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Four Vietnams: Conflicting Visions of the Indochina Conflict in American Culture

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FOUR VIETNAMS: CONFLICTING VISIONS OF THE INDOCHINA
CONFLICT IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Four Vietnams: Conflicting Versions of the Indochina Conflict from Cold War to the Global War on Terror argues that there is no single historical consensus among Americans on the Vietnam War. There are, instead, four different “Vietnams” in American popular and literary culture: an early Cold War version of Vietnam as an Asian “domino” susceptible of collapsing to Communism and thereby causing its neighbors to collapse successively; a 1960s and early 1970s version of the American enterprise in Vietnam as an imperialist war, an “immoral and criminal” attempt to suppress an indigenous people’s will to political and economic independence; a late 1970s version of the war as a “tragedy without villains” for which nobody could really be held morally accountable; and finally, a version of the war as a “noble cause,” an altruistic, benevolent attempt to save the Vietnamese people from the horrors of Communism. *Four Vietnams* attempts to demonstrate that each of these four “versions” take shape at successive stages in American culture during the second half of the twentieth century as responses to particular historical conditions and circumstances, and I also argue that each of the four interpretive schemas is grounded in a particular ideology. Chapter 1 outlines representations of the Indochina conflict in Eisenhower-era anticommunist liberalism. Chapter 2 situates the Vietnam War within the leftist critique, ascendant in the late 1960s and early 1970s, of imperialism and capitalism. Chapter 3 discusses the war as view through the (retrospective) lens of post-Vietnam Carter-era centrist liberalism. Chapter 4 discusses the emergence of cultural conservatism during the Reagan-Bush years and the Rightist attempt to “reclaim” the history of the Vietnam War. Each chapter also examines the relationships between a series of texts (novels, films, nonfiction books, popular songs) in which the Vietnam War or some aspect of the war is a central feature and the formation of these “versions” and the reigning discourse on the war. Lastly, I attempt to show how discourse on the Global War on Terrorism often reads American involvement in the Middle East today through some of the same interpretive schemes that have been applied to Vietnam and how Vietnam is often invoked in radically different ways by warring ideological camps in the current debate as an analogy to the current military and political situation both abroad and within the United States itself.

INTRODUCTION

There is no middle ground in the semantic war. You choose sides by the words you use.

—Jonathan Schell, *The Village of Ben Suc*

The epigraph above serves as a convenient springboard from which to launch a discussion about the struggle in American culture over the meaning of the war in Vietnam (or, more generally, the entire Indochina Conflict between the mid-1940s and the early 1980s). I take the quotation from a well-known war correspondent's first-person account of a 1967 U.S. military operation in Vietnam, and although it specifically refers to his distaste for the euphemistic jargon of the military officers he talked to during his time in the field, it is illustrative of some of the more pervasive problems one still encounters when reading about, writing about, and talking about the Vietnam War—no less so today, as American policy in Vietnam some thirty to forty years ago is frequently invoked as an instructive yet tragically (or, depending on who is speaking, willfully) ignored analogue to current American policy in Iraq and the American predicament there.

Schell, who makes his antiwar position fairly clear in his writings, chooses not to participate in the repellent discourse of the military brass because he does not want to become complicit in their practical agenda, and he situates his piece within a burgeoning body of antiwar reportage and “atrocities” literature (which I will go on to discuss at length in the second chapter). He identifies himself as participating in this discourse by doing many of the same things that similar antiwar writers do—contrasting (ironically) brute American force wedded to technology with the determination of the technologically disadvantaged Vietnamese, emphasizing the arrogance and hubris of the American military man, and highlighting the artificiality and unpopularity of the American-backed South Vietnamese forces. As I will go on to demonstrate, these contrasts and emphases were all staple fare in antiwar (I acknowledge the elusive nature of the term) literature and film, employed in different modes, both fiction and non-fiction. Like everyone else engaging in this interpretive struggle over Vietnam, Schell employs a particularly recognizable discourse (antiwar, anti-imperialist) which identifies his “side” and simultaneously signals his rejection of another discourse (militarist and conservative).

The Village of Ben Suc, of course, tells us about a particular moment during the war, a particular operation in a particular place. But, as with most other writing and film on Vietnam, no matter what the ideological grounding, the particular is subservient to the general. The details are not important in and of themselves, it is the pattern in which they are configured that matters most. What does this narrative about a joint American-South Vietnamese mission in 1967 tell us

about the larger war beyond its parameters? That is the implicit question Schell's text asks of us, and that is the same question that other books, articles, and films depicting people and situations in the Vietnam War ask of us. Schell wrote the piece more than thirty-five years ago, but his remarks about choosing sides in the "semantic war" could easily apply to just about everything written, said, sung, and shown on the screen about Vietnam since then. The subject of the Vietnam War, as the title of a recent book by Robert McNamara has it, as an "argument without end," or as another writer, Michael Herr (like Schell, a former Vietnam correspondent) has it, a never-ending crossfire of facts and figures between people who will never agree with each other on certain fundamental assumptions about the war.

Schell's observations are also applicable to the current arguments over the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, and more broadly, to the Bush Administration's conception and execution of the "Global War on Terrorism."¹ There are now at least two fundamentally distinct and diametrically opposed narratives of this war (I include the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in the War on Terrorism primarily because the Bush Administration, which conceived of this designation, does so, and for the sake of convenience I'll refer to such operations by their official names throughout this discussion). The one which rests on the assumption that the invasion and occupation was and is immoral and illegal—a gross infringement on the sovereignty of a nation which posed no threat to the United States and a breach of international law—casts the Bush Administration as villains who cynically manipulated the hijacking attacks of September 11, 2001 as a pretext to dupe a gullible and frightened public into supporting a war against so-called "rogue states" sitting on invaluable resources (namely, oil) and standing in the way of global capitalist domination. September 11, according to this view, also served as the Reichstag Fire for the administration's war against civil liberties at home, such as the right to privacy, freedom of expression and association, and due process for anyone deemed an enemy combatant. Now, the primary reason which compelled Congress to approve the President's decision to invade Iraq, according to this school of thought, has now been shown up as a sham and a falsehood. No weapons of mass destruction have been found. The daily round of attacks against Coalition Forces, it is pointed out, only provide the strongest evidence that Americans and their allies are not wanted in Iraq; that there is a deep-seated resentment toward the American presence there, and that the resistance against the occupation is popularly based and widespread. The prison abuse scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay are merely indicative of the pervasive nature of such atrocities and illustrative of the racism and bigotry of U.S. forces working in Iraq and Afghanistan. Generally speaking, this narrative of the Global War on Terrorism as a ruse for Anglo-American domination of the Middle East and its resources contests what the writers and

