

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

The Gilchrist Brothers

Billboard

Marc Steiner: Welcome to Shared Weight and the story of the Gilchrist brothers, of Republican Congressman Wayne Gilchrist, who's represented the 1st Congressional District in Maryland for eight terms. He was a Marine Sergeant in Vietnam who saw combat in 1965, his brothers JEFFREY: and Alan who served with him in Vietnam, brother Richard who served in the Navy, and Clifford, who remained home to teach. We join the brothers as they reflect on how their views of the world have grown since that war and been affected by that war. First, the news from National Public Radio.

Segment 1

Hello, I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to Shared Weight, a radio documentary series 30 years after the end of the Vietnam War. This hour, we bring you the Gilchrist brothers. Wayne Gilchrist is a Republican Congressman who's represented the 1st Congressional District in Maryland for eight terms. He was a Marine Sergeant in Vietnam who saw combat in 1965. I first interviewed him 14 years ago on Capitol Hill for my radio show. I didn't know then he was a vet, until he ran John McCain's presidential campaign in Maryland in the year 2000. We knew we had to interview Wayne Gilchrist after I heard the story about how incensed he was that a young soldier, one of his constituents, who was killed in Iraq, would not be given the Purple Heart because his death was an accident and not in combat. Wayne rummaged through his box of medals from his days in Vietnam. He took out one of his Purple Hearts and HE pinned it on the young man as he lay in the coffin. So, we met him at his home in Kennedyville in rural Kent County on the Eastern shore of Maryland. It was the morning of his son's wedding, and we met him with four of his five brothers.

WAYNE: This is Marc Steiner.

MARC: Hi.

WAYNE: My aunt Jo.

JO: Nice to meet you.

WAYNE: This is Judy.

MARC: Judy, pleasure. Nice to meet you.

JUDY: Nice to meet you.

ANDREW: I'm Andrew.

WAYNE: This is Nick.

Nick: Nick -----. Nice to meet you.

MARC: Nice to meet you too.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

MARC: We walked into Wayne's home to meet his brothers and start our conversation about the war from the perspective of these brothers, three of whom served in Vietnam at the same time. They grew up in a small town in New Jersey in a deeply conservative working class family.

CLIFFORD: I'm Cliff, number one. Bath County, Virginia.

ALAN: My name is Alan Gilchrist, and I'm the number two son. And I'm from Raulway, New Jersey.

JEFFREY: Jeffrey . . .

ALAN: Number three.

JEFFREY: Thank you, Alan. Number three. Newland, North Carolina.

WAYNE: Wayne, number four. Kennedyville, Maryland.

RICHARD: My name's Rich Gilchrist. I'm the number five son, and we're currently living in Toms River, New Jersey.

WAYNE: And David, number six who's not here is from

JEFFREY:?: Provincetown

WAYNE: Provincetown or Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

MARC: You were in the Marines. You joined the Marines when?

WAYNE: '64. In high school. 18.

MARC: And Jeffrey, you were?

JEFFREY: I was in the army. '66.

MARC: You were drafted.

JEFFREY: I was drafted, and mom says, 'You're going to enlist,' so I did.

MARC: Did you want to go?

JEFFREY: Mmmm. I was saving up for an engagement ring, so obviously I didn't want to go. But I went anyhow, and I enlisted. I didn't get drafted.

MARC: Okay. And Alan, you were in the N-?

ALAN: I went in October, 18, out of high school.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

Multiple voices: '62.

ALAN: '62. Into the Navy, and after two years and actually in D.C., in the Pentagon, I volunteered for Vietnam.

RICHARD: I enlisted in the Navy. I came home from work one day, and I had an invitation to join the army on the table. So, I sat down to lunch with my father, and I looked at it and said, 'I think that's my draft notice.' I said, 'I'm going to go up to Elizabeth and enlist in the Navy.' I said, 'I'm not going to sleep in the dirt. I'll sleep on a clean bunk. The Navy has clean bunks.' And he said, 'Not a bad idea. Are you going to take the bus or the car?' And I said, 'I'll take the bus.' So, I went up and enlisted. That was in '66.

MARC: And you're the oldest?

CLIFFORD: Yeah, okay. Yeah, I'm the oldest. Yeah. One of the—two of our family who never served in the military-

JEFFREY: And I just want to add too, back then, the draft basically hit the 18, 19-year old, 20-year old single, and when it did right on the cusp, Cliff wasn't drafted. He was married. And we all said, 'Lucky bum.' But anyhow.

