UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-SANTA BARBARA

SHOT TO THE CORE:
VIETNAM VETERANS AND THE DISENTEGRATION OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

A Study through Memoirs and Oral History

SENIOR HONORS THESIS, 2008-2009

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY
ALLISON FISCHER

FACULTY MENTOR: PROFESSOR LISA JACOBSON

Dedicated to Dr. Robert Fischer, Veteran of World War Two and my Grandfather
You are always in my heart

Contents

Introduction

"We were the children of the 1950s and John F. Kennedy's young stalwarts of the early 1960s. He told the world that Americans would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship" in the defense of freedom. We were the down payment on that costly contract, but the man who signed it was not there when we fulfilled his promise. John F. Kennedy waited for us on a hill in Arlington National Cemetery, and in time we came by the thousands to fill those slopes with our white marble markers and to ask on the murmur of the wind if that was truly the future he had envisioned for us."

We were Soldiers Once ... and Young
by Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore, USA (Ret.)
and Joseph L. Galloway

The United States military occupied Vietnam from 1959-1975 with the stated goal of preventing the spread of communism in South East Asia. Unlike previous wars in which the US was involved, such as World War II, the Vietnam War was never formally declared by Congress, was fought almost entirely with guerilla tactics, and had no ultimate objectives other than the vaguely defined goal to "spread democracy" and stop the spread of communism. The Vietnam War launched a model of warfare unfamiliar to American troops in which a state group (such as the US military) battled a non-state group (the Viet Cong). This model of warfare created an environment of perpetual battle mindset. Furthermore, the difficulty in distinguishing Viet Cong guerrillas from Vietnamese civilians, and new, more destructive warfare technologies, resulted in indiscriminate killing and a high civilian death toll. Other exceptional factors of the war include the troop rotation system, which limited each soldier to a one-year tour of duty in

Vietnam. This policy provided for a continual influx of inexperienced officers and inhibited the growth of unit cohesion and camaraderie amongst the troops. Finally, the "war of attrition" policy advocated by General Westmoreland did not successfully wear down the resolve of the North Vietnamese troops and encouraged the practice amongst US officers of exaggerating VC death counts. Ultimately, for the first time in American history, the US and their allies publicly acknowledged their failed warfare mission.

Along with the unique nature of the war itself, social turmoil and shifting cultural ideologies in the United States in the 1960s contributed to a particularly traumatic re-adjustment experience for Vietnam veterans. Until 1968, Americans cautiously supported the war in Vietnam. Communism seemed to be a pervasive threat, and the media wholeheartedly spread the idea that American soldiers in Vietnam were quickly and effectively eliminating supporters of this dangerous political ideology. However, the Tet Offensive in January of 1968 effectively demonstrated that Americans were not accomplishing all they claimed in Vietnam. The event, in which Viet Cong aggressors unexpectedly struck military and civilian command and control centers throughout South Vietnam, effectively turned public opinion against the Vietnam War. After this date the media began to portray the detailed atrocities that occurred daily in Vietnam, and the American public rallied around a large-scale anti-war movement. Co-occurring events, such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, prompted further protests and social turmoil.

The domestic social unrest during the 1960s both reflected and generated societal conflicts, particularly amongst the youth who embraced the civil rights movement's quest for social justice, and the counterculture's rejection of militarism and social conformity. Calls for racial equality, sexual freedom, and peace on earth challenged the values of Cold War America. The disparity in ideals and values between the men and women of the "greatest generation" who came of age in the 1940's and 1950's and the youth of the 1960's was of particular concern for soldiers in Vietnam. These young men, in many cases, rejected the authority of their superior officers, whom they perceived to be traditionalists, warmongers, and most significantly, liars. Unfortunately, their non-serving peers often viewed veterans of Vietnam as "incarnations of what they considered a criminal policy."[1] Ultimately, these conflicting and evolving values often isolated veterans and relegated them to the outskirts of society.

The process of recovery from the Vietnam War, both for individual veterans and for society as a whole, was extended and continues in contemporary society. The extreme and seemingly futile war violence, survivor's guilt, and prevalent anti-war sentiment all converged to create a population of deeply traumatized war veterans. Furthermore, the war's attack on core American ideals prompted a national sense of shame and hesitation to address the implications of such a great national failure. As a consequence, the late 1970's saw a societal repression of all references to Vietnam. Few books, movies, or

---

[1] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1977), 220. Caputo's memoir is one of the first autobiographical accounts of the war in Vietnam. It was published in a generation when Americans were extremely hesitant to discuss the war. In Consequence, Caputo played a major role in setting the tone for subsequent discussion for the war and its legacy in American society.

critical analyses of the war emerged during this time. Most significantly, society relegated veterans, the face on this national failure, to the outskirts of society. Historian Rick Berg explained, "In a war of containment, he [the veteran] has failed and is contaminated. He is now part of the problem, a carrier who must be sterilized."[2] Instead of greeting returning Vietnam Veterans with the ticker tape parades of World War II, Americans greeted them with a general attitude of suspicion and sometimes subjected them to outright discrimination in the post-war years.

This study explores war memoirs and oral histories to examine the defining elements in the lives of Vietnam veterans and the ways in which the evolving perceptions of war have contributed to the cultural memory and legacy of the Vietnam War. The majority of the men and women who fought in Vietnam grew up in a period of strong American idealism, influenced by the American (and allied) victory in WWII as well as President Kennedy's calls for patriotism and national unity. However, unique aspects of the Vietnam War, including the guerilla combat style, advanced weapons technologies, domestic anti-war movement, relatively uncensored media coverage, and conflicting messages regarding the goals of the war, contributed to a particularly traumatic re-adjustment experience for Vietnam veterans. Upon discovery that core "American values" such as the moral primacy of democratic government, individual freedom and ethical equality were, in fact, nothing but myth, many of these men and women suffered

---

[2] John C. Rowe, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," in *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, ed. Rick Berg (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 136.

an acute identity crisis in the years following their military service. Attitudes toward and acceptance of Vietnam veterans have improved significantly since 1980. However, throughout their post-war lives Vietnam veterans have experienced disdain from peers and elders, discrimination with regards to education, employment and health benefits, as well as a high prevalence of stress disorders and addictions.

Moreover, this thesis will argue that the idea of American Exceptionalism wielded great power and importance for the men who fought in Vietnam. The events and experiences of soldiers in the Vietnam War shattered basic assumptions these soldiers had internalized since infancy, regarding their personal and national identity. However, in the process of re-thinking and re-telling their experiences through memoirs and oral histories, veterans have shaped the cultural memory of the war in both conscious and subconscious ways. Memoirs published in the years immediately following the fall of Saigon paint a scattered, incoherent, and futile picture of war. However, memoirs written in recent years, while maintaining descriptions of the futility and brutality of war, increasingly conform to a narrative style that rationalizes the acts and mindsets of Vietnam veterans. In consequence, as time has passed, the cultural memory of the war has been infused with a reconceived notion of American Exceptionalism and of the American war hero.

Sources and Methods

Due to its contemporary and highly controversial nature, there are an abundance of primary source materials relating to the Vietnam War. In order to focus specifically on the veteran experience, the primary source materials for this research project are limited to memoirs and oral histories of American men and women who served in Vietnam. To properly evaluate the diversity of experience among veterans I analyze the memories of veterans from varying racial, class, and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, testimony from enlistees, draftees, varying military ranks and men who served at differing points as the war progressed provide insight into the similarities and differences amongst Vietnam Veterans. Finally, by reading selected memoirs and interviews written in the last third of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I am able to interpret the evolving legacy of the Vietnam War.

The advantage of using autobiographical testimony as primary source material is two-fold. Memoirs give the reader an understanding of the reality of war through the words of those who experienced the brutality firsthand. Because cultural preconceptions, painful emotions, and the simple passage of time can alter and distort memories, especially in the case of trauma victims, veteran memory is also a valuable tool in understanding how the memory of the Vietnam War has been shaped and altered over time. My analysis of memoirs will enhance our understanding of how the events of this war and transformations in American society both during and after the war affected the veteran's process of readjustment. Within these personal testimonies I will specifically

analyze motivations for joining the war, changing views while serving in Vietnam, veteran's reactions to the anti-war movement, and their retrospective views on the war and its legacy. This analysis will provide a counter-opinion to the media fed images of veterans and create a better-rounded view of the reality of the Vietnam War.

Representing the Vietnam War through the experiences and memories of veterans has gained popularity in recent years because of the impression that veteran's memories can reveal the "real" and "raw" side of the war. Oral history gives an impression of the ambiance surrounding a historic situation and gives a voice to men and women previously overlooked by history.[3] However, personal impressions should not substitute for political and historical knowledge. Those who fought in Vietnam knew little of the culture and politics of the Vietnamese, and lacked the broader perspective of the war's progress. As Berg explains, every veteran can tell the "real" story of his experience in Vietnam, however these "direct experiences are marked by uninformed impressions and unconscious biases."[4]

A distinct pattern emerges in the reading of Vietnam veteran autobiographical testimony. The veteran invariably lives the first part of his life in the safety and order of the pre-combat world. However the horrors of Vietnam destroy his identity-defining beliefs and values. After the war he sees the world differently and is viewed differently

---

[3] Ronald J. Grele, "Listen to their Voices: Two Case Studies in the Interpretation of Oral History," in *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, by Ronald J. Grele, vol. 2 (Chicago: Precedent Inc, 1985), 236.

[4] Berg, 148

by everyone around him.[5] While there are clearly similarities in the experiences of veterans, the uniformity of this narrative appears to stem more from an attempt to retell the story of a gruesome and unsuccessful war in a comprehensive and relatable manner.

In many ways, what is forgotten in the retelling of a memory is as revealing as the details that are remembered. Veteran Nathaniel Tripp complained, "now they (Vietnam veterans) sit drinking beer and picking at the scabs of old wounds, forgetting how the wounds got there, reinventing the war and themselves because the truth is too terrible to face."[6] While Tripp clearly resented this restructuring of memory, when examined closely, almost all veteran testimony "utilizes a variety of psychic defenses in order to protect themselves from the conclusion that the war was pointless and futile."[7] This observation could potentially be used to discredit the use of memory as a primary source. However, memory becomes an invaluable source if it is accepted as a construction based not only on replication of a past experience, but of a combination of remembrance, fantasy and invention influenced by contemporary interests and values.

---

[5] Wilson Hubbel, "My Experience in Vietnam, Part 1" (lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, January 7, 2009).
Wilson Hubbel grew up in San Diego County. He received his draft notice in December of 1965 and served in Marine Corp from 1966-1967. He is a strong proponent of discussing his traumatic experience in Vietnam as a path to healing and greater societal awareness.

[6] Nathaniel Tripp, *Father, Soldier, Son: Memoir of a Platoon Leader In Vietnam* (South Royalton: Steerforth, 2006), 31.
Nathaniel Tripp served as a Platoon leader in Vietnam from 1968-1969. His memoir describes his fatherless childhood and a search for some type of role model in Vietnam. He artfully weaves his postwar experiences of flashbacks and relationship difficulties into a description of his service in Vietnam.