artists above see as the disingenuous explanation that the Bush Administration and the neoconservative movement offer as a rationalization for the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the continued support of Israel.

This narrative and its ideological underpinnings are easily recognizable in a popular and commercially successful film like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), yet there is a powerful undercurrent of discourse which offers elaborations upon these precepts and informs, perhaps in an oblique way, a sizeable portion of public conversation on Iraq and the Global War on Terror. Books like Tariq Ali's *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* (2003) as well as Chalmers Roberts's *Blowback* (2002) and *The Sorrows of Empire* (2004), among others, are regularly cited as antidotes to Samuel Huntington's venomous "clash of civilizations" thesis—Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1998) is a foundational text for the pro-Israel, anti-Muslim neoconservative Right—and useful expositions of the ways in which United States Machiavellian foreign policy backfires. The leftist AK Press offers a catalogue of spoken-word compact discs featuring lectures by popular speaker/writer figures, from Noam Chomsky to Ward Churchill, on these same topics. American literary culture to a large extent echoes the Chalmers Roberts "blowback" thesis, with writers like the late Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal, and Norman Mailer hurling barbs at both the Bush Administration's rationale for the war and the fifty-year foreign policy heritage that they allege brought on the terrorist attacks. The foreign policy heritage they refer to, of course, is the United States' having supported repressive dictatorships in Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Doing so, they charge, has only earned us the hatred and resentment of the native peoples who had to suffer under these petty tyrants. September 11, according to the "blowback" thesis, was the understandable response of some of these long-suffering peoples to U.S.-sponsored repression. The "blowback" thesis is by no means the province of intellectual elites and is widely understood as a reasonable and sound frame of reference for understanding the moral and political dimensions of the Global War on Terrorism. Among any number of everyday people one talks to about the current war, one is bound to encounter several who espouse some variation on this thesis. A typical formulation runs something like this: "It's hypocritical to demonize Osama bin Laden because at one point when he was useful to us, the CIA trained him." Hollywood stars from Sean Penn to Susan Sarandon to Jeanine Garafolo echo this view (or is it the other way around?) during interviews and appearances. The antiwar, anti-Bush Administration songs of popular rock bands like System of a Down and A Perfect Circle get regular airplay on FM radio. And it is fairly easy to detect in the remarks of political figures like Senators Edward Kennedy, Barbara Boxer, Nancy Pelosi, Charles Rangel, and Richard Durbin, among others. In short, it would be dishonest to

deny that the anti-Bush, anti-Global War on Terror view resonates within a large segment of American culture.

In the pro-Bush, neoconservative narrative, the September 11 attacks showed that stateless criminal organizations like Al-Qaeda, who nevertheless received material and financial support from rogue states like Iran and Iraq, could operate and conduct attacks against American interests with virtual impunity as long as those states were permitted to continue harboring and aiding terrorists. In order to get rid of the problem of terrorism, according to the logic of this narrative, the United States needed to formulate and implement policies of pre-emptive war and “regime change” concerning the rogue states. If the links between Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Al-Qaeda were not readily apparent, it was only because the two were extraordinarily adept at concealing them. The Bush Administration presented the main, pressing reasons for the need for regime change in 2003 as a preemptive action against a potentially imminent biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons threat and an attempt to rid the heart of the Middle East of despotism and sow the seeds of a democratic revolution that would spread throughout that part of the world and hopefully dry up the stateless terrorists’ means of support. What compelled the entire enterprise, according to the Bush Administration and its apologists, was not an imperialist thirst for cheap oil but a spirit of enlightened self-interest. Likewise, what the administration’s critics on the Left mistakenly perceived (or misrepresented) as a war on civil liberties and a campaign of persecution against Muslims is nothing more than a concerted effort to intercept and disrupt communications between terrorist cells planning to attack Americans from within their own borders. As the Bush Administration put this version of the Global War on Terrorism before the public via its official mouthpieces, Bush apologists not officially connected to the administration as well as a number of writers have reinforced this view in books like Kenneth Pollack’s *The Threatening Storm* (2002), Con Coughlin’s *Saddam, King of Terror* (2002), Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol’s *The War Over Iraq* (2003), William Bennett’s *Why We Fight* (2003), among many others. The adjunct to books like these are Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Channel, along with the right-wing radio personalities such as Neil Boortz, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, and Rush Limbaugh, all of whom routinely attack critics of the Global War on Terrorism as traitorous, and make it a point to show (by running certain senators’ taped remarks from the late 1990s) that the same Democrats who now complain the loudest about President Bush’s failed and wrongheaded policies of preemption and regime change all sermonized about the need for such action when a president from *their* party sat in office. Their response to the left’s attack on the fifty-year foreign policy heritage usually approaches the problem from the stance of *realpolitick*: during the Cold War the United States was often forced to secure alliances

with unsavory dictators because of necessity. Right-wing dictators like Chile's Augusto Pinochet and Shah Reza Pahlavi of Iran were weak and unconnected to any larger conspiratorial alliance or axis, unlike leftist dictatorships aligned with and receiving material support from the USSR. The United States essentially faced a choice between befriending them and maintaining them as bulwarks against Sino-Soviet expansion or abandoning them, allowing them to collapse and permitting something even more dangerous, repressive, and hostile to U.S. interests to arise in place of them.