CLIFFORD: The truth be told, I don't think. I certainly admired and truly admired my brothers who served, whether it be Rich in the Navy who didn't get sent to Vietnam or these three guys who did.

JEFFREY: It probably would have been too much for mom and dad. They needed some anchors at home. And you guys were the anchors.

CLIFFORD: And we had to pay the phone bill.

JEFFREY: Because we were crazy enough to volunteer to go to Vietnam.

MARC: And you all served where, once you went to Vietnam, you all served where in Nam? Where did you serve, Alan?

ALAN: I was in the National Military Command Center, NMCC, in Saigon, **Tonseneut** area. That was—it was just a war room game, a war room, and that's where everything originated from.

JEFFREY: Wayne was the John Wayne. We were the clerical. I worked for the tactical operations center. I reported to the United States MIAs, KIAs, and WIAs, which, in a way, was rather frustrating 'cause I was told by who and what and where what to write and what to send back knowing what I was leaving out.

MARC: What do you mean, knowing what you were leaving out?

JEFFREY: Information on what the people in the United States were not supposed to know.

WAYNE: I was with—I was in what we called I-Corps. Vietnam was divided into four regions. I was in number one, which was by the DMZ in the northern part of Vietnam, and we called it I-Corps, and so we moved around fairly often from near the DMZ to the Laotian border to near Da Nang, and we moved around there depending on the action or the activity of the VC or the North Vietnamese Army.

MARC: Wayne, let me just focus on you for a minute. You, of the three brothers, the four brothers that served, the three that were in Vietnam, you're the one that saw combat.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

WAYNE: Yes. You know, you think differently when you're an 18, 19-year old than you do when you're in your 60's.

MARC: Mhm.

WAYNE: But you know, you heard stories about Korea, you heard stories about Guadalcanal, you heard stories about D-Day, plus I just wanted to see the world, so I had an idea one of the best ways to do it because it seemed exciting, plus the recruiter painted this magnificent picture of adventure and life around the world and what you could do as a young Marine. [snap] I was sold, so I took a bus to Elizabeth and enlisted without telling my parents

?: Oh, I remember that. Oh man.

WAYNE: But I didn't tell my parents or anyone that I was due to go July the 15th, 1964 to Parris Island, and I didn't tell my parents until the Monday night before that Wednesday, which I regret to this day.

MARC: Why do you regret that?

WAYNE: Because when I got on the bus on the corner to go to Newark airport to fly to Paris Island, both my parents walked me to the bus stop. To this day, what is vivid in my memory is seeing their faces, that they knew that I wasn't ever going to come back the same way. They knew it, you know. I didn't know it. So, I get on the bus, I want this great excitement, and I could still see the look in their eyes, partly because I didn't tell them. The second thing that happened was when I got off the bus in Paris Island, I said, 'Oh my God, I made a mistake.' And I had heard from some of the men in our neighborhood. They told me stories about it, which I really didn't believe. One of the stories was that there's no seat cover on the toilet seat. We don't have a toilet seat. You just have the toilet.

Jeffrey: . . . and you have to share with a hundred guys . . .

WAYNE: So, the first thing off the bus, we went to the head, and I saw that there were no toilet seats, and I said, 'Oh my God, everything else they told me is going to be true.'

MARC: What was it about your family and your parents and the town you grew up in that you mean you almost felt compelled you had to..

WAYNE: Well, we grew up in a neighborhood where everybody was either a World War II vet or a Korean War vet that we had very close, intimate contact with on a regular basis.

ALAN: There was one, Charlie Wilson, across the street from the Korean War. He was, I guess, still in shell shock. He never got over the war.

: He would stand out.

ALAN: He would just stand out in the middle of the street or on the sidewalk and just stare off into space. That was an ongoing thing the whole time we were growing up. And that was the effects of him being in the Korean War, so that's how we grew up and we saw both ends of it.

RICHARD: And Andy **Roussen** was on Utah Beach on D-Day.

ALAN: Yes.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

RICHARD: And Leo **Stratowski** was on Iwo Jima.

JEFFREY: Guadacanal.

WAYNE: Guadacanal, both. Next door.

JEFFREY: Constant, from the time we were five until we were in high school, we were influenced by these people, day by day. They were our neighbors, and most of them drank.

CLIFFORD: Some of them.

JEFFREY: Alcohol was a big part of their lives.

MARC: Wayne's tour of duty in Vietnam overlapped with his brothers JEFFREY: in the army and Alan in the navy. Three brothers in the same war at the same time. JEFFREY: remembers trying to find his brother Wayne.