[7] Berg, 160

In final consideration, memory holds value and legitimacy as a primary source. However, like all primary sources, it contains biases and inaccuracies that must be recognized. Veteran testimony provides otherwise inaccessible information regarding the emotion and ambience of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, the biases and inconsistencies amongst veteran memory help to explain why the war was so traumatic for its participants. These inconsistencies reflect the senselessness and brutality of war. Consequently, a fully informed understanding of the Vietnam War (if this is possible) must combine memory with formal historical and political discourse. The combination of these two elements pays due attention to the human side of war while also explaining the overarching policies and cultural factors which guided the pace of the war.[89]

Literature Review

In the present day, the collection of Vietnam War-related memoirs, documentaries, docu-dramas etc. equals or exceeds these types of recently published materials for other wars and crucial moments in American history.[10] However, unlike older conflicts and events, the vast majority of Vietnam War literature has been published in the last 25 years. As revisionist historian Rick Berg explains, the long silence and

---

[8] Note on the Primary Sources: I have used ideas and a large amount of primary source testimony from a UCSB class offered in Winter '09, Religious Studies 155 (The Impact of the Vietnam War on Religion and Culture). For more information visit the course website-http://rss155.org

[9] When relevant, substantive information on veterans referenced above is noted.

[10] An amazon.com book search on Feb. 16, 2009 yielded the following results: American Civil war-48,800 books, World War One- 32,365 books, World War Two- 56,674, **Vietnam War- 74,710 books**

subsequent outpouring of Vietnam literature indicates that, "the ambiguous nature of the US intervention in Vietnam—both partial and endless—generated a cultural response that reflected both conspicuous avoidance and intense preoccupation."[11] Put simply, the patterns of discussion regarding the war reveal the original shame and evolving cultural obsession with integrating the Vietnam War into American historical discourse.

A significant portion of Vietnam War secondary literature focuses on the political and militaristic implications of the war itself. In particular, accounts of American blunders in Vietnam, such as the Tet Offensive and Mai Lai Massacre, are abundant.[12] Additionally, investigations into the politics and strategies of Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara and other war administrators are numerous, though with very little agreement between separate analyses.[13]

While there is extensive literature documenting the public and private war policy, there exists relatively little analysis of the lives and post-war experiences of the veterans themselves. Two of the most respected works on the subject of veteran readjustment are: *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans—Neither Victims nor Executioners* Robert J. Lifton, and *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* by Jonathan Shay. While Lifton and Shay viewed Vietnam veterans from different

---

[11] Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Penguin (Non-Classics), 2004), 238.
[12] James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*; Fitzgerald, Francis, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*; and Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* all relate to the military and cultural factors surrounding the Vietnam War.
[13] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*; and James G. Blight, *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* shed light on the political leadership of the Vietnam War.

perspectives, they both emphasized the role which personal and cultural values played in the experience of veterans. Lifton's book relied on his experience as a counselor and psychiatrist to present a psychological portrait of the veteran experience. He argued that the mental shift that allows normal men to kill during wartime is merely a more extreme form of the subtle changes civilians make to perform effectively in the different spheres of their everyday lives. Furthermore, he believed that certain circumstances involved in the Vietnam War produced a type of morally ambiguous violence that had little presence in previous American-fought wars. However, Lifton argued that the "atrocity producing situations", which motivated veterans to perform violent and morally questionable acts, caused extreme stress reactions. The root cause of trauma in these situations, Lifton argued, was the departure from values and ideals veterans had internalized since their youth. His psycho-historical approach to the Vietnam War appears as an informed and multi-faceted manner of understanding a trauma which affected such a large portion of men.[14] While I do not quote extensively from Lifton throughout my paper, it is from his trailblazing work which I adopt my argument of personal and ideological breakdown during wartime.

Jonathan Shay's book, *Achilles in Vietnam* further explained the characteristics and historical roots of veteran trauma through a comparison with Homers epic, *The Iliad*, written over one thousand years ago. Through his analysis of both interviews from Vietnam veterans and the text of *The Iliad*, Shay demonstrated the remarkable similarity of experience amongst veterans of all wars in all centuries. Lifton's analysis began, "in the moral world of the soldier—what his culture understands to be right—and betrayal of

---

[14] Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the war: Vietnam veterans: neither victims nor executioners.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), i-xiv

that moral order by a commander."[15] He further argued, "what has not changed in three millennia are violent rage and social withdrawal when deep assumptions of 'whats right' are violated."[16] Both Lifton's psychological approach and Shay's classical approach strengthen my own argument that the ideal of American exceptionalism, destroyed in Vietnam, played a critical role in the veteran readjustment experience.

Myra MacPherson's book, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*, is one of the most thorough analyses of the veteran experience in the context of the evolving war legacy. MacPherson extensively analyzed the impact of the Vietnam War on the generation of Americans who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike Lifton and Shay, MacPherson developed a broad perspective of the Vietnam War and its implications based on political, social, and psychological analysis. She acknowledged Lifton's argument that increased militarism contributed to the high incidence of trauma in Vietnam veterans. However, her central thesis is that the anti-war movement, though not a part of actual combat, colored every aspect of the post-war experience for Vietnam veterans.[17] While my argument follows this conclusion about the influence of the anti-war movement, I believe that MacPherson's belief in the power of the American public is somewhat overstated. Clearly, the anti-war movement affected Vietnam veterans, however, in light of their wartime experience, the ambiguous public attitude was merely the proverbial "icing on the cake" on a much larger personal, psychological trauma.

---

[15] Shay, 3
[16] Shay, 5
[17] Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (New York: Indiana UP, 2002), 7.

Finally, Kyle Longley's book, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*, follows the life of the American veteran from his indoctrination as a US soldier to his disillusionment in his postwar life. Longley explained, "commonalities of social constructions of masculinity, which include factors such as the importance of family and community and the shaping of perceptions by political and entertainment role models, all affected decisions of the millions of young men who came of draft age during the Vietnam War."[18] This explanation of the motivating forces of men who fought in Vietnam took the lofty dialogue of Lifton and Shay and placed it within the context of the American experience understood by the broader population. Longley's use of memoirs and oral histories to explain the broader picture of the Vietnam experience provided a valuable guideline for my own research. He fully demonstrated how the single voices of Vietnam veterans can be brought together to bring a deeper and more nuanced understanding the Vietnam War and its consequences in society. While Longley's book followed a similar method and structure to my own research, I do not cite it throughout my paper because I did not discover the book until fairly late in my writing process.

In addition to the evolution in thought and experience of Vietnam veterans, this paper addresses the manner in which a complicated and incomprehensible event, like the Vietnam War, can be shaped into a coherent narrative. In his essay, "Memory and American History" David Thelen argued that "people depend on others to help them decide which experiences to forget and which to remember and what interpretation to place on an experience." Furthermore, he advances the idea that, "people develop a

---

[18] Kyle Longely, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (ME Sharpe, 2008), 15.

shared identity by identifying, exploring and agreeing on memories"[19]. While scholars largely agree that memories are never simple, objective representations of the past. Instead they are an individualized reconstructions of events influenced by psychological, linguistic, and cultural factors.

While all the authors discussed above address, in detail, a particular aspect of my personal research, my thesis is significant because it focuses specifically on the veteran perspective of warfare and "American values". Isolating the voice of veterans gives a unique view into the lives and evolving mindsets of the men and women who were most deeply affected by the war. Additionally, the way in which veterans tell their own stories will provide insight into the forces that shape the cultural memory of the war.

---

[19] David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 72, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1908632?cookieSet=1 (accessed March 19, 2009).

Chapter One

The Age of Innocence

Origins of American War Mythology and the Ideology of American Exceptionalism

America is a "City on a Hill", a "redeemer nation" with a divinely ordained mission to spread the noble ideals of freedom and prosperity throughout the world—or so all Americans have been told, both directly and indirectly, from our earliest educations. These widely held American beliefs exemplify the manner in which myths define the cultural identity and ideology of any given society. In his book, The *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam,* John Hellmann defined myths as "stories containing people's images of themselves in history." Furthermore he stated, "A people cannot function without myth. The narrative structures of myths articulate salient patterns that we see in our past and hold as our present value and purpose" [20] Throughout its 250-year history the United States has developed a set of myths, which fundamentally attempt to advance the notion that the United States is an exceptional nation endowed with unique privileges and responsibilities.

The creation of the myth of American Exceptionalism can be traced back to the years immediately following the victory in the American Revolution. Before this time, Historian Susan Mary Grant argued, "the nation was symbolically impoverished, lacking

---

[20] Hellmann John, *The American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), x.

its own music, literature, art…and homegrown heroes."[21] To compensate for this shortcoming, Americans transformed leaders and founders such as Washington, Jefferson, and eventually Lincoln into mythic figures who represented the desired core ideals of American society: liberty and equality.[22]

The guiding mythology and ideology of American society, created in the shadows of the American Revolution, was validated and strengthened in the aftermath of the Civil War of the nineteenth century. "In America, as elsewhere, professions of national sentiment would have rung hollow indeed, and been long since forgotten, had the point not been carried with a bayonet or a rifle."[23] In other words, American identity has been largely defined in times of war. The Northern victory in the Civil War began the process of restoring confidence in American institutions, and allowed for a reemphasis of American ideals based on the strength of these values in times of conflict.

The redefinition and articulation of American values during wartime has continued into the twentieth century. As the United States became increasingly involved in global affairs, inter-mixing with foreign cultures and governments strengthened American Exceptionalism, particularly the belief in national righteousness.[24] Nowhere is this trend more evident than in the popular interpretations of World War II. The Second World War is viewed retrospectively as "America's one black-and-white, good versus

---

[21] Susan-Mary Grant, "Making History: Myth and the Construction of American Nationhood," in *Myths & Nationhood*, comp. Geoffrey Hosking and Schopflin George (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2000), 93.
[22] Grant, 99
[23] Grant, 91
[24] Charles E. Neu, *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2009), 9.

evil war of the twentieth century."[25] Soldiers served their country without reservation, the enemy was unquestionably evil, and veterans received a hero's welcome.

Clearly these assumptions of the home front in prior war generations are a part of a carefully constructed narrative. During the American Civil War, attempts to draft soldiers into both the Union and Confederate Armies spurred dissent and mass rioting. Furthermore, on the battlefield, "Soldiers, particularly since the development of antiseptics, have resorted to self-inflicted wounds, such as shooting oneself in the foot. Part of gung ho patriot lore is that everyone prior to the Vietnam generation marched eagerly to war. This is pure mythology."[26] Even in the most widely accepted war in US history a portion of soldiers faced an apathetic American population upon their return. In fact, The GI Bill, one of the most celebrated elements of the World War II veteran recovery process, was originally met with great resistance. In an edition of *American Legion Magazine* written close to sixty years ago, David Camelon discussed the treatment of injured World War II soldiers returning home before the conclusion of the war. He explained, "it seems impossible to believe, now, that thousands of disabled men discharged during the war were forced to depend on charity for their very existence for months before the country they had fought to defend got around to caring for them."[27] However, the wartime victory and fragile economic situation within the US made way for

---

[25] MacPherson, 45
[26] Macpherson, 17
[27] Quoted in Glantz, Aaron. *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans.* (University of California Press, 2009), 71.

approval of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act in 1944 (GI Bill).[28] Ultimately, the widespread celebration and acceptance of World War II in the United States is a testament to the ingrained nature of mythology and ideals in American culture. Classic images of World War II, such as the Battle of Iwo Jima linger "in our popular memory as an image of five men struggling together to raise a flag. What veteran would stain that picture of handsome young men and their derring-do with bloody recollections of hand-to-hand combat?"[29] Ultimately, veterans knew of the brutality of warfare but due to an intense propaganda campaign, the American public still subscribed to a sanitized view of American wartime mythology.

