

Support for PBS.org provided by:

What's this?



December 4, 2009

**BILL MOYERS:** Welcome to the JOURNAL. A few days before President Obama's speech this week, some old friends wrote me about a death in their family: A young soldier, ordered back to war for a third tour, couldn't face it; and took his own life. About the same time I read a report based on military records which revealed that from 2003 to 2008 some 43,000 troops had been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan despite having been classified as "non-deployable" for medical reasons. In plain English, they weren't healthy enough to go, but were sent, anyway.

So I listened uneasily to the President Tuesday night. He didn't say a word about the fact that the well is running dry. We are short on soldiers and he asked none of the rest of us to sacrifice, not even to pay for the war he says will defend us from terrorism here at home. Like George W. Bush before him, President Obama will fight this war with overworked soldiers under intolerable stress and he will pay for it on credit in an economy already stretched to the cracking point.

As Congressman David Obey said recently, the burden falls only on the soldiers and their families. Quote: "They've had to go to the well again and again and again and again, and everybody else is blithely unaffected by the war."

The events of this week prompted me to want to talk to a man who has been affected by the bitter experience of war firsthand, and has used his artistic talents to show us what combat is like for the soldiers who wage it.

Through a series of powerful motion pictures Oliver Stone has demonstrated that fiction is often the best way to digest reality.

The writer and director has been here in New York recently on the frontlines of a different kind of battlefield, finishing a sequel to one of his hit movies, "Wall Street."

**GORDON GEKKO:** Greed, for lack of a better word, is good.

But once again, Michael Douglas is playing Gordon Gekko, the character who made "Greed is good" a mantra for the kind of high risk, high rollers who have suckered our economy into its current predicament.

But that's not why I wanted to talk with Stone. He was wrapping his new movie just as Barack Obama was committing 30,000 more American troops to Afghanistan, and Oliver Stone's a man who knows more about what it's like to be a soldier than any other filmmaker.

In 1967, not yet 21 years old, and at the height of the fighting in Vietnam, he enlisted, and then volunteered for combat. He fought through the Tet Offensive and beyond. Wounded twice, he was awarded the Purple Heart twice and the Bronze Star for "extraordinary acts of courage under fire."

When Oliver Stone returned from Vietnam, he enrolled at New York University, studying on the GI Bill, Oliver Stone even made a short film in which he played a Vietnam vet wandering lonely through the city...

He's been wrestling with those experiences for years, expressing his feelings through a trilogy of motion pictures about Vietnam... "Platoon," which won Oscars for Best Picture and for his directing... "Born on the Fourth of July," the story of an embittered, crippled soldier returning from war...

**UNIDENTIFIED MAN:** I served my country. And I don't want you to feel sorry for me. Do not shed a tear.

**UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN:** But as it had happened to our village for so many centuries, we rebuilt our lives.

**BILL MOYERS:** And "Heaven & Earth," about a young Vietnamese woman's life shattered by the fighting that devastated her country.

Oliver Stone, thanks for coming.

**OLIVER STONE:** Thank you, Bill.

**BILL MOYERS:** Let's talk first about the President's decision. The President went to some length Tuesday night to say that Afghanistan is not Vietnam. But are there some lessons from your own experience in Vietnam that the President should be aware of?

**OLIVER STONE:** You cannot win the hearts and minds of people if you invade their country with soldiers. Invade them with schools, with help and the basic security required, but do not invade them with grunts, who don't know anything about the local customs. The moment you send these patrols, as we did in Iraq, into villages, you offend the people. Wherever I've been in the world, I've traveled extensively. The Vietnamese wanted us out. The Afghans are happy to take our money. They know the Americans are coming. This means money. Everybody can cut a deal with the Americans. Even the Taliban can be paid by the Americans. We --

**BILL MOYERS:** Well that, apparently, is what the-- Washington hopes that we might be able to do as with the purchasing-

**OLIVER STONE:** To buy it off.

**BILL MOYERS:** Yeah, to buy it off, as we did in Iraq.

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, the people were--

**BILL MOYERS:** Not inconceivable.

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, you-- we can buy our way through this? No. At the end of the day, they'll take the money, but they'll go their own way. They're fiercely independent as were the Vietnamese, by the way. I always thought of the Vietnamese as warrior ants. They never gave up. I don't know if you remember the slaughter they went through. We killed so many of them. But they kept coming. They never gave up because they were fierce and nationalistic. We're running the risk of alienating the nationalism of the Pashtun peoples, which is an extensive tribe in that area of Afghanistan. And they will now be offended enough to really link up with the nutcases of the Taliban. So that these two groups will come together. So, we will now be fighting a real war. And this will be out of our control. This will be the end. We will be sucked into a massive, massive war. Where we'll be bombing extensively again like in Vietnam.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why do you think he is doing this when he had so much public support for not doing it?

