

Summit

Mr. Harold Hayes, Managing Editor
Esquire Magazine
488 Madison Avenue
New York 22, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Hayes,

Much of my time since our interview has been spent in what you might call casual research. This means, for one thing, that I have looked at over 150 copies of Esquire, going back to the beginning and reading my way up, looking out for changes and trying to appreciate the reasons for them.

The greatest area of change seems to have been over the last five or six years. There had always been good material and graphics in Esquire, but only the issues since 1955 have had a real substance, a center and a unity almost non-existent in popular publications. This unity does not refer to the occasional special issues, but to the structuring and make-up of each issue as a whole, with only policy the same from issue to issue. The old grab-bag Esquire, the strange mixture of Argosy, Peep, and Vanity Fair, has fostered a magazine which has finally settled the confusion between slickness and refinement.

Because I was in parts of Europe where current American magazines were hard to find, I missed the July Esquire, and did not see it until the other day. (I had seen "Herzog" before then. It was clipped and mailed to me in Madrid.) If I had read that issue before our meeting, there would have been some difference in the material I presented to you. Those ideas, as you told me, were all right for Esquire as it has been, but not for Esquire as it will be. The July issue has cleared this up for me. It was more than a particularly good, particularly timely issue. It was a subtle turning point in format, an assertion, a kind of editorial manifesto for the Sixties, with the tenets implied.

In addition to the back issues, I took a careful look at material from your marketing research department. This contained Arnold Gingrich's "Report on the State of the Medium", as well as an incredible amount of figures on your subscribers' preferences in scotch, shoes, automobiles, etc. Mr Gingrich's report is clear enough, and if the statistics did nothing else, they made me consider, probably for the first time, who the readers of the magazine are. The next step, obviously and logically, is to think about who they might be during the next few years.

With this information back of me, I can see where

most of the features I suggested were not worth consideration. Three years ago, even a year ago, they might have sounded better. A few of the ideas still sound good, but my thinking, in general, did not take into account the element of growth and change in the magazine's policy. Too many magazines have taken the fact of being established as a license to run stagnant, and they are fighting for their lives now because of it. These days, an issue that seemed fresh and current at the time production began can be a curio by the time it hits the mails and newsstands.

But if Esquire is very much of its time, so am I. And even with the education gained from this research (and, obviously, far from understanding the mechanics, technical and otherwise, of magazine publishing), I still do not understand one of your questions. You wanted to know why I thought my ideas would be right for Esquire, why, at this time, I thought them up and offered them.

My answer, one I had even while I spoke to you (but did not give because at the time it seemed so simple as to be simple-minded), is that they seemed to me both interesting and new. They seemed to be ideas that could be developed into material for intelligent readers, material that could either goose them intellectually or entertain them or both. They weren't for magazines that have allowed overbreeding in format to produce insipid content, nor for the readers who dwell and bloat on the phony urbanity that most "men's" magazines discharge monthly. They were specifically for Esquire.

I know that out of the twenty features I proposed, all but a few had moss on them by the time they reached your desk. The few that were worth anything were too undeveloped to be considered in terms of actual production. (The idea for a piece on Dempsey and Tunney is not far from the piece by Schulberg coming in the next issue, and the Lindbergh idea is already being put together for you. I was close.)

These are the old ideas that I still think are worth something:

A regular column on the theatre by somebody with the style, knowledgeability, and aesthetic sense that MacDonald brings to his film column. Maybe Eric Bentley. Or Tyrone Guthrie or Jose Quintero, if they can write.

Occasional poetry, but by people like Auden, Graves, Cummings, etc., people that readers who haven't read poetry since college will recognize and be impressed by. Bluntly, it would be classy without being pretentious, and would appeal to women who read the magazine.

A piece by Aldous Huxley on the cults of Southern California.

Some new ideas, a bit more developed, are enclosed.

I had one day, between the receipt of your letter and our appointment, to get the original ideas up. The kind of reading and thinking I've done since that interview are the kind I would have liked to have done before it. In other words, I flew in and out of your office pretty much by the seat of my pants.

I still want to work for Esquire, more now than two weeks ago. I submit these new ideas in the hope that they won't waste your time and that they have not wasted mine. If they are unacceptable, I'd like to know why. (If reasons for this kind of thing can be given. Maybe all that can be said is, "They go", or, "They don't go".) If lack of practical experience is the main drawback, I'd like to get that experience with Esquire. I'd take damned near anything, and when I either like what I'm doing or like what I'm working for I learn fast.

Eventually, I would like to write for Esquire. I'm always writing and it's always getting better. I think that the work I've had printed so far is better than almost anything you'd see by undergraduates today, most of whom write because they think it's smart or because they're pissed off at something or because when they were in high school somebody told them they were awfully clever. I would still like you to look at those stories and film reviews, and would like them to figure in any final considerations. But, again, I am not sending them in to you. And, again (nerve runs high in the last ditch), I would like another chance to talk to you about all of this.

