. This breakdown in discipline, Kinney asserts, mirrors broader social breakdowns:

The perceived breakdown of American world hegemony in Vietnam occurred concurrently with an attack on the categories that defined and upheld that power: race and gender. In challenging the status quo, movements such as Black Power and Women’s Liberation sought to rewrite the past as well as the present. The violent solipsism of Vietnam War narratives reflects this very material struggle to redefine American identity. (4-5)

As the title of the play suggests, *Defiance* features a number of fierce challenges and conflicts on stage, often with sharp consequences for the loser. The language of the play is saturated with figures of war and combat; what follows is a list of the main quotations in which that war laden language appears.

- “You are not combat ready” (Littlefield to battalion, 9)
- “I’d have poured you coffee, but I’m waiting till the skipper comes to pull out the big guns” (Margaret to King, 12)
- “Usually a man with combat ribbons takes Sunday seriously” (White to King, 14)
- “(Y)ou’re [sic] talking to these men like they’re champing at the bit to die for their country just misses the boat” (Littlefield to White, 16)
- “Captain King here’s on the front line with an increasingly brazen and contemptuous element disrupting this camp” (ibid)

- “(A) disputatious man is like a knife that’s fallen in the tall grass. You got to take a minute, locate the handle first, grab it right” (White to Littlefield and King, 18)
- “We just had an incendiary case of rape last week. A black marine raped a white marine right here on base” (Littlefield to White, 19)
- “Seems to me I should point out the path upward, towards a target in the sky!” (White to Littlefield, 19)
- “In a plan of battle, shouldn’t the objective be victory?” (White to Littlefield, 19)
- “I’m also hearing from my staff NCOs that black marines are systematically cutting into the mess line, intimidating and challenging the white marines. It’s explosive” (Littlefield to White and King, 21)
- “A battalion has to answer an order like one man. One man or you’re all dead” (Littlefield to White and King, 22)
- “At least Black Power condones the spirit of aggression. That’s something we can work with” (King to White, 24)
- “Captain, I’m sorry I lit off on you” (Littlefield to King, 25)
- “You humiliated him.... Made yourself an enemy” (Margaret to Littlefield, 29)
- “I can still dominate and lead those men!” (Littlefield to Margaret, 30)
- “When women get upset, they cry. When men get upset, they see an international threat” (Margaret to King, 41)
- “You’re many men. You represent change. Same as combat. Point man takes the heat. This time it’s you” (Littlefield to King, 45)
- “Courage? Holding a position against hostile fire takes courage. Going to Toronto takes an afternoon in a car” (Littlefield to Margaret, 45)
- “Well, it’s Conduct Unbecoming. And it would end a career like a rifle shot” (King to White, 52)
- “The concept of obedience is a house of cards if you believe in nothing. A man who obeys only to avoid confrontation is made of repeated opinions and smoke” (White to King, 59)
- “You wanted to know what it was like in Vietnam? It was like this. A knot in my stomach! Because nothing was right! And nothing’s been right since!” (King to White, 60)

- “You’re a leader, but you run from it. When a man runs from his own character, the world gets smaller and smaller. Like the pig chute at the slaughterhouse” (White to King, 60)
- “Then I will defy you!” (King to Littlefield, 65)
- “My dream was shot down in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968!” (King to Littlefield, 66)
- “Captain, Martin Luther King’s death does not give you permission to lead a cynical life. Nor to mutiny” (Littlefield to King, 66)
- “He wants your ass, my soul, and the keys to the car” (King, talking to Littlefield about White, 67)
- “Against gunfire! Against attack! I can’t protect you against your own folly, sir” (King to Littlefield, 68)
- “I’ll have to send him to General Noyes. And once I do that, you’ll be dead in the water” (King to Littlefield, 68)
- “You’d kill! You have killed to be a hero. To be admired. My God, should I be surprised about a girl?” (Margaret to Littlefield, 71)
- “You know, I’m still looking for a good clean fight” (Littlefield to Margaret, 71)

Certainly this quality of Shanley’s writing suggests the ubiquitous atmosphere of violence. It also indicates how tightly wound the tensions are between the different social groups that Shanley’s characters represent. But it also suggests that the violence of warfare in Vietnam has come to America, inflecting language and thought and suggesting that the enemy is not a foreign presence, but an internal one, that social tensions in America are contributing to the challenges the American military faces abroad conflicts (just as the Vietnam War had a reciprocal impact on Lyndon Johnson’s New Society policies). King suggests that the war is here, and that the enemy is America itself, when he tells Littlefield that “[Hate] doesn’t start in the barracks. And it doesn’t end when you join the corps” (26).