**OLIVER STONE:** This is a key question. And I think many people are asking themselves that today. Why? He was the reform candidate, the agent of change. And here he's pursuing Bush III policy. I am shocked by that. I thought that he had-- I know that he's an intelligent man. I know that-- and many smart Americans are saying, "I know he knows something I don't know." But I heard that argument all the way back to Vietnam, you know? I said, "Well, we must be going into Iraq," George Bush Senior, "Because they know something I don't know." Well, I don't believe that anymore. I really don't. I'm past that stage of my life. Iraq Two, we know that they lied to us. We know that the government is quite capable of manipulating intelligence. And who knows, in this case, what Obama is actually getting from his intelligence sources. Some of the intelligence people are against the move.

**BILL MOYERS:** So what wiggle room did he have? I mean, you and I both know that if there were another attack on America, not from Pakistan, necessarily, but from Afghan soil, Obama would be finished and so would his party. What wiggle room did he have, given the fact, as you just said, his options were framed by the Bush/Cheney years?

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, from Afghanistan, you mean from the caves between-- really it's Pashtunistan, which would be the area-- the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

**BILL MOYERS:** That's right.

**OLIVER STONE:** That's where you're suggesting-- the attack may have been planned there, but it was really planned by Sheikh Mohammed all over the world. He planned it in Berlin, in Hamburg. He planned it in America. They're in America- the terrorist- terrorism is a disease, it can happen like cancer, like drugs. It comes from everywhere. It can come from our cities. So, we don't-- it doesn't have to be originating in Afghanistan. I don't believe that it will. I think that-- Al Qaeda is only 100 people there left in those borders, in those caves, according to James Jones. On October, he made a statement in CNN.

**BILL MOYERS:** That's the President's National Security Advisor - right.

**OLIVER STONE:** National Security Advisor. There's 100 Al Qaeda left, at best. They could not mount any serious attack. But what they do have is influence. And influence is mighty. So, all the Muslim young people that are coming all over in Canada- in America, they're the ones who may do something. And if we send 30,000 American kids, grunts, who are not special troops at all, over there into their homeland. Like we did in Saudi Arabia before Iraq One. And like we did in Iraq Two, when we went into Baghdad, we are going to alienate those people. We are going to influence- I mean, give- we're giving a gift, a gift to Al Qaeda's and influence will expand beyond what they really can do.

**BILL MOYERS:** But would you give him the benefit of the doubt on this? Perhaps he did decide that this was the thing to do. That if he went in quickly, with a lot of force, he could- might bring it to an early end. Is it conceivable to you that Obama would have said I didn't-- You know, he did not campaign on getting out of Afghanistan. He campaigned on taking it seriously. So, maybe he said, "This is the best way to bring it to bring it to a quick end, a war I didn't start."

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, he may very well believe that. But I like Obama, but I think this is the tragic mistake. This is in a deeper way than just 30,000 men because it's not going to be 30,000 men. It's a shadow army. It's-- we're talking a contracting contractors alone in Vietnam is was six soldiers to every contractor. So, contractors are-- get a free ride here. They're war profiteers. So, if we're going to go up to 100,000 troops, we know that there's probably going to be another 30,000 contractors going in, maybe more. I mean, I don't know how we can afford all this. It's going to be \$50 billion a year now. But it's going to go up to \$100 billion a year now this war in Afghanistan. How is he going to pay for that?

**BILL MOYERS:** A million dollars a soldier.---

**OLIVER STONE:** What about contractors and what we pay them? And what are we paying the Taliban and - what about the CIA funds and the predator missiles that cost so much money? And all this?

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, how do you explain - I know a lot of people this week truly wrestling with this, asking the very question you're asking.

**OLIVER STONE:** Where is the money going to come from? How is our so-called empire going to-- it is an empire. How is that empire going to continue?

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you mean empire?

**OLIVER STONE:** We have an empire. We have soldiers in 120 nations all around the world. We have bases north of Afghanistan as you know-- it changes monthly. But Kazakhstan, Kurdistan, Turkmenistan. All these names. We have rings around Soviet Russia, practically. We've built in Latvia. We put NATO back in America has grown huge since the-- especially since the end of the Cold War. We expanded into the East. NATO was never supposed to go East. Do you remember that? NATO was for Western Europe. It was never supposed to go East. Clinton took it to Poland, to Czechoslovakia. Hungary. Bush expanded it. The Russians have a beef with us. And you know, rightly so. We became very big after 1989. Bigger than we were. And now we're going to pay the price. The decision by Obama, although it seems minor, 30,000 men. I think it's major. I think this is very ominous. And I don't know that this time, because coming off the recession of where we are now. It doesn't make sense. It's like piling bricks on a donkey. You pile them so high, the donkey is going to collapse.

**BILL MOYERS:** What would you have said to the President before he made his decision if you could have talked to him?

**OLIVER STONE:** Don't sell out, man. I mean, the generals got you. You get into the presidency, and I think it's a trap. I would imagine you would know from Lyndon Johnson's experience. And he himself is on his tapes, was talking about the need to win in Vietnam. He-- although in his bones, I think that Lyndon Johnson knew he could not win there.

Billions of dollars were spent in Vietnam. Huge waste of money and people got rich off the war. They always do. I always-- when I think of war, I think of money and patriotism. And Obama went out of his way to say that-- to read Vietnam into this was false history. I disagree completely, we always heard the story that the Vietnamese, if we didn't stop them in Vietnam, the dominoes would fall. Thailand would be next. Malaysia and so forth. And they would come, communism would come to the shores of California. And we hear it again and again.