While there was no major public involvement in the Vietnam War until the mid 1960s, president Kennedy and Johnson devoted time and effort to shaping the public opinion of the war from the start of US involvement in the 1950s. Towards this end, Kennedy evoked a series of cultural symbols designed to "stir vivid impressions involving the listener's most basic values."[30] In particular, the image of the Green Beret warrior heavily influenced public opinion towards the Vietnam conflict in the 1960s. The United States military originally envisioned the Green Berets as a guerilla force specially trained to fight in a conventional war between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, these elite and specially trained forces also served as the "hero image" the US needed in order to unite behind the cause of war. This hero image falls in to line with a

---

[28] Glantz, 72

[29] Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: Trauma, Memory, and the Vietnam War* (University of Minnesota P, 2001), 75.

[30] Justin J. Gustainis, *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War* (New York: Praeger, 1993), 5.

long history of "accounts of pure, brave, dedicated American heroes who defeat evildoers by virtue of their superior skills and high moral purpose"[31] These images and ideals inspired a blind patriotism amongst many American youths, and served as motivation for many who served in Vietnam.

The Influence of War Mythology on the Vietnam Generation

The youth of the Vietnam generation grew up on World War II tales of glory. Films such as *Sands of Iwo Jima (1949)* and *Flying Tigers* (1942) dominated the popular images of war, and their central character, John Wayne, rose far above his movie star status to embody the image of the ideal American warrior. While he had no genuine political authority, Wayne's influence in the creation and reinforcement of 1950s political ideology is undeniable. Through his performance in the blockbuster movies of the day John Wayne exemplified the values of masculinity, patriotism, self-reliance and responsibility.[32] His image and actions conveyed the idea that one could not be a true American man until he proved his strength on the battlefield. The opportunity military service offered to develop these characteristics was a major reason for early support of the conflict in Vietnam. Men in the early stages of the war viewed Vietnam as the playground of their generation. It was their chance to prove their strength and masculinity as their fathers had done in Europe and the Pacific.

---

[31] Gustainis, 23

[32] Gary Wills, *John Wayne's America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 30.

The timing of the Vietnam War was such that youth of eligible draft age were, in large proportion, children of World War Two veterans. As such, many veterans cited the father-son relationship and a deep faith in the American government as motivations for joining the war in Vietnam. In his memoir, *The Ghosts of Thua Tien*, Vietnam veteran John Nesser described his childhood in a Midwestern Catholic family. Like many men and women of his generation Nesser learned of the evils of communism at a young age, both in school and at home. Even prior to his participation in the war, Nesser expressed doubt as to whether American involvement in Vietnam was the right course of action. However, he unhesitatingly joined the US Army in 1968. In justification of this decision, Nesser stated, "many young men in college talked about going to Canada or otherwise dodging the draft, but I never really considered that option. My conservative upbringing had instilled in me a strong sense of duty to my country, and I would have risked the disapproval of my family especially my dad, who was my model and hero."[33]

Similarly, ex-Marine, Wilson Hubbell reports that when he was a child almost all the older males he knew had served in wars. Between World War I, World War II and the Korean War, the US army in the twentieth century had an almost constant need for manpower. Consequently, for Hubbell, enlisting in the Vietnam War effort was less of a

---

[33] Nesser, John A. *The Ghosts of Thua Thien: An American Soldier's Memoir of Vietnam.* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Inc Publishers, 2008) 6.
Nesser served in Vietnam from 1969-1970, in the Ashau Valley, one of the most active and violent zones in Vietnam. Nesser effectively narrates the tension between the desire to serve one's country and the hesitation to support the US aims in Vietnam. Throughout the book he resists any inclination to employ a heroic mindset. His memoir is renowned for refusing to succumb to the traditional memoir narrative

government mandate and more of an expectation and rite of passage. In his mind, he could not become a grown man until he spent time in the service.[34]

Veterans of minority races echo strongly the desire to follow in the footsteps of their male elders and role models. Vincent Okamoto, a Japanese-American veteran stateed, "Growing up I thought military service was an inevitable rite of passage. All six of my older brothers had served in the military. I could hardly wait my turn."[35] Furthermore, these men expressed, even more explicitly than their white counterparts, the desire to prove themselves as American men and warriors. In explanation of his attitude towards the Vietnam War, Wayne Smith, an African-American veteran states, "I was very naïve, I thought we were going to help free the Vietnamese from communist aggression. I volunteered. I believed in it. My family was proud of me."[36] Likewise, Charley Trujillo, a Mexican-American migrant farmer explains, "I was gonna get drafted so I went ahead and volunteered. It was part of trying to be American and patriotic and the whole romantic notion of war…we wanted to prove that we were really Americans."[37] Both Okamoto and Smith evidence the desire common amongst minority veterans to prove that regardless of their race, they too were real Americans and could live up to the American standard of success.

---

[34] Wilson Hubbel. Lecture. Jan 7, 2009.
[35] Okamoto, Vincent in Christian, Appy G. *Patriots: The War Remembered from all Sides*. (New York: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 357.
[36] Smith, Wayne in Christian, Appy G. *Patriots: The War Remembered from all Sides*. (New York: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 262.
[37] Trujillo, Charley in Christian, Appy G. *Patriots: The War Remembered from all Sides*. (New York: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 366.

While stated motivations for entering were war were relatively uniform across divides of race and army rank/division, there existed a clear divide between those who served prior to the Tet Offensive and those who served after this date in 1968. Soldiers in Vietnam in the 1960s were already well aware of the difficulties of their wartime mission, however they still held on to a great sense of possibility. Richard Olson, one of the early "advisors" commissioned by the Kennedy Administration, explained,

> I'm not one of those veterans who's embittered with a whole host of grievances. I have nostalgia and enormous reverence for my experience. I felt like I was in the middle of world history, part of a world process...I wanted Communism and totalitarianism to be ruled over by a free world spirit."[38]

Evidently, back in the United States the media continued to reassure the American public that the war had a just cause and a clear end in sight. Hence, soldiers who served before Tet were considerably more likely to echo the idealistic viewpoints of the Kennedy years as justification for war participation than their later-serving counterparts.

Following the Tet Offensive, anti-war sentiment exploded in the United States. The media fueled this outrage by airing unedited footage of daily life in Vietnam. Consequently, men who served in the later years of the conflict had their warrior dreams shattered before they even entered battle. In fact, many soldiers serving post-Tet had already participated, in some way, in the anti-war movement. Helen Tennent Hegelheimer, a flight attendant for World Airways from 1968-1969 described her interactions with planes filled with young men on their journey to Vietnam. She stated that at this late point in the war, "these boys knew they were destined for combat and they

---

[38] Richard Olson in Appy, 62

knew what their expected mortality rate was. I remember an Air Force Blue Beret actually told me they were trained to die."[39]

Veteran Michael Moore echoed this morbid attitude with a darkly humorous picture of his own wartime experience. By 1969, the year Moore arrived in Vietnam, he explained, "we had no allusions we were going to win the war, we just didn't want to be the last person killed there." Moore fully illustrated the hypocrisy of the later-serving soldiers in the story of his flight to Vietnam. He explained,

> We flew on a commercial airline to Vietnam, however there was not one single man on that plane who was not a member of the US Armed Forces. When we de-boarded the plane the stewardesses are thanking us for flying Continental, and I was thinking 'I'm about to die in Vietnam and you're thanking me for flying continental![40]

In summary, veterans' retrospective justifications for joining the war evidence a clear buy-in to American myths and ideals. Those who were pessimistic from the start of the war had already had their visions and ideals shattered by media coverage and dissent on the home front. The "American man" as embodied by John Wayne and the soldiers of World War II was strong, fearless and independent. By serving in the war effort, the men of the Vietnam generation evidenced a hope that Vietnam would allow them to fulfill the idealized image of the "American hero".

---

[39] Helen Tennant Hegelheimer in Christian, Appy G. *Patriots: The War Remembered from all Sides*. (New York: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 107.
[40] Michael Moore (lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, February 9, 2009).

Chapter Two

Evolving Views While Serving in Vietnam

Many young soldiers deployed to Vietnam in the 1960's expecting to re-live the glory days of their fathers in World War II. They soon discovered, however, that the reality of the situation in Vietnam bore little relation to this lofty ideal. Soldiers in Vietnam faced a host of unique problems and challenges that were unknown to American soldiers of previous generations. These experiences directly contrasted with the romanticized soldiers possessed prior to deployment.

Primarily, when American soldiers deployed to Vietnam they did so under the impression that they were aiding the South Vietnamese in fighting the communist enemy. However, as many veterans openly admitted, "we didn't speak Vietnamese, didn't have any interpreters. We didn't know the customs, the local patterns of village life. We didn't understand the structure of the village, the family or the history."[41] As a consequence, soldiers could not comprehend why the North Vietnamese viewed Ho Chih Minh, the communist leader of North Vietnam, as a liberator. The largely rural and uneducated population of Vietnam knew little of the political ideals related to communism. They knew Ho Chih Minh only as a redeemer who promised a chance for a better life.[42] Accordingly, there was very little local support for the "help" that the Americans offered the Vietnamese. Instead of drinking in local bars and playing with peasant children,

---

[41] Tripp, 126

[42] Patrick Coffield, "A Short History of Vietnam" (lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, January 16, 2008).

activities the veterans of World War II fondly reminisced about, American soldiers in Vietnam accepted that "half of these poor beleaguered souls (Vietnamese peasants) were Cong, eager for an opportunity to drop a grenade on a street filled with GIs".[43]

Howard Olsen echoed this sentiment of mistrust towards the local Vietnamese in his memoir, *Issues of the Heart.* Upon arrival in Vietnam, Olsen was charmed by the begging Vietnamese children and sought to help them in any way possible. However, he was quickly reprimanded by his platoon commander who informed him, "shit, those kids will grab at anything you throw at 'em…They might look innocent enough, but you can't trust a single one. You don't know when one of those sons-a-bitches is gonna toss a grenade in your lap, so don't get friendly with any of 'em."[44]

The guerilla style of the war in Vietnam led to further difficulties and complications for American soldiers. Viet Cong soldiers had no uniform other than a "black pajama" outfit also commonly worn by civilians. Consequently, the supposed enemy was often completely indistinguishable from the general population. Furthermore, as the war progressed, soldiers became increasingly confused as to the identity of the true enemy. Was it the Vietnamese, the "gooks", "Charley"? Or was it the American government, for asking their men to fight a war of attrition, in which there were no declared goals for winning? This ambiguity of the enemy led to mass frustration and anger amongst American troops. Nathaniel Tripp explained, the Vietnam was a war "which had paranoia and delusion as its foundations. When things went poorly the blame

---

[43] John Ketwig, *...And a Hard Rain Fell* (Sourcebooks Inc, 2008), 80.
[44] Howard Olsen, *Issues of the Heart: Memoirs of an Artilleryman in Vietnam* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, Inc, 1990), 14.

had to be laid somewhere. And the growing distrust worked both ways. Every day there were more potential assassins in the rank."[45] Furthermore, veteran Malcolm Hamilton described, "it got to the point where pretty much anyone outside my squad was a problem."[46] For Tripp, Hamilton, and many others, in the absence of a clear-cut enemy, outside of their small group of fighting men, no one could possibly be trusted.

