

Resisting the War against the Poor

Charles J. Liteky

Charles J. Liteky served as a chaplain with the U.S. Army from 1966-1971. In November 1968 he received the prestigious Congressional Medal of Honor from President Lyndon Johnson, for actions performed in the Bien Hoa Province of Vietnam. Perhaps the best way to introduce Charlie is by quoting a few excerpts from that citation:

“Chaplain Liteky distinguished himself by exceptional heroism while serving with Company A, 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, 199th Light Infantry Brigade. He was participating in a search and destroy operation when Company A came under intense fire from a battalion size enemy force. Momentarily stunned..., the men hugged the ground for cover. Observing two wounded men, Chaplain Liteky moved to within 15 meters of an enemy machine gun position to reach them, placing himself between the enemy and the wounded men. When there was a brief respite..., he managed to drag them to the relative safety of the landing zone.... In a magnificent display of courage and leadership, Chaplain Liteky began moving upright through the enemy fire, administering last rites to the dying and evacuating the wounded.... On several occasions when the landing zone was under small arms and rocket fire, Chaplain Liteky stood up in the face of hostile fire and personally directed the medivac helicopters into and out of the area.... Upon the unit’s relief,... it was discovered that despite painful wounds in the neck and foot, Chaplain Liteky had personally carried over 20 men to the landing zone for evacuation during the savage fighting...”

Liteky left the priesthood in 1975, worked with veterans in drug rehab and benefits counseling, and married in 1983. In 1986, he returned his Congressional Medal of Honor to the U.S. government as a personal protest of the deadly U.S. interventions throughout Central America. Regarding that decision, he has stated: “In 1968, I was awarded the Medal of Honor for saving lives. In 1986, my conscience called me to return it to help save other lives, those of Latin Americans.” He has served two terms in federal prisons for nonviolent protests of U.S. policy, particularly the existence of the School of the Americas.

In the summer of 1966 I joined the U.S. Army. I was 35 years old, 16 years senior to most of the young men answering the draft call to serve God and country. I was a Catholic priest, six years ordained and answering a different call: a religious call to support young men in the prime of their youth, who were willing to risk their lives without question for a cause called “freedom and democracy,” in a place called Vietnam.



Chaplain Liteky in Vietnam with Gipper. Photo by Paul Phillips

My first assignment as an Army chaplain was to a basic training center located at Ft. Benning, Georgia, one of many nationwide first stops for 18-year-old and over draftees. I was to provide their spiritual and sometimes psychological support. I was a priest in camouflage, recognizable as a minister only by small black crosses sewn on to my fatigue shirt collar. Politically, I was a clerical hawk, the worst kind of political hawk, because we have brought moral sanction to given military endeavors.

At that time I believed in the just war position as it was taught by the Catholic Church. I considered any

war against communism just. I knew little to nothing about Vietnam and its centuries-long struggle to free itself from foreign domination: first by the Chinese, then the French, the Japanese, and the French again, before the U.S. arrived. To the Vietnamese we were just one more in a long line of colonial powers engaged in the selfish search for wealth and power. We condemned communism for its total control over peoples lives, yet the injustice of colonialism was tolerated without negative comment.

By the time I realized what I had done by supporting and participating in the Vietnam war, it was too late to be anything but sorry. I'll carry the burden of that sorrow for the rest of my life. Literally millions of lives were wasted: Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Australian, Korean, and American. Most of the killed and wounded were non-combatants: old men and women, young boys and girls, mothers and infants. I spent most of my time writing letters of condolence to wives and mothers of young men killed in action. Memorial services conducted in forward base camps became routine. Gradually I became accustomed to the pain and suffering war creates; I left the Army in 1971 with my humanity severely damaged.

The war was winding down in the early '70s. No one in or out of the military wanted it to go on. It was a lost cause. Finally, a U.S. military intervention had gone sour. The bitter taste of defeat has remained in the mouths of military and political participants to this day. A kind of intervention paranoia called "the Vietnam syndrome" has settled over the nation that causes politicians and military leaders to be wary of sending fragile American youth on military excursions anywhere. President George Bush Sr. tried to put the Vietnam syndrome to rest after the Gulf War victory, but the syndrome will never fade away entirely as long as there is one Vietnam vet alive with his or her memory intact.

Thousands of Vietnam vets had their wake-up call either while they were still in Vietnam or shortly after their return to the States. (I was not one of them. I wish I had been. It would have made my personal failure easier to live with.) Those vets came to the realization that the war was not about "freedom and democracy," but about U.S. economic interests. Enraged at the government that had deceived them and robbed them of their youth, they threw their combat medals at the Capitol in Washington, DC.

My moment of truth did not come until 10 years after the Vietnam war had ended. It happened in the middle of a civil war in the little Central American country of El Salvador. I was with ten Vietnam veterans on a fact-finding trip regarding atrocities reportedly committed by the Salvadoran Army. Women seated in a semicircle—white-shawled and black-dressed, young and old—were holding photographs of mutilated male bodies, given to them by the military as visual aids to help them identify their mysteriously missing sons and husbands.

Those horror stories told by simple peasant women (stories implicating my government and my fellow citizens) finally crashed through the emotional defenses I had built around my psyche. I could no longer protect myself by denying the harsh realities of war. Suppressed memories of Vietnam came rolling back like angry waves and finally reached the guarded shores of my consciousness. As I began to wake up, I prayed for the courage to face this hard fact: that I had been a moral supporter of an immoral war in Vietnam.