**BILL MOYERS:** But it is also a fact that Afghanistan is where much of the attack was planned on 9/11. That did change the reality. Don't you think?

**OLIVER STONE:** No Afghanistan is just like Texas. It's just endless scrub. I don't think it means much. I think Pakistan is where the ballgame is. Afghanistan-- is ridiculous to go to war there. It's like a wasteland. I mean, the people are fighters. These people have been-- they resisted the British, the Russians. They-- I've often felt we are paralleling the Soviet Union. We fought the Soviet Union so hard from 1945 on. And when they finally crumbled in 1991, it seems that our fate will follow the same course. I don't know why, it felt like we're locked. If your enemy dies, you may go on for a few years, but somehow we have the same sickness. There's no way people from the mainland of America can go over there and not intrude on these people. Just the fact to even walk into a village with our uniforms and our guns is an intrusion on their way of life. And it's an offense. The way we- if a soldier looks at a woman in a certain way, you know, they take offense. The-- the mentality is quite different than ours. We don't- it's another culture completely. And I don't understand why Obama, who knows about culture and he has an Indonesian background, too, I don't under- I'm shocked that he could look to force. No good will come of using force in a foreign land.

**BILL MOYERS:** You make me think of that opening scene in "Platoon." One of the more memorable moments in American movie making in my book. When the fresh Americans like yourself arrive in Vietnam. And for the first time, on that tarmac, they see those body bags.

**OLIVER STONE:** Innocence abroad you'll say, yes.

**MALE VOICE 1:** Ah man, is that what I think it is?

**MALE VOICE 2:** Alright...

**BILL MOYERS:** I know it's been a long time. But what would you say to those new troops going to Afghanistan about combat, based on your experience?

**OLIVER STONE:** I don't think it's going to be a happy experience for them. They will-- these are young men who are going to age fast. They're going to find themselves unwanted, un-liked. People who smile at you. You're never going to believe that they really like you. You don't know if they're going to stab you in the back or put a roadside bomb in your-- on the road, when you go out. Information-- you know, as you remember, the Vietnamese people were friendly, but dangerous. We didn't know who was who. They would come and work for us in the base camps that we built. These huge Las Vegases where we had P.X.'s. We were selling cars and TVs, often illegally. They would make their-- these products would make their way into the hands of the Viet Cong in-- and NVA. A lot of our stuff ended up on the wrong side of the fence. Same thing is true here.

**BILL MOYERS:** What can you say about the chaos of war? How does it manifest itself? How did- and how does the brain adjust to that chaos? Or can it adjust to it?

**OLIVER STONE:** It multiplies. Violence begets violence. It just gets worse. The bombs go off. Innocent people get killed by accident. Mistakes happen. Take friendly fire. You remember friendly fire in Vietnam. I think 20 percent of our casualties were killed by ourselves because mistakes happen.

**BILL MOYERS:** There's a scene from "Born on the 4th of July" that's hard to take and impossible to forget. It's about friendly fire. The unintentional killing of your own comrades.

**RON KOVIC:** What happened?

**BILL MOYERS:** Were you ever involved in that?

**OLIVER STONE:** Oh, sure. It happened all the time. It was very dangerous in combat, 'cause you don't know where it's coming from. Sometimes it would be the guy behind you would lose it and fire off. The guy who was killed in Afghanistan, Pat Tillman, great guy, apparently. But he was killed by accident. By his own troops. That happens a lot in war. But the damage is collateral. It goes back not only into the dead, who come back. It goes

through that generation, families. They come back to the States. The kids are affected, the wife, the parents. Then you have the people who come back with wounds, which are even worse in some cases. The concussions from Iraq. The brain damage. Far worse. They're saving more people on the battlefield now than they did in Vietnam. And as a result, you have more damaged people.

**BILL MOYERS:** What about the fear? Were you afraid there?

**OLIVER STONE:** At times, yeah. Absolutely. It was-- especially in the beginning. Frankly, I was trained well, but not particularly well. And we got there. When you first see combat, it's like pro-football. It goes much faster than you think and more awkwardly than you think. And it's not particularly grand or anything. And you try to save your life. And you see death. And you get used to it. And after a few engagements you get better at it. You learn--

**BILL MOYERS:** Better at it?

**OLIVER STONE:** You get better at it.

**BILL MOYERS:** Does the fear become blurred or numb as you do? Like patrolling in the--

**OLIVER STONE:** You crystallize the fear. You have to lose the fear. You have to get past it because otherwise you're going to freeze up.

**BILL MOYERS:** So, how do you get past it?

**OLIVER STONE:** Sometimes, for example, you get angry. And that's not a good emotion, either. But you get awfully, as I said, pissed off. And you know in Vietnam, we had the issue of less control. But there was a lot of racism, as there is in I think as there is in Iraq and Afghanistan. A lot of soldiers lost their ability to differentiate between the villagers and the enemy. The idea of killing innocence.

**SOLDIER:** Cease fire! Cease fire you [no audio] hole! What the [no audio] are you doing? [No audio] Damn it, I want to know what happened.

