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A Memoir of Uncertainty: Tim O'Brien's Vietnam Narratives

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Uncertainty is human. It is part of our nature. As unique individuals, we see the world differently than those around us, sometimes subtly; in other cases fundamentally, different. Uncertainty deals with the way we understand and interpret information; experiences, education, emotions, and biases affect comprehension. Uncertainty displays itself in the decision-making process. (Cohen 40) Humans react to provocations much differently than others. Decisions are based on the nature of these internal and external impressions. All warfare is uncertain because it is human based. As humans, it is our very nature that at once makes war both possible and unpredictable. Historian William Murray asserted, "3000 years of history underline that fog, friction, ambiguity, and uncertainty have always formed the underlying topography of war" (Owens 71). The gaps between likelihood and outcome support the existence of an unknown element in war. In the spring of 1968, Tim O'Brien graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. The recent graduate learned that his degree would be used in the United States Army. O'Brien served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1970 in 3rd Platoon; Company A, 5th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Division. Following his tour of duty, O'Brien pursued a graduate degree from Harvard University. The veteran's writing career started with an opportunity at the Washington Post, and commenced in 1973 with the release of *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me up and Ship Me Home*. In this memoir, O'Brien wrote: "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories" (O'Brien). The first collection of war stories was followed by additional narratives illustrating O'Brien's experiences in Vietnam. The uncertainty of war is illustrated with Tim O'Brien's Vietnam narratives in four interactive contexts: interactions with ourselves, organizations, the enemy, and the external environment.

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Comments

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Dr. Deborah Uman

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A Memoir of Uncertainty: Tim O'Brien's Vietnam Narratives

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Reality is observed through our own translucent lens. An understanding of the past and present and the significance we attach to it is constrained and shaped in our minds. (Cohen 38) As far back as ancient Greece, thinkers have argued that we do not see objective reality; we see images of reality that are shaped by our perspectives. Being perfectly rational would mean that all of our decisions and actions would aim directly at a universal good. A variety of cognitive, social, and motivational factors texture the meaning we derive from information in our personal interaction with uncertainty. (Cohen 43) In 1968, O'Brien was introduced to the reality of conscription and war in a foreign land. The political science major was drafted to serve in the U.S. Army but remained uncertain of his purpose and position in the war.

Cognitive prejudices influenced O'Brien's decision process. Decision makers form strategies to shape developments and to govern the right course of action for the response. O'Brien claimed to be persuaded then, and now, that the war was wrong. He added, "Doubts, of course, hedged all this: I had neither the expertise nor the wisdom to synthesize answers; the facts were clouded; there was no certainty as to the kind of the government that would follow a North Vietnamese victory or, for that matter, an American Victory" (O'Brien 18). The purpose and direction of American forces in Vietnam was unclear to the public, but an alleged fear of the "Domino Theory" (Owens) suggested American involvement was necessary. The domino theory suggested that if one country fell under communist ideology, surrounding countries would follow

this precedent. O'Brien's political position created additional doubt. He claimed, "I was a confirmed liberal. Not a pacifist, but I would have cast my ballot to end the Vietnam War, I would have voted for Eugene McCarthy, hoping he would make peace" (O'Brien 22). One theory suggested that individuals simplify reality by sifting information through a system of beliefs or cognitive maps of the environment. These maps provide a coherent way of organizing and making sense of confusing and conflicting positions. A cognitive map of the environment in 1968 exposed a nation being pulled in several directions. Anti-war protests encountered the firm hand of WWII generations. The older generations didn't care for conscientious objectors of the war (Tollefson 67). Others protested American casualties or policies in enemy engagement. O'Brien maintained an educated political standing. This perspective was significant to his interaction with cognitive uncertainty.

Free will is possibly the greatest source of uncertainty; however, the influence of American culture remains potent. O'Brien was raised in Worthington, Minnesota, a rural town in the Midwestern United States. He claimed, "I was bred with haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a nation giving bridle to its own good fortune and success. I was fed by the spoils of 1945 victory" (O'Brien 11). Childhood summers were spent on the shores of Lake Okabena; imitating their fathers, taking on the Japs and Krauts. There was a distinguished admiration for the tradition of past generations. Upon the news of his conscription, O'Brien remained uncertain of his position on the war, but his parents reinforced and respected privacy in the decision. Despite privacy within the household, a drafted O'Brien became vulnerable to public opinion and discussion. "Decision-making is further problematized because individuals are not lone actors sealed from outside influences; the influence of organizational and subordinate behavior shape decisions in powerful ways" (Axelrod 13). The organizational