During the seeming millisecond between my wake-up call in El Salvador to the present moment, actually a time span of 17 years, I have been trying to make up for the unquestioned trust I placed in the political leaders of the Vietnam era. Certainly I was not alone in my near-blind trust. To my knowledge, not a single military chaplain of

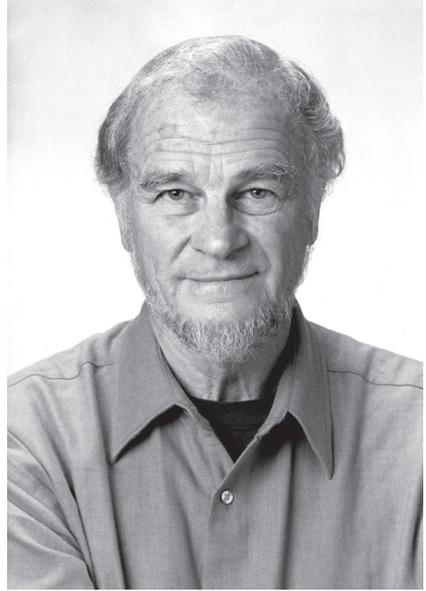
any denomination spoke out against the immorality of the Vietnam war. (This says something about the spiritual poverty of us all.) I had heard the dissenting voices of clergy and laity at home, but I reasoned that they just did not understand. Ironically, I had been the ignorant one, calling the informed ignorant.

Now I spend the majority of my time reading, writing, speaking, and protesting about U.S. foreign policies that create death, injury, and destruction—by direct and indirect intervention—in Third World countries. It is typical in these countries for 1-2% of the population to control 90% of the wealth, forcing the rest of the people to live in what amounts to economic slavery to assure the comfort of the wealthy.

The poor majority live their short lives on a mere survival level; they have little to no health care or opportunities for education. But those poor, whose lives revolve around procuring daily nutritional requirements for themselves and their families, can endure only so much. Personal dignity demands that they fight for their lives, rather than gradually die of starvation and the diseases that accompany malnutrition.

What do we in the U.S. do for our impoverished neighbors to the south, to help them in their daily struggle for survival? The U.S. government equips and trains their militaries in state-of-the-art methods of counterinsurgency (also called Low Intensity Conflict), designed to keep the poor in line. The taxpayer pays for this military education. U.S. national interest is the end that justifies any means, despite whatever policy makers might say about the plight of the poor! Just as “whatever it takes” is often used in the military when orders are given to carry out a mission, so also foreign policy is drafted without scruples.

In 1990 I heard about the existence of a U.S. military educational institution called the School of the Americas, located at Ft. Benning,



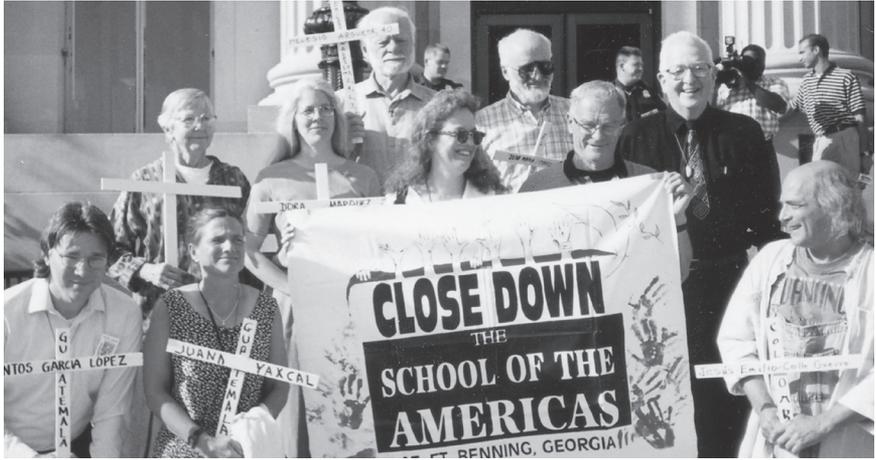
Charlie Liteky in 2001, after completing one-year sentence at Federal Prison Camp Lumpoc for civil disobedience at Ft. Benning, GA

the same post where I had begun my career as Army chaplain in 1966. The purpose of the SOA has always been to train Latin American officers, so that they can implement U.S. foreign policy in Latin America more effectively. I already knew enough about U.S. policy in El Salvador and Nicaragua to sense the sinister role of the SOA; further research revealed the School's sordid history, with literally hundreds of graduates cited for human rights abuses throughout the region. These abuses were at odds with stated U.S. policy objectives as well as the SOA's human rights rhetoric, but they were perfectly consistent with what I knew of Low Intensity Conflict as a tool for maintaining an economic hierarchy.

Today many U.S. citizens are waking up to the reality of what our military is being used for (namely, the undermining of attempts by the poor to organize against their oppression), and we are appalled. In the spirit of resisting tyranny that gave rise to our own nation, we should help rather than hinder the efforts of the poor to struggle for a life free of economic slavery.

In Vietnam I was on the wrong side of a protracted war against the poor; today I'm determined to be on the right side. I will continue to work for and with the poor, resisting First World economic dominance that is currently ensured by U.S. military support and training. Step One is to close the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia.

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Charlie Liteky and Margaret Knapke hold sign in front of courthouse after sentencing of SOA-10, June, 2000. Surrounding them are other members of the SOA-10: John Honeck and Judy Bierbaum (left front); Sister Megan Rice, Kathleen Fisher, Gerhard Fischer, Rev. Brooks Anderson, and Rev. Charles Butler (rear); and Tom Bottolene (right front).