When one probes popular and elite discourse on the Global War on Terrorism, it is fairly easy to see that a person's understanding of the Vietnam War informs—indeed, is perhaps central to—his or her understanding of the current conflict. Vietnam has been invoked repeatedly ever since October 2001, when the United States bombed and invaded Afghanistan, but talk of Afghanistan as a “quagmire” paralleling Vietnam faded after what seemed to be a fairly quick military success for the United States. By the 2004 presidential election, however, Vietnam had resurfaced in a major way. The campaign took place against the backdrop of a mounting insurgency and an increase in attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq, and these brought the Vietnam War and the conflict of interpretations over its meaning into the forefront of the debate for two main reasons. First, the parallels between Iraq and Vietnam were irresistible, for reasons that should be fairly obvious. After having kicked the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the 1980s and 1990s with short, low-cost, victories against Grenada, Panama, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Americans were not accustomed to any military engagement lasting longer than a month, and now Iraq presented the gloomy spectacle of a bloody and costly insurgency that might last several years—just like Vietnam in the 1960s. The second reason Vietnam resurfaced was because of the veteran status of the two candidates. John Kerry was a Vietnam veteran; George W. Bush was not. The Kerry campaign emphasized this discrepancy to maximum effect. The underlying message from the Kerry campaign was that John Kerry knew the terrible human cost of war from firsthand experience, and was the right man to end the bloody occupation of Iraq, which had been orchestrated by “chickenhawks” like George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

If anything, the resurgence of the arguments over Vietnam only showed that Americans have never reached any sort of broad cultural consensus on the meaning of that war. Supporters of John Kerry generally agreed on one “version” of the war, as the supporters of President Bush agreed upon an entirely different one. At the risk of being reductive, we might say that Kerry's supporters agreed with Kerry himself that the Vietnam War should never have happened—or, at least, should never have warranted American involvement. Consequently, Kerry's view of the Vietnam War mirrored his view of the Iraq War (at least the view he espoused during the 2004

campaign): that it never should have happened. The reason for this was, implicitly, that the situation in Iraq ominously paralleled the situation in Vietnam. The idea that the invasion and occupation were based on a faulty and perhaps even mendacious premise (weapons of mass destruction) paralleled the revelation that the Gulf of Tonkin incident (the pretext for troop escalation in Vietnam) never happened or did not happen in the way the Johnson Administration presented it. Iraq presented a swamp which could suck in more and more troops endlessly; Vietnam, which sucked in troops year after year with no visible sign of military progress, had been described as a “quagmire” by Vietnam-era journalists like David Halberstam. Was the fighting in Iraq between occupation forces and insurgents really taking shape along the lines of an imperialist war against an indigenous uprising? During the Vietnam War, the Left insisted this was the case, as it tentatively suggests now that it is the case in Iraq. During the Vietnam War, U.S. military atrocities, for the Left, belied the moral bankruptcy of the policies and directives coming down from the highest levels of decision-making. Such crimes revealed the true nature of the war as imperialist aggression and a grab for resources and strategically valuable territory, cleverly concealed by jingoist rhetoric and disguised as an altruistic campaign to save a people from the horrors of Communism; and the heroic status of those who spoke out against these policies and decision-makers and called for an immediate American withdrawal from Southeast Asia. Similarly, American crimes such as those at Abu Ghraib reveal the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim racism and ethnocentrism at the heart of the enterprise and tear the mask off the benevolent façade of altruism. While John Kerry himself, during the 2004 election campaign, downplayed the notion of the Vietnam War as an American crime, it is clear that many of his supporters and sympathizers saw such parallels all too clearly.

While George W. Bush was silent on the subject of Vietnam, perhaps out of the feeling that he lacked the credibility, as a non-Vietnam veteran, to make any sort of definitive public judgment on the war or its legacy, supporters of Bush were by no means silent. John O'Neill's Swift Boat Veterans for Truth—supporters of Bush—were determined not to let Kerry monopolize election discourse about Vietnam and Vietnam service. They were veterans, like Kerry—indeed, many having served in the same or in a similar capacity as him—yet they disagreed not only with his projected foreign policy goals for America in the twenty-first century, they rejected his view of the Vietnam War utterly. Whereas Kerry's narrative of the war was largely grounded in some of more familiar the notions I've mentioned above, the Swift Boat Vets held to an entirely different set of ideas about the war. Their narrative rested on an apposite set of assumptions: the validity of America's crusade against Communism in Southeast Asia, the real nature of the conflict as an invasion of a sovereign nation by an aggressor, falsely portrayed by

treacherous propagandists at home and abroad as merely a civil war or an attempt by Vietnamese patriots to reunify a country divided by meddling imperialists; the infrequent and aberrant occurrence of American atrocities compared to the conscious use of terrorism and indiscriminate killing of civilians by the enemy, and the traitorous status of certain Americans who condemned American policy as immoral and thereby gave aid and comfort to the enemy. Listening to these two camps, it seems as if they are talking about two entirely different wars. What accounts for this radical disparity in their stories? To dismiss one side or the other as merely untruthful or cleverly distorting the historical record in order to serve a political agenda, as ideologues on either side of this debate often do, is unhelpful and simplistic, I believe. I offer a couple of examples in order to show the crudity such thinking often engenders. The popular bumper-sticker slogan “Kerry Lied While Real Men Died” (a retort to the “When Clinton Lied, Nobody Died” slogan, referring to the comparison between the insignificant, immaterial consequences of the former President’s perjury about Monica Lewinsky and the very real consequences of President Bush’s supposed mendacity about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq) subtly implies that Kerry’s antiwar activities back home directly led to the deaths of American servicemen still in Vietnam, men still serving their country faithfully while a traitor stabbed them in the back from the home front. Online review forums and customer picks-and-pans outlets like those on Amazon.com offered some highly charged and ill-informed accusatory rhetoric at the other end of the spectrum. One customer, a Kerry supporter, listed twenty-five “Books Which Prove the Swift Boat Vets Are Liars.” Chief on the list were books about the My Lai Massacre, in which the Swift Boat Vets played no role, and indeed which they never denied happened. How does a book about this atrocity “prove” that Kerry’s detractors are lying about the candidate’s past involvement with the hard core of the antiwar Left?