In contrast to the mythical image of American soldiers as heroes or liberators, many Americans began to view themselves as the villains of the war in Vietnam. Philip Caputo described his first experience of active combat while in Vietnam. Like most "battles" in Vietnam, Caputo's mission consisted of invading the houses of villagers, rummaging through belongings, and searching for hidden members of the Viet Cong. However, Caputo explained, "maybe it was the effect of my grammar school civics lessons, but I felt uneasy doing this, like a burglar or one of those bullying Redcoats who used to barge into American homes during our Revolution."[47] Caputo evidenced the raw disappointment suffered by soldiers who entered the war desiring to fulfill the image of the American hero. He came to the realization that he and his fellow American soldiers were behaving in a manner strikingly similar to the oppressors of their ancestors. Caputo served from 1965-66 and wrote his memoir soon after the war's conclusion.

---

[45] Tripp, 73

[46] Malcolm Hamilton (lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, February 4, 2009).
Malcolm Hamilton served in the US Airforce from 1967-1968. He then served another year in Vietnam, living in a small village and assisting in public health issues. He faced great readjustment issues upon arrival in the US. Hamilton is a current resident of Santa Barbara, and a California native.

[47] Caputo, 88

Consequently, his wartime emotions and memories are a pioneering force in the typical Vietnam veteran narrative.

The idea of the "ambiguous enemy" was especially present in American soldiers of color serving in Vietnam. Vincent Okamoto reports, "when I got there my guys were talking about gooks, and zipperheads, and slants and I said to myself, 'damn, I'm a gook…' But it didn't take long for my mentality to become just like theirs…even so I was nearly killed by Americans who mistook me for Vietnamese"[48] Okamoto, like most Japanese men and women of his generation was born in an internment camp. Therefore at one point in his life the Unites States government considered him an enemy. Yet in battle his leaders told him that the Vietnamese, men and women who had never done harm to him or his family were the true enemy. Similarly, Mexican migrant worker Charley Trujillo describes, "the few times we got together with the Vietnamese they'd point to my skin and say, 'same-same.' And some of the guys would say, 'hey man, you better watch out because from behind you look like a gook."[49] Evidently, men such as Okamoto and Trujillo experienced racism and discrimination on both ends of the spectrum. The country they were prepared to give their lives for often did not offer them full citizenship at home, yet they were expected to support, so wholeheartedly, the values of the US that they would kill to uphold them.

As the war progressed, American soldiers became increasingly aware of the futility of their mission. The apparent senselessness of the violence in Vietnam led to a

---

[48] Okamoto, Vincent in Appy, 372
[49] Trujillo, Charley in Appy, 368

lack of resolve amongst the troops and a re-thinking of the nature of the war. While the sentiment is far from universal, a significant population of veterans reported a growing admiration or sympathy for the Vietnamese. Malcolm Hamilton stated, "combat is not like being raped, you might take some shots but you're dealing them too. I was doing everything the bad guy was doing except with more food and ammo."[50] Similarly, Hubbel explained, while Americans were fighting out of desire for glory, or because the government required them to do so, the Vietnamese were fighting "for the land and their lives, and everything they held dear to them."[51] In essence, the American side was often uncommitted to their mission in a war they increasingly viewed as vague and futile. In contrast, the Vietnamese saw no other option than to fight vigorously for the way of life they had known for centuries.

Testimony from the overwhelming majority of veterans indicates that men may have entered the war excited and anxious to battle. However, the slow progress and futility caused apathy to spread throughout the American troops. Nathaniel Tripp stated, "looking out across those hills to the north, there was the urge to simply walk away, answering to no one… This would have been the sane thing to do. Nobody gave a fuck for the war". In essence, "individual leadership, strength, courage and humanity were more important than in any other war, because there was no guiding vision, no goal, no leadership at the top.[52] Consequently, as the war dragged on, survival of one's tour of

---

[50] Malcolm Hamilton. Lecture. Feb 4, 2009.
[51] Wilson Hubbel. Lecture. Jan 7, 2009.
[52] Tripp, 150

duty came to symbolize the ultimate victory. Veteran William Anderson explained, "we decided we weren't gonna try to save the world from communism, we were just gonna work like hell to get out of Vietnam alive."[53]

The lack of resolve amongst American troops helps explain the shattering of American myths and ideals that occurred in Vietnam. For every soldier who was shot, injured, mutilated and killed there was another available to take his place. Many men concluded that they were not fighting for a moral cause as they had been told. Wilson Hubbel explained, "myself and many others arrived at the conclusion that war is a business. We were not soldiers, not warriors, just targets"[54]

Clearly, the "American war myth" exemplified by the propaganda of the 1950's is a social construct. However it is a construct that has held our nation together at critical points in American History. This myth was very real and very important for the men who served in Vietnam. Veteran William Erhart, expressed the pain and disappointment he felt upon discovering that his youthful visions of war would never play out in reality:

> John Wayne doesn't surprise me, the only war he fought was in Hollywood. I wonder about Audie Murphy (1950s actor and WWII veteran) though. Did you know he was the most decorated soldier in World War II? Man he musta seen some trash. And then he comes back and spends the rest of his life making hell-for-glory it-was-the-greatest-experience-of-my-life you oughta-try-it-sometimes-kids war movies. What makes a man sell out the truth like that?[55]

---

[53] William Anderson, interview by Stephen Maxner, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project (Lubbock), September 22, 2000.
[54] Wilson Hubbel. Lecture. Jan 7, 2009.
[55] William D. Erhart, *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, Inc, 1986), 103.
Erhart was born on the east coast of the United States. He joined the Army immediately following his high school graduation and served from 1967-1968. Following his service

Ultimately, the forested jungles instead of battlefields, extreme difficulty in distinguishing the Viet Cong from ordinary civilians and widespread unpopularity of the American mission, effectively destroyed any vestige of the American war myth for Vietnam veterans. Soldiers responded to this identity assault with anger, desperation, and fear. These emotions as well as a breakdown in traditional moral codes drove normal men from normal American backgrounds to commit extraordinary acts of violence in Vietnam. As veteran Jim Nolan states, "it took just twenty days for me to transform from a normal kid into a stone cold killer."[56] This transformation, which occurred in so many men called into doubt core assumptions these men had made about warfare and about humanity in general.

Undeniably, the Vietnamese were not the first people to experience indiscriminate violence at the hands of Americans. However, in preceding American-fought wars the ultimate victory of the 'noble cause' could be used to justify steps taken along the way. Morally questionable violence and an ultimate defeat in Vietnam deprived American soldiers involved in the conflict of similar justification.

The ultimate failure of the US mission in Vietnam validated and compounded the contradictions between American myth and reality. While all previous American-fought wars diverted from American ideals to some extent, these acts of questionable morality were justified by and eventually overwritten by an ultimate victory. Deprived of this

---

he became an active leader in the VVAW. He is currently a writer with multiple publications relating to his experience in Vietnam.

[56] Jim Nolan (lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, January 28, 2009).

justification, returning soldiers experienced a critical identity crisis in the fifteen years following the conclusion of the war. As Hamilton explained, "In Vietnam the combat was like a hurricane, it (could) blow right through you and when its over all the things you know to be true are gone"[57] In the following chapter I will argue that many elements of the post-war recovery experience respond in some way to the breakdown in the identity of the soldiers which occurred during the Vietnam War.

[57] Malcolm Hamilton. Lecture. Feb 4, 2009.

Chapter Three

Veteran Opinion and Experience in the Re-Adjustment Period

By 1968 a significant population of men had finished their tours of duty in Vietnam and returned home to the United States. From ancient times societies have practiced elaborate rituals for cleansing soldiers of their wartime wounds and preparing them for a successful return to civilian life. For instance, in traditional Angolan villages, soldiers returning from war were required to fast for an indeterminate amount of time. Following this fast, village healers burned a perimeter of sacred herbs around the veteran in a public ceremony. Villagers believed that these herbs warded off evil spirits and allowed the soldiers to comfortably reintegrate into society.[58] Ticker tape parades and pats on the back may seem to be small and somewhat pointless attempts to honor veterans returning from war. However, they are in fact the modern form of these ancient cleansing rituals.[59] In a larger sense these small gestures convey a sense gratitude and approval for the soldier's efforts abroad.

Unlike veterans of previous generations, however, "Vietnam Veterans weren't exactly the most popular kids on the block." Erhart lamented, "I'd enlisted in the Marines in the spring of 1966 with visions of brass bands, victory parades, free drinks in bars, and

---

[58] Joseph DeRivera, *Handbook on Building Cultures of Peace* (Warren: Springer, 2008), 91.
[59] MacPhereson, 45

starry-eyed girls clinging to my neck like so many succulent grapes."[60] On the contrary, all forms of societal recognition were categorically denied to Vietnam Veterans. "More than any U.S. war since the Civil War, Vietnam divided America and made us reevaluate our society."[61] Consequently, the American public regarded veterans with indifference, and often, outright contempt. Some anti-war protesters displaced their frustrations with the violent and unjust war on the veterans who simply wanted to resume their civilian lives. Regardless of whether or not they received direct insult, veterans unanimously reported the perception that their presence was an undesirable reminder of a national failure. Ultimately, the poor reception of veterans made the universally difficult process of re-adjusting to civilian life uniquely tormenting for Vietnam veterans.

Veterans and the Anti-War Movement

The domestic antiwar movement had a profound effect on veteran's postwar readjustment. The movement began quietly in the early 1960s with small, local gatherings in response to the troop escalation in Vietnam. Prior to 1968, however, a majority of Americans still supported the US involvement in Vietnam. However, the events of 1968 deeply disturbed many Americans and allowed antiwar sentiment to infiltrate all sectors of society. Stereotypical images of antiwar protest portrayed large groups of longhaired, peace-sign waving college students, and hippies placing flowers in

---

[60] Erhart, 225

[61] Barry Romo, Pete Zastrow, and Joe Miller, "History of the U.S. War in Vietnam," http://www.vvaw.org/about/warhistory.php (accessed February 2009).

the barrels of M-16s.[62] Clearly these public political protests were only one element of a large and diverse protest. In fact, the widespread opposition to the Vietnam War never amounted to a central, unified movement. Many of the main protagonists of antiwar sentiment came from other important factions of the day, such as the movements for civil rights and nuclear disarmament.[63] This decentralized organization was, however, one of the greatest strengths of the movement. Instead of being limited to a small, radical groups of individuals, antiwar sentiment gained credibility as it gradually infiltrated diverse societal groups.