JEFFREY: CO called me in, and said, 'What company was your brother in?' I said, 'I think he's in Foxtrot,' and he goes, 'Well, let's hope not because there's not too many people left.' So, I said, 'I need to go.' I got there that night in Da Nang, forgot the name of the base—a lot of this stuff, for some reason, does not stay with me—navy to safety factor, I don't know, but I slept in Wayne's cot. He was out cleaning up the mess of Foxtrot.

WAYNE: It was early in the morning. We were trying to get a group of NVA soldiers who kept shooting at our helicopters to take our wounded out, that were wounded since 3 A.M. in the morning. So, it was around 7 A.M. We go in. There's a little bit of a firefight. I get hit [slap] like I was run over by a Mack truck. And I remember hearing the other Marine behind me saying, 'Sergeant Gilchrist got shot right through the chest.' I didn't know what happened. It was that much of an impact, and so there's only a few of us, and they had to go back to get reinforcements, so I was laying on the ground by myself. Right after I hit the ground, I could see myself. And I can still see myself very clearly. From about treetop level, I can see myself on the ground. I can see me laying there. And there was no pain. There was no pain whatsoever. I'm about treetop level. I see myself. I know it's me. There's no fear in me whatsoever. There's no anxiety. It is just me laying on the ground. And then all of a sudden, I feel the pain. And I could not breathe, and the first thing that came into my head was the backyard. Clifford accidentally hit me in the stomach with a bat when we were kids. I don't think I was ten years old. The wind got knocked out of me, and Clifford said, 'Relax and breathe through your nose.' So, I'm lying on the ground in Vietnam. I can't breathe, and so I started very slowly breathing through my nose, very shallow breaths. And I realized that I could breathe that way. A little while later, the other Marines come up, there's a bigger firefight, they put me in a poncho, they carry me back to the area where all the other wounded are. This is about 7 A.M., and around 10 A.M. is when it was cleared up enough to get the helicopters. When they evacuate you after you're wounded, they take you to a place that is exactly like the program MASH. They take you off the helicopter, and they take the people in who are wounded the worst, first, then the doctors operate on you right away. And the first person you see when you wake up after the operation is the chaplain, and the chaplain says, 'Is there a letter I can write for you or someone I can contact?' And I said, 'I have a brother somewhere around Saigon, and I don't know where.' And so the next day, they flew me in a helicopter to the repo's hospital ship. They contacted Jeffrey. Jeffrey flew up there. I had just gotten there, and within a few hours—I'm laying there, and something...I'm gonna choke up...Someone was standing right there, and I didn't pay attention to him because I assumed it was a corpsman or somebody, and that person didn't say anything—

JEFFREY: I couldn't.

WAYNE: And then I looked. It was Jeffrey. So, he stayed with me three or four days.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

JEFFREY: We cried and hugged, and then we went home.

MARC: What was it like for you, seeing your brother shot at that moment when you flew out there?

JEFFREY: Well, I guess it would be traumatic for anyone.

MARC: Yeah.

JEFFREY: And it wasn't his time to go 'cause I saw them sew him up, especially the back. I'm not sure what was holding his back together, but anyhow, he's here, and you live that over and over again a lot, sometimes.

WAYNE: I was shot in May '67.

ALAN: Mother's Day.

RICHARD: Mother's Day.

WAYNE: May 14.

ALAN: He was shot on Mother's Day, and my mother knew it.

WAYNE: I always have a Busch Lite on May 14.

MARC: What do you mean, your mother knew?

ALAN: No, she said there was something wrong.

MARC: She felt something—

ALAN: When he was shot, it was on Mother's Day, and she felt something before the military came to the house. You know, they send the enlisted men. If you see the officers coming, you're gone. That is a sinking feeling, so I knew, turn around, but I saw the enlisted, so we knew it wasn't—

MARC: You knew he wasn't dead.

RICHARD: You knew it wasn't serious.

ALAN: We knew he wasn't gone. He didn't stay at the treetop. He came back down.

BROTHERS: That was fine. That was fine.

RICHARD: The treetop was just a temporary thing.

BROTHERS: Temporary.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

JEFFREY: In other words, you were given a chance. Let's change our minds again. I want to experience something else—

BROTHER: But on Mother's Day, you were given a round trip ticket thing.

BROTHER: A round trip ticket, yeah.

JEFFREY: Maybe I won't re-up.

ALAN: She alluded to it that day on Mother's Day that she had this feeling that something happened when it happened.

MARC: Long before the Marines showed up at the door?

ALAN: No. That day that he was shot, my mom said she felt something.

