

Introduction

to the 2016 Edition

A chance encounter in line at a Burger King on Silom Road in Bangkok in 1993 changed my life. From that moment I was pulled inexorably into the vortex of Clyde Edwin Pettit's friendship, which was inseparable from his intellectual influence. My adult life as a payer of attention to events in the world around me would not have been the same without Ed and *The Experts*.

Ed had a knack for mentorship. Members of the small tribe of Pettit protégés tend to find each other: my Bangkok friends Mick Elmore and Scott Murray were members, and – back in the States and bearing witness from the now long-ago period of this book's compilation, the early 1970s – so were Ed Baum and Mario Lopez-Gomez. In the summer of 2014 Ed Baum looked me up because he was coming to Seattle and told me over lunch a highly entertaining story about hitchhiking across America as a young hippie, getting robbed, showing up broke in Washington, D.C., and getting hired by Ed Pettit. For the record, the Eisenhower quote on page 87 was supplied by Ed Baum.

What Ed Pettit exposed us to was the most revealing of case studies in what is at stake when a self-justifying establishment's insistence on shoring up the status quo meets a free individual's proclivity to think for himself. The Clyde Edwin Pettit that you will come to know between the lines of the quotations in this masterfully arranged book calls to mind the great William Hazlitt, the freest of freethinkers, who wrote in his 1821 essay "On Consistency of Opinion": "Prejudice, fashion, the cant of the moment, go for nothing; and as for the reason of the thing, it can only be supposed to rest with me or another, in proportion to the pains we have taken

THE EXPERTS

to ascertain it.” Or, as Ed told me when I asked him about the genesis of his brilliant, indeed historic January 1966 letter to Senator Fulbright (re-published here on pp. 499-505): “Slowly the idea was forming in me, as a contrarian, that it made no sense. If you hear something a hundred times, you’re inclined to believe it. If you hear it a thousand times you begin to wonder: am I mad, or is the rest of the world crazy? I made the perilous assumption that it was the rest of the world.”

When Ed presented me, unbidden and ceremoniously, with my own inscribed copy of *The Experts* while plying me with whiskey and stories the second time we met (in his room at the Bangkok Christian Guest House, where he stayed because it was affordable but whose name and other guests caused him chagrin), he insisted that I read it not piecemeal, cherry-picking quotes here and there or scanning for famous names, but front to back, cover to cover. I did just that and am glad I did, because a big part of the book’s point is that it constitutes an implicit narrative. What *The Experts* is really all about is the free individual’s opportunity and responsibility to pay active attention to ongoing events in the world in which he or she lives, rather than being led by the nose, to discern true narrative for oneself rather than tacitly agreeing to live in what Norman Mailer memorably called “that godawful *Time* magazine world out there.”

(Speaking of Norman Mailer, Ed claimed to have stood behind Mailer, holding a microphone in one hand and pushing with the other on the great writer’s rear end to hold him up atop an overturned plastic milk crate, as Mailer berated “people with beards” and “girls in long dresses and granny glasses” who were taunting National Guard troops outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968. Ed credited a drunk and possibly stoned Mailer with single-handedly averting “a strong possibility of violence” by saying: “A long time ago, before you people were born, I wrote a book once, called *The Naked and the Dead*. I was a soldier, just like these fellas here. They’re my boys. Don’t fuck around with my boys.”)

Ed Pettit possessed the prophetic gift of seeing through the lies and evasive fictions that we human beings tell ourselves, along with the corollary curse of being unable not to see through them. Thus he struck me as being – like other deeply insightful people – deeply lonely. His loneliness surely had much to do with having grown up the only child of two intel-

INTRODUCTION

lectuals from Chicago who were living, for some reason that was never clear to me, in the backwoods town of Stuttgart, Arkansas. When I visited Stuttgart in 2011, his childhood friend Alexandra McCoy told me: “That family was brainy, brainy, brainy.” But Ed was gregarious and craved company: He wanted others also to see through the lies and evasions. Thus he was sympathetic toward his fellow humans – specifically his fellow Americans – but exasperated with them. “There’s a disease going around these days that no one has noticed,” he told me. “I was the first to diagnose it. I call it mass Alzheimer’s. Nobody remembers anything!” (He also coined original usages of the phrase “white trash” to refer to Beltway denizens like “corporate attorneys, lobbyists, undersecretaries, journalists, [and] Hill staffers,” and of “cults” to refer to mainstream churches: “Unfortunately, many of my friends belong to cults.”)

Ed lived and worked in Washington in the 1960s and 1970s and knew, both by reputation and personally, many of the people whom one should and would have known in that time and place. Describing the city’s atmosphere, he told me:

You would hear constantly, “Napalm will win the war for us.” Fucking napalm was the greatest thing ever to come down the pike, you woulda thought. It was always *something* was winning the war. It was always “these *little* gooks,” with the emphasis on how diminutive the people were – and are – not perceiving that that was an advantage. They were always surrendering in six months.