If, at this time, the above is of no interest to you or the magazine, I won't bother you again, unless encouraged. It is one thing to be ardent and another to be a public menace, and it would be a poor way to acknowledge your already generous considerations. My first letter to you asked for a few minutes of your time, and I got the better part of an hour, with this second chance thrown in. That's plenty. I appreciate it and will remember it.

Very truly yours,

Mike Herr

Mike Herr

November 13, 1961

Essex House, 1-F
Garth Woods Apts.
Scarsdale, N.Y.

GR2-2325

RESUME:

Mike Herr
Garth Woods Apts.
Essex House 1-F
Scarsdale, New York
Greenleaf 2-2325

Education:

Syracuse University
Liberal Arts

I completed my regular course of study last May, majoring in literature, with a minor in history and fiction writing. I am one hour short of the requirements for the B.A degree, but am now engaged in fulfilling that requirement.

Honors:

Departmental honors, Department of English, Syracuse University.

Second Prize, Rho Delta Phi Short Story Contest, Syracuse University, 1960.

First Prize, Rho Delta Phi Short Story Contest, Syracuse University, 1961.

Experience:

Literary Assistant, Syracuse 10. (Undergraduate quarterly, published at Syracuse University.)

Published four short stories and eight film reviews in the four issues of Syracuse 10 printed during the 1960-61 school year.

Summary:

I am primarily interested in doing magazine writing. I feel qualified to write news, feature articles, commentary, reviews, general criticism, or fiction.

Beyond extensive undergraduate training, I have had no practical experience in this field. If there were no opportunities for writing at present, I would be grateful for employment in an atmosphere that would provide me with such experience.

195 West 10th St.
New York 14
New York

Mr. Harold Hayes
Esquire Magazine
488 Madison Avenue
New York, New York

July 2, 1962

Dear Mr. Hayes,

This is just an inquiry. I wanted to get it to you before the Class of '62 was let loose in New York, but at that time, a month ago, I wasn't sure of my position regarding the Army. I'm sure now, and am ready and eager to change jobs as soon as possible. Naturally, you are the first person I want to contact.

I took the job with Hearst Magazines because it offered a chance to learn the business. After five months, I think I've gotten most of what they have to offer. Even another month would be a waste of time, for me and for Hearst. I've got this experience, plus my column for The New Leader and the Esquire assignment behind me, and feel qualified to take on something a little more demanding, something requiring whatever tastes and talents I've acquired.

I've been in reasonably close contact with Esquire during the past few months, and probably would have heard of any openings there. I doubt that any have occurred. But if there should be something available, I'd like very much to be considered for it. I'll hold off on writing other magazines until I hear from you, mainly because I'm not particularly anxious to work for any other magazine. My enthusiasm for Esquire is still pretty much intact. Of course, I'd like to be able to talk to you about all of this.

I'd also like to thank you, first of all for putting me in touch with Samuel Vaughan, and, most of all, for the colleges assignment. You've given me more consideration than I've had any reason to expect, and I'm most grateful.

Sincerely,

Mike Herr

Mike Herr

July 13, 1962

Mike Herr
195 West 10th St.
New York, New York

Dear Mike:

I'd be perfectly happy to see you. The problem is, I have the mumps. (Somehow, this always seems to call for some added expression, but, to tell you the truth, I'm speechless about the whole thing.)

I don't expect to be back in the office until at least the 16th of July. I don't know how urgent your schedule is - if you have to leave town before that, I'd be happy for you to come by the house here and talk with me, providing, that is, that you've already had the mumps. Otherwise, you could give me a call here at the house or wait until I get back to the office, whichever suits you best.

Let me know and I'll suit myself to your convenience, as limiting, however, as that may appear to be.

Cordially,

Harold Hayes
Managing Editor

HH:caw

Telefax

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LETTERS

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CHARGE
TO

Esquire 488 Madison Ave., NYC, NY

To

Mike Herr
c/o JUSPAO Press Mission
A.P.O. San Francisco
96243, California

February 13, 1968

Via

Regarding your letter of February 5: your establishment material and column not repeat not received here. will await new column. hope you have copies of all that stuff will advise if subsequently received. Stay well.

Harold

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To get fast, dependable service, write in "Via W. U. CABLES here"

CALL
LETTERS

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CHARGE
TO

Esquire 488 Madison NYC, NY

To Mike Herr
c/o LIFE
CONTINENTS SAIGON

May 9, 1968

Via

Hold

Hold on. Money coming. Call Candida

Best

Hayes

1272 1C (9-60)

Send the above message, subject to the terms of the Western Union Telegraph Company set forth in its tariffs on file with the Federal Communications Commission.