The arrival in an American airport after a long flight home from Vietnam was often the first time the veterans faced the more radical protagonists of the antiwar movement. Marine Corp. veteran, Wilson Hubbel grew emotional as he described how flights carrying soldiers home from war were scheduled to arrive in the middle of the night so as to avoid disruption for tourist passengers.[64] In explanation of his arrival in the United States, Veteran William Erhart stated, "I considered myself lucky to get out of the San Francisco Airport without being assaulted by bands of rabid hippies armed with snapdragons and daisies, and placards reading 'Baby Killer'".[65] While Hubbel resisted the sensationalist embellishing of which Erhart is likely guilty, both men's descriptions conveyed the message that Vietnam veterans were no longer welcome members of American society. Ultimately, the movement not only deprived veterans of a hero's

---

[62] Elliot Landy, Elliot Landy's Vision Photo Gallery, Civil Rights Movement (accessed February 2009).
[63] Appy, 263
[64] Hubbel, Wilson. Lecture. Jan 7, 2009.
[65] Erhart, 7

welcome, but also forced these men to the outskirts of society and denied the significance of their wartime experience.

In recent years some academics have downplayed the extent to which the American public scapegoated Vietnam veterans. In "The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam" sociologist and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke argued that descriptions of veterans attacked at airports and called baby killers and murderers are largely urban legends. He claimed that the idea that Vietnam veterans were met with direct animosity did not gain prominence until 1990 when "the Bush administration invoked the image of the spat-upon veteran to solidify support for the (Gulf) War and opposition to the growing anti-war movement."[66]

US Marine Corp veteran, Wilson Hubbel, retrospectively expressed similar doubts about the extent of the extreme hostility and violence directed towards vets, asking, "would you aggressively approach a total stranger, much less a Marine, spit on or otherwise attack them, then walk away and expect nothing to happen to you?"[67] However, in a 1980 Veteran's Association study, one-third of returning combat veterans from the Vietnam War said that they received direct, unfriendly treatment from their non-going peers.[68] In all reality, there are very few documented cases of overt physical assaults on veterans. However, the pronounced, yet often unspoken, civilian attitude of uncertainty towards the actions of soldiers in Vietnam, clearly intensified the emotional and social isolation of Vietnam veterans during their postwar recovery process.

---

[66] Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York UP, 1998), 3.
[67] Wilson Hubbel. Lecture. Jan 7, 2009.
[68] Victor Fischer, *Myths and Realities: A Study of Attitudes Toward Vietnam Era Veterans* (Washington, D.C.: Veterans Administration, 1980), 25.

The public apathy towards veterans manifested in a discreet, yet definitive anti-veteran sentiment that infiltrated society in the 1960s and 70s. Nesser commented, "it didn't take me long to figure out that wearing my uniform was a big mistake."[69] This desire to hide one's status as a veteran strongly contradicted the idea that veterans did not feel discrimination in the years following the war. Returning from war is meant to be a momentous event in the life of an individual, but as activist veteran Robert Muller stated, "in the case of Vietnam vets, you learned to repress it, keep it a secret, shut up about it, because people either considered you a sucker or some kind of psychopath who killed women and children."[70]

The mistreatment that veterans suffered in regards to their attempts to obtain education and employment demonstrated the pervasive antiwar sentiment present throughout American society. While the GI Bill for Vietnam veterans was grossly inadequate, many veterans chose to attend colleges and universities following their service in Vietnam. However, it was not a simple process to re-adjust to the sheltered school environment after experiencing the brutal realities of war. Malcolm Hamilton described how as a child he always dreamed of being a doctor, but, when it came to his four-hour biology lab, "I couldn't sit still, I was constantly looking around checking the doors, the windows."[71] Rather than appreciate his unique situation, Hamilton was advised by his professor to "quit rather than further drag out his failure."[72]

---

[69] Nesser, 168
[70] Wilbur J. Scott, *Vietnam veterans since the war the politics of PTSD, agent orange, and the national memorial* (Norman: University of Oklahoma P, 2004), 54.
[71] Hamilton, Malcolm. Lecture. Feb 4, 2009
[72] Hamilton, Malcolm. Lecture. Feb 4, 2009.

Veteran testimony reveals a clear gap in understanding between those who served in the war, and those who could not imagine why one would make such a choice.[73] Erhart, who enrolled at Swarthmore University in 1969, experienced the full extent of this gap in understanding when he agreed to an interview with the campus newspaper. While the article reflected Erhart in a positive light, the campus community's reaction to a veteran on campus was surprising. Erhart described the frustration that resulted when students wanting to further inquire about his war experience approached him. After being repeatedly asked exclusively, "Did you kill anyone?" and "How much combat did you see?" Erhart arrived at the conclusion that "I was Swarthmore's real live Vietnam Veteran. I was a specimen. A curiosity. I was a freak in a carnival sideshow."[74]

The confrontational nature of students' interactions with veterans can be attributed to a variety of factors. Primarily, antiwar sentiment was widespread on college campuses in the late 1960s and 70s. However, the majority of college students during the decade were of high socioeconomic status and able to avoid the draft. In contrast, due to factors of racism and economic inequality, those who fought in Vietnam came in great proportion from lower-class families who did not attend college in large numbers. In consequence, a great hypocrisy emerged in which those who protested the war often did not know personally a single soldier who served in Vietnam.

Ultimately, for those who made it through, the college experience was one of the more positive elements of the postwar recovery period. In contrast to the general

---

[73] Jim Mcgarrah, *A Temporary Sort of Peace* (New York: Indiana Historical Society P, 2007), 52.
[74] Erhart, 10

population, college students were (in large numbers), liberal, analytical thinkers, anxious to educate themselves about the unfamiliar. Hubbel jokingly stated, "Vietnam was a great experience to go through before becoming a college student. (Both war and school) are hard work under terrible conditions, for no pay"[75] Veterans who attended college in the postwar years repeatedly reported that beyond the initial 'arms-length' treatment students were often anxious to familiarize themselves with veterans and integrate them into campus culture.

A majority of veterans arrived home from war and began immediately to search for a job. Unfortunately, this did not always prove an easy task. Because of growing stereotypes against veterans, employers were often reluctant to hire men who were potential "baby killers" or "war-crazed psychopaths". In fact, major American companies such as Ford Motors refused on principle to hire anyone with prior involvement in the Vietnam War.[76] Veteran John Ketwig, author of *And a Hard Rain Fell* described an environment in which being a platoon sergeant, "counted for nothing. In fact, it counted against me. I might as well have arrived for the interviews dressed in jungle fatigues and carrying an M-16."[77] This experience directly contrasted the traditional hiring practices in which great value was placed on military service. Ketwig and others describe dexperiences in which they were denied employment based solely on their participation in the war, regardless of whether this experience directly applied to the job for which they

---

[75] Wilson Hubbel. Lecture. Jan 7, 2009.
[76] Prof. Richard Hecht (lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, January 5, 2009).
[77] Ketwig, 341.

were applying. Evidently this discrimination in hiring practices came, in part, from a set of legitimate concerns regarding the stability and reliability of veterans. However, the persistent and uncompromising company policies toward employing veterans suggests something greater, a fear and disgust towards the violent acts that American soldiers committed in Vietnam. In essence, by refusing to hire veterans, civilian employers effectively distanced themselves from the brutal reality of warfare. Unfortunately, this discrimination left men who served the US in Vietnam unemployed and often in poverty in the years following the war.

Veterans ultimately had mixed reactions and opinions regarding anti war sentiment and protest. Many veterans lashed out against the idea that "bands of rabid hippies"[78] felt they had they held moral superiority over veterans who had witnessed firsthand the pain and destruction of war. However, others, such as Nolan stated that it seemed as if "the people who protested the war were the only ones who really cared about what was going on in Nam."[79]

Furthermore, by 1969 there was established contact and teamwork between antiwar activists and GIs. The activist group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) was the organization that ultimately succeeded in mobilizing veteran discontent. This faction of the anti-war movement is particularly powerful as it publicly demonstrates the dissatisfaction with the war effort amongst the men who fought. In 1971, spokesman for the VVAW and future senator John Kerry addressed the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. He stated,

---

[78] Erhart, 68
[79] Jim Nolan. Lecture. Jan 27, 2009.

> In our opinion and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom, which those misfits supposedly abuse, is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy, and it is that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart.[80]

Kerry's emotional words highlighted the raw and confused emotion that veterans experienced in the years immediately following their tours of duty. By speaking out so candidly against a war in which they had personally fought, the members of the VVAW conveyed the extent of their postwar devastation.

The Role of the Media

There is little doubt that American involvement in Vietnam was brutal, drawn out, disorganized, and ultimately pointless. As the "Winter Soldier Investigation" a war crimes confessional led by the members of the VVAW candidly revealed, soldiers in Vietnam had, at times, "raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power…and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam."[81] Furthermore, the carnage and death resulting from new weapons technologies completely destroyed the Vietnamese landscape. However, many of these realities of the Vietnam War are realities of all American wars. The "heroes" of the nineteenth-century frontier often employed torture and mutilation in order to control

---

[80] John Kerry, "Vietnam Veterans Against the War Statement," The Sixties Project, Primary Documents, http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/VVAW_Kerry_Senate.html (accessed March 19, 2009).

[81] John Kerry, "Vietnam Veterans Against the War Statement"

Native American interference with Westward expansion. The trenches of World War I produced a wartime bloodbath that has yet to be repeated. And the violent firefights of World War II, the supposed "good war", effectively destroyed the European cities and countryside. So what was the difference? Why did soldiers and civilians alike react so forcefully to the war in Vietnam? Why did the war become such a public affair?

The bulk of the scholarly research on these issues points to the role of the media as a main catalyst of the widespread antiwar sentiment. Media coverage of World War II was highly propagandized. Images of war extended to the American public were cleansed of any reference to violence or death and infused with a clear-cut vision of America's wartime goals.[82] In contrast, by the 1960s, a majority of American families owned televisions on which they could watch the progress of the war unfold on the nightly news. In particular, the uncensored images of the Tet Offensive and the Mai Lai massacre undermined two of the most widely accepted ideas Americans held about the war in Vietnam: that the war was under control and the US held the "moral upper hand" against the Vietnamese. This first "living room war" had great impact on the civilian perceptions and understandings of warfare. As Communications professor Joshua Meyrovitz explained, the radio and newspaper coverage of previous American wars employed a vocabulary of euphemisms that were incapable of portraying the full brutality of war. However, in the television coverage of Vietnam "instead of verbal euphemisms such as 'fierce battle' or 'fighting for democracy' there were concrete images of wounded soldiers and civilians", Ultimately, Meyrovitch concluded, for the average civilian, "the

---

[82] John C. Rowe, "Military Propaganda: Defense Department Films from World War II and Vietnam" in *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, 95.

fighting pictured on television seemed very different from the way John Wayne would have fought it"[83]

The candid media coverage of the war provoked great emotion and often anger amongst Vietnam veterans. MacPherson explained, "many Americans, viewing such grisly realities of war from the remoteness of their living rooms, concluded that men in Vietnam were somehow morbidly different from those warriors of the past."[84] In reaction to this skewed understanding of warfare Nathaniel Tripp stated, "I had contempt for those who said stop the killing when they meant stop the cameras so we can forget the destruction."[85] The constant stream of media coverage repeatedly re-exposed veterans to the trauma they had experienced in battle. "The daily news on TV never let me forget about Vietnam," Nesser lamented in his memoir, "I did not want to be reminded of the war, but that was very difficult with television news blaring the latest casualty figures every day"[86]

In contrast, anti-war veterans, such as the members of the VVAW often applauded the visual media and used it as a medium to express their own personal anti-war views. Notable veteran, Ron Kovic, author of *Born on the Fourth of July* stated, "Every chance I had to get my broken body on the tube or in front of an audience I went hog wild. Yes, let them get a look at me. Let them be reminded of what they'd done when they'd sent my generation off to war."[87]

---

[83] Joshua Meyrovitch, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (London: Oxford UP, 1985), 136.
[84] MacPherson, 50
[85] Tripp, xiv
[86] Nesser, 172
[87] Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 150.