To wonder aloud what conclusions we might draw, half a century later, if we replaced “napalm” with “drones” and the now-shocking slur term for Asians with blanket aspersions toward Muslims that are now widely considered acceptable, would perhaps cut too close to the bone for many in post-9/11 America. But for Ed cutting close to the bone was the point. What is the purpose of human self-awareness and language? If you’re not going to write and speak close to the bone, why write or speak at all? Would you rather live in the real world, or in that godawful *Time* magazine world out there? Thus was Pettit truly an heir to Hazlitt, and kin to Hazlitt’s direct heir George Orwell, whose essays “Notes on Nationalism” and “Politics and the English Language” are directly pertinent to the subject matter of *The Experts*.

Like Orwell, Pettit was keenly attuned to nuances and manipulation of

THE EXPERTS

language, to self-protective hedging and rhetorical throat-clearing, to hackneyed, overworked metaphors (tides turning, winds blowing, lights at ends of tunnels), and to willful misperception of the rhythms of history. Thus was he driven to document the vapidity of pronouncements like “Vietnam is now, I think, actually emerging from the twilight” (Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in April 1964), “Gen. Giap continues to make his incredible mistake of facing U.S. firepower” (the Jesuit magazine *America* in October 1966), and “Within the past month or so I have been beginning to feel that we are on the verge of a breakthrough” (George W. Ball, on becoming foreign policy advisor to Vice President Hubert Humphrey in September 1968). You get the idea. But you’ll get the full effect of the tragedy and how and by whom it was wrought by reading the whole book, cover to cover.

“I bragged for years on radio and television that there were [in *The Experts*] about thirty Top Secret papers that I stole or borrowed from senators and Xeroxed,” Ed told me. “I wanted to be arrested or interrogated, and I never could be. You can’t ever be busted in the U.S. when you want to be.” One such document – a November 17, 1966 memorandum from Secretary McNamara to President Johnson – brought me up short when I was proofreading the book for this new edition: “I believe our bombing is yielding very small returns, not worth the cost in pilot lives and aircraft.” To Ed (I think), the point of stealing, Xeroxing, and publishing Top Secret internal government memoranda and diplomatic cables was not to be naughty or subversive for the fun of it, but to render explicit the contrast between what is said and written for public consumption and what is acknowledged and debated privately by people wielding the power of life and death over other people. My father-in-law spent a year in Vietnam as a United States Air Force officer, advising the South Vietnamese air force on aircraft maintenance and flying spotter planes in harm’s way. He returned Stateside in June 1966—five months before McNamara sent that Top Secret memo to Johnson—and married my mother-in-law in Reno. As I write this, Art Haywood is still with us at age 90, no thanks to Robert McNamara or Lyndon Johnson.

I was born in 1965, the year the first officially acknowledged U.S. combat troops went to Vietnam. *The Experts* opened my eyes to what had been going on in the world even as I had been obliviously enjoying a rather

INTRODUCTION

idyllic middle-class American childhood. Coming into awareness of the wider world during the second half of the 1970s, I could tell – I could *smell* – that there was some kind of miasma or pall hanging over American society. I knew that its name was Vietnam, that there had been a war, and, to be sure, American society did begin seeking that ever-elusive goodie to which we feel somehow entitled, “closure,” around that time through films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, and later *Born on the Fourth of July*. But what never took place was any real communication about what exactly had happened, and why, from my parents’ generation to mine. And for that I blame my parents’ generation, all of them, whether they were “for” the war or “against” it. They agreed to disagree with each other, one side held up the edge of the carpet while the other swept the war under it, but none of them ever explained any of it to me. Perhaps others of my generation feel the same. As a friend who had been a draft-age hippie protester late in the war said to me, in exasperation, and only after I pressed him, what the storied Sixties were really all about was “how the blood of the war got on everyone’s hands, and we couldn’t wash it off. It’s still all over the place.”

It was sometime in the mid-1990s that my friend said that. At the time I was actually living in Southeast Asia, in Bangkok, and I felt and still feel that that was what it actually took for me to begin understanding what Vietnam – or rather “Vietnam,” the war not the country – did to America. I witnessed and reported from within the long, dark shadow the war still cast over Cambodia; I visited Vietnam; I heard about and read some of the journalists who had covered the war and even got to meet Tim Page and Al Rockoff; and of course I met Ed Pettit. In the two decades since then, to make a long story short, a great deal of history has happened. I first read *The Experts*, cover to cover, while doing journalism in Kashmir, the region long disputed between India and Pakistan and subject to both endless heavy-handed Indian military occupation and violent anti-Indian militancy. A light bulb went on for me then that has never dimmed or turned off. Invited in 1994 to contribute an article to the newspaper *The Times of India*, I wrote, “Whenever I read cant in Indian publications about ‘restarting the political process’ in Kashmir, I am reminded of the American pipe dream of winning Vietnamese ‘hearts and minds’” – and more in the same vein. Perhaps my article was useful to someone who read it; a writer

THE EXPERTS

often never knows. But the hard truth about the human race is that, as Ed told me rather bitterly when I breathlessly told him I wanted to compile a similar book on Bosnia, “You could do *The Experts* about anything.”