PLEASE TYPE OR WRITE PLAINLY WITHIN BORDER—DO NOT FOLD

Taipei
15 November

Dear Harold,

I don't know whether you've been in touch with Candida concerning my whereabouts, or whether my whereabouts are even of the least concern to you at this point. If you've talked to C.D., you may know that HOLIDAY hung me up for nearly two months with various monies - expenses to get me out here and a fee that I couldn't leave the hemisphere without receiving. I'm leaving here in two days for Hong Kong, where there's some chance for a brief assignment, and then directly to Saigon, arriving there around the 1st of December. You'll have your Establishment piece in about one month. This lapse of four months since leaving New York has made me sit bolt upright in the middle of the night, all sweats and bad nerves, more times than I care to remember. The column is more important to me than anything I've ever done. You'll have the first one soon, as soon as I can get myself out in the field and see enough of the war to justify a column in Esquire. You said last June that the idea of a column was attractive to you. I hope so; I promise you one good column, one dynamite first try, and I hope it's attractive enough to run the thing out for months.

We've never discussed expenses on this, except to agree that there would be some, a limited amount. I've asked Candida to get in touch with you about it. Forgive this crass lapse, but I'll need whatever you can send. For the first time in my young life, there is some real urgency about dough. I won't speak of it again, except through Candida, and we can keep our correspondence limited to editorial matters. I just wanted you to know that old China Mike hasn't got a pot to piss in, and, thanks to HOLIDAY, it's been like this for months. By the time you get this, I could already be in Saigon. Candida will know

where I am at all times, even if I have to spring for a cable to tell her. Remember me to Johnny Berendt. I'm going to eat that war up for you.

Best,

Mike

7 January

Saigon

Dear Harold,

Weeks ago, right after I arrived, I sent you a letter thanking you for the dough and the good wishes. As the postal authorities explained it to me, I "anticipated authorized mailing privileges", and the letter got no further than San Francisco. It was returned to me yesterday. They've dealt leniently with me, though, and this and all subsequent letters will be delivered. They've promised.

Everything is going fantastically well and I can't get any of it written and off to you. It's like this: the list that Beyer gave me is practically worthless, much of it because the people named are no longer here, most of it because his premise is a bad one. Once, years ago, when he first came here, there may have been a split in the Mission between regulars and irregulars, but today the operation is homogenized, its members so straight and true and earnest that you want to stomp them. Our premise for the chart, the one we discussed in your office, is not much better. There are simply no interesting irregularities in the use of power here. I've spent two weeks now tracking down leads and lovely rumors, and have come up with almost nothing. No, the AP bureau chief was not given a special jet to Tokyo; the USAID deputy in Dalat does not own real estate; Bunker did not threaten Thieu with a kick in the ass, not ever. The power of Americans in Saigon is boring, it is shabby. So I'm trying something else.

The few Vietnamese that will be in the chart will be listed under Friendlies, along with Filipinos, Koreans, Australians, etc. It will be a totally American chart, and will include at the top those men who are, bluntly, at the top; Westmoreland, Abrams, Bunker, Komer, etc. Other categories include Gone But Not Forgotten, Forgotten But Not Gone (mostly people who lost power when the military took over civilian "political" functions); Tourists (Humphrey, Charlton Heston, Percy, Steinbeck, etc.), and a complex section on the Press. I've done a map of American Saigon for you, and once I've made one more round of the offices, I'll mail it all in, along with a brief cover piece about Saigon.

I'm pretty well orientated, as they say in the Marines, but it hasn't

been easy. Except for the Delta, IV Corps, I've been all over the place. I've been along on four operations now, two of them not particularly dangerous, one of them spooky and one of them out and out terrifying. The first of the columns will not be long in coming. I want to nuts around just a little more with the style of it, want to make certain that it is really special, absolutely fresh.

If you spend any time here and then pick up, say, Shaplen's book on the early Sixties, it has to break your heart. In the matter of arranging statistics and intelligence reports to suit our notions of success, we make the old French high command look like pikers. The logistics of this war are epic, the men who are doing the actual fighting are superb, the scale is overwhelming, yet I think we are in the most desperate military situation we've ever been in, anywhere. First Westmoreland saw the light at the end of the tunnel, and then Johnson saw it too, and now all of those tired bastards can see it. ("They're on the ropes, you dig, we've scattered their command, recruitment is down, it's as good as over, all but the mopping up.") This spring will be the worst of the war, the most savage, the bloodiest time of all, but no one here will admit it. There is virtually no secure area in Vietnam, not one aspect of our Mission that has succeeded, yet I never speak of it except with a few select friends from the press corps, Bernie Weinraub or John Apple. One gets used to having his loyalty questioned over here, and if one wants the continued cooperation of the Mission, one just shuts the hell up. I'm not an analyst, anyway. I'd rather be with the troops. Their courage and decency are misspent, but they're real enough. And now that thousands of draftees have been sent here, you find plenty of interesting people to write about. I want to stay on until summer, working for you one way or another. I've got some ideas for features, too. I'll send those in with the Chart material.