behavior model emphasized the influence of large organizations that function according to regular patterns of behavior. O'Brien asserted, "I did not want to be a soldier, nor even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world" (O'Brien 22). The organizational behavior of American culture and O'Brien's concept of order molded his interaction with uncertainty and social influence. O'Brien added, "It was not just that I valued order. I also feared it's opposite—inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all" (O'Brien 22). O'Brien was raised in a system dictated by an organization. Order had always been maintained, supported, and advised by this organization. "The seductive power and efficiency of the routine can lead to assumptions that the standard outputs of organizational behavior have universal applicability" (Axelrod 51). It is nearly impossible to think outside of the box when your entire intellectual understanding is inside the particular framework. O'Brien spent the first twenty-one years of his life in a conservative, rural Midwestern town. Therefore, his bounded rationale was constructed by his limited experiences, to date. The cultural influence of Worthington, Minnesota is significant to O'Brien's interaction with uncertainty throughout the decision process.

Fear textured and motivated O'Brien's interactions with the uncertain nature of his position in the war. The Vietnam War was the first war televised by the media. American public had access to the images of a war fought thousands of miles away (Steinman 16). The educated O'Brien had never experienced war, but wasn't naïve to its character. His interaction with fear revolved around the uncertainty of death; "Mostly, though, you wonder about dying, what it looks like inside you. Sometimes you stop, and your body tingles" (O'Brien 70). Casualty reports were no mystery among the American public. Influential studies; such as Dave

Grossman's *On Killing*, added to these fears: "War is an environment that will psychologically debilitate 98% of all who participate in it for any length of time" (Grossman 37). These studies shared the devastating impact war has on all those involved, and added to the probabilities, percentages, and equations running rampantly in O'Brien's sub-conscious. The fear of uncertain interaction with death or debilitation consumed O'Brien's thought process: "Will the pain be unbearable? Will you scream or fall silent? Will you be able to look at your own body, afraid of the sight of your own red flesh and white bone" (O'Brien 123). It's difficult to imagine the physical characteristics of death. The concept is abstract and entirely foreign to the past and present life of Tim O'Brien. Rarely, does an individual have an immediate, physical interaction with death. No interaction is alike, nor can it be replicated; therefore, death remains abstract and unknown among human kind. The attempt to understand an abstract concept; such as death, is emotionally and physically exhausting. The external fear and interaction with uncertainty in death transpired into the fear of scrutiny. A fellow educated draftee, Erik Hansen, discussed the interaction of fear with scrutiny:

"Here we are. Mama has been kissed goodbye, we've grabbed
Our rifles, we're ready for war. All of this not because of conviction,
Not for ideology; rather it's from fear of society's censure,
Fear of weakness. Fear that to avoid war is to avoid manhood.
We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we
Are not brave, not heroes" (O'Brien 38).

This fear related was a dependent of cultural influence, but directly interacted with the individual fear of scrutiny. In more liberal areas of the country, fear of death, debilitation, or scrutiny were

accepted and sympathized with (Steinman 31). O'Brien was raised in a place where tradition counted. He added, "It was not a town, not a Minneapolis or New York, where the son of a father can sometimes escape scrutiny" (O'Brien 18). O'Brien's textual images advocated patriotism and tradition in the context. Tradition can be interpreted differently, but for O'Brien, it had a simple meaning. He witnessed the hard work and sacrifices of prior generations. O'Brien credited past generations for the victory in 1945, and remained grateful for the opportunities these individuals had provided him with. These men and women responded to the call of their nation, when they were needed. The text suggested a fear of scrutiny; which transcended into a general awareness of hypocrisy. He praised the sacrifices of past generations; it would be hypocritical to avoid his duty when given the opportunity. O'Brien contrasted his limited perception of death against the inevitable fear of scrutiny.

A government, an army, or any large and complex organization is not a single calculating individual. These organizations consist of individuals and bureaucracies with different functions, perspectives, and agendas that add to the decision process (Palmer 127). Bureaucratic procedures, subtle and substantial differences in perspective of influential people, the cognitive maps and lenses of leaders, and those who influence them; all contribute to the process by which decisions and actions come about. (Axelrod 63) In these organizations, some of the individuals are intellectually equipped to think through ambiguity and uniqueness, but others are limited to their specific function. The individual interaction with a complex organization is uncertain, and the outcomes are varied. "Sometimes their voices are heard and processes get adjusted. Sometimes they are drowned in the momentum of the machine as dissent is ignored in favor of routine and conformity." (Palmer 91) In other cases, subordinates exercise initiative; they disobey orders and instructions; they misinterpret guidance; they conform; they participate in

group think; they operate on their own agendas. (Cohen 117) O'Brien's interaction with an organization; U.S. Government, United States Army: reveals uncertainties within myopic rationality, non-myopic rationality, leadership and cohesion.