Since the argument between Kerry and the Swift Boat Vets is illustrative of the arguments between the Left and the Right over Vietnam, it is perhaps worth discussing at the outset. This conflict goes back to 1971, when Kerry became active in the veterans’ movement against the war, and began making public statements against the war which *another* group of veterans found disagreeable, even traitorous. Kerry, in their view, was leveling a generalized accusation that American soldiers were regularly committing atrocities in Vietnam. “We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them,” he argued, in front of a panel of Congressmen. “We learned the meaning of free-fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals.” What bothered many of the veterans who did not want to associate with the antiwar movement was Kerry’s seemingly

uncritical acceptance, during his Winter Soldier Hearings in Detroit, of lurid tales of atrocities from the participants:

They told stories that at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam in addition to the normal ravage of war and the normal and very particular ravaging which is done by the applied bombing power of this country.²

This testimony, for veterans who disagreed with Kerry about the war or certain aspects of the war, was not merely encouraging the enemy and making the lives of servicemen still doing tours in Vietnam even harder—it presented a general picture of the war which they found distasteful. Many of the non-antiwar veterans, like the man who emerged as John Kerry’s chief opponent then (John O’Neill), felt that the war against Communism was a legitimate one; a war in which they were proud to have served under the auspices of a valid cause, and while they did not deny that some atrocities took place, they could not accept that they were as regular, as pervasive, or as deliberately carried out as Kerry’s statement implied. The idea of Americans committing such awful crimes, for them, only sullied the entire enterprise and robbed the American cause of any claim to legitimacy. Only soldiers waging an imperialist war for less-than-noble reasons commit those types of crimes.

Thus, competing visions or narratives of the Vietnam War—its nature, purpose, and character—have been battling one another ever since the war began and continue to vie with one another for dominance. Although veterans like John Kerry and John O’Neill constitute important voices in these arguments, the arguments themselves have concerned all Americans who pay attention to what is going on in the world and their country’s role in it. These arguments have not been confined to the arenas of congressional hearings, antiwar rallies, radio talk shows, and neither are they confined to election year periods (although it would not be difficult to make the case that arguments over Vietnam come back to the forefront of public discussion against the backdrop of impending or occurring U.S. military action abroad). As I have pointed out at the beginning of this introduction, the arguments have inhabited all sorts of different forums and outlets of expression, to include films, both documentary and fiction; printed media, everything from novels and poems to polemics and historical narratives; and sound recordings, namely, music with lyrics. In this study I attempt to do two things. First, I try to outline the terms of the arguments—in other words, to clarify what exactly *is* being argued. Of course, the larger

argument is over the necessity and morality of the Vietnam War, or at least American involvement in it. But when somebody argues the justness of the war, is it merely a question of whether or not atrocities occurred? As I hope to demonstrate, the argument involves much more than the question of atrocities, and I do not mean to imply that there are only two sides in the argument.

Secondly, I try to show just *how* the arguments have been formulated and articulated. Arguments about Vietnam, in media, are certainly not confined to non-fiction and documentary films. Fiction and fiction films, I believe, can often argue a position just as effectively as non-fiction prose—one has only to recall the example of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to recognize that. Of course, they argue via significantly different means. That is what I hope, in each particular case, to shed light on—a given text's particular means of achieving its often propagandistic objective.

I have undertaken this project in the hope of making what I feel will be a significant contribution to the body of scholarship on Vietnam War literature and film. The trend in such scholarship, which has really only emerged in the last fifteen years or so, has been one of a move from primarily humanistic criticism (i.e. concerned pretty much with the goals of the New Criticism and attempting to establish a few noteworthy Vietnam War novels as fit for inclusion in the American literary canon), to criticism increasingly preoccupied with political discourse in such novels, as well as an increased interest in novels formerly dismissed as propagandistic ephemera, and a focus on issues of race and gender in these American products as well as Vietnamese literature and film dealing with the war. Thomas Myers's seminal *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (1988) champions several Vietnam War novels and memoirs of the 1970s and early 80s, many of them now considered standard fare, and his study was a groundbreaking one in that it brought critical attention to these texts. But Myers focuses almost exclusively on these texts' participation in classic literary conventions and thematic concerns (he develops a lengthy comparison between Melville's *Moby-Dick* and John Del Vecchio's combat novel *The Thirteenth Valley*, for example), and the questions of politics and arguments about Vietnam are virtually absent from his discussion.

Philip Beidler's *Re-Writing America* (1991), the next significant critical study of Vietnam War writing, does touch on questions of politics and even discusses at length the role of conservative, rightist politics in James Webb's portrayal of the war in his novel *Fields of Fire*. Renny Christopher's *The Viet Nam War/The American War* (1995) argued for the inclusion of Vietnamese exile narratives in the provisional Vietnam War canon, and introduced readers to several of this little-known but valuable body of writing. Christopher is very much concerned with politics and spends a good deal of time analyzing the Vietnamese writers' attitudes toward

Communism, the United States, and imperialism. Milton J. Bates's *The Wars We Took to Vietnam* (1996), seems to have set the tone for discussion since. Bates focuses on the generational, racial, sexual and other cultural conflicts Americans took with them to Vietnam, and shows how these conflicts have played out in narratives of Vietnam ever since. The most recent major study of Vietnam War writing, Jim Neilson's *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative* (1998), is exclusively concerned with the issue of political discourse in representations of Vietnam in fiction and non-fiction.