And yet, this focus on America as the source of America’s problems runs the risk of suggesting that the country might be righted by a few just acts, by a moral reorientation, by a momentary epiphany. For such reasons, Katherine Kinney is suspicious of friendly fire

narratives, since they often supply a sense of closure, completeness, and coherence to an incoherent conflict that is nevertheless meaningful in its incoherence. She writes:

The incoherence of the Vietnam War carries with it a deeper if hidden suggestion that what has been forgotten in the act of historical memory is more compelling, more meaningful than what is remembered, encouraging a more contentious and unruly conception of the national body even while openly desiring the narrative orderliness of World War II. (8)

This wariness is echoed by Philip H. Melling, who finds that the tendency of Americans to write only about the American experience of Vietnam, not the Vietnamese experience, reiterates the failure to look beyond a narrow set of (imperial) interests, and thus to re-enact the war figuratively:

The charge of self-interest [Americans regarding only their own experience of the war, not that of the Vietnamese] is difficult to refute, and there are good reasons why it has persisted. Certainly the Vietnam veterans—as a large of those who have written about Vietnam are—have felt the need to come to terms with their own experience before they dealt with anyone else’s. In most cases that experience was extremely narrow and did not allow for social intercourse with civilians. In the war the American soldier found himself culturally isolated from the Vietnamese people.... For a writer to enter Vietnam in his fiction, particularly if he wasn’t an accomplished novelist, and to deal with a people even his own government had failed to understand, was a daunting challenge. The immediate priority was to write about himself, not about a people with whom he had found it difficult to establish relations. (86)

In one sense, Shanley’s play illustrates the point. Littlefield’s decision to report his misbehavior is potentially redemptive, even transformative; he speaks the final words of the play, claiming responsibility for the “bad behavior” he is reporting to General Noyes (72). King has defied the authority he respected, and in doing so, has claimed the responsibility of leadership he had tried to defer: “You have done nothing but treat me like a black man when all I wanted was to be treated like a man!” he tells Littlefield.

And when I asked you not to use me as a symbol, you told me that I *was* a symbol, and it was my duty to allow myself to be used! So here I am! Your Executive Officer! And by your own argument, I represent many people, many people, not just myself! And you, sir, represent things beyond yourself also! And must be held to a standard higher than an individual man! (69)

And through his skillful circumvention of the chain-of-command, White has compelled moral actions amid the low morale of the battalion, forcing King to act: “Doesn’t matter what I want. Doesn’t matter what you want either. Only thing that matters is what you do” (59).

But the play is not as conclusive as we might expect. Littlefield’s decision will affect no one but him and Margaret, and it is simply unclear whether or not their marriage will survive. White has attained justice and driven King to do good, but in the process has violated the chain-of-command and revealed himself to be vengeful in his pursuit of justice. The case of PFC Davis will be passed on to another superior officer, and he is just as likely to have to stay stateside and deal with his marriage as escape to Vietnam. And King has broken the unwritten rule that an XO must protect his CO, and has likely sacrificed his career along with Littlefield’s, with no clear future before him; indeed, his future is so curtailed that he exits the stage with a curse rather than a speech.

Given that *Defiance* is the second of a proposed trilogy of plays by Shanley (the first being *Doubt*) depicting moments of crisis and development in recent American history, I would suggest that we might find a historical corollary for the explosiveness of Littlefield’s secret and the inconclusiveness of the play’s ending in the Pentagon Papers, the leaked DOD study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam which the *New York Times* began publishing on June 13, 1971. In comparison with the recent ‘Wikileaks’ reports of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, the Pentagon Papers disclosed truly secret information—among them, information about incursions in Laos and Cambodia and about force escalation in Vietnam concurrent with Johnson’s campaign pledges to the contrary—that created a “credibility gap” between the president and the public. Although the study covered years during Johnson’s presidency (1967-68), Nixon sued to stop publication of the papers, only to have his case overturned by the Supreme Court.

King’s final remarks to Littlefield serve as a fitting warning to abuses of executive power, and seem apt not only for Littlefield, but for the president at the time of the play, Nixon, and for later presidents whose cynical decisions have voided the very source of their authority, so that they have “no way to tell right from wrong, no less why [they] should be obeyed and followed” (59). King tells Littlefield:

I know who you are! I know you’ve done more right than wrong in your life! So you had sex with a girl. These things happen. But that her husband is an enlisted man under

your command... It's not that you've done such a bad thing. I might've done worse. It's just that it's utterly fatal to the life you're living now. (69)

The play does not end with a promise of healing for the corruption of the morale and the morality at Camp Lejeune by Littlefield's misdeeds, or of the country as a whole by abuses of power by Johnson and Nixon. All it offers is a diagnosis, a firm and clear statement to the patient that there is an illness and that it must be acknowledged before the healing may start, though whether or not the cure will take remains to be seen.

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