Myopic rationality refers to only looking one step ahead and optimizing at each step. (Cohen 121) The conscription process, basic training, and deployment options present O'Brien with various decisions. He interacts with these uncertainties using myopic rationality. Coping with uncertainty requires deliberate creation of resilience to manage the effects of inputs and interactions with the system (Cohen 121). O'Brien entered basic training and immediately recognized his position within the environment; he claimed, "I was superior. I made no apologies for believing it. Without sympathy or compassion, I instructed my intellect and eyes: Ignore the herd. I kept vigil against intrusion into my private life" (O'Brien 33). O'Brien's myopic rationality suggested that isolation from the herd would aid his survival. He reinforced this rationality, asserting; "It was a war of resistance; the objective was to save our souls. Sometimes it meant hiding the remnant of conscience and consciousness behind battle cries, pretended servility, bare, clenched-fisted obedience" (O'Brien 35). Initially, O'Brien's decision to remain superior and isolated is necessary to survival, but he recognized the importance of sharing this burden. O'Brien seeks the friendship of a fellow draftee, Erik Hansen. He valued their intelligent conversations; "Simply to think and talk and try to understand was evidence that we were not cattle or machines" (O'Brien 35). The basic training experience can be dehumanizing. The military is expected to process and train thousands of potential recruits, within an allotted period of time. Isolation is O'Brien's resilience to the organization. The functions of the organization are designed to dehumanize the candidates. O'Brien fears that conforming to the demands of this organization could jeopardize the uniqueness of his character. Thomas Schelling added, "People

can often concert their intentions or expectations with others if each knows that the other is trying to do the same” (Schelling 23). Both draftees were educated, college students, focused on self-preservation, but friendship proved to be valuable in both stories of survival. O’Brien added, “I succumbed. Without a backward glance at privacy, I gave in to soldiering. I took on a friend, betraying in a sense my wonderful suffering” (O’Brien 35). O’Brien’s position in this organization’s environment defines his interaction. His perception of rationality evolves as the circumstances change, but O’Brien remained faithful to the principles of myopic rationality: optimizing at each step of his interaction with the organization (Cohen 120).

Non-myopic rationality suggests that behavior is rational if it optimizes the final outcome, even if it involves bad or sub-optimal intermediate results (Cohen 120). O’Brien and Hansen, navigated and interacted with the organization’s environment naively, but applied their own perception of non-myopic rationality. The government politics model reinforced that decisions are seen as a resultant of bargaining games among officials in the government. (Covey 7) The draftees were presented with different decisions and opportunities throughout basic training. Enlistment incentives and other bargaining tools were used to influence military occupational selection. O’Brien concluded, “Erik had decided at the beginning of basic to enlist for an extra year so as to escape infantry duty. I had gambled, thinking they would use me for more than a pair of legs, certain that someone would see the value of my ass behind a typewriter or a Xerox machine” (O’Brien 50). Erik Hansen’s non-myopic rationality persuaded his decision process. Hansen rationalized this sacrifice as a means of self-preservation; a decision aimed to direct the final outcome. He chose to lock in the certainty of a fixed gain over the potential of no gain. The fixed gain: life; trumped the potential of no gain: death. However, this decision often revolves around how the dispute of gains and losses is outlined for the decision-maker. Some

will take a risk to decrease losses over the inevitability of a fixed loss. Hansen commented on the outcome of O'Brien's decision; "I had this awful suspicion they'd screw you, make you a grunt. Maybe you can break a leg during advanced training; pretend you're insane" (O'Brien 50). O'Brien's rationale suggested that his education was valuable to the organization. O'Brien didn't falter on his commitment to serve, but his fixed losses differed from Hansen's. He risked the value of his degree to avoid additional service time on his contract. O'Brien subjected himself to the uncertain intentions of an organization to eliminate the certainty of his fixed loss. He rejected any incentives from senior officials, and ignored sales pitches such as; "You re-up and I can get you a job in Chu-Lai. I got jobs for mechanics, typists, clerks, damn near anything you want, I got it. So get your nice, safe rear job. So you lose a little time to Uncle Sam, big deal" (O'Brien 72). In both scenarios, the draftee's non-myopic rationality defined his interaction with an organization, but each decision produced a separate outcome.