**SOLDIER 2:** I don't know sir. Possible accidental discharge.

**SOLDIER:** Have five men get in there, and tell me how many you got?

**GROUP OF SOLDIERS:** Foley! Foley! There! Check it out! Get 'em out!

**RON KOVIC:** Oh my God. We didn't do this did we? Oh my God! Jesus Christ.

**OLIVER STONE:** That's also going on in Afghanistan. There was a wedding party of 50 people was attacked by a predator drone. I mean, we've set off bad hostility towards America among all those people. And these are tribal people. They have big families. So, we probably pissed of 1,500 people.

Yeah, that ferocity, that fear, it goes on. People kill babies by accident. They kill families. It's happening now. It's the nature of war. We cannot operate in a foreign country. We intervene. Once we intervene, America has this blocky reputation. I mean, it just cannot be done by our servicemen.

**BILL MOYERS:** What was it like to kill?

**OLIVER STONE:** Frankly, you get numbed out. I mean, you reach a place of desensitization. You shoot without thinking. And you shoot because it's an instinct.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you know who you're shooting at?

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, I was killing sol-- we were killing enemy. We were actually in conflict with the NVA in the jungle. But when we were in the villages, it was much more difficult. But I certainly saw American soldiers abuse villagers. Hit them, torture them, in some cases rape them, burn down their hooches. I mean, we treated them badly.

**BILL MOYERS:** How about you? How did you come to terms with what happened to you? And what did happen to you there?

**OLIVER STONE:** A lot of things happened. I mean, the priests were there blessing us. And would bless us before we went out in the field. And basically tell us that God was on our side against the North Vietnamese. We went into situations that were-- let me just say that I came back desensitized, another person. Speaking another language. Thinking another way. Not believing in anything I saw in Vietnam. From the officer class down. They were

badly mismanaged. Badly fought war. Tremendous waste of resources and money. I never saw an intelligent approach to the war, which I think could have been done. But it was never achieved. There were some very good officers. They were World War II material. These guys had been through a real thing in Korea. And you would trust them and also our Master Sergeants. We were working with 40, 50-year-old Master Sergeants. And we looked up to them. But in reality, they didn't know what they were doing in this jungle. They had no idea. They were arrogant. They had come from World War II, and they thought that they could beat the Vietnamese. They didn't take it seriously. And we also had the attitude of heavy fire. Soon as you get opposition, you bring in heavy artillery. You even bring in planes and bombs, if necessary. And you just bomb the hell out of the place. Then you move forward again. You can't win a war that way. You have to win that kind of a war-- if you're going to go guerilla, you have to go guerilla to guerilla. You have to go in with what we're doing, to some degree, in Afghanistan, but it won't work. But, you know, with special forces, specially trained soldiers. Joint, what they call JSOC, Joint Special Operations Command which is where McChrystal comes from there. It's a dirty war, McChrystal fought in Iraq.

**BILL MOYERS:** All wars are dirty, right?

**OLIVER STONE:** Yeah, but they kill people, they assassinate people. It's like the Phoenix Program.

**BILL MOYERS:** Maybe they've learned what you've learned about Vietnam. Maybe they'll do it differently.

**OLIVER STONE:** Yeah, but the Phoenix Program, it did work to some degree. But there was an enormous collateral damage. They killed so many innocent people. My Lai, which I wanted to make a movie about. The massacre in My Lai in March of '68 was based on faulty information gathered through Phoenix Program.

**BILL MOYERS:** Phoenix Program for our viewers, was the program by which VC, Viet Cong and Vietnamese were picked up and tortured until they told what they knew, or made up what they told us.

**OLIVER STONE:** Oh, yes. Yeah. But we also picked up school teachers, labor reformers, anybody was thrown into the pen. You know? It was anybody who talked about change against the government. Anybody who expressed a desire for reform was lobbed together with communists.

**BILL MOYERS:** Was there an experience where the illusions fell away and you said to yourself, "We're not the good guy?"

**OLIVER STONE:** Yeah, I would say when I was wounded a second time, it was in January. I said, "I'm in for it." I thought this was much more. I thought in terms of Hemmingway and Jack London and Joseph Conrad. You know, I was a literary young man. I was a cerebral young man. I had been to Yale. So, this was all new to me. I couldn't even take notes in the field, 'cause it was so wet. It was another war. And all of a sudden, I got real. And I think that was the best thing that ever happened to me, in a way. I got real. And--

**BILL MOYERS:** Why did you go?

**OLIVER STONE:** Because I wanted to.

**BILL MOYERS:** You didn't have to go. You could have stayed in Yale.

**OLIVER STONE:** I wasn't happy with-- George Bush was in my class in '68. Class of '68. It wasn't my class. It wasn't my type of people. I didn't belong. I didn't know where I belonged, Bill. I just knew I didn't belong there.

**BILL MOYERS:** Did you feel you belonged-- at first, when you arrived in Vietnam, did you think you belonged there? A warrior?

**OLIVER STONE:** At first. At first.

**BILL MOYERS:** As a warrior?

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, I was feeling my way. And I don't think I am warrior class. But I did my job. And I did well as a soldier, eventually. At first, I would be a typical grunt. I made mistakes. I was wounded-- probably the first time I was wounded, I was shot by my own man. I think or a grenade shrapnel blast got me from my own-- I believe so. It was this idiot behind me threw a grenade, when he didn't know he was doing at night, and it landed close to me.