In short, the raw nature of the Vietnam War media coverage facilitated a fall from innocence amongst the American public. Men and women lashed out on the discoveries that our country's leaders were often selfish and manipulative, that war was violent and futile, and that the United States was not invincible. Clearly neither the media, nor its civilian viewers *caused* the traumatic recovery process of veterans. However, this new societal dynamic, in which the American general population was intimately involved in the war's progress, forced veterans to confront the pain and moral ambiguity of their wartime experience in a very public arena.

PTSD and Personal Coping Mechanisms

Because veterans were often so ashamed of their wartime experience it was extremely common for men to return from war and refuse to discuss or otherwise confront their traumatic memories. "I built a box around myself" recalled Malcolm Hamilton, "I was complexly emotionally available to my wife and children because my emotions were too scary and dangerous."[88] However, these powerful emotions and memories often surfaced in the form of flashbacks. Vietnam veterans almost invariably described how, upon arrival home from war, anything from an ambulance siren to a knock on the front door could spark a full-on reversion to battle mentality. Nathaniel Tripp opened his memoir with a vividly described flashback in which his farm in Vermont turns into Vietnam, and his children into soldiers in his platoon. He stated,

> a smoke grenade, which I have been saving for nearly thirty years appears in my hand…I place my back to the wind, spread my legs slightly, and

[88] Malcolm Hamilton. Lecture. Feb 4, 2009.

> raise my arms above my head…All these movements come back to me as the old circuits in my brain, so long unused, instantly rewire themselves.[89]

In response to their shame and social ostracization, veterans often used unhealthy coping mechanisms in order to escape from the guilt and identity issues which they suffered. A preponderance of veterans admitted to using alcohol and other drugs as a method of numbing their wartime memories and pain. While drug use was also widespread in Vietnam, it was largely confined to the rear troops and men serving in the later years of the war. However, upon arrival in the US, the use of mind-altering substances became the preferred method of self-medication. William Erhart explained, "I usually stayed up until alcohol and exhaustion made it impossible to keep my eyes open any longer. When I shut them, the nightmares would be waiting: the old woman in the ricefield, the small boy with the grenade in the crowded marketplace at Hoi An."[90] Similarly, veteran Jim McGarrah explained, "My prewar values were shattered by the knowledge that random violence was now all around me and in me no matter where I went." Consequently, a desire to be high, particularly on speed, in the presence of other humans dominated my days and nights"[91] While reports of postwar drug use are conflicting, a Harris survey in 1971 estimated that 26 percent of Vietnam veterans had used illegal drugs after returning from the war.[92] Evidently veterans experienced great difficulty in reconciling their wartime experience with their postwar lives. Drugs enabled these men to numb their pain and (in many cases) fit in with their non-serving peers.

---

[89] Tripp, 2 and 54
[90] Erhart, 20
[91] McGarrah, 222
[92] MacPherson, 470

Whether it is called "combat fatigue", "shell shock", or "post-Vietnam syndrome," the condition now officially termed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has been documented in veterans since the most ancient wars. The symptoms of the disorder: feelings of isolation, perpetual combat mindset, emotional numbness, and flashbacks to the original traumatic experience have been noted for centuries. However PTSD was not formally recognized as a legitimate illness until 1979. Prior to this point Americans typically believed that the psychological problems of veterans resulted from troubled home lives, low economic status and/or low intellectual capabilities.[93] Conversely, numerous psychological studies, spearheaded by veteran expert Robert J. Lifton, have proven that participation in and exposure to abusive violence, and not innate personal characteristics, are, in fact, the root causes of stress disorders in veterans.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) defines the cause of post-traumatic stress disorder as exposure to a "psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of human experience."[94] In terms of the Vietnam War this means that every soldier who committed a violent act or observed such an act was at risk to suffer symptoms of PTSD. Ketwig's memoir provides insight into the ways in which the "atrocity producing situations" in Vietnam and the cultural climate at home both increased the number of, and enhanced the suffering of Vietnam veterans afflicted with PTSD. Ketwig described an event in which he observed a group of Green Beret soldiers use a hose to brutally torture and kill a Vietnamese prostitute. "This woman was a scapegoat," Ketwig exclaimed, "She possessed no important intelligence. She was

---

[93] MacPherson, 234

[94] American Psychiatric Association., Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR Fourth Edition (Text Revision) (New York: American Psychiatric, Inc., 2000), 417.

simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."[95] The widespread emotions of anger, desperation, and fear exemplified in this act drove normal men from normal American backgrounds to commit extraordinary acts of violence. However, as MacPherson explained, for many men, the Vietnam War became "psychologically illegitimate". Veterans were simply unable to reconcile their actions with their innermost beliefs and values. Shay further describeed, "veterans can usually recover from horror, fear and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as 'what's right' has not also been violated."[96] Ultimately, with such a high number of traumatic and violent occurrences in Vietnam it is unsurprising that the proportion of veterans who suffered (and still suffer) from PTSD was significantly higher than in any previous war.

Clearly the attitude of the American public also played a major role in the extreme stress reactions of Vietnam veterans. Dr. Jack Ewalt, the chief psychiatrist of the Veterans Administration counseled hundreds of World War II veterans. He explained, "they [like the veterans of Vietnam] spoke of nightmares, of bombing villages and knowing they had killed civilians…But everyone was telling them that they were heroes. Buying them beers at the club or tavern. If they ever hinted that they might have done something wrong 'over there,' they were bathed in the approval of home."[97] In contrast, any doubts or fears Vietnam Veterans had, regarding the morality of their wartime acts, were confirmed and enhanced by the negative attitude Americans held towards veterans. Soldiers, men who were historically admired as the upholders US liberties and values, became the pariahs of American society.

---

[95] Ketwig, 86-88
[96] Shay, 20
[97] MacPherson, 50-51

While PTSD was obvious and widespread amongst Vietnam veterans, treatment was not forthcoming. Jack McLoskey, a leading activist in the Vietnam veteran's movement ranted,

> yeah—we approached the VA. We were told to fuck off. The VA was not offering that [counseling groups], they didn't want us to exist. A lot of these psychologists and psychiatrists that were working for the VA would freak out. They couldn't grasp some of these stories that Vietnam veterans were telling them, of killing, of slaughter. These were people that got college deferments...they didn't understand Vietnam.[98]

Jim McGarrah reinforced this hesitation of the VA to provide medical assistance. He recounted an experience in which he waited at a decrepit VA mental health facility for hours only to be told by an overworked psychiatrist that his issues were in no way unique. Furthermore, he would have to pay for his own treatment and medication because those were not services provided to veterans. McGarrah complained, "as long as we kept hiding, we could receive the leftover benefits of the legitimate veterans who fought in the *good* wars."[99] McGarrah evidenced the extreme discomfort of American public institutions to endorse in any way a war that so deeply countered American values and expectations. In the absence of a formal diagnosis or great sympathy for their cause many veterans were prescribed drugs such as Thorazine and sent away without receiving the assistance they needed to address their problems.[100] Even with extensive activism from

---

[98] Stacewicz, Richard. *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.* (New York: Twayne Publishers), 1997, 271

[99] McGarrah, 2

[100] Thorazine is a drug typically prescribed to Schizophrenics and individuals in the manic phase of Bipolar Disorder. It has wide-ranging side-effects including: lockjaw, uncontrollable twitching, breast development in males, intestinal blockage and the inability to move or talk, (http://www.healthsquare.com/newrx/tho1441.htm). It is fairly successful in suppressing the flashbacks and extreme agitation of Vietnam veterans. However its extreme side-effects render it an ineffective long-term treatment of PTSD.

Vietnam veterans, it took congress ten years after a majority of veterans had returned from war to provide any formalized plan to treat veterans suffering from PTSD. The treatment centers provided by this national funding were often staffed and run by veterans themselves and consistently lacked the funds and manpower to treat the excessive population of traumatized veterans.

The Roots of Recollection

When veterans were denied the public assistance they needed to resume their civilian lives, many began the long process of recovery through their own personal means and methods. Recovery from war trauma is a long and complex process. Each veteran has a varying explanation of how they arrived at their current point of stability. Some veterans can never recover any semblance of their former lives. Most acknowledge that the war fundamentally changed them and the way they understand the world. Shay explained, "to encounter radical evil is to make one forever different from the trusting, 'normal' person who wraps the rightness of the social order around himself snugly, like a cloak of safety."[101] Ultimately, recovery can never be the 'return to normal' that many veterans wish for. There is no known pill or treatment to restore the innocence stolen on the battlefield or relieve the survivor's guilt that tortures so many veterans.

The veteran's ability to resume a fulfilling existence was affected by a variety factors including: the degree of combat in which they participated, whether they enlisted or were drafted, the extent of support from family and friends, and the personality of the

---

[101] Shay, 185

individual veteran. However, beyond these factors it appears that the Vietnam veterans who went on to live successful lives in some way managed to fit the scattered fragments of their wartime memories into some type of larger narrative. Journalist and veteran Bruce Shapiro explained how the journalistic process could serve as a form of therapy for veterans. He stated "our job is to make narratives, to take the fragmented shards of horrifying experiences and put them in some kind of shape."[102] This same process has appeared to be extremely helpful in allowing veterans to shape their wartime memories into a story with a manageable purpose and coherent structure.

The beginnings of recovery as well as the 'creation of a larger narrative' can, in part, be attributed to the VVAW sponsored "rap groups." These groups, initiated in 1970 involved "groups of veterans sitting around in a room and confiding to one another the most troubling aspects of both their military service and their experiences in coming home from war."[103] Lifton, a leading founder of the rap groups re-modeled the traditional vision of group therapy by ensuring that everyone present was absolutely equal and had a valid perspective. The veterans recognized the necessary presence of a person with "greater psychological knowledge who could help guide their talk toward coherent conclusions and help resolve the dilemmas that were keeping them from functioning normally in society." Wilson Hubbel explained how his veteran support group was the catalyst in his full reintegration into civilian society and rationalization of his war experience. This group offered him a place of mutual honesty and support. He described how being in the presence of other vets allowed him to feel less burdened with

---

[102] Glantz, xix

[103] Gerald Nicosia, *Home to War: A history of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement* (New York: Crown, 2001) 59.

shame and less alone in his experiences.[104] These groups confronted, head-on, the trauma and hypocrisy of the Vietnam War when the majority of the civilian population wished to erase the event from their memory. Ultimately this communalization of experience greatly influenced the creation of the typical Vietnam narrative—one that discarded idealized visions of the United States and acknowledged the inherent presence of hypocrisy and injustice.