Again, thanks for that money. Saigon is incredibly expensive, and I wouldn't have made it without the advance. I'll keep in touch.

Best,

Mike

5 February

Hue

Dear Harold,

I expect that the newspapers have made it clear to you why I don't want either of those pieces run. As far as the Establishment thing goes, I know that a third of the names on the list will be out of here in a matter of six or seven weeks, and the whole tone of the piece, the entire premise, is as dated after two weeks as ~~the~~^{it} I'd written it years ago. There is no similarity between the Saigon I left this morning and the Saigon I wrote about in January, and as far as I can see, the only value the Establishment stuff has for either of us is as a format check. My inclination is to drop the project altogether or, barring that, waiting out the next three months to see how the Boys adjust to this, and doing it all over again. I'm sick about it (I never worked harder on anything in my life, and I think the text was good), but I don't see any real alternative to scrapping it. Please advise.

As for the column, or that mass of stuff I sent in as a column, I'd rather not see that run right now, either. It is not the same war, not in any way. Before the Tet offensive, the war had a kind of easy sameness to it, and writing against a two-month lead time was no problem. The general feel of things remained the same, month after month, even year after year. Now, all the terms have changed, all the old assumptions about the war, about our chances for even the most ignoble kind of "victory" in it, have been turned around. If, for some reason, you want to get something into print in a hurry, the column might do. I'd rather you wait another ten days or so until I get the new material finished, and run that instead. It will be a little more formal than the stuff I sent before, a little less idiosyncratic and later I can use some of the sections and vignettes for future pieces. I'd like to know your feeling about that material. Is it too broken up for your tastes, too disjointed, or do the details come together? And does it make sense to people who have not been here? I've been careful not to take too much for granted with my probable readers, trying to explain as much as I can about Vietnamese customs, military operational procedures, terrain, weapons, etc. The very few people here who read both the Establishment piece and the column were terribly enthusiastic about it, but they've had the advantage of the same experiences, the same

references, that went into the writing.

The last ten days have been incredible. Even the most experienced correspondants here have been shattered by the offensive and, even more, by the insane American reaction to it. I think, in my last letter, I told you that the military situation here was desperate and that Spring would bring the most terrible fighting of the war, but I wasn't prepared for this. I lost my non-combatant status in the Delta on the first day of the offensive, during an ambush, and I have passed through so many decimated towns and cities that they get all mixed up in my mind. Here in Hue ("They'll never hit Hue," the Command was always fond of saying. "They'll never hit Saigon, they'll never hit Dalat, they'll never hit Can Tho, etc. etc.") the destruction has been incredible, air strikes knocking out whole blocks of the one really lovely city in Vietnam, destroying the university, the walls around the Citadel and, probably tomorrow, the Citadel itself. Yesterday morning, in Cholon, I was riding on the left side of an armored jeep when a mortar round exploded ten yards away. I had my field pack slung over my shoulder and a four-inch piece of shrapnel burned into it, and another fragment hit the driver, blinding him in the left eye. They fight at least as well in the cities as they do in the jungles, and I think they could, eventually, take Saigon. Right now, with about 1500 men, they have crippled the city, and no American with any power will admit it. , will even give the Viet Cong the respect they've earned by this offensive. Where we have not been smug, we have been hysterical, and we will pay for all of it.

Let me know what you thought of the first material and what you'd like me to do about the Establishment piece. Was the chart material clear to you? Was the piece too long? While I'm waiting to hear from you, I'll just work on another column, which you should receive in about two weeks. I don't much like having to throw out two month's work, but I really think it's best. I'm trying to get to Khe Sanh now, but it's difficult. If it doesn't work out, I'll go back to Saigon and get things together for you.