As the quality of leadership changes over time, the organization can demonstrate very wide ranges of effectiveness. (Covey 12) Leadership can also alleviate the psychological effects of fear and stress in warfare. "High morale and less stress are found in soldiers, in combat, with confidence in their commanders. This confidence is based on the seen professional competence of the commander, or belief in his credibility, and on their perception of his caring about his troops" (Bass 32). Leadership and initiative are related in the decision process. Leaders are expected to use initiative in decision analysis, and in taking action. In O'Brien's tour of duty, he interacts with the uncertain components of leadership within the organization. To value initiative ultimately means to praise disagreement and a degree of disobedience. (Bass 33) O'Brien interacted with different measures of leadership; each experience was unique to the individual in command. He summarized the character of his first leader, Mad Mark. "He was not gung-ho, not

a man in search of a fight. It was more or less an Aristotelian ethic that Mad Mark practiced: Making war is necessary and natural profession. It is natural, but it is only a profession, not a crusade” (O’Brien 82). The platoon leader, Mad Mark, used his cognitive lens and initiative to interpret any present uncertainties. In a combat zone, the uncertain nature of life and death are present realities. In most cases, leadership defined the majority’s interaction with these elements of combat: life and death. O’Brien added, “The enlisted men, all of us, were grateful to Alpha’s officers. And the officer’s justified it, muttering that Colonel David was a greenhorn, too damn gung-ho. Phony ambushes were good for morale, best game we played on the LZ minuteman” (O’Brien 106). The initiative and obedience of leadership molded O’Brien’s interaction with uncertainty in the organization. Failed leadership created dissension and doubt among the subordinates. Uncertainty in leadership is detrimental. O’Brien’s statement confirmed this claim; “After this disaster, Captain Smith tried to regain his leadership, but the lieutenants gracefully avoided him. He was openly ridiculed by the men. There was half serious talk of him being a marked man” (O’Brien 158). In a military setting, the chain of command is instrumental to the execution of decisions, but also determines subordinate interaction within a given environment. O’Brien credited different leaders for their efficiency and integrity, but criticized others for their leadership principles. The uncertain nature of leadership within an organization textured O’Brien’s experience in this interactive context.

The strength of cohesion impacts the performance of individuals and organizations in the unpredictable nature of war. Unit cohesion is the “bonding together of members of an organization in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and their mission” (Department of the Army). Consistency in perspective is gained through a mutual understanding and crucial in sustaining a common sense of meaning. O’Brien’s interaction with

cohesion hinged on the use of language and depersonalization to rationalize with the present uncertainties. O'Brien asserted, "Except that in Alpha you don't kill a man, you "waste" him. You don't get mangled by a mine; you get "fucked up." You don't call a man by his first name— He's the kid or the Water Buffalo, Buddy Wolf or Buddy Barker or Buddy Barney" (O'Brien 80). He claimed that you could serve a year in Vietnam and live with a platoon of sixty to seventy people, and you could leave without knowing more than a dozen complete names. Mats Tegmark concluded; "The reason for this convention of language is that a first name is too personal. Being attached to someone through his first name will only make losing him more painful (Tegmark 113). O'Brien shared this language when two comrades were killed; "The tragedy was somehow lessened and depersonalized by telling ourselves that O'l Ready Whip and Quick got themselves wasted by the slopes" (O'Brien 81). It is the language of a community, into which the newly arrived soldiers (The "FNGs") are initiated by proving that they can survive long enough for the next replacement to arrive. It is in the best interest of the military and the grunt that the thought of death be de-dramatized (Tegmark 115). O'Brien's interaction with cohesion is defined by the coping strategies used as a common bond among the private soldiers at the bottom of the military hierarchy. He learned that words make a difference. O'Brien added, "It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead." The language was both hard and wistful, but the bodies were transformed into piles of waste amidst a much wider wastage (Tegmark 115). The reality of war has proven to be too much for one man to handle. Cohesion rested on the group's ability to manage uncertainty in context.

The environment of war contains a thinking, intelligent, uncooperative, and unpredictable enemy who often sees the world fundamentally different. The gulf between perception and

reality, merely in understanding our own perspective on the present and future, is exacerbated by our attempts to understand the enemy and his perspective. (Covey 56) Indochina has continued to be a region of economic and political interest. Indochina garnered the interest of the British East India Company, but later attracted the attention of France, Japan, China, and the U.S (Lasker 92). Some empires sought imperialistic objectives, but others pursued the exploitation of native resources. Regardless of the purpose, war and discontent ultimately consumed the region dominated by foreign capital and policies. Generations of natives had learned to adapt and venture farther into the countryside of their homeland (Lasker 92). In 1968, uncritical and unrealistic assumptions about what motivated the Vietcong, about their decision-making, about the bases of their rationality, led in part to the fundamentally flawed strategic concept that the United States could win the war by manipulating the cost benefit equations through attrition. (Schelling 52) From a political standpoint, U.S. interaction with the enemy focused on anti-communist efforts and the supposed success of attrition. Immediate interaction with the “VC” inspired figurative and literal uncertainties of the enemy. Intrinsic, frictional, and dynamic uncertainties defined O’Brien’s interaction with the enemy.