MARC: Wayne Gilchrist was badly wounded in Vietnam. JEFFREY: was deeply affected by what happened to his brother and the work he had to do in contacting the families of the killed, the wounded, and the missing. And Alan came home to continue in the navy reserve. They came home different men than the ones who left for war. And these very patriotic men began to feel the weight of returning home to a nation divided, to protesters in the street. We'll be back in a minute with the Gilchrist brothers.

SEGMENT 2

MARC: Welcome back to Shared Weight and the story of the Gilchrist brothers. We now speak to the brothers who did not serve in Vietnam. The oldest brother, Clifford, who became a teacher and Richard WHO joined the navy and served with NATO in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Clifford reflects on his time home.

CLIFFORD: As my teaching career evolved, I think one of the seminal moments—it wasn't actually a moment; it was a period of time—while these guys were in the service, there were things going on. I remember my first presidential election that I could vote in because they hadn't passed the 26th Amendment was Johnson/Goldwater.

BROTHER: Right.

CLIFFORD: The only Republican I've ever voted for for president was Goldwater because I didn't like Johnson's ad with the little girl dancing through the fields.

MARC: The famous "Daisy" ad.

RICHARD: They showed it one time.

CLIFFORD: And the cloud, the mushroom cloud, but I couldn't vote for Johnson after that, and I think knowing where these guys were and not knowing what was going on, being very suspicious of what we learned and what we didn't know encouraged me to become the kind of teacher that I eventually became, trying to provoke my kids into learning as much as they could, questioning authority in a responsible, respectful way, but questioning what you were being told, questioning why should we do it this way? Is there another way we could do it? Encouraging my students to recognize that that little book that we refer to as the Constitution, well it's just a tiny, little thing when you consider all of it put together, but if we truly took to heart what that preamble—the six goals in the preamble—what kind of a nation would we really be if we adhered to those six goals? And I think, as I reflect upon it, thinking about what they experienced, certainly I can only imagine what it

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

was like to be there in any of their shoes, but I think that encouraged me to become the kind of teacher I sought to become, and I think part of that was also because I felt that I wasn't doing my part like they were.

MARC: But you felt that then for a while?

CLIFFORD: Yeah. For a number of years, I felt it. I felt somewhat guilty and a level of being maybe a little irresponsible and self-indulgent because I was unwilling to take that step.

MARC: And brother Richard shares what many men who served in the Vietnam era felt about that war.

RICHARD: Obviously, I didn't serve in Vietnam. My navy service was spent in a NATO communications base in Northern Ireland on the top of a mountain listening to what was going on over there, getting the BBC news, which was not as friendly as you would imagine. Our perspective was, if we're going to have to do it, let's do it and get it over with. You know? We keep lollygagging around, move over to here and take this area. Then we move over here and that area gets re-infiltrated. It's just the most frustrating damn thing in the world. If you're going to go and do something and stop the dominoes from falling to communism, we're holding the Russians back over here in the north Atlantic, do something right. So, it was very frustrating from our, from all of the guys that we had. A whole bunch of guys who were CB's who did a lot of our antenna and radio tower work almost all of them re-enlisted to go in. it was amazing.

MARC: I began to explore with Wayne and his brothers how they felt and changed when they came home to the world. Men who really wanted to serve started analyzing where we were as a nation.

MARC: What were your feelings about the anti-war movement here during that time?

WAYNE: I think that when we went as young kids there was a natural assumption that the government was competent and informed.

: Right.

WAYNE: And you were patriotic, and people did it before you, so you did it. So, you really didn't have too many questions about what got us involved in the conflict in the first place. When we came back—and I was still in the Marine Corps when I came back, stationed in Quantico, there were a lot of anti-war demonstrations in Washington, and I can remember standing out there with an M-14 and very pretty young women putting flowers in the barrel of our guns, so our thoughts were not anti-war demonstrations, our thought was wow, you know, this is...maybe I can meet her later. To a man, I'm not kidding you, we, as returning vets to Quantico, Virginia, were often in Washington for security purposes, and I think we were not necessarily political. We didn't think about Jane Fonda. We didn't think about anti-war demonstrations, although we did to the extent that we could, but it was just, we have a few months left, we're going to get out and live our life. And we still had some sense the government was competent and informed. Gradually though, as we began to leave the military, have a job, raise a family, go to college, the Pentagon Papers, a number of periodicals written about the war, we began to see what was left out of the equation was that the government never knew enough, they weren't knowledgeable enough about the history of that region. They compared Ho Chi Minh to Stalin, to Mao Tse Tung, and Ho Chi Minh wasn't a Stalinist and he wasn't a Maoist. He was someone that wanted to be free of colonialism, so I began to understand that the U.S. got us involved in war in Vietnam that never should have happened.