**BILL MOYERS:** There's a scene from "Platoon" where one of the soldiers is writing a letter to his grandma.

**CHRIS TAYLOR:** I guess I have always been sheltered and special. I just want to be anonymous. Like everybody else. Do my share for my country. Live up to what grandpa did in the First War and dad the Second. Well here I am-- anonymous all right, with guys nobody really cares about. They come from the end of the line, most of 'em, small towns you never heard of - Pulaski, Tennessee, Brandon, Mississippi, Pork Bend, Utah, Wampum, Pennsylvania. Two years' high school's about it, maybe if they're lucky a job waiting for 'em back in a factory, but most of 'em got nothing, they're poor, they're the unwanted, yet they're fighting for our society and our freedom. It's weird, isn't it, they're the bottom of the barrel. And they know it, maybe that's why they call themselves 'grunts' cause a 'grunt' can take it, can take anything. They're the best I've ever seen grandma, the heart and soul.

**BILL MOYERS:** And now? What do you think about that?

**OLIVER STONE:** I think they were good people. I don't think we were fighting for the freedom of America. No.

**BILL MOYERS:** What were you fighting for?

**OLIVER STONE:** Our lives. Survival. Most of those guys that I met were counting the days until they could DEROS could get out. In other words, they were fractured units. The 25th infantry. We would go in-- I had 300 days left out of 365 days. The next guy to me had 27 days left. That's all we were doing. Trying to get out alive. Or as the Bee Gees said, "Stayin' alive."

**BILL MOYERS:** I'll be back with Oliver Stone, but first this is one of those time when we take a short break so you can go to your phone or computer and pledge your support of this public television station. The station needs your help now more than ever and is waiting for you to be in touch. Thank you.

**[NOT ALL VIEWERS WILL SEE THIS CONTENT DUE TO PLEDGE]**

**BILL MOYERS:** For several weeks now we've taken some unflinching looks at the ugly face of war. You've not only stayed with us, you've responded with some strong comments of your own. We presented the film, "The Good Soldier," a first hand account from combat veterans on what it means to learn to kill.

**EDWARD WOOD:** My generation really repressed what the war was about. We forgot that we had been animals for awhile.

**WILL WILLIAMS:** The more of your people that you see that are hurt or killed, the more it intensifies your desire to kill.

**PERRY PARKS:** There's a certain amount of guilt I think you learn to live with. There are things I wish I had not done. But there's no way to change those things.

**BILL MOYERS:** Here's what some of you had to say:

**SUZANNE W:** I don't know how to contact the men featured in your piece, "The Good Soldier" but I would like to express the fact that my heart was broken by all of their stories...I wish with all of my heart that they did not have to hurt like this in the name of our (my) freedom...Let them know they are being heard. Thank you isn't enough. Suzanne W.

**JIM DECKER:** In honor of Veterans Day I found the episode to be disrespectful to the millions of men and women who have served in the military, including in combat, and live normal, productive lives...I spent two tours in Vietnam between 1967 and 1969 and returned to the U.S. afterwards and simply went on with my life...I'm proud of having served - even though I believe war is a terrible thing and wish with all my heart no one ever had to fight in one. Jim Decker.

**BILL MOYERS:** We looked back at President Lyndon B. Johnson's fateful decision to escalate the war in Vietnam. And we did so with those once-secret phone conversations taped in the White House. There were some striking parallels with our current, painful dilemma in Afghanistan.

**LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Not a damn human thinks that 50,000 or 100,00 or 150,000 is going to end that war.

**DAVE:** What I found fascinating was that Johnson asked all the right questions, got the

right answers and still went ahead knowing there was no reason to fight the war and no way to win...Just once in my lifetime I would like the president and Congress to do what is right rather than what they think will win re-election. Dave.

**MICHAEL DREW:** ...yes, an escalation may very well be a mistake on Obama's part. But the fact remains: this is now, that was then; Afghanistan is not Vietnam...the differences in the underlying ground realities are profound, while the similarities, I believe, are mostly on the surface...In 1964, the wisdom gained by the experience of Vietnam was not available to Johnson, his general and his men. It is available to Obama. Michael Drew.

**ALVIN:** By juxtaposing the decisions then with now, I can only recall what Albert Einstein once said: "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Alvin.

**BILL MOYERS:** And I made my own suggestion for how we can all truly share in the sacrifice of the two wars we are waging in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**BILL MOYERS:** Let's bring back the draft. Yes, bring back the draft, for as long as it takes our politicians and pundits to "fix" Afghanistan to their satisfaction. Let's insist our governing class show the courage to make this long and dirty war, our war, or the guts to end it.

**STEVE KANE:** I have two sons in college that could be affected by your suggestion...Were my sons to face the draft there would not be a day that I would not call or visit my California congressional delegation and demand an end to our military presence in Afghanistan...Is that what it is going to take again? Despite the danger that your proposal might bring to my family I commend you for the courage and personal commitment to broadcast it. Steve Kane.