Regards,

Mike

4 May
Saigon

Dear Harold,

This Vietnam trip must really have established some sort of record for sustained confusion. At this moment, having reached Candida by phone last night, I'm expecting some word from either her or you, and I really have no idea at all what that word might be. Whatever you do or do not want from me here, please answer this letter by cable, c/o LIFE CONTINENTS/SAIGON, so I'll know definitively, for once, what kind of plans to make. As for the confusion, let me try briefly to outline the past six months:

During the last week of January, I mailed approximately 12,000 words to you via certified mail; this included what I thought of as the first two columns and the piece that would have accompanied the Saigon-American chart. I kept the chart itself because I wanted to check the dates of departure of each of the names included. Since I have no idea which of my letters or cables have reached you, let me go over something again. The Establishment piece and the list were okay, but no more; I think that the premises were wrong, that the whole project might have been worthwhile two years ago, when there was a viable establishment here and when it had some honest color. That was the period covered by Beyer in his outline, but it had no resemblance to the Saigon I came to in November. The American community then (it's infinitely worse now) was so outsized, so grim and beaurocratic and dull that I only followed the project because it was something you wanted and because I knew that you'd already paid Beyer for his half of it. Beyer turned up here in December, and we worked on it together, but he felt that there was less to it than I did. (I still am spooked by this damned piece, and, as I've said before, will produce it for you if you really want it. I don't believe in it, I think it's a bad idea, a silly idea. It was fine once, but not any more, not for years.) Anyway, I shipped the manuscripts off and left for the Delta, and was in the Special Forces compound in Cantho when the Tet Offensive broke. Tet changed everything here, and made the material I'd mailed seem like it had been written from a different war. If it had been published in, say, March, it would have made us all look foolish. The war had gone on in so much the same way for so long, that a two-month lead time was no problem, but Tet was just too big. I was able to get a call through to Saigon, and a cable was sent to you, telling you to hold all the material until you heard from me. It was five days before I could get out of Cantho, five days in which I lost my non-combatant status and could find no time to sleep or even slip my boots off. When I finally made it back to Saigon I wrote you a letter which seemed to me at the time perfectly coherent, but which really must have seemed a little insane to you. If you ever got it. Much of Saigon was occupied by the Vietcong then, and all of the more civilizing services offered by the military were suspended, mail especially, and I'm fairly sure that none of it - the copy, the wire or the letter - ever reached you. I spent two or three days in Saigon getting my head together and then split for Hue. The manuscript you have now came out of that. It is the first of what I laughingly refer to as "the column" (a private joke), and I think it's damned good. I can't imagine what you're going to do with it, but I'm about finished with another one and I'm going to send it off to you. And then begin another. There is something compulsive, obsessive, working here; I have all of this time in now, all of the experience,

* My copies were stolen, along with my pass, by ARVN troops near Hue. All I have are full notes.

a terrifying feel for the war, which I'm hip to, and I must not let any of it be wasted. Now, a piece like the Establishment piece would seem obscene, like using, say, a battalion aid station for background in a fashion spread. There are two Vietnams, the one that I'm up to my ass in here and the one perceived in the States by people who've never been here. They are mutually exclusive.

I can't imagine how greatly things have changed back there in the past five weeks, after Johnson's speech and King's death and the peace scares. Except for Joe Alsop, I know no one here who really believes that this war is going to end easily. I think the very worst of it is just beginning, and I think, regardless of how most Americans feel, that it is a more important subject than ever. I want to stay for a few more months, no more, and continue with the kind of stuff that I mailed out in early April. The idea of doing conventional features is not exciting, and the idea of working for anyone but Esquire is appalling. With that lined out as honestly as possible, I must simply ask you for some dough, assuming that you're at all interested. I will need what Candida referred to on the phone as "a lot of money", not really a lot, but enough to finish up a respectable tour here in some comfort. It is incredibly expensive here. I have colleagues in the press corps here, some of them incredible fakes, fantastic hacks, who live so well on their expense accounts that they may never be able to adjust to peace. They have \$600 a month digs at the Continental or the Caravelle, and every five weeks they go off on R&Rs paid for by their outfits, off to Hong Kong or Taipei or Bangkok. This is bad for my morale, especially bad considering that, a small handful aside, they seldom get into the field, attend operations, speak to troops or hang around where there is incoming. CBS, for example, spends a quarter of a million dollars a year for rooms alone, and damned near that much again for R&Rs. By those standards, I'm not after a lot of money, only enough. I've been here for six months straight, and I need a couple of weeks away. It has been frustrating, dangerous as hell and painful in more ways than I can tell you, and I want out for a bit. (It has been exciting too, but I won't go into that here.) Can we work something out?

Thanks mostly to some kind words Robert Shapelen has offered on my behalf, I've been invited to meet with Landsdale this week. He sees no one from the press. I have a piece in mind for you, to be done when both Landsdale and myself are back in the States. He's leaving next week for good, after all these years. I think he'll agree to a few days together in the late summer or early fall, and I think it could be fascinating. This should reach you on Tuesday, and I'll wait around Saigon through Thursday for some sort of answer. Depending on that answer, I'll either come back to New York or go back up to the A Shau Valley with the 1st Cav. It seems an odd choice. Please give my regards to Johnny Berendt, and let me know what's happening.