ALAN: It's true. Gulf of Tonkin never happened, and Ho Chi Minh came to the United States first. Actually a Specialist 5 saved his life, and the first country he went to ask for help was the United States to be free from that colonialism, and we ignored him. But again at 18, we're all going to lick the world. We're all Rambo. And the military knows we're very impressionable, and what happens, and you know that, and you put a 50-caliber machine gun... What I went to was a self-

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

protection class in Coronado. Boy, you feel pretty powerful throwing those hand grenades and shooting that bar and 30-caliber machine gun. Man, you feel invincible, and they know that. They're just professionals at it, and you just get caught up in that euphoria, but as time goes on, like the Sarge says, at the time, yes, I hated every anti-demonstration. I was one of those of blind faith. I don't know what it is, but today, I look at it as why did 56,000 have to die to open up a sneaker factory? Give me a reason for that.

WAYNE: We began to have this sense that this is one difficult situation that we're trying to kill mosquitoes with sledgehammers, and it's not going to work.

ALAN: Right.

WAYNE: And gradually as we were over there longer, we began to pick up the idea because McNamara was the Secretary of Defense. When I first got there, he said the war will be over in six months, and then we just knew that wasn't true.

MARC: Patriotism runs red, white, and blue in these men's veins. They're harking back to another era and to the future.

ALAN: It will be questioned by those in authority now that if we don't agree, we're morally wrong, it's just totally false. Unpatriotic, I can't go to the Vietnam Wall without crying. I cry every time somebody steps on a landmine because it's totally uncalled for. I truly believe that those mothers and fathers would rather see their sons and daughters grow up, get married and have a family. That flag has nothing to do with glory. That does not replace that son or daughter or loved one. They'd rather have them home. And that's what...we're back down in another quagmire. And for someone to question my patriotism—see now, if we don't agree, we're unpatriotic, it's really sad that it's come to this point, very, very, very sad. I cry at the Star Spangled Banner. If I'm at a ballgame, I sing it, and I sing it loud.

Jeffrey: It's a good thing to point out, because of what you said, as I'm listening it sounds somewhat unpatriotic because of the comments made, but the reason they're made is because of the strong, patriotic values that we do have—

ALAN: Right.

JEFFREY: It's hard for young people to understand that our patriotic values go way beyond what anybody is taught today, and I don't think half the people know the Star Spangled Banner.

ALAN: Well, I just feel that it just --- me that each time this thing just becomes, and as the years go on, and it's repetitive, it does seem light, but I still, I mean, I still love my country, and I love to salute the flag, but it has gone past. It's now we're coming into an area where we're, unfortunately, unable to get along. We're decisive. It's come down to—and you know, if you go up the thing, and those, if you watch from Eisenhower on, or even, both parties were able to talk, both parties were able to discuss, both parties were able to come together, and now to me, it just seems hatred for one for the another, and that's just gone beyond the point. That's very unhealthy. And to suffer for it is the people and the citizens because of the decisiveness, and they get caught up in that same battle, if you're on this side or on this side, and you just see it constantly now. There's name calling. It's just gone so far beyond what it should be, and it's very hurtful to the country, not to mention our standing around the world, but that's how I feel now because there was one father wrote that in the Star-Ledger up there, and I said that every time I see that officer or enlisted man kneel down and give that flag, I mean, my heart breaks. [MUSIC-Eddy Arnold "Make the world go away"] Just like Vietnam, I went past that blind patriotism. Well, like my brother said, you don't get the facts, and how do you feel when they come out, like Gulf of Tonkin was false, and no one really knew what went on, what was 200 miles, or what really transpired, but they quick-grabbed, and the amazing thing was that every part of the government took that as gospel and ran with it, and those who questioned were silenced at that time in the government. It's amazing how they could do that, but I mean, I understand it's after the fact, but here we are going through the same scenario.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

MARC: What about you, . . . ?

JEFFREY: At that time, I would, probably... I would have been an anti-anti-war protester at the time. I believed what I was doing. I believed that the people that taught me to do what I did was right. And under the circumstances, I don't think it was wrong. I just think that I wouldn't hurt an anti-protester now.