**GUY COLE:** I am a combat vet and I am not convinced a military draft is a good idea. If you think the military is callous now, just wait until they have a guaranteed supply of new recruits. Perhaps there should be a form of compulsory national service, but there should be no exemptions. Everybody goes or nobody does. Anything less would be abused. Guy Cole.

**J.E. MCNEIL:** What you and so many have forgotten is that having a draft never slowed the U.S. from war...The draft did not stop our ill-advised forays into Korea or Vietnam...All a draft does is assure that the poor people who have managed to dodge the military recruiters get caught and sent to be cannon fodder anyway. J. E. McNeil, Executive Director, Center on Conscience & War.

**BILL MOYERS:** Keep your comments coming-by mail, e mail, or on the blog at pbs.org. Your suggestions and criticisms are an important part of our editorial process. We'll keep reading and listening to what you think. Thank you.

#### [END OF SPECIAL CONTENT]

**BILL MOYERS:** Back to your experience. If you were not a filmmaker, Oliver, how do you think you would have coped with what happened to you there? I mean, would you have found another avenue? Would you have flipped out? Or would you use the title of one of your own movies, become a Natural Born Killer? Seriously.

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, when I came back from Vietnam, I was very-- I was an angry young man and had violent thoughts. And I went through a period of adjustment. I was very lucky in the sense that I went to NYU Film School, and I got a chance to make films. And that was a release, an artistic expression and I did three Vietnam movies. So, I think over the course of those three movies, I learned a lot more and I worked out some of my deepest feelings, that I didn't even recognize, at the time.

**BILL MOYERS:** When you were in Vietnam, were you a natural born killer?

**OLIVER STONE:** No. No. No. Killing came as a result of a process. They were shooting at us. We were losing men and as I said, it was a combat situation in the jungle. But I think I did a good job, when I killed, because it saved men and it was a tricky situation. I saved some people. And I did my job as a soldier. But I will always remember the man. I saw him up front, up very close. I saw his body after I killed him. He's still there, you know? But he was doing his job.

**BILL MOYERS:** He's still there. Where?

**OLIVER STONE:** I saw his-- I mean, he's there as a spirit in my mind. Now, of course, we open-- you know, the Americans fired wildly at times. So, we fired a lot of rounds. So, who knows what else we did. You know, we used to clear space in the jungle with machine gun

fire and 79s and mortar fire. We fired a lot of indiscriminate shells. So, there's a lot of casual and collateral damage.

**BILL MOYERS:** I ask the question, because you can help me clear up a mystery. You wrote this book in 1966. "Oliver Stone: A Child's Night Dream." The year before you enlisted in Vietnam, the year before you saw combat and it's fiction. But there's a chapter in here, written before you went to Vietnam that is eerie and uncanny. It's titled, "Dear Mom". And I'm wondering, would you care to read this passage?

**OLIVER STONE:** It's a fictional letter I wrote to my mother. I had not been in Vietnam yet. I had been in Vietnam as a teacher. And I had also been in the Merchant Marine in 1965.

**BILL MOYERS:** Wait a minute, you'd been in Vietnam as a teacher?

**OLIVER STONE:** Yes. Yeah.

**BILL MOYERS:** Before you--

**OLIVER STONE:** I went there as a teacher in 1965.

**BILL MOYERS:** In what kind of school?

**OLIVER STONE:** In Solan, Free Pacific Institute. It was a Catholic school, teaching Chinese students in high school and I was there for almost a year. And then I did the Merchant Marines as a wiper. I was a wiper.

**BILL MOYERS:** What's that?

**OLIVER STONE:** It's the lowest job on the ship. It's cleaning out the engine room. Blowing the boilers. It's a great experience for me. But I came back to America. I actually went back to Yale a second time and dropped out a second time because I was writing this book. I wanted to be a novelist. I admired Mailer and Hemingway and as I said Joyce and Jack London and above all Joseph Conrad. And I wanted to do something like this.

And I wanted to be a novelist. It didn't succeed. The book was rejected. And that's when I went back. I said "To hell with this trying to be different, trying to be Oliver Stone." I was going to go back to my given birth name of William Oliver. And I went back into the Army, and I joined as Bill Stone, William Stone. I wanted to be anonymous. I wanted to be, as I said in "Platoon", I wanted to be like every other person. I didn't want any special breaks. I wanted to be just infantry.

I didn't want to be an officer. I didn't want to be a lieutenant. I wanted to be just a P.F.C. and get it from the bottom. And if God, at that time, if God had a meaning for my life, he'd sort it out. Otherwise, I'd be dead. That's my approach in 1967.

"I killed a man the other day. I suppose it was a great event in my life. Something that since childhood, when with devotion, I watched the violence on the television screen. I have always more or less lived with. Perhaps I expected too much. Because of and by itself, it was rather commonplace. Like bumping into someone at a subway turnstile on Lexington and 59th. I shot him out of a tree at 30 yards.

"I picked him out and fired seven rounds in mad succession. Until I was assured that he would utterly cease to breathe, to move, to exist. Whereupon, as if in pointed irony, I heard the cracking sound of breaking wood. He was tumbling from his nest like an unseen falling coconut. And came to a quiet halt on the firm intersection of two thick branches. A tangle of shrubbery hid all the emotional parts of his body.