In bringing this long-cherished reprint to fruition, it’s my great pleasure to thank my mother-in-law Elaine Haywood for retyping the entire book, my wife Jennifer Haywood for doing the page design, Christopher Dollar for designing the striking new cover, Paul Haralson for help above and beyond the call, Jeb Wyman for the subtitle (regarding which, see below), and Oliver Lopez-Gomez (Mario’s son, who fortuitously did a stint as my intern just in time to be helpful by updating the index). I also asked Oliver to interview his father and write something up, and he gave me this:

My father, Mario Lopez-Gomez, was 17 years old when he first met Ed. My dad, on a casual invitation, had decided halfway through high school to move from his dad’s house in San Francisco to live with his cousins in Washington, D.C. This brought the necessity of working to live, and through this work he found Ed.

For his part, Ed was looking for a handyman around the house. Why he chose a 17-year-old Hispanic high schooler is beyond me, but in my dad he found something a bit more valuable than a handyman: a youth with potential, in a time when being a youth was no picnic. For the U.S. was still at war in Vietnam – a war that by 1971 had torn the country apart and had yet to leave it alone. Dad, in little more than a year, could have been over there, fighting a war that had begun in earnest when he was only ten years old.

For better or worse, the war brought my dad and Ed together in a lasting friendship. First a handyman, then a sounding board for some of Ed’s ideas, soon my dad was helping him put together the volume you now hold in your hands.

Even though I found out about him only recently, I am glad, for Ed sought the facts about the war, not for any predetermined agenda but for the truth. The truth for American families at the time, and for American families now. We might not always like what the truth is, or that our patriotism or dedication to ourselves and others might be questioned in the pursuit of it. In the long arc of history, however, the truth will come out, and it’s better for it to do so now, when we can use it.

INTRODUCTION

My dad knew this Clyde Edwin Pettit, for although Ed was an eccentric and passionate man, he was smart and humble as well. He was someone who saw the world a little differently and a little bigger than those around him, and yet he rarely used his own opinions or understanding, but those of others, to make his points.

And in my dad he found at first a handyman and later someone to have a beer with and bounce ideas off of. Ed inspired my dad, like so many others throughout the years, to pursue his interests and figure out this crazy messed-up world. Ed knew he wouldn't fix it. Not once did he talk about an overriding overall solution to all the world's woes, but maybe he could set some people on the path who could, or at the very least who might not make the same mistakes again.

Clyde Edwin Pettit was an unconventional man in a very conventional world, a world that needed someone to remind it to listen to everyone, not just the experts.

I also want to acknowledge the support both moral and material given me by Professor Ed McNertney, John Singleton, James English, and my many other friends at Texas Christian University, whose purchase of copies for TCU students helped make possible this printing, in the hope that other copies might benefit other students at other universities.

A couple of notes on the subtitle(s): the new subtitle is "How Hubris Sent 58,307 Americans to Their Deaths in Vietnam." That number is the number of American names on the stark wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. It stands for 58,307 identifiable people, most of them, as Pettit wrote in his Foreword, "young men sent to foreign fields to shed blood, each cell stamped with the genetic uniqueness that once made them individuals." It also serves as grimly inadequate shorthand for the war's vastly greater and unknowable true cost, which emphatically includes its horrifyingly much higher toll in Vietnamese lives and trauma. The purpose of the new edition's subtitle is to catch Americans' attention and encourage them to read and learn from the book. The original subtitle was "100 Years of Blunder in Indo-China," but Ed also snuck onto the cover a sly alternate subtitle that says it all: "The Book That Proves There Are None."

To have included a "further reading" appendix, as I considered doing,

THE EXPERTS

would have been both presumptuous and pointless. Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* is probably the first book on any must-read list. I'll mention here just three other books (of many) that I've found especially powerful and helpful, each covering one of three distinct periods of the war and its aftermath: *Once Upon a Distant War* by William Prochnau (an ominous, darkly fascinating account of the ostensibly prewar years 1961-63); Michael Herr's brilliant *Dispatches*; and *River of Time* by Jon Swain. You can't do much better than to start with those three books – but don't stop there. There is so very much further reading to be done.

Ethan Casey
Publisher, Blue Ear Books
Seattle, August 2016
www.ethancasey.com