An emerging element of this larger narrative involved the re-humanization of the enemy (the Viet Cong) in the minds of American soldiers. "Restoring honor to the enemy is an essential step in recovery from combat PTSD," Shay explained; "the veteran's self-respect never fully recovers so long as he is unable to see the enemy as worthy"[105] Wilson Hubbel illustrated the great power and importance of forgiveness. Hubbel returned to Vietnam in 1996 and throughout his tour he met and socialized with Vietnamese men and women who had sympathized with both sides of the war. He was even able to dine with a former member of the Viet Cong. As a parting gesture of forgiveness the men exchanged photographs of themselves in their respective military uniforms. Hubbel stated, "now when I think of Vietnam I don't think of a hellish warzone and a despicable enemy, but instead, a country with beautiful landscape, delicious food, and generous, loving people."[106] Jim Nolan also acknowledged the great importance of recognizing the humanity and honor of the Vietnamese people. By stating, "everybody has a story. Everybody has something to say if you'll just listen"[107], Nolan evidenced

---

[104] Wilson Hubbel, "Return to Vietnam" (lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, March 9, 2009).
[105] Shay, 115
[106] Wilson Hubbel. Lecture. March 9, 2009
[107] Jim Nolan. Lecture. March 11, 2009

how as the years since the war's conclusion have passed, the Vietnamese have transformed in his head from "gooks," "cowards," and "useless vermin" into honorable and respectable warriors.[108]

Another essential element in the veteran recovery process was confronting and coming to terms with survivor's guilt. PTSD counselor Dr. Sharon Rapp described how survivor's guilt was one of the most lingering and unapproachable elements of the veteran recovery process.[109] Veterans often had great difficulty accepting that the war in Vietnam was random and senseless, and so consequently, was the fate of each man who fought. Jim Nolan described the intense and long-lasting guilt he suffered at the loss of his wartime confidante and role model, Charlie.

> For thirty-three years, whenever I thought about Vietnam, that day, or thought about Charlie, all I could remember was the feeling of intense guilt. I forgot all the details, all of the circumstances. If I felt guilty about Charlie's death, then it must have been my fault. I made up facts in my distorted mind that fit my feelings...It should have been me that died that day instead of my best friend. Thirty-three years of hating myself; not knowing what I was angry about or why I flew off in a violent rage at the slightest prompting. Not knowing why I didn't deserve to live or to be happy or to be loved. It's called survivor's guilt.[110]

Following the loss of special comrades in Vietnam, many veterans reported a sense of being 'already dead.' For these men, the loss of someone so close to them meant the ultimate destruction of morality in the human race. Ultimately, suicide was the most common reaction to this intense and lingering guilt.

---

[108] Shay, 105-116

[109] Sharon Rapp (lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, March 4, 2009).

[110] Nolan, Jim. "My First 25 Days in Vietnam." The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Religion and Culture. University of California, Santa Barbara. 14 Mar. 2009 <http://rs155.org/RS-155/Documents/Entries/2007/8/17_My_First_25_Days_in_Vietnam.html>.

However, the veterans who were able to transform their survivor's guilt into a positive force were often able to restore a guiding purpose to lives. Primarily, survivor's guilt compelled many men to speak out in the memory of those who were killed in battle. Nolan described the pain and difficulty he felt in telling the story of his experience in Vietnam; an experience that he viewed as, "more intimate than sex." However, he explained, what ultimately drove him, time after time, was a duty to honor and remember his friends lost in Vietnam.[111]

Finally, veterans evidenced an overwhelming need to accept the "reality" of the war in order to move on with their lives. If they could not let go of the remaining fragments of the "John Wayne image" they could in no way accept and legitimize their presence in Vietnam. McGarrah explained, "until I accepted the facts of the war, that it had altered forever the way I perceived the world, had made me into someone I couldn't always like, had caused me to redefine what it meant to be human, that I was responsible for my own actions having joined the Marine Corps of my own free will, I could not begin to heal."[112] Veteran Michael Moore echoed McGarrah's view that accepting "the facts of war" as an essential part of reconciliation. Moore readily acknowledged that he killed people, that these people had families and lives and people that depended on them, and that his actions had consequences far beyond his comprehension. However, he "decided I was worthy of forgiveness," and that has allowed him to move forward.[113]

---

[111] Jim Nolan. Lecture. March 11, 2009
[112] McGarrah, 252
[113] Moore. Lecture. Feb 9, 2009.

The Cultural Memory and Legacy of the Vietnam War

The "creation of a larger narrative" that was so elemental to the process of recovery amongst individual veterans, revealed vital information about the developing memory and legacy of the Vietnam War within American culture. This collective understanding of the Vietnam War developed at times in collaboration with and at times in great conflict with the understanding of individual veterans. With time came greater perspective on past events. However, in the case of the Vietnam War, this passage of time also promoted a sense of "societal amnesia" in which Americans have forgotten or reinterpreted the more painful elements of the war. Following the completion of the war, American civilians chose to turn their backs on and suppress the memory of this great failure in American history. Throughout the 1970s, the pain of loss was too fresh and the brutality of the war too raw to attempt to rationalize the war in any way.

It was not until the 1980s that a shared cultural memory and interpretation of Vietnam began to emerge. Berg speculated, "it is almost as if following a 'respectful silence' we have committed ourselves to the bittersweet work of mourning our loss: our national innocence, the lives of our sons and daughters...American idealism didn't die; we are simply in the course of 'healing the wounds those ideals suffered in *our* war"[114] Unlike the "Good War," Vietnam has yet to develop a widely accepted image or purpose. Ronald Reagan urged the American public to recognize that "ours was, in truth, a noble

---

[114] Berg, 2

cause."[115] This 'noble cause rhetoric', widely advocated by conservatives, attempted to convey the message that Americans could have won the war had they not be held back by the constraints of the media and the anti-war movement. This viewpoint was clearly accepted by a portion of the men who served in Vietnam, particularly those in Officer positions. Veteran Douglas Kinnard wrote "The War Managers," a book based on a 1974 questionnaire he sent to all 173 army generals who served as combat commanders in Vietnam. He found that "critical as the generals were of...the lack of a coherent strategy, they were even more upset by the media...they felt that the media was undercutting them and looking for ways to degrade home-front support."[116]

However, this attempt to fit Vietnam into the traditional American historical discourse of "ahistoricism, amnesia, and end-of-history assumptions" has not met with widespread approval or acceptance.[117] The broader population of the United States has derived their understanding of the Vietnam War through the images and emotions presented through cinematic and musical presentations. However, these popular representations often fell victim to the same trappings of mainstream historical discourse. Marita Sturken claimed, through the docu-drama, the most commonly consumed image of the Vietnam War, "the politics of gender and race surrounding the war are represented and re-scripted, the myths of the war are established, questioned and replaced with new myths and the primary representation of the Vietnam veteran is constructed."[118] As such, revisionist historians have often pointed to widely popular movies such as Rambo (1982)

---

[115] "Ronald Reagan quotes," http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/political/ronald_reagan,6 (accessed March 19, 2009).
[116] Douglas Kinnard in Appy, 321-322
[117] Moser, 160
[118] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Los Angeles: University of California P, 1997) 86.

to show an attempt at restoring masculine power and independence as an essential element of American mythology.[119] Furthermore, these movies often showed the soldier or veteran as a victim of his circumstances. Unforeseen events and actions depicted in the movie removed the responsibility and guilt from the veteran. In consequence, viewers could interpret the soldier's violence as an act of bravery and self-defense instead of the mark of an innately evil character.[120] In support of this interpretation of the war as a patriotic and humane experience Nesser stateed, "I am glad I served my country in Vietnam and if I had to do it all over again, I would...I have become more inclined to believe that our presence there may have served both a geopolitical and humanitarian purpose."[121]

War veterans did not always meet this romanticized view of the war with approval. Tripp lamented, "it is too easy, and a part of the healing process, to look back with a sense of victory, when all I felt at the time was defeat. It is too easy to forget the incredible suffering inflicted upon so many."[122] The most recently created and renowned cultural portrayals of the Vietnam War often echoed Tripp's sense of defeat. In particular, Oliver Stone's movie, Platoon (1986) as well as Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket (1987) re-scripted the war as a traumatic moment for American culture and values. Conveying the war as a cultural trauma fulfilled a desire to absolve the American public of direct responsibility in the war. However, these movies also attempted to portray the war in a manner that did not deny the violent role played by American soldiers. On the movie Platoon, Vietnam veteran and journalist, David Halberstam stated, "It is painfully

---

[119] Turner, 94
[120] Turner, 96
[121] Nesser, 185-186
[122] Tripp, 130

realistic. The other side gets to shoot back. The enemy soldiers, albeit more of a shadow hovering constantly in the background than a fleshed-out reality, are portrayed as professional and tough.[123] This approval was not however, universal. In contrast, Tim O'Brien argued that the contemporary interpretations of Vietnam demonstrate a cultural preoccupation with "the American idea of manhood, with adventure, and with a gnawing sense of guilt."[124] Furthermore, Yusef Komunyakaa, an African-American veteran pointed to the lack of racial diversity in Vietnam films, stating "I don't know if we've grown in the US to the extent that we can embrace the idea of Black American war heroes. I don't think any of the Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War really do justice to the black presence."[125] Ultimately, every portrayal of the war, whether it is a memoir, drama, or documentary has biases, as well as strong protagonists and detractors. However, Turner argues, "America's future success lies in the ability to balance between our need to fully recognize the horrors of Vietnam while easing the potentially negative impact these horrors have on our national mentality.

An essential element of this new American identity calls to one of the broader legacies of the 1960s: that protest equates to patriotism. Veterans did not mince words regarding the brutal nature of the Vietnam War. Through their protests and candid discussions, veterans conveyed the message that one must speak out against the discrepancies between American actions and ideals. They stressed the idea that it is wrong to fight for one's country if the war goes against core values of dignity and morality. Furthermore, they spread the ideal that blind patriotism is ultimately destructive

---

[123] David Halberstam, "On Oliver Stone's Platoon," *New York Times*, March 8, 1987 (accessed March 15, 2009).
[124] Tim O'Brien in Appy, 544
[125] Yusef Komunyakaa in Appy, 259

to the progress of the country. Historian Richard Moser explained, "Resistance to war replaced war as a means of articulating values and ideals." [126] Veterans who spoke out against the war in the 1970s recognized that their fight to defend the "American way of life" was not in the war zone, as it was for their fathers. Rather it was at home in the US.

Ultimately, "the antiwar soldiers found in their dissent the fulfillment of their greatest expectations as soldiers—that heroic act in which ideals become reality."[127]. In this explanation, Moser illustrated the manner by which veterans became heroes through their postwar experience, rather than their experience in Vietnam. American society has a tradition of rewarding those who speak out against the injustices of modern society. Vietnam veterans spoke of the inhumanity of modern warfare. They stressed the idea that "war making restricts liberties, inhibits free debate, and centralizes power."[128] As a consequence of the raw honesty of Vietnam veterans, the influence of the John Wayne paradigm of war on society has decreased. Instead, there is a newfound understanding that war, necessary or not, is bloody, violent, and has consequences that reach far beyond our comprehension.