Intrinsic uncertainties result from bounded rationality. These factors create a gap between perception and reality. Cognitive biases, emotions, assumptions, experiences, and heuristics are all factors that shape the meaning people elicit from information (Axelrod 20). In an ambiguous environment, the decisions and actions that result due to bounded rationality are highly unpredictable. Superiority, inferiority, and self-preservation influenced the cognitive biases, emotions, assumptions, and experiences that shaped O’Brien’s bounded rationality. Prior to entering Vietnam, O’Brien and other trainees were subjected to the biases of leadership within the organization. Leadership reinforced American superiority; “You’re American soldiers.

You're stronger than the dink. You're bigger. You're faster. You're better educated. You're better supplied, better trained, better supported" (O'Brien 107). The supposed inferiority of the enemy was prevalent to the convention of language used in characterization. O'Brien's drill sergeant in basic training used an inferior enemy to train and command the recruits. The drill sergeant claimed, "Dinks are little shits—If you want their guts, you gotta go low. Crouch and dig" (O'Brien 44). Leadership within the organization worked to build the confidence and demeanor of their recruits. Drill sergeants prepared recruits for a hostile environment by establishing self-confidence in each of the candidates. In most cases, educating recruits on the enemy created an even greater misunderstanding of the opposition. Despite the use of superior and inferior language to dictate bounded rationality; self-preservation was the greatest influence in this equation. Language was used to build different perceptions of the enemy within individuals, but self-preservation created unity within the group. The common bounded rationality reflected a general attitude of the Vietnam War; "No one in Alpha company gave a damn about the causes or purposes of their war: It is about "Dinks" and "Slopes" and the idea is simply to kill them or avoid them" (O'Brien 80). O'Brien's interactions with intrinsic uncertainties are influenced by the language and biases of his environment; however, self-preservation is the ultimate stimulus of his bounded rationality.

Frictional uncertainties deal with the inability to determine precisely how friction will manifest itself. (Axelrod 21) Friction results from poor communication, fear, danger, exhaustion, disobedience, initiative, will, inertia, and other human factors. Clausewitz added, "While the fact that friction will exist in all military operations is certain, how friction manifests itself in each unique episode remains uncertain" (Clausewitz 27). Frictional uncertainties interact with O'Brien and his comrades figuratively, and in the literal tense too. Both are equally taxing on the

physical and psychological state of a human. In the figurative tense, anxiety prior to combat assaults, or the alleged perception of an individualized enemy created frictional uncertainties. O'Brien emphasized the eeriness of patrol in the dark; "What we could not see, we imagined. Then—only then—we would see the enemy. We would see Charlie in our heads: oiled up, ghostly, blending with the countryside, part of the land" (O'Brien 28). It's psychologically exhausting to imagine fear, in particular, the enemy. For most infantrymen, a physical image of the enemy was uncommon. Imaginative pictures of the enemy were constructed in a series of interactions: self, organization, and environment. Each context contributed to a detail of the infantrymen's fear for the enemy.

Literal measures of frictional uncertainty are manifested in an immediate interaction with the enemy. Equipment failures are integral to the friction of war. O'Brien publicized this frictional concern; "I flicked the safety back and forth to be sure it wouldn't jam—I toyed with my M-16, patting the magazine, rubbing the trigger. Would the weapon work when the moment came?" (O'Brien 90). This specific frictional uncertainty is significant, but the abstract friction established in death and killing consumed O'Brien's thought process. According to Dave Grossman's influential study *On Killing*; soldiers experience a sequence of stages: concern about killing, the actual kill, exhilaration, remorse, and rationalization and acceptance. Grossman added, "If a soldier cannot complete the cycle through rationalization and acceptance, he will likely succumb to combat exhaustion" (Grossman 43). O'Brien's narrative follows this sequence of stages in his interaction with the enemy: Concern about the killing; "It was the first and only time, I would ever see the living enemy, the men intent on killing me" (O'Brien 97). The actual kill; "I confronted the profile of a human being through my sight. It did not occur to me that a man would die when I pulled the trigger of that rifle" (O'Brien 97). Remorse and rationalization;

“I neither hated the man nor wanted him dead, but I feared him” (O’Brien 98). The nature of basic training prepared recruits for adverse situations. Training was designed to be repetitious; therefore, trained instinct replaced the decision process in a given situational response. In many cases, soldiers struggled to separate training from reality. In each scenario, the consequences of action are far different than the other. Frictional uncertainties, figurative and literal, shaped O’Brien’s interaction with the enemy.