MARC: You would have then—

JEFFREY: Because just as they have something to learn about what I've experienced, I've learned from my experience not to judge them. I don't know how else to put it without getting a little riled, but that's about how I feel. They have the right to make their own decisions, but I just don't like to see the United States being torn apart. And other people think it's just their little life. Well, a lot of things we do in our world as a group of people reflects throughout the world, so we have to kind of remember that. We are part of a little, round, blue ball.

CLIFFORD: The strength that we have as a nation is that we are, throughout our history, have had differences of opinion and been able to tolerate those, and I know it's just studying, going back as far as when Jefferson ran and the amount of hatred. You know, we talk about how it's more divisive now than then, but I remember reading something not that long ago about the kind of name calling and just ugly, intolerant, and factually contrived pictures made of Jefferson and his opponent then, and so you mentioned before that—one of you did—that the more we change, the more-

RICHARD: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

JEFFREY: Too old, too soon, too smart, too late.

BROTHER: There you go.

ALAN: There you go.

CLIFFORD: And I think-

JEFFREY: Should've, could've, would've.

CLIFFORD: Having had three brothers in Vietnam, while I wasn't conflicted about their service at all, and I certainly honored their service, and I think somewhat empathize Alan's remarks about today and those young men who are being killed and maimed and the innocent civilians, and the untold magnitude of collateral damage, which is one of the most ugly, one of the ugliest terms I think I've ever-and the way people can use that term, collateral damage, with such casualness is truly offensive to me. But as the war progressed, I felt that we were being lied to, and while I agreed with the premise and the spirit of those who were opposed to the war, I was appalled and offended at the attitude that some people in the country had toward those people conducting the war or fighting the war. The leadership should have been the ones who bore the brunt of their disdain and their rebuke, certainly not the young men.

CLIFFORD: There's a student of mine who's basically lost—he and his brothers, I taught two of his brothers—they basically lost...their mother committed suicide. Their father, who spent two tours in Vietnam, and I'm not sure what kind of shock he experienced, but he's in Vietnam now. He went back to Vietnam. He's never returned. His sons have not seen him in several years. And I think there's a war that was precipitated on a hoax, my feeling is, and I think about Eisenhower, a great president, I think, in many ways, prophetic, in a sense, when he said we have to be concerned about the growth of the military-industrial complex, and today, our nation is pretty much founded, from my perspective, and from what I know, which may be very little, but from what I know, we would fall apart economically if it wasn't for that military-industrial

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

complex, so from that perspective, Eisenhower was a prophet. On the other hand, he was one of the foremost advocates of the domino theory, which we now know was like the Soviet Union. That was as factual as the strength of the Soviet Union. They imploded, and I think Alan and one of them talked about—one of you guys talked about the leadership, and we'd like to think that the leadership in our country was brilliant and looked at everything objectively, understood who they were putting in harm's way and why.

MARC: These five brothers, Republicans, a carpenter, a Congressman, a mailman who's administered in New Jersey state prisons, a sporting goods owner, and a retired high school teacher, who's a county commissioner, are steeped in conservative values, search for an America that does not walk in lockstep, but one that is whole and honest.

Segment 3

MARC: Welcome back to Shared Weight, the story of the Gilchrist brothers, of Republican Congressman, Wayne Gilchrist, his brothers, Jeffrey and Alan, who served with him in Vietnam. brother Richard who served in the navy, and Clifford, who remained home to teach. We rejoin the brothers as they reflect on how their views of the world have grown since that war and been affected by that war.

MARC: When the three of you came back from Vietnam, it feels like you were all affected by this very differently.

ALAN: You didn't mention it. You were afraid to mention it, to say you were in Vietnam.

JEFFREY: No, you didn't even say you were a vet.

ALAN: No.

JEFFREY: I was sitting in a coffee shop downtown. I was renting a small house in Rahway, New Jersey at the time, and I was having my breakfast by myself. I got off the bus the day before, finally got home from Vietnam. Nobody met me. I'm having breakfast and two men are laughing and looking at the newspaper calling us baby-killers and women-killers. I finished my breakfast and left, never said a word or said anything.

ALAN: No, you didn't.

JEFFREY: You didn't become publicly known. And that's how I've been basically ever since. But once in a while I do get a little annoyed at some fellas, but it doesn't do any good 'cause basically they've already made up their mind because of the confusion that Wayne was talking about.

JEFFREY: Well, you have to keep it inside. You know, that's the difference between—the reason we don't talk about it, there's a lot of things that have never come out since this particular day, right now.

MARC: Mmhm.

JEFFREY: And even though they may be small, there are certain things that stick with me. The odor of Vietnam, the smell.

ALAN: Yeah.