The post-war revision of the Vietnam veteran identity was not always met with widespread approval. More conservative Vietnam veterans often felt that the discussion of the brutality and violence of war was an insult to the wartime experiences of all soldiers. Nesser argued, "recent attempts to welcome Vietnam veterans home are a little late. Like many other Vietnam veterans, I have a special contempt for those who deserted our country and for the Hollywood actress (Jane Fonda) who gave aid and comfort to the

---

[126] Moser, 155
[127] Moser, 155
[128] Moser, 157

enemy"[129] Similarly, in a 2004 letter to John Kerry, a number of Vietnam veterans agreed, "we are concerned about the comments you made AFTER you came home from Vietnam. You accused your fellow veterans of terrible atrocities—and to this day you have never apologized."[130] These contradicting opinions point to the still unresolved legacy of the Vietnam War in American society.

While the legacy of the Vietnam War is conflicted and constantly changing, the completion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 represented a culminating point in the development of the veteran's memories and collective memories of the Vietnam. The memorial negotiated the conflicting goals of honoring the war effort while recognizing its painful place in US historical discourse. The monument's simple design consists of large slabs of black reflective granite inscribed with the names of the American soldiers lost in Vietnam. The original goals of the monument were "to be reflective in character, harmonious with its surroundings, contain the names of those dead and missing as a result of the conflict, and make no political statement about the war."[131] "Most war memorials in America—statues, schools, bridges, parks—proudly salute American triumph." However, Kristin Hass explains, this was not the aim of the Vietnam memorial. "The war was a painfully mired drawn out defeat that called in to question the most fundamental tenets of American patriotism"[132] Consequently, the monument was designed to be a tasteful reflection of this painful, yet character-forming event in US

---

[129] Nesser, 186
[130] "Text of Veterans' Letter to Senator John Kerry," 25 Aug. 2004, CNN.com, 20 March 2009. http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/08/25/patterson.letter/index.html.
[131] "Wall Information," The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, http://thewall-usa.com/information.asp (accessed March 19, 2009).
[132] Kristin A. Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Los Angeles: University of California P, 1998), 12.

history. The names of the lost American soldiers convey the survivor's guilt of American veterans and invite the American public to share in the responsibility of honoring their memory. The reflective granite demonstrated the concept that each and every American played a role in the war in Vietnam, regardless of whether or not they personally fought. Finally, the abstract construction conveys the unresolved and evolving concept of the war in contemporary society. Each visitor is allowed to form his own interpretation of the personal and cultural impact of the war.

Conclusion

The Road to Reconciliation?

In his or her road to recovery each individual veteran attempts to somehow place his or her individual experience into a larger view of American history. As a historian I have attempted to do the same. I have read thousands pages of veteran testimony and seen the raw emotions that emerge, even thirty years later, when these men speak of their experiences in front of a group. In his own way each man attempts to convince himself and others, that his experience had meaning, that the pain he has suffered and inflicted is part of a cause larger than himself. Yet how is this possible when, on the whole, the "lessons" our country learned in Vietnam are all too easily forgotten?

Following the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the United States was extremely hesitant to involve itself in foreign conflicts as it had done, so forcefully, in the past. However, this "Vietnam syndrome" effectively came to a close in 2001 with the September 11 terrorist attacks on US soil. Following this startling event, the newly elected President George W. Bush issued a series of new directives advocating, among other things, a policy of preemptive warfare. In a statement to Congress in November 2001, Bush stated, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the

United States as a hostile regime."[133] While defensive action was arguably necessary, it seems that these words, as well as the actions that followed attempted to reinstate the black and white reasoning, inherent in American war rhetoric, that was so traumatizing for the men serving in Vietnam.

In response to a still somewhat mysterious cause, the United States invaded Iraq in March of 2003. Six years have passed, 4,238 US soldiers have died, and $585 billion have been spent; yet the US government is only now beginning to make definite plans to exit the country.[134] I have neither the time nor space to discuss this issue in full, however suffice it to say that while US leaders (particularly the former Bush administration) claim there is great difference between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, the returned veterans tell a different story. Much like Vietnam, soldiers fighting in the Middle East have an abstracted concept of their fighting goals. Iraq veteran, Ben Dickinson asserts, "I never felt any animosity towards the people we were fighting other than that we were forced to be there."[135] Furthermore, the weapons technology used in the Middle East is supposedly "more advanced" than that of Vietnam; however, indiscriminate violence, including widespread aggression against civilians, is a presence in Iraq just as it was in Vietnam.

The military *has* eliminated the troop rotation system of Vietnam because of its clear ineffectiveness in sustaining a united and well-trained group of soldiers. However, in its place is a new policy where men fighting in the Middle East must serve multiple tours of duty. While soldiers arriving home from Iraq do not experience the

---

[133] George W. Bush, "Text of the President's Speech," http://yc2.net/speech.htm (accessed March 19, 2009).
[134] Glantz, 2-10
[135] Dickinson, Ben. "Iraq Veterans Panel." Lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, February 25, 2009.

discrimination from their peers that was so traumatizing to Vietnam veterans, they still experience huge obstacles in obtaining the medical treatment and social assistance that is necessary to reintegrate in civilian life. Glantz discusses how Iraq war veterans "are getting layered with PTSD." They are not even allowed to heal themselves from their first war trauma before they must return to the Middle East.[136]

As Americans we claim to "live the dream." We like to fantasize that anyone, no matter who they are or where they came from, can rise above adversity to achieve extraordinary things. Yet we continually deny this dream to our veterans, the men supposedly defending our way of life in the face of adversity. In the past forty years of American history, the military has increasingly viewed soldiers as expendable manpower, sending them to fight in wars of debatable morality, and then denying them proper help and support upon their return to the United States.

Through all their suffering, an overwhelming sense of hope is still conveyed through the words and actions of veterans. These men often seem to feel that they have been denied something that is rightfully theirs. However, it is not too late to make a change. The sufferings of Vietnam veterans should not be for naught. Their stories, regardless of the format, need to become a part of the mainstream discussion of war and its consequences in our society. I have argued throughout this paper that the larger reason for the widespread suffering and disillusionment in the aftermath of the Vietnam War results from a sense of immense betrayal amongst all Americans. It is evident that we are now far-removed from the founding principles of our country. The blessings of liberty

---

[136] Glantz, 30

are *not* secured for "ourselves and our posterity."[137] It is essential to the future unity and success of the United States that we put our efforts and our dollars into creating a modern society that upholds this traditional ideal. Each day hundreds of soldiers arrive home from Iraq and Afghanistan. These men's stories already bear great similarities to the narratives of the men who fought in Vietnam. The ending does not have to be the same.

[137] Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Anderson, William. Interview by Stephen Maxner. *The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project* (Lubbock), September 22, 2000.

Appy, Christian G. *Patriots The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*. New York: Penguin (Non-Classics), 2004.

Bush, George W. "Text of the President's Speech." http://yc2.net/speech.htm (accessed March 19, 2009).

Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1977.

Dickinson, Ben. "Iraq Veterans Panel." Lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, February 25, 2009.

Erhart, William D. *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co, Inc, 1986.

Halberstam, David. "On Oliver Stone's Platoon." *New York Times*, March 8, 1987. (accessed March 15, 2009).

Hubbel, Wilson. "My Experience in Vietnam, Part 1." Lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, January 7, 2009.

Kerry, John. "Vietnam Veterans Against the War Statement." The Sixties Project. http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/VVAW_Kerry_Senate.html (accessed March 19, 2009).

Ketwig, John. *...And a Hard Rain Fell*. Sourcebooks Inc, 2008.

Kovic, Ron. *Born on the Fourth of July*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976.

Mcgarrah, Jim. *A Temporary Sort of Peace*. New York: Indiana Historical Society P, 2007.

Moore, Michael. Lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, February 2, 2009.

Nesser, John A. *The Ghosts of Thua Thien: An American Soldier's Memoir of Vietnam*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co, Inc, 2008.

Nolan, Jim. Lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, January 28, 2009.

Olsen, Howard. *Issues of the Heart: Memoirs of an Artilleryman in Vietnam*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co, Inc, 1990.

Tripp, Nathaniel. *Father, Soldier, Son Memoir of a Platoon Leader In Vietnam*. South Royalton: Steerforth, 2006.

"Text of Veterans' Letters to Senator John Kerry." 25 Aug. 2004. CNN.com. 20 Mar. 2009

Secondary Sources:

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR Fourth Edition (Text Revision)*. New York: American Psychiatric, Inc., 2000.

Bush, George W. "Text of the President's Speech." http://yc2.net/speech.htm (accessed March 19, 2009).

Coffield, Patrick. "A Short History of Vietnam." Lecture, Religious Studies 155, Santa Barbara, CA, January 16, 2008.

DeRivera, Joseph. *Handbook on Building Cultures of Peace*. Warren: Springer, 2008.

Fischer, Victor. *Myths and Realities: A Study of Attitudes Toward Vietnam Era Veterans*. Washington, D.C.: Veterans Administration, 1980.

Glantz, Aaron. *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans*. Los Angeles: University of California P, 2009.

Grant, Susan-Mary. "Making History: Myth and the Construction of American Nationhood." In *Myths & Nationhood*, compiled by Geoffrey Hosking and Schopflin George, 90-105. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2000.

Grele, Ronald J. "Listen to their Voices: Two Case Studies in the Interpretation of Oral History." In *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, by Ronald J. Grele, 212-41. Vol. 2. Chicago: Precedent Inc, 1985.

Gustainis, Justin J. *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War*. New York: Praeger, 1993.

Hass, Kristin A. *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Los Angeles: University of California P, 1998.

Hecht, Prof. Richard. Lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, January 5, 2009.

Hellmann, John. *The American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.

Landy, Elliot. Elliot Landy's Vision Photo Gallery. (accessed February 2009).

Lembcke, Jerry. *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: New York UP, 1998.

Lifton, Robert Jay. *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.

MacPherson, Myra. *Long Time Passing Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*. New York: Indiana UP, 2002.

Meyrovitch, Joshua. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. London: Oxford UP, 1985.

Moser, Richard. *The New Winter Soldier: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1996.

Neu, Charles E. *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2009.

Nicosia, Gerald. *Home to war a history of the Vietnam veterans' movement*. New York: Crown, 2001.

Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. Los Angeles: University of California P, 1997.

Thelen, David. "Memory and American History." *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989). http://www.jstor.org/stable/1908632?cookieSet=1 (accessed March 19, 2009).

Rapp, Sharon. Lecture, Religious Studies 155, University of California-Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, March 4, 2009.

Romo, Barry, Pete Zastrow, and Joe Miller. "History of the U.S. War in Vietnam." http://www.vvaw.org/about/warhistory.php (accessed February 2009).

"Ronald Reagan quotes." Funny Quotes, Author Quotes and Quotes from Famous Celebrities. http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/political/ronald_reagan,6 (accessed March 19, 2009).

Rowe, John C. "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology." In *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, edited by Rick Berg. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.

Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Turner, Fred. *Echoes of Combat: Trauma, Memory, and the Vietnam War*. University of Minnesota P, 2001.

"Wall Information." The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. http://thewall-usa.com/information.asp (accessed March 19, 2009).

Wills, Gary. *John Wayne's America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.