Neilson argues that an essentially conservative literary culture (academia, literary journals and reviews, publishing) has championed blandly non-ideological representations of the war, like Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* or Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, as the definitive literary treatments of them, thereby silencing any debate about the war. Neilson, who is looking at the Vietnam War from a leftist perspective, takes for granted that the war was a criminal, imperialist venture, and he offers a set of radical, lesser-known texts in place, or at least alongside of, the uncontroversial ones. What he finds most objectionable in the postmodern, experimental, apolitical novels like *Cacciato* is the writer's refusal to provide historical certainties. Since the Vietnam War was an immoral and illegal war, in Neilson's view, we can't afford to valorize any ambiguity in representational deviations from that paradigm.

In short, Neilson is an absolutist. My purpose is not to single him out or focus exclusively on the epistemological shortcomings of Leftist absolutism, for I devote much of my discussion in the following pages to a critique of Rightist absolutism (regarding the history of the Vietnam War) as well. I myself do not pretend to know, to borrow a phrase from a Chomsky essay, where the truth lies between these conflicting assessments of the Indochina conflict and its significance in history. But absolutist certainty informs historiography, writing, and filmmaking on the Vietnam War as in few other subjects. Even among liberal historians and writers, who reject absolutism, there is nevertheless a general tendency to take a particular view of Vietnam for granted. Readers, writers, and filmgoers who think about the Vietnam War and its legacy often situate themselves within a particular interpretation and reinforce it by excluding anything which contradicts the assumptions embedded within that interpretation as well as sticking with whatever reaffirms those assumptions. In my experience, general readers and viewers outside academia judge a Vietnam War novel or a film good or bad based on its politics. *Platoon*, because it focuses on atrocities by Americans, is generally shunned by people with a rightist bent, while someone who leans more to the Left would appreciate the bleak treatment of Vietnam and subversive political sentiment running through a novel like *Meditations in Green*; they would be more likely to write a rightist novel like *Fields of Fire* off as militarist and jingoist.

My desire has long been to sort out some of these representations of the Vietnam War into their respective political categories, and I hope I achieved at least a start on that objective. Of course, since there is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to films and books on Vietnam, I have neither space nor time to cover *all* of the writing and film about Vietnam, not even all of the major artifacts. Rather, what I have tried to do is select the representative examples, situating them in the context of similar writings/films whenever possible, and then subjecting them to sustained analysis and close reading in order to illuminate the strategies they employ in order to argue their view of the Vietnam War.

Of course, nothing ever fits as neatly into a category as we wish it would sometimes, but I identify three major political categories of Vietnam War discourse into which I attempt to situate the texts I discuss. I am not the first to recognize these categories; the prolific literary and cultural critic H. Bruce Franklin, as well as a few recent historians—James Olson and Randy Roberts, for example—have already tentatively sketched them. Franklin points out that arguments have largely revolved around the question of whether the war was a morally just war against Communism, a “quagmire” of “mistakes” or “a genocidal exercise in imperialism.”³ In short, a rightist view, a centrist or liberal view, and a leftist view are the interpretive categories. The political position one takes on Vietnam, Franklin correctly observes, “is determined by one’s answers to such seemingly simple questions as these: When did the Vietnam War begin? Who were the opposing sides? When did it end? Who won? Why?” Although these are by no means all the questions, they are some of the most fundamental ones. And as it is easy to see, it is not always a simple matter of giving a beginning and ending date or saying, for example, that the Vietnamese won and the Americans were defeated, because then one is forced to delve into the semantic subtleties of the notion of “defeat.” The Right argues, for example, that the Vietnamese didn’t really win, they merely appeared to win after breaking a treaty—in effect, by cheating. Even with the issue of opposing sides, one’s politics get in the way of naming sides. As Schell said, you choose your side by the words you use. In many ways, these arguments over Vietnam seem to me an illustration of Nietzsche’s famous dictum that “there are no facts, only interpretations of phenomena.” What I try to do in this study is look at the various ways in which these “phenomena” are interpreted, to look at the “words” that a narrative voice uses or the images that a film employs in order to identify itself with one of these interpretive categories. I believe that this is important, in a time when these categories have returned as the primary interpretive schemes in arguments over the Global War on Terrorism: the far Left sees an imperialist war for domination of the Middle East and its resources, the liberal center sees a bungled and mishandled war based on faulty intelligence (there is now a voluminous literature,

following in the wake of the *9/11 Commission Report* (2004), on American intelligence failure and the need for reform), and the neoconservative Right argues that war is an attempt to bring democracy to a region historically crippled by despotism. I wish to be able to show interested persons, first of all, that whatever interpretive scheme through which they are looking at the current conflict, it has its precedent in the Vietnam War, and is merely one among other competing (and sometimes equally compelling) narratives; that each of these categories has a long and distinguished history, and each employs certain readily identifiable strategies—rhetorical or otherwise—in order to present itself as the truth.

Prior to the escalatory period (roughly 1965) of the Vietnam War, these interpretive categories did not exist. Of course, the political Right, center, and Left as we know them have existed in some form or other since at least the early twentieth century. But before the early 1960s, there were no distinct arguments that the Vietnam War was imperialist war or a noble crusade. These categories do not coalesce until the breakup of the cultural consensus of the 1950s and early 60s (that the spread of Communism was undesirable and that the way to deal with it was a policy of “containment”). My first chapter sketches this cultural consensus on “containment” and then shows how certain voices (some on the Right, some on the Left) challenged it and moved toward the formation of these arguments in the wake of the breakup of the cultural consensus. The second chapter focuses on the formation of the leftist view of Vietnam as an “immoral and criminal” war and the various ways in which this view has been articulated in both fictive and non-fictive modes. The third chapter focuses on the formation of the centrist, moderate liberal view of the Vietnam War as a tragic mistake, or “tragedy without villains,” as one historian called it, and its permeation of literary and cinematic representations of Vietnam. And my fourth chapter looks at the formation of the conservative, rightist view of the Vietnam War as a morally just crusade to defend people from tyranny, and looks at the various vehicles for this particular view in film and print.