Dynamic uncertainties result from interaction. The concepts of chaos and adaptive complexity illustrate the unpredictability present in war when forces interact (Axelrod 29). Dynamic uncertainties are the most problematic because they directly result from interaction. In the Vietnam War, U.S. forces struggled to identify the enemy; “There was no reliable criterion by which to distinguish a pretty Vietnamese girl from a deadly enemy; often they were one and the same person” (O’Brien 116). One soldier endured the remorse of an uncertain situation that inflicted consequences. These consequences were situational. Unfortunately, the outcome of an action and decision resulted in a civilian casualty. Similar to intrinsic principles, dynamic uncertainties are influenced by bounded rationality. In particular, self-preservation ideologies impacted Alpha Company’s interaction with dynamic uncertainties and the enemy. In wake of an interaction with the enemy, uncertainty raises from the outcome of this particular episode in O’Brien’s narrative; “I wish I could help her—didn’t know she was a woman, she just looked like any Dink. God, she must hurt. Get the damn flies off her, give her some peace” (O’Brien 113). In contrast, unfavorable interactions with the enemy molded dynamic uncertainties and bounded rationale. Guerilla warfare tactics used by the enemy frustrated American forces on all levels of the hierarchy. On the ground, Alpha company and O’Brien witnessed casualties in their platoon at the hands of a transparent enemy; “The men were angry. No enemy soldiers to shoot

back at, only hedgerows and bushes and clumps of dead trees” (O’Brien 118). These interactions with the enemy and the results of dynamic uncertainties triggered emotion throughout the platoon. Revenge and hatred consumed the platoon; emotion victimized the members of Alpha Company. O’Brien stated, “In the next few days it took little provocation for us to flick the flint of our Zippo lighters. Thatched roofs take flame quickly, and on bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking our revenge in fire. It was good to walk from Pinkville and to see fire behind the Alpha Company” (O’Brien 119). Vengeance seemed to numb the adversity of the present situation. American G.I.’s witnessed and experienced destruction at the hands of a translucent enemy. Tangible destruction of material property justified the frustration toward a hidden enemy. These interactions produced different results. In each case, the outcome and interaction with the enemy was influenced by dynamic uncertainties.

The external environment affects the war and the combatants in it. There are sources of input from the environment: weather, terrain, noncombatants, allies, and third party observers. How we perceive and interpret the world around us results from how we process external stimuli and the meanings we attach to them. We make assessments of significance and predictions of the future through the lenses we have crafted over a lifetime of experiences and education (Cohen 61). Uncertainty in observation and initial orientation, both in terms of knowing ourselves and knowing the external environment, can create a gulf between perception and reality that grows wider and more problematic as the situation unfolds (Axelrod 41). People tend to concentrate on ratifying initial beliefs rather than deliberately seeking disconfirming evidence that challenges this environmental perspective. In addition, people tend to fit ambiguous and even conflicting information into pre-existing images and predictions; therefore, coping mechanisms enable them to maintain their initial constructs. Uncertainties in the observation and orientation with the

external environment are inherent to war. Clausewitz added, “The art of war deals with living and moral forces. Consequently, it cannot attain the absolute, or certainty; it must always leave a margin for uncertainty, in the greatest things as much as in the smallest” (Clausewitz 49).

O’Brien’s Vietnam narratives interact with the external environment in two contexts: observation and orientation. These two points of attraction interact with the individual simultaneously, forming complex interactions with one another. O’Brien’s observation of and orientation with the external environment are created in three different perspectives: civilian, combat zone, and post-war.

The liberal education culture and conservative, traditional, social culture influenced O’Brien’s interaction with the uncertainty of war prior to his departure. As a civilian, O’Brien’s public status, U.S. Army draftee, left him vulnerable to local opinion. O’Brien’s observed individuals in the liberal culture that discovered techniques and/or strategies to avoid the dilemma of conscription altogether. O’Brien added, “Most of my college friends found easy ways away from the problem, all to their credit. Deferments for this and that. Letters from doctors and chaplains. It was hard to find people who had to think much about the problem” (O’Brien 21). The problem, national conscription, was relevant to O’Brien, but irrelevant to most of his peers in this liberal environment. His orientation in this environment exposed him to liberal rationalities. O’Brien paraphrased the argument of a former college acquaintance; “No war is worth losing your life for—the issue isn’t a moral one. It’s a matter of efficiency: what’s the most efficient way to stay alive when your nation is at war? That’s the issue” (O’Brien 21). The liberal environment focused on individual well-being and the most efficient scenario to preserve life. The environment’s ideology removed any moral or social uncertainties. Life and death were the only uncertain elements in the equation.