Best,

M. J. He

Hong Kong
18 May

2
Dear Harold,

I've gotten this to you via Slim Aarons, whom I ran into here. I wanted to go on a bit about the wire I sent to the legal department, re the General. He's fiction - I hoped that that would be obvious - made up out of a dozen odd types I've run into around Vietnam, most especially a Special Forces colonel I knew in the Delta who was a Persian scholar and a fanatic about things like the late Beethoven Quartets ("The purest thing in all of music!"). There were others, too, the party intellectuals of the Vietnam War, and they all went into the General. When I was finished, and began showing it to a few people, they all assumed that it was Lansdale, whom I'd never even met at the time. The history of the General is in no way comparable to Lansdale's (the General is in the army, for one thing), but it does suggest that spooky trail that Lansdale left behind in the early days of the U.S. involvement. The General is invented, and bears no real resemblance to persons living, dead, etc.

I must rush this letter, because Slim is taking off for New York soon, and I want you to get this in plenty of time. You've been damned generous about everything, and I want to begin thanking you here and now. I was rapidly approaching very bad shape in Vietnam, and needed this break badly. I've been over here screwing off for five days now, and it's been marvelous. After six straight months of the war, I've almost forgotten how to behave in civilization, but I'm getting it back. I've got a few small adds on the first piece that I'll have out to you on Monday. When will it be run? And how? I'm nearly done with the second piece, and you'll have that before I go back to Saigon.

Again, thanks for the money and the good words and the support. Letter follows.

Best,

Mike

3 600 exposures film
Vietnam; all on
Dayton Establishment
June 1 8/60
Sample column

Dear Harold,

About two months ago it occurred to me that next October we will have known each other for six years. This is one of those facts, recollected on the fly, that can make you feel suddenly very tired; Summing Up at twenty-seven. I had received a letter from a young writer finishing his senior year at Princeton, asking for advice on how to make out in New York. For me, it was one of the better jokes this spring, but the kid was the brother of a slight acquaintance, so remotely connected that he couldn't have known. In answering him, I was bushwhacked by the memory of the first meeting you and I ever had, and it came to me with an abrupt, embarrassing precision. How really green I was then, how overbearingly earnest and maladroit. I must have come away from that meeting with a feeling of failure, and it must have gone deeper than I knew, because when I thought of it recently none of the things I'd done since then made me feel any better.

This recent urgency over my accreditation has only brought to a head something I've wanted to do for over two years now, namely to write about the war in Vietnam for Esquire. Before I get into some particulars, let me add one more scrap of preface: As far as accreditation and writing from Vietnam go, I have options, one of them, possibly, incredibly lucrative. I swear, Harold, that this isn't a dodge to make me seem in any way more valuable to you. (It wouldn't work anyway.) I mention it only because none of the options interest me in the least. You may remember my enthusiasm for Esquire six years ago, and you may be surprised to know how little of it has diminished. And while it might strike you as patsy-talk, strictly speaking I don't write for money. I care everything about editorial respect for my work, and, even more, about having the right audience. As far

as I'm concerned, Esquire and any writing that I do in Vietnam are all tied together in my head, and it would take some terrible desperation to separate them for me. This is one of those weird, magic equations that writers make up for themselves, an illogical arrangement of symbols that has been known to generate first-rate work. It's strange; while I have every reason to think of you, professionally, as a good friend, and to be grateful for all the considerations you've shown me, we always seem, somehow, to just miss each other. I think, finally, that this might be our time.

Let me begin with some specific ideas for simple feature pieces. The six outlined below were taken from an older list of around twelve. I've kept these because they have in common a potential for going beyond themselves, for implying larger aspects of the war not immediately involved with their subjects.

1.) The Press in Vietnam - This could include as an appendix, an "Establishment" chart. I'd talk to all kinds of reporters - American, European, the wire men, the television crews, special correspondants from small city papers right up to Robert Shapelen. By centering on individual journalists I could get to that most delicate issue - the kind of coverage we've been getting. Some of the reporters (they are extremely attractive figures) work out of the old "I-Was-There" war correspondent's tradition. A lot more (most, I think) cover the fighting from PIO briefing rooms in Saigon, getting their color from the Caravelle cocktail lounge and the Playboy Bar. I remember the attitude of sympathetic disdain with which the Europeans regarded the Americans. I'd want to talk about the women reporters, about the casualties, about the hacks and about reporters like Morley Safer and Robert W. Apple, Jr. I'd touch on the different kinds of censorship operating on the coverage from there. Some of it is routine, official, but there is also the principal of self-censorship, far more cynical and far more common. When I was in Saigon, I spent a lot of time in the company of journalists, many of whom openly admitted

that they were doing whatever they had to do to keep their assignments. There might be a nice finish to the piece in a talk with David Halberstam, who is going back for Harper's this September.