As I have said, these categories have been identified, but they have never been discussed at length, and, so far as I can tell, nobody has made an attempt to situate the varied body of Vietnam War representations within these interpretive schemes. My main argument is that these interpretive schemes do not exist independently of the texts, but rather that *the texts themselves* are instrumental in their formation. And the production of the texts and their ideological content is a response to or perhaps even determined by specific historical circumstances. I propose to delve, in the succeeding chapters, into the complex relationships between the production of these texts (I use the term broadly, to include written works as well as films, television, and sound recordings) and these historical forces in order to illuminate the ways in which events (like the

1968 Tet Offensive or the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis) and circumstances (for example, President Johnson's troop escalations and bombing campaigns or President's Reagan's commitment to destroying the USSR) can determine the main concerns and assumptions inhabiting various discourses on the Vietnam War. At the end of each chapter, I will attempt to sketch briefly some of the ways in which some of these discourses on Vietnam inform current debates about the Global War on Terrorism. In my conclusion I will point to some of the problems that I believe are inherent in some of these relationships.

Notes

¹ I will use the term “Global War on Terrorism” without scare quotes henceforward throughout the text. I do acknowledge that the term has proven highly unsatisfactory to many for a number of reasons. For conservatives and supporters of strong military action against armed Islamist groups, such as Daniel Pipes, the term “terrorism” is a sop to the domestic Muslim population in that it elides a description of the patently Islamic nature of this threat. Pipes and others like him take President Bush to task for what they see as an overweening political correctness and timidity toward the sensibilities of the Muslim-American lobby, embodied in powerful advocacy organizations like the American Muslim Council and the Council on American-Islamic Relations. For leftist critics of the enterprise, like Noam Chomsky, the use of the term “terrorism” is hypocritical, as United States’ foreign policy has regularly employed terrorism—generally understood by both sides as the deliberate and calculated targeting of civilians as opposed to military assets—as a means of achieving its objectives. Chomsky and others like him hold up Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Phoenix Program in Vietnam, training of personnel from right-wing Latin American militaries and intelligence services, support for the Contras in Central America, and other more recent U.S. interventions as examples of this state-sponsored terrorism. I choose to use the term not because I unquestioningly accept the assumptions underlying the Bush Administration’s usage of it but for the sake of convenience. Likewise, I acknowledge the problems centrist critics (who support a war against Al-Qaeda and militant Islamist groups but who view Iraq as a digression from this objective) have with including the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in the Global War on Terrorism, but again for the sake of convenience I include it here within the official designation, as does the Bush Administration.

² John Kerry, “A Veteran Opposes the War, 1971.” In Robert J. McMahon, ed. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1990): 492.

³ H. Bruce Franklin, *The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s): 1.

CHAPTER 1

THE COLD WAR CONSENSUS AND VIETNAM AS A “DOMINO”

You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.

—Dwight Eisenhower, 1954 press conference

China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerilla assault on Malaya but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists.

—John F. Kennedy, 1963 television interview

Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield only means to prepare for the next. We must say in Southeast Asia—as we did in Europe—in the words of the Bible: “Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.”

—Lyndon Johnson, 1965 speech at Johns Hopkins University

Containment Consensus in American Culture

On May 7, 1954, the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, an outpost in the northern part of Vietnam, fell to the Communist Viet Minh after a months-long siege. The battle marked the end of a bitter, nine-year long struggle between the old European power, trying desperately to hold onto its precious colony, and the Viet Minh (or Vietnamese Communists) who were determined to drive all Westerners from their native land. Dien Bien Phu was as much a symbolic victory for the forces of anti-colonialism around the world as it was a brilliant performance for the small, under-equipped army under the command of its wispy leader, Ho Chi Minh, and his general, former schoolteacher Vo Nguyen Giap. Dien Bien Phu was the decisive battle in perhaps the most significant of what Nikita Krushchev, several years later, would call the “wars of national liberation.” All over the world, indigenous peoples yearning to rid themselves of the yoke of European colonialism looked to the example of Vietnam for inspiration.

The perceptive citizens of empire registered the end of one era and the beginning of another. British author Graham Greene, who saw a good deal of the French Indochina War first-hand, later observed that the “battle marked virtually the end of any hope that the Western Powers might have entertained that they could dominate the East.”¹ Europeans could no longer take the fact of their presence in Asia and Africa for granted; no longer would they be able to rely on their colonies as sources of cheap labor and raw materials. While the French and the British bemoaned the shrinkage of their nineteenth-century grandeur, the leadership of the United States saw the conflict in Vietnam as symptomatic of another problem. The Americans, who cherished the

memory of a heroic past in which brave colonists drove off their British oppressors, professed to despise colonialism. Yet Presidents Truman and Eisenhower believed that they were faced with a particularly difficult problem—the departure of the colonial powers might leave a dangerous political vacuum, a cavity waiting to be filled with the pus of Communism, which fed off discontent, unrest, and social instability. Since Europe had controlled such a great part of the world until the end of World War II, the prospect that so much territory would now be vulnerable to the bullying advances of Soviet expansion was, to many Americans, a frightening one.

Indeed, to President Eisenhower, it seemed as if the French Indochina War would be the spark that set off a chain reaction, the same sort of degenerative process that had obliterated Eastern Europe in the late 1940s. The disease of Marxist ideology had spread from the Soviet Union into neighboring countries, and the rot festering within those border nations had, in turn, contaminated *their* neighbors. The infection seemed, inevitably, to be sweeping ever westward. Now, in the early 1950s, another blight was apparently cropping up in Southeast Asia. If the imaginary dam of the China-Vietnam border burst, and the Red tide flooded into the former French colony, then before long Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia would drown in the deluge. The process would gain an unstoppable momentum of its own, many American political leaders believed, until the United States was surrounded on all sides by the Sino-Soviet menace. The disease of Communism must be contained, their thinking went; the infection, if it could not be cut out, could at least be isolated and prevented from spreading further around the globe. Thus a particular model of the universe took shape first in Washington and then in American culture; Americans envisioned a frightening cosmos in which the forces of godless materialism threatened to steam-roll freedom and democracy through a series of slow and deliberate chessboard moves.