WAYNE: You know what Jeffrey 's saying. We have never sat down and talked about this.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

ALAN: Never talked about Vietnam. First time.

WAYNE: No, we have never discussed-

JEFFREY: If my children had any family gathering-

ALAN: Never mention it.

JEFFREY: We'd always avoided politics and war.

ALAN: That's right.

BROTHER: Always.

JEFFREY: 'Cause that highway's too vast. I think that-

ALAN: It's easier now than when we were twenty.

JEFFREY: Well, only because maybe there'll be an influence on somebody who's wondering what about it.

ALAN: Well, I talked to an individual and-

JEFFREY: Because if you are anti-something, don't just be an anti-something with a crowd. You got to do something about the problem.

MARC: In some ways, emotionally, Vietnam hit you pretty deep.

JEFFREY: The results.

ALAN: Well, I think most of them when they came back, that was—there was no welcome 'cause you just think of the other, World War II, you come home a conquering hero. Well, we came back and hid. My children were 13 and 14 years old before they knew I was in Vietnam, and the only reason I spoke was they were being taught wrong in school on the history of it. I took the history book. The history book was wrong. And then it hit me there. 'We never knew you were there, Dad.' I never mentioned it. My wife never mentioned that I was in Vietnam. I just put it away.

JEFFREY: In a way, we were a little embarrassed. We didn't feel like heroes, but at the same time, I would not put someone down for what's happening right now. Never. Because those men are doing their darndest to do what they are told and what they can do as Americans, and we started out with chaos how many hundreds of years ago. We started out with chaos, and it's been that way ever since.

CLIFFORD: When you think about what's happening today, and as you reflect on what really happened in Vietnam, the fact that when Jeffrey came home from that war and had to feel that kind of rejection because of people like Johnson and McNamara and what's his name, Alan?

ALAN: Westmoreland.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

JEFFREY: Wastemorland.

CLIFFORD: And individuals who knew all along that they were lying. Lying. And that there were countless numbers of young men being murdered and maimed, and countless numbers of innocent Vietnamese people losing their lives, losing their environment, and knowing what the napalm was probably going to do, the number of people who—what's his name, Rickover? Was it Admiral Rickover?

BROTHERS: Admiral Rickover.

CLIFFORD: I mean, the number of people who, in this country, suffered as a result of that. And then knowing what the leadership of this government is doing in this country and not doing, the things that they are more than likely knowingly concealing from the American people.

MARC: I asked them how they looked at the world now, 35 years after the end of the war they fought in.

WAYNE: I think it's a sad time right now in American history that we're re-doing the same mistakes we made in the 50's and 60's, not being sophisticated enough to distinguish between Stalinism, Maoism, and colonies that wanted to be independent.

ALAN: The reason you bring that up all the time.

WAYNE: And to associate the Islamic world with World War II or the Nazis is really, really bad, and to make a comment about Islamic fascists when there is no such thing as an Islamic fascist. If you're a Muslim, you are from an Abrahamic tradition, a Christian tradition, where you believe in one God, and to please that God, you treat your neighbor as yourself and you do justice to all humanity. We are not sophisticated enough to know the difference between a murderer, a terrorist, an insurgent, and a Muslim. And we're not sophisticated enough to know the difference between how Islam is practiced in Iran, how it's practiced in Syria, how it's practiced in Lebanon, or Pakistan, or any other of those countries. It's their religion and their culture. And there are no evil empires. Now, if we've learned anything about Vietnam, the average Vietnamese person that we came in contact with whether it was Saigon or-

ALAN: Right. Mr. Foo, Mr. San, my buddies.

WAYNE: or some mountainous village-

JEFFREY: Mama San, Be San, washed my clothes, cleaned my shoes, made my bed

ALAN: I went to baptisms.

JEFFREY: They were human beings.

TOGETHER: They were human beings.

WAYNE: That wanted to live their life, that wanted to have children, that wanted to be good teachers, good scientists, good carpenters, good people that raised rice. Now, in the middle east, the average Iranian, the average Syrian, the average anybody, whether they're a scientist or carpenter, a teacher or a plumber, or a truck driver, or whatever they are, those are the ones who directly hold the fibers of the society together, so they're not a part of an evil empire, so the key thing now that we didn't have back then is dialogue. We should begin talking to these countries. It's better to talk first and hold the shooting 'til much later.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

JEFFREY: I don't know why we're afraid to do that. You can get a lot done whether you're afraid to disagree.