2.) Saigon - I suggest this, not because, on the surface, it is in any way Esquire's sort of piece, but because it is mine. (Credentials to follow.) Before I left for Asia last year I called you about this piece and, quite wisely, you turned it down. My call was like the ones I'd get from writers when I was an editor: "I have this great idea! A piece on India!" As an idea, it's like a disengaged organ, nothing vital about it. But I believe, ideally, that there is nothing more dramatic to write about than a place - almost anyplace - and that I have a real skill for doing it. (This kind of immodesty will turn up from time to time. I don't have an agent to do it for me.) Without giving you my thirty-five cent lecture on The Best Kind of Journalism; An Aesthetic, I think that the tactful selection of details, held together by good writing, can reveal a city better than a thousand photographs, and that in the case of Saigon, revealing the city means revealing a great deal of the war. Saigon is the gauge. Not since Madrid in the Thirties has a single city stood for so much, reflected so many aspects of a war.

Even as recently as April, 1966, old Saigon hands still spoke of "the Paris of the East", spoke of it out of the ruins. Not even Manila, Showdown City, offers this contrast of luxury and meanness. There is a day-to-day, street-to-street feeling of something about to explode; the streets are closed by sandbags and concertina wire, the boulevards under perpetual patrol, the graceful parks surrounded by ARVN troops, the bars and hotels filled with desperately frightened American kids, some of them literally hours from combat, both coming and going. It is like some Apocalyptic City, where the final view is not a matter of politics, power or morality, but of sensibility. (Don't let this

spook you, by the way. It's not my style to write preachments.)

I began blocking this story out in my head on the day I arrived there a little over a year ago. It would be a big piece, both in its length and in the vision of the city I'd try to evoke, that mood of debasement, pain and glamour all working at once. Please consider this one, and let's talk about it.

3.) I have an idea for a piece that could be called The Aces, or The Veterans, something like that. I'd find, say, six Americans who have put in a lot of combat time over a long period, who have gotten themselves a hotshit reputation not only for what the Army considers valour, but for personal style as well. Pappy Olds is an obvious example, and I know I can reach others once I get there. Call them war celebrities; those few men that everyone else knows about, the legends whose currency can run at least as long as a year in any war. I'd like to select them and profile them, maybe like this: Keep them as six separate items, beginning each with some brief biographical and descriptive material, and then letting each of them speak for themselves in the final text, about six hundred words for each, without my intruding. Soldiers, particularly the professionals, talking about themselves are fascinating. Sometimes you have to listen to twenty minutes of Soldier's Guide, some self-conscious oogle-boogle compounded of Baptist-Midwest-backstreet-American values, sometimes refined by a West Point overlay, and then you hit on one crushing moment of candor that makes all the rest worth it. The media, television in particular, have found a way to make conventional propaganda look innocent. The way they've been picking their quotes from selected combat troops, I can barely remember hearing the honest voice of a soldier in Vietnam. It's as though the men they interview have been programmed, one more symptom of a packaged war. The other talk, unbroadcast and unreported, can be chilling or touching, disgusting or sobering, but it comes from some honest contact with the situation and is worth recording, arranging and publishing.

4.) Keeping Up With the Green Berets - I think the intensive coverage of the Special Forces began to dwindle two years ago, and it's reached a point of scarcity now that one suspects a cover-up. (I think that the Levy trial triggered the first extensive mention of them in months.) My idea would simply be to hang in with them for awhile, talk to as many of them as possible, watch them work, deftly pick a few choice brains, and write it. I'd want to know whether they've become so brutalized, as a unit, that the public would be appalled by their conduct, or whether the old ambition of the Army to form a truly elite force has been shattered by the realities of guerilla warfare and the tragic feedback of pacification. I'm aware of how very tough this piece would be, but I'd want to do it anyway.

5.) There could be a tremendously moving piece in one of the outfits that are, ostensibly, on the periphery of the war. Their alleged function is support, but more and more they are being brought into the center. The old axiom says that it's not the fighting that's hard, but the waiting, and what I saw on Guam last year, the tension and the anxiety, backs this up. The Eighth Tactical Fighter Wing or the 606th Air Commando Squadron, both in Thailand, are possibilities. If this interests you, I could find others.

6.) Some profiles:

General Westmoreland - (God damn! What a hell of an idea!) The fact is, nobody knows much about him. He's either Lord-blessed by the Reader's Digest set or vilified by the dove intelligentsia, and somewhere in between there is an interesting, complicated, whole man. No matter what one may think of him, he's been the victim of mindless over-simplification. All I want to do is the fullest portrait of him that's ever been done, really full. Keeping away, for the moment, the most crucial issues of the Vietnam war, I'm respectful of his abilities as a commander. His position has been corrupted from the outside by political expediency, (It could grow worse; he could end up as our Coriolanus.) yet I'm inclined to be sympathetic towards him.