A war-weakened Eastern Europe had fallen quickly enough, but in Southeast Asia, where poverty and hunger ran rampant, Communism could spread like wildfire on a dry and windy day. For poor and hungry people, the Marxist vision of an egalitarian, classless society had an edge over American promises about upholding democracy and freedom. Indeed, the makers of U.S. foreign policy viewed the struggles of nationalism against colonialism within the larger context of America's competition with the U.S.S.R. for the leadership of the world. The unconventional and patently ideological nature of the Cold War itself stemmed from the fact that confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union was never open and direct. American and Russian soldiers never fought one another in a set-piece battle of the kind that had raged over the fields of Europe during the first two world wars. The arena in which capitalism and Communism *did* confront one another, albeit indirectly, was the Third World, or the secondary battlegrounds of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In the immediate post-World War II era, when many

young, economically and technologically undeveloped nations were struggling against the burden of European colonialism, attempting to define themselves against the Western powers which had conceivably obliterated or wrecked their own cultures, they looked to those two great modern superpowers which had just emerged victorious from the recent cataclysm for assistance and sponsorship. The Cold War largely revolved around the fierce competition between the United States and the Soviet Union for the loyalty—or the “hearts and minds”—of the people in countries like Vietnam.

During the early stages of the Cold War and the initial upsurge of anti-colonialist struggle, a vast corpus of American cultural products (from tracts and novels to speeches and films) employed a particular language to describe the apparent spread of Communism around the world and, simultaneously, to articulate a program for keeping that condition under control. I call this discourse the “rhetoric of containment.” Containment rhetoric functioned as a linguistic paradigm through which Americans could view their world and make sense of developments in both the domestic and international spheres. It rested on certain assumptions about history and historical processes, the role of the United States in the world, the nature of Communism, as well as the goals and intentions of Communist leaders. The assumptions about history inherent in containment rhetoric largely revolved around what has come to be known as the “Munich analogy,” or the idea that the communist strategy for global domination differed little from that of the Nazis during World War II. If that war had taught Western leaders anything, it was that Lord Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler at the Munich conference was a grave mistake. Chamberlain gave them an inch; respecting no treaties, they took miles. If one appeased the Communists, they would do the same. The Munich analogy went hand in hand with the assumption that Communists were indeed bent on global domination, and that there was a unified international conspiracy attempting to realize that goal. And last, but perhaps most fundamental, was the assumption that nations could be classified as free or unfree on the basis of their political alignment. Nations were either free (meaning, variously, that they were capitalist and/or friendly to the United States and its allies) or enslaved by tyrannical Communism. This belief was intertwined with the first two assumptions, of course, insofar as it posited an axis of non-communist nations that held Western notions of democracy, individualism, and freedom in common with one another. Opposed to that democratic front stood the rest of the planet, held in the iron grip of Soviet domination.

Containment rhetoric was, as I hope to show, a consensual and unifying force in American culture of the 1950s and early 1960s, before the ideological balkanization of the later 1960s set in. It served as the conceptual framework through which institutions like the

Presidency and the State Department forged America's foreign policy and made crucial decisions about the implementation of that policy, yet it also served as a public discourse through which popular writers and commentators could interpret the significance of their government's actions on the international scene. Those who argued for or against decisive action in some part of the world that appeared to be threatened with a Communist takeover did so within the containment framework. Did the events in question reflect the patterns of development implied in that paradigm? If so, then one could make a case for economic aid to neutral country where political instability invited communist agitation, for a military advisory effort to the army of a non-Communist regime trying to put down a leftist rebellion, or, in the worst case scenario, for direct military intervention with U.S. troops in a foreign war. At the height of the Cold War, the assumptions on which the containment paradigm rested went largely unchallenged by most American politicians as well as the American public. Some, however, saw what they believed to be problems inherent in U.S. policy in Indochina early on and argued against intervention in Vietnam by attacking those assumptions embedded in the rhetoric of containment. Thus, a counter-discourse was born, one which subverted and overturned the precepts of the dominant anticommunist philosophy by attempting to expose its historical analogies as false, its view of America's role as ethnocentric and exceptionalist, and its conception of world Communism as simplistic and two-dimensional.

Since the rhetoric of containment rested on the assumption that the spread of Communism resembled certain physical processes and obeyed the same laws, it is no surprise that the discourse was laden with pseudoscientific metaphors that suggested natural disasters and evoked cataclysmic images of destruction. When anticommunist speakers and writers referred to the extension of Soviet influence around the world, they often described it in terms of chain reactions, sparks that would start wildfires, plagues, and leaking dikes that foreboded flood. One image that Eisenhower fastened on in particular was the image of the leaking dike, a metaphor for the China-Vietnam border. American logistical support to the French forces fighting the Viet Minh (the early name for the Vietnamese Communists) would be the plug to keep the swelling waters at bay for the moment. As President Eisenhower observed of the situation, "What you've got here is a leaky dike, and with leaky dikes it's sometimes better to put a finger in than to let the whole structure be washed away."² Eisenhower and the Cold War presidents who succeeded him needed compelling, vivid metaphors through which to bring home the reality of communist expansion to a complacent, prosperous nation, resting on the laurels of its magnificent victory in the recent world conflict. They emphasized the need for the United States to find some way to contain that expansion and keep it under control. The notion of the chain reaction was an integral

component of the rhetoric of containment. It easily lent itself to an imagery of spreading disaster that was particularly useful in galvanizing support for holding the line against the Reds. If the spread of Communism was a wildfire, an outbreak of disease, a dike ready to burst, then the proper countermeasures against it would be to dig firebreaks (or draw boundaries), impose quarantines (or isolate communist regimes), and plug the hole in the dam (or prop up weak and unpopular dictatorships).

