

The background of the cover features a stylized American flag. The top left corner shows the blue field with white stars, while the rest of the cover is dominated by red and white stripes that transition into yellow and orange at the bottom right, suggesting a sunset or fire.

Touched with Fire

**THE FUTURE OF THE
VIETNAM GENERATION**

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AMERICA

I wonder what the Air Force B-52 pilot thought when told his navigator was Certain. Bob Certain later told me he had spent his life dodging the idea of becoming an Episcopal priest. Actually our slang in Vietnam for "chaplain" was "sky pilot." So this all fits together. One dodge led to another, so in December, 1972, he was perched in the navigator's roost of a B-52 eight miles over Hanoi. He had brought the plane twelve thousand miles, first to Guam then to the IP, initial point for bomb run, over Hanoi. His perch was that same complex electronic core of the plane manned by the black lieutenant in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*. The right place, but a bad time. Surface-to-air missiles (SAM, but not our Uncle), antiaircraft artillery, and fighters defended Hanoi. SAM shrapnel punctured the aircraft. They were crashing. Bob pulled the ejector. The explosive drove his seat at bullet speed straight down, out of the plane's underside and into the North Vietnamese night sky. The chute opened. He landed. No broken bones. He hid in a ditch. A search party with dogs captured him. He was freed in March, 1973, with our other POW'S. He says the missile hit and the high-altitude ejection got his attention. He is now rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Yazoo City, Mississippi.

Wartime experiences spur within all of us a fresh look at things. The epitome is the experience of POW's, because their separation from our old life is so sharp and extensive. They are usually able to see our country with new eyes. In the January, 1983, *Anglican Theological Review*, Bob wrote about America and Americans,

The human personality can be likened to a large mobile; one part out of kilter throws the whole thing off

balance; and you have to fix the right part to restore the balance of the whole. The part that is causing the out-of-balance condition is not always obvious, especially when it is in the subconscious. Many would say that the United States is currently exhibiting an out-of-balance condition, that something isn't quite right in our corporate "psyche". . . . It may be that the process of open forum on a small, though public, scale will effect catharsis on a large scale.

Bob's image of a mobile is a reminder that the events of the 1960s are interconnected. Using another metaphor, if the various commitments we each of us make are the bone of our culture, then the backbone is connected to the hip bone, and the hip bone is connected to the leg . . .

We committed ourselves to many causes in the sixties, creating a whole new tension of relationships and ideas, and when one part moved, everything shifted. We called these commitments movements: civil rights, women's, war protest, and environmental. A spiritual wind stirred the mobile. The wind was youthful idealism, the natural product of our comfortable upbringing and the great hopes of our parents.

Or, muscle is moving these new bones. The muscle was the machines that facilitated communication: computers, cars, presses, mimeograph, Xerox, TV, radio, phone, and jets. The civil rights volunteers went into battle *in buses*, the Freedom Buses. In its 1983 50th Anniversary retrospective on America, *Esquire* published an article on campus unrest in the sixties, "The Leaflet Wars" ("If you wanted to hold a meeting or start a revolution, first you had to find a mimeograph machine."). At West Point, cadets are told, "Wirepower is firepower."

It was confusing enough to be *in* America, but to fresh eyes the picture was dazzling and disorienting. No wonder I felt unsettled in Hawaii. It is no accident that ballet and symphony progress in "movements." The word connotes the same kind of thing that was happening in America. Different movements connected by a theme of idealism. In fact the poetry of the time was the music that suffused the whole culture. From Provincetown to Nha Trang the music and lyrics were everywhere in our lives,