Ellsworth Bunker - Because he's there.

Major General Edward Lansdale - Probably the most intriguing American figure in Vietnam, he is, and has been for years, head of the CIA operation there. Along with His Eminence, he was responsible for the old Vietnam Lobby. It's supposed that he served as both the model for the hero of "The Ugly American" and the villain of "The Quiet American". Aside from the fact that he fascinates me, I think he'd be a natural for an Esquire piece.

I have other ideas, but they're slighter or less well-defined for me: The Black Market (I have a first-rate Saigon connection for that), a piece about the American civilian women in Vietnam, a piece about the intellectuals (aesthetes?) among the troops stationed there, a Recreational Guide to Vietnam. One of these might be worked out. As for the other six, I feel that they're all interesting. I'd be excited about doing any one of them, particularly Saigon or one of the profiles. But there's something else I have in mind, something a lot more ambitious; so ambitious, in fact, that from your point of view it will have to strike you as practically insane.

I want, quite exactly, to be your correspondent. I want to spend several months living (modestly) on the Esquire nut, ranging around the country, mixing with all sorts of company, occasionally going in and out of combat. Digging the war, you might say. After the first few weeks I'd like to begin sending you a running, formal account, a journal made up of extended vignettes, set pieces, geographical sketches, personality portraits (it would be full of people), even battle reportage. In all, it could run any length you'd like, and it could be published in any form you might choose. I think of it as a regular column, but that's only one possibility. It would not be "news" material, nothing that would derive its effect from being current, but would cover those aspects of the war that don't date. Most of the journalism on the war so far has been hard news. The "higher" journalism, it seems, is exclusively political, or at least academic. (John Sack's piece is the

only important exception I can think of.)

Last week, when I blurted out some stuff in your office about "the best kind of journalism....dramatic value of the war....a chance to make it seem more real....." you asked me to be more specific. The six ideas outlined above are more specific, and if I'm back on this now, it's because I have a hope for it that I can't get rid of. (The last time I felt this way about a piece of work, I took a 3,000 word assignment meant as a humorous look at Fort Dix and ran it up to 10,000 words, damned few of them funny, all of which Holiday ran. Marianne Moore liked it so well that she wrote me an extravagant letter about it, and John Sack told me last week that when it came out a year ago he re-wrote the first third of "M" because my piece had made him feel that his Fort Dix was lifeless. After more than a year, he remembered the piece better than I did, quoting from it accurately to me over the phone, flattering the hell out of me. It's distasteful for me to talk this way about my work, but honest-to-God, Harold, I want to impress you now.) In the past, and for good reason, you've been skeptical about what I could do for Esquire. Now, I have some published pieces that I'd be pleased to refer you to: the Dix thing, Bleecker Street, campus drugs, the Museum of Modern Art, Guam, Montreal/Expo. They're my credentials. Those, and the fact that I've already been to Vietnam, that much of the ground I'd be going over for you I've gone over before.

The editorial-production problems of such an assignment are technicalities that I believe we could handle. Leave the perishable stuff for the newsmen and the analysts, and concentrate on the people, the climate, the moods, all the parts of the war that go beyond deadlines. Anyway, there is a cut-off point after which all wars are alike, their most vital textures the same. As for the question, and it's some question, of whether Esquire should devote this kind of space to Vietnam, I can't presume to comment on. I think, though, that for most of your readers it is the abiding obsession. (Before August, 1965, it was merely a preoccupation.) As an overwhelming, unavoidable fact of our time, it

goes deeper than anything my generation has known, even deeper, I'm afraid, than Kennedy's murder. No matter when it ends or how it ends, it will leave a mark on this country like the trail of slime that a sand slug leaves, a lasting taint. If standard journalism really worked, if all the sophistication of our communications could really engage and purge, there would be no need for the kind of work I want to do now. You can turn your television set on and see, in color and after a few hour's lapse between action and broadcast, your nephew's corpse being loaded on a helicopter, your brother's leg being shattered by mortar, your husband's platoon coming in from patrol. It's almost like those Napoleonic campaigns, when the aristocracy would take some chicken and a cold Chablis and repair to the lawn to watch the artillery engagement below. Almost, but not quite, because somehow the news, the blunt fact, deadens the reality, conceals the truth, making the war look canned and hopelessly remote.

This would be dangerous work, professionally dangerous more than anything else. If I failed in it, there would be no way in the world for me to recoup. A bad piece is an abomination to you or to me, but it would be forgotten. But a major take, like the one I'm proposing, would have to succeed. If it bombed, it would be remembered, and it would mean quite a bit more than just not being able to write again for Esquire. So you can see the kind of confidence (laced with arrogance) that I have in this idea and why, after all this, I've come directly to you with it.

Milne