Despite the captivating attraction to efficiency and self-preservation in the equation, “prairie” culture was influential in re-introducing moral and social uncertainties. Initially, O’Brien’s interaction with the external environment and uncertainty is defined by different probabilities, equations, and outcomes. As the decision-process continued, O’Brien’s rationality abandoned theory and probability. Ultimately, the gravity of moral and social uncertainties influenced the decision, not reason. O’Brien claimed, “Piled on top of this was the town, my family, my teachers, a whole history of the prairie. Like magnets, these things pulled in one direction or the other, almost physical forces weightlifting the problem, so that, in the end it was less reason and more gravity that was the final influence” (O’Brien 18). The extinction of reason and the influence of gravity defined O’Brien’s interaction with uncertainty in this environment. Gravity evolved into a moral, social conviction that molded his interaction with uncertainty in this context. O’Brien added, “More, I owed the prairie something. For twenty-one years I’d lived under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air, wallowed in its luxuries” (O’Brien 18). O’Brien’s ideology in his rationalization to serve is somewhat of a moral conviction, but romanticized as well. O’Brien is mature in his recognition of the opportunities and luxuries provided by the community. This maturity was teased by an overwhelming pride for the tradition and character of his hometown. Both environments, liberal and conservative, influenced O’Brien’s interaction with the uncertain nature of war. The two different external environments encouraged the evaluation of numerous factors; however, O’Brien’s focus on moral and social uncertainties determined the final outcome.

Observation of and orientation with the combat zone shaped O’Brien’s interaction with uncertainty throughout his time as an active-duty soldier in the U.S. Army. In the environment of

war, observation and orientation occurs internally and externally, even if the interaction is within a tangible, external environment. O'Brien entered Vietnam uncertain of the real, physical nature of war. Vision is another part of uncertainty about the future that must be added to the construct. Vision is an attempt to create an image of the future and then to develop plans, policies, and programs to achieve or avoid it. Imbedded is a degree of doubt, conscious or otherwise, of whether the vision is the correct or best one (Owens 74-75). O'Brien's first interaction with Vietnam and the land was molded by a vision, internal uncertainty of his external environment. O'Brien remarked, "The plane slides down, and the mountains darken and take on a sinister cragginess. You see the outlines of crevices, and you consider whether, of all places opening up below, you might finally walk to that spot and die" (O'Brien 69). Upon his arrival, O'Brien internally interacts with the intangible elements of this external environment. The intangible components of this environment are life and death. The military is a profession that works in, around, and among life or death. O'Brien questioned the norms, or standards, of his interaction in this environment; "You are not sure how to conduct yourself—whether to show fear, to live secretly with it, to show resignation or disgust. You wish it were all over. You begin the countdown" (O'Brien 70). How does one act when faced with life and death? O'Brien had studied the war, reflected on his life, and visualized death; however, in the physical war environment, he was unsure of his conduct. The sub-interactions with the environment, internal and external; contribute to an abstract interaction with and understanding of the external environment.

Conscious and sub-conscious interactions with the external environment illustrate uncertainty. In the Vietnam War, U.S. armed forces and O'Brien were foreign to the land and culture of Southeast Asia. In a foreign, unknown environment, it's natural for humans to seek

familiarity. In *Men Against Fire*, S.L.A. Marshall observed; “The battlefield is cold. It is the lonesome place which men may share together—the harshest thing about the battlefield is that it is empty—it is the emptiness which grips him as with paralysis” (Marshall 64). Isolation can intensify the paralytic effects of fear. O’Brien discussed the internal interaction with fear and isolation in this foreign environment. O’Brien commented, “One of the most persistent and appalling thoughts that lumbers through your mind as you walk through Vietnam at night is the fear of getting lost, of becoming detached from the others, of spending the night alone in that frightening and haunted countryside” (O’Brien 87). In a foreign environment, greater significance is attached to familiarity. O’Brien examined interactions among the individual and familiarity, within a foreign, unknown environment. O’Brien stated, “We followed the man in front like a blind man after his dog; we prayed that the man had not lost his way, that he hadn’t lost contact with the man to his front—the man to the front is civilization. He is the United States of America and every friend that you have ever known; he is Erik and the blond girls and a mother and a father” (O’Brien 88). A relationship with familiarity seeks to cope with the unknown elements of an environment. O’Brien’s sub-conscious and conscious interaction with the environment exposed uncertainty, fear of isolation, and a fear of separating from certainty. This interaction revealed uncertainty in a foreign environment, but distinguished the importance of savoring certainty and familiarity within an unknown state.

Segregation impacted O’Brien’s observation and orientation of uncertainty in the external environment. Civil rights leaders and other critics, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., described the Vietnam conflict as racist—“a white man's war, a black man's fight.” King maintained that black youths represented a disproportionate share of early draftees and that African Americans faced a much greater chance of seeing combat (Tucker 10). The draft did