"For a second, it felt deliciously good. I could almost have eaten it. I could almost have eaten it. Whatever this satisfied feeling was. Something had fallen exactly into place like a bone comfortably cracking in the body. Good shot, Oliver. Good shot. It seemed so suddenly strange and without even touching him, I had brought him down like a buck. A light delightful tickle pervaded my wrists. Especially my right wrist, you know? The one I broke as a child. Yes, above all, it was the wrists which responded as if they themselves had hurled the bullet knife. A grim satisfaction possessed me. He was mine. I killed him. Me. Nobody else."

**BILL MOYERS:** This was written--

**OLIVER STONE:** Yeah, it was written before.

**BILL MOYERS:** --the year before you went. I mean, in some kind of perverse, weird way, did you go to Vietnam and live this?

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, there's a lot of perverse and weird stuff in that book. It was really coming to terms with oedipal confusions of my mother and my father and I had fantasies of war when I was young. A lot of them bred by movies and television and books. Hemingway had been-- war defined a man. So, I was an adventurer and I desperately wanted to seek adventure, but I hadn't experienced it, a war. And that was the last frontier for me. So, it became necessary somewhere when I was doing this book for me, "I have to go back now. This is not good enough. I have to go all the way." So, I went back and I enlisted at White Hall Street there.

**BILL MOYERS:** Once you have taken a life, can you ever look at yourself and other human beings the same way?

**OLIVER STONE:** Pema Chodron has been on your show. So, I think you understand that Buddhism understands this. I mean, if you take a life, it's a tremendous responsibility. But there are times when you have to take a life and you have to do it quickly and efficiently. And you have to do it, because otherwise more harm can result. So, there are justifications for taking lives. In this case, the soldier that I saw, that I killed, I may have killed others, I think. But this soldier was in a position where he could have killed several people.

**BILL MOYERS:** You remember what he looked like?

**OLIVER STONE:** Oh, yeah. More or less. Yeah.

**BILL MOYERS:** Did your eyes join?

**OLIVER STONE:** He was dead. No, I threw a grenade in a very difficult situation and it hit the hole he was in. He was in the middle of a group of us, you see. So, the most dangerous thing was that it creates a crossfire. So, that would happen often.

Let's say we all started to fire at once, we'd be hurting each other. So, we were in a very dangerous situation. And he was in a spider hole, actually. He popped up out of nowhere. They were very remarkable tunnel system and I got him with one toss. And it was a very dangerous toss, actually because if I'd overthrown the grenade, it would have landed in our own troops.

But I was a good pitcher. I mean, a good baseball player. And I just knew in my body that I would hit this hole at 20-30 yards. Anyway, I saw it. And I live with it. I live with it and I meditate on it. And it's good that I did it, because I did my job as a soldier. If I hadn't done it, I wouldn't-- and if I'd let other people be killed and I could have done something about it. I think it was the-- who wants to go to war in the first place? But in a war, that was the most efficient way to do things.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why did you go?

**OLIVER STONE:** As a 19-year-old boy, no, I went when I was 21, the second time. I went to find out what the bottom line was. To see how bad life could be. This book was a mental approach to how bad life could be. I mean, it's about suicide. I was thinking of suicide. A young suicide. There were a lot of people at that age, who think about it.

And it was much on my mind. And I had reached a place where I was burned out, as a young man, I suppose. I and I said, "This is it. I have to go back and see the bottom--" in "Platoon" I said, "See the bottom of the barrel." And there I found hope. Because I was with guys-- Pork Bend, Indiana. Places in Kentucky and Tennessee that you wouldn't dream of and these guys were real. They were salt of the earth and they brought me in. They allowed me in. Into their group and their camaraderie.

And I reveled-- it brought me back to life. There is a basic human connection, like water, we flow together. And it was a beautiful experience. I mean, Vietnam was horrible in many ways. But it was also very beautiful and reaffirming experience that we can exist side by side with everybody, with anybody.

**BILL MOYERS:** The band of brothers sort of thing?

**OLIVER STONE:** Well, I won't go that far. But there was that aspect of-- I found the bottom, if you know what I'm trying to say. I'm tumbling out of Yale and I end up in an infantry unit, as a nobody. P.F.C. -- walking point on my first day. Nobody cares if I live or die. That's kind of like the bottom, you know?

**SOLDIER:** Saddle up! Lock and load!

**SINGER:** I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee, and I'm going to Louisiana, my true love for to see.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you think President Obama, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, the senior leaders of Congress who are lining up on this issue, do you think they have any understanding of what grunts like you are going to do in Afghanistan? I didn't when I was at the White House. Do we ever? Those people at the top? Do they understand what you experience there?

**OLIVER STONE:** I don't think so. No. I think you have to go to war. But look what happens. The warriors who become generals tend to be the most hawk like. So you see, the guys who go in and out like me, they don't listen to us. We disappeared into the landscape. A lot of the Vietnam veterans feel as I do and especially now that they've seen several wars as they've gotten older. They understand that, you know, as Smedley Butler, the great Marine general said the "war is a racket" for corporate America. And he said, "I fought--" he got two medals of honor. Smedley Butler.