ALAN: Well, I think from now on, the biggest excuse now is 9/11, so the fear factor is just being used at such a high level, and since that day, all bets are off. There is no dialogue. It's all right because of 9/11. Everything goes back to 9/11, and now that's the reason for everything going on in the world today or what our policy is is just 9/11, so they get everybody thinking back to that day and bring you back into the fold of that terrible, terrible day, that tragic day, and they haven't—that's the premise of the whole situation now as far as mention Axis of Evil and this country and that country.

CLIFFORD: This government tries to put itself up—what was it, that Puritan who claimed that we're going to build a city on a hill. It's going to be a light unto the world. And it's just—I get so angry when I think about—Wayne talked about the difference Muslim cultures in the different countries, and how for the most part, Islam is a religion of peace, and what Osama bin Laden has done, what kind of an evangelical as Osama bin Laden been to Islam and how he has distorted because of his hatred, how he has distorted that belief around the world, what has our nation, forgive me, but our president done to the Christian faith. I thought about the other day, if you had a person, if you had a person in a third world country, parts of Ethiopia, where our son is, there's no communication. If you had that person who was looking for guidance, for direction, and he was trying to find a faith that he or she could hang onto, and you took bin Laden as a disciple of Islam and you took George Bush as a disciple of Christianity, and you look at what they talk about, and if took quotes, you could cherry-pick those quotes, but what have their lives, what have their decisions that they have made, what is our government's decision about torture, even though now they're reversing course, but what does that say about Christianity? And Jeffrey talked about talking. What's wrong with talking with one another? Didn't Christ, if Christ is the paragon of Christianity, didn't Christ talk to everybody? Didn't he go into the homes of those people who were either considered sacred or the Jews, you know, he talked to the Gentiles and everybody. And our government, our current government, is unwilling to talk to those 'infidels'. And I guess as a result, what bothers me most is that the number of people here and there and everywhere around the world whose lives are being either thrown into turmoil, who, as Alan said, won't see their daughters or sons get married, won't see their grandchildren, and isn't that life of that child in Lebanon or Israel or Iraq or Iran or Darfor or any number of other places-

JEFFREY: Oklahoma.

CLIFFORD: Isn't that life of that little child, yeah, those little children in Oklahoma.

JEFFREY: This is why Clifford was spared not going to Vietnam because his emotions and his way of expressing things, it's so intense that it's—not to say that it isn't healthy, it's just that people with such insight are affected by not even being in a situation that is horrible.

ALAN: My brother-in-law who has never been to church or whatever, he brought it up. He lives in Pennsylvania, never was in the service, but he says—and he knows where I'm coming from, alright. I serve Jesus Christ-

MARC: This is your brother-in-law now.

ALAN: My brother-in-law. This is why we're here. The only purpose here is his purpose. He said, 'I don't want to say anything out, but the president uses the faith card too much.' And I said, 'Whoops, you're not hurting my feelings in any way, shape, or form.' And he says, 'I don't go to church, and I've never been to church, but I know one thing, that he uses that faith card too much.' Now that is simplifying it, but I tell you, it's amazing what Clifford was saying because we had a beautiful opportunity, the Lord had just put on my spirit, that we had at that time, rather than our enemy was elected. That election doesn't count. We had an opportunity to go in and work together. Okay, that doesn't mean they're going to accept it, but this is what the Christian would do in the faith and follow the teachings that confound your enemy. We had an opportunity to go in there and build that up, to build God up, to not stop their produce from crossing into—everything was cut off, European Union, no more aid. Not thinking about those people, the same middle class people that are here today.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

They were unable to sell their goods, food rotting in the gardens, on the farms. We had a beautiful opportunity, men of faith. That would have, I feel in my spirit, from that very day, that that would have turned that Gaza around, just to give that hand. That's what it's all about, not like today. They're stopping the medication coming across the border from Canada. They said the Bush family found a free trade he didn't like, and it's true. You see what I'm saying?

MARC: In all the questioning of the intentions of our leaders that came to them after the war, they're clear about what kind of America they want.

WAYNE: The paradox of our country is that our strength arrives from our differences, from our disagreements, from our arguments. That's where the fiber of this society gets its strength in its ability to express strong differences of opinion, and in a general sense, there is tolerance for that mix.

Brothers singing

MARC: Five young men supported the war in Vietnam. Three served there. They all began to question authority after the war, but maintained their rock-bed conservative hopes for our country, but none of them will ever again be blinded by anyone's ideology, nor will they take political leaders' utterances as gospel. Thank you for listening to Shared Weight and the story of the Gilchrist brothers. To hear the rest of the story, go to www.centerforemergingmedia.com, and thanks for listening.

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