pose a major concern. Selective Service regulations offered deferments for college attendance and a variety of essential civilian occupations that favored middle- and upper- class whites. The vast majority of draftees were poor, undereducated, and urban—blue-collar workers or unemployed. This reality struck hard in the African American community. Furthermore, African Americans were woefully underrepresented on local draft boards; in 1966 blacks accounted for slightly more than 1 percent of all draft board members, and seven state boards had no black representation at all (Tucker 13). African Americans often did supply a disproportionate number of combat troops, a high percentage of whom had voluntarily enlisted. “Although they made up less than 10 percent of American men in arms and about 13 percent of the U.S. population between 1961 and 1966, they accounted for almost 20 percent of all combat-related deaths in Vietnam during that period” (Tucker 13). In 1965 alone African Americans represented almost one-fourth of the Army's killed in action. O’Brien’s observation of this external environment confirmed these claims; “For the soul brothers, that route is not easy. To begin with, the officer corps is dominated by white men; the corps of foot soldiers, common grunts, is disproportionately black. On top of that are all the old elements of racial tension—fears, hates, suspicions. And on top of that is the very pure fact that life is at stake” (O’Brien 173). One would hope that civil rights and ancient cultural perceptions would be abandoned in the combat zone. Unfortunately, the Vietnam War added to racial tension, both foreign and domestic. O’Brien’s observation and orientation with this environment was shaped by segregation. Segregation impacted unit cohesion, but more importantly jeopardized the only certainty within this environment: trust.

O’Brien claimed that grunts commonly dreamt about the possibility of landing a rear job, removing them from the immediate danger of combat. However, African-American service

members claimed that these jobs were given disproportionately. O'Brien added, "With either the hunch or the reality that white officers favor white grunts in handing out rear jobs, many blacks react as any sane man would. They sulk. They talk back, get angry, loaf, play sick, smoke dope. They group together and laugh and say shit to the system" (O'Brien 173). O'Brien's observation of this environment suggested racial segregation, but the orientation and immediate interaction with this environment revealed uncertainty. O'Brien's observation of segregation within the unit demonstrated the cancerous impact to unit cohesion. His immediate interaction with segregation created doubt in the trust of presumed comrades. S.L.A. Marshall added, "I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapon is the near presence or presumed presence of a comrade" (Marshall 47). The presumed presence of a comrade is critical to individual morale. The discrediting of this trust removed the only certainty within O'Brien's present environment. O'Brien added, "He told me that one of the black guys had taken care of the first sergeant. It was an M-79 round, off a grenade launcher. Although the shot was only meant to scare the top sergeant, the blacks weren't crying, he said. He put his arm around me and said that's how to treat whitey when it comes down to it" (O'Brien 174). The Caucasian, top first sergeant, was killed by a friendly M-79 round. O'Brien reinforced that death wasn't the objective of this racial protest; however, in a warfare environment, levels of protest are demonstrated differently. In the environment of life and death, these messages are also interpreted differently. The basis of this interaction with uncertainty and segregation relates to the fundamentals of the decision process: "Imperfect understanding and judgment, the inability to measure psychological forces and the unpredictable manners in which each domain interacts with the other in the unique and fluid balance creates uncertainty" (Cohen 27). Both Caucasians and African-Americans misconceived segregation within the ranks. These

misconceptions shaped the cognitive lens, action, and the outcome of interaction with segregation and uncertainty in war.

Interactions with our self, organizations, the enemy, and the external environment provided Tim O'Brien's Vietnam narratives four interactive contexts to illustrate the uncertainty of war. One scholar noted, "If war is one part passion, one part chance, and one part reason, then two of the three elements in its nature are by definition wanton, even uncontrollable" (Palmer 103).

O'Brien's narratives demonstrate that information can reduce the simple uncertainties, but coping with the others is a function of the decision maker. Americans today use the meaning of war to determine levels of acceptable cost; casualty acceptance or a version is determined by the situation, not by abstraction. O'Brien exposes war as the abstract approach to understanding, interacting, and coping with uncertainty. In O'Brien's final interaction with uncertainty he questioned the purpose of war. O'Brien interacts with a hybrid of moral fear: "The fear of losing one's humanity; the fear that killing, maiming, and destruction are, in the end, for no real purpose." (Palmer 193). This moral fear climaxed upon his return to the state of Minnesota.

O'Brien was removed from a state of destruction and waste, but re-inducted into the untouched Midwestern prairie lands. O'Brien left a war behind in one plane flight. The surreal exodus from war added to O'Brien's fogged rationalization and understanding of what had happened in Vietnam. He concluded, "And over Minnesota you fly into an empty, unknowing, uncaring, purified, permanent stillness. Down below, the snow is heavy, there are patterns of old cornfields, there are some roads. In return for all your terror, the prairies stretch out, arrogantly unchanged" (O'Brien 208). The different interactions culminate to form O'Brien's last impression of the war: confusion. Once again, the experience had to be given a common meaning to permit an understanding. War is an abstract endeavor. O'Brien concluded the

abstractness of war and determined the experiences only granted meaning in stories. O'Brien's illustrations of war don't define uncertainty, but the unique interactions offer perspective on the interactive, uncertain nature of war.

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