He was in China. He was in the Philippines. He was in Haiti, Nicaragua. He said, "It was all for nothin'." It was all for Bank of America. It was all for the corporations. It was for United Fruit. It's all for corporate interests. War is a racket. "It's a bigger racket than Al Capone ever invented," he said. "Al Capone had two counties in Chicago. I was in ten countries."

**BILL MOYERS:** But you know there are soldiers who have actually said to me, based upon some of the programs we've done, you know, "Moyers, I don't--" they won't like this conversation. Because they will say, "I go into the Army knowing what I'm supposed to do. I am a fighter. I don't want to be pitied as a victim. I want to be respected as a fighter. That's what I sign up to do." These are the people who pump their arms in exhilaration, when they heard that they were going to Afghanistan. There are soldiers who really do believe it's a calling.

**OLIVER STONE:** I say this. I totally agree. And I wanted to be a mercenary in 1965. I wanted to sign up for the Belgian Congo. I was crazy. I mean, I really was hungry. I was eight-- 17 at that time. So, I had that gene. And I know what it's about. And I think if there are those people in society, let's use them constructively. We do need soldiers.

We need commandoes. We need special forces. Well-trained. These are men who will go to any extent to fight. And they fight well. And we do need-- and this terrorist game is not-- I don't believe that it's a clean game. I do think there's going to be some illegal operations. I think we have to wink at them, to some degree. You know that as long as it doesn't get like the Bagram Jail in Afghanistan or where we start really torturing people. I don't believe in torture at all.

But I do believe that you eliminate threats. And we have people who can do that. Delta Force, Seals. I do believe in that and I think those guys should be there. And we need those guys. We need a strong, small and mobile Army. You know, I don't believe--

**BILL MOYERS:** So, you're not saying we have to retreat from the war on terror. We just fight it differently?

**OLIVER STONE:** We fight terrorists everywhere in the world because terrorists are going to fight us. I mean, terrorists are going to exist for the rest-- it's like fighting-- I don't believe in the drug war. I don't believe in stopping immigration. But I don't believe we can stop terrorism completely. But there will be moments in which we can intersect with terrorists who mean us harm and we should eliminate them.

**BILL MOYERS:** Oliver Stone, thank you very much.

**OLIVER STONE:** Thank you Bill.

**BILL MOYERS:** For this conversation.

**BILL MOYERS:** On Tuesday night President Obama took pains to say Afghanistan is not Vietnam, and of course he's right. But war is war, no matter where or when it's fought. Because its costs are great and its consequences unpredictable, the men who wrote our Constitution were determined to make it hard to go to war except to defend ourselves and our liberty.

Although long abandoned, such constraint deserves more respect than it gets. And in this regard, Afghanistan, along with Iraq, is like Vietnam. Almost unilaterally - with only a fig-leaf of Congressional approval - Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, both Bushes, and now Barack Obama committed us to costly wars far removed from the rationale of self-defense set forth by those delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787.

Our founders knew too well the habits of European kings who went to war at the drop of a

royal hat or for the lust of a royal heart. Matters of life and death, they argued, should never be so easily decided by one man. In the now quaint but still elegant language of their day, they understood - and these are the words of James Madison - that: "In war, the public treasures are to be unlocked; and it is the executive hand which is to dispense them." But that was not a good idea, Madison said. Such a mixture of powers would be a temptation "too great for any one man." Even a good man, of good intentions. Madison worried that: "The strongest passions and most dangerous weaknesses of the human breast; ambition, avarice, vanity, the honorable or venial love of fame, are all in conspiracy against the desire and duty of peace."

They were not naive, our founders. The question of war was no theoretical exercise for them. The new republic was threatened on all sides. Its young government had to be able to defend itself; the new chief executive - not a king but a president - would need, at times, to act quickly and decisively. So the founders debated the question vigorously. Where do we vest the power of war?

Charles Pinckney of South Carolina wanted to give it to the Senate alone. Pierce Butler, also of South Carolina, wanted to vest it in the President, quote, "who will have all the requisite qualities and will not make war but when the Nation will support it." That idea brought Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts to his feet, shocked: "I never expected to hear in a republic a motion to empower the executive alone to declare war." And George Mason of Virginia agreed. "I am against giving the power of war to the executive," Mason said, "because he is not safely to be trusted with it -- or to the Senate [...] I am," he said, "for clogging rather than facilitating war."

In the end the delegates compromised, as usual, with an eye to checks-and-balances. They gave Congress the power to declare war legally, but left the President free to repel sudden attacks. The delegate from Connecticut, Oliver Ellsworth, summed up their collective wisdom when he said, "It should be more easy to get out of war than into it."

How far we've come.

That's it for the Journal. Go to our website at [PBS.org](http://PBS.org) and click on "Bill Moyers Journal." You'll find there [our complete coverage of the war in Afghanistan](#). And you can access a list of [resources for veterans and their families](#). That's all at [PBS.org](http://PBS.org).

I'm Bill Moyers, and I'll see you next time.

---

© 2008 Public Affairs Television. All Rights Reserved.