Doomsday rhetoric in which the chain reaction was the central metaphor would have been particularly alarming to Americans, in light of then-recent events. The world had, for the first time, seen the awesome destruction unleashed by one type of chain reaction—atomic fission—less than a decade previous. The metaphor seemed particularly apt in that both phenomena—the expansion of Communism and the atomic bomb—easily lent themselves to similar treatment. Both posed dire threats to civilization and humanity; they threatened to engulf the world in darkness. As ominous as the connection between the bomb and the spread of this alien ideology was, the notion of the chain reaction found its most effective expression, not in the language of physics, but in the form of a familiar image taken from a harmless pastime—a configuration of upright dominoes, each one placed close enough to the other so that the fall of the first in line would necessitate the fall of the last. No matter how long that line, now matter how many twists and turns it took, the slightest push of a finger would set the force of gravity in motion, and the process would work its way down the line until the last had fallen. Eisenhower seized upon this image as an analogy for the process by which the forces of Communism planned to dominate the world. If the Soviets knocked down one country, then before long adjacent countries would fall, and the chain reaction would gain its own unstoppable momentum until the whole world was Communist-controlled. This idea came to be known as the “domino theory” and perhaps no other Cold War metaphor exerted as firm a grip on the popular consciousness of the 1950s and early 60s as this one did. It was simple and easy to visualize. Not everyone could form an adequate mental picture of an abstraction like “chain reaction.” What anticommunist speakers and writers needed was a memorable and widely familiar concrete image. By transforming an innocent child’s game into an image of menace, the metaphor also implied that what seemed harmless—the desire of childlike colonial entities for political independence—was really something quite sinister: a masked international conspiracy. The idea of a globe covered with dominoes effectively collapsed Americans’ world-picture into a dualistic, Manichean scheme of international relations in which the United States and the Soviet Union (often abstracted, during the Cold War, into concepts like “freedom” and “tyranny”) existed as the primary antagonists in a momentous struggle for control of the planet. The domino theory, the

central metaphor in containment rhetoric, provided political leaders with a frightening image of free nations toppling, crumbling beneath the weight of Communist tyranny, one after one, until the last domino—the United States—met its lonely fate.

Eisenhower used the image for the first time on April 7, 1954, at a news conference where a reporter asked the president to comment on the significance of the conflict in Vietnam. In his notoriously muddled language, he warned the public that the impending Communist victory in this far-off country was going to have repercussions that were perhaps not readily apparent to most Americans, safe and secure in their prosperous world of tail-finned cars and air-conditioned homes. “You have a row of dominoes set up,” he explained, “and you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly, so you could have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”³ Whereas the previous administration had largely been concerned with the prospect of Soviet domination of Europe, recent developments in China and Korea had shifted the attention of Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to the Far East. Asia, not Eastern Europe, it appeared, was now the arena in which the future of the free world would be decided. Vietnam was of particular importance because, among other reasons, it provided strategic access to the Pacific and facilitated control over the western rim and its valuable raw materials. Contemporary events seemed to confirm the validity of Eisenhower’s analogy. The Russians had already toppled two dominoes, China and North Korea; it looked as if the rest of Southeast Asia would follow suit. If this happened, the administration maintained, the Soviet Union would easily be able to dominate the entire Pacific, as Japan had tried to do during the 1930s and early 40s. All of the natural resources and ports in that ocean would fall into the hands of the enemy. And it was not far from Southeast Asia to Hawaii, or from Hawaii to California. That was the way, many Americans believed, in which the Soviet Union would eventually defeat its archenemy—not through outright aggression, not by showering America’s major cities with nuclear missiles, but by sneaking subversion, infiltration by fifth columns and sponsoring armed insurgencies the world over until America stood a lonely island of freedom in an ocean of tyranny threatening to swallow it entirely.

Although Eisenhower’s above-cited speech marked the first use of the most familiar containment trope—the domino theory—the basic components of containment rhetoric predate his administration. They are inchoate in much of the foreign policy discourse the late 1940s, the years of Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. As a response to the critical situation in Greece near the end of that decade, where an anticommunist dictatorship found itself threatened by a Soviet-sponsored leftist insurgency,

President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson devised a plan for providing American aid to foreign states that were struggling to maintain independence in the face of internal subversion by Communism. Truman himself never actually used the word “domino” in any of his public statements, yet we can see, in his own March 1947 explanation of the administration’s new foreign aid program, the basic elements and the fundamental logic of the theory that would underpin America’s blueprint for dealing with the rest of the world for the next twenty years. “If Greece should fall under the control of an armed minority,” he reasoned, using the cause-and-effect formula that was fundamental to the domino theory, “the effect upon its neighbor, Turkey, would be immediate and serious. Confusion and disorder might well spread throughout the entire Middle East.” Truman explained that “the disappearance of Greece as an independent state” would have dire consequences for the rest of Europe as well.⁴ Communism, according to this line of thinking, was akin to a contagious disease. Soviet influence had already spread all over Eastern Europe, and it now looked as if the infection there would spread down into the countries of the Mediterranean. Countries that came under communist control, Truman and Acheson assumed, would be reduced to the status of Russian satellites. In order to prevent this from happening, the United States had to prop up the weak regimes in those threatened nations so as to create bulwarks against the oncoming flood of Soviet expansion. In Greece, where the besieged government had a substantial measure of popularity among its people, the policy was more or less successful. Yet when the administration turned to Korea, it was confronted with a different problem altogether. South Korea, established in 1948 with the support of the United States, was, like North Korea (established under the sponsorship of the Soviet Union), largely an artificial nation defined by an artificial boundary. Americans found themselves committed to a South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, who was valuable insofar as he opposed Communism, but problematic in that he ran the country like a dictator. The rhetoric of containment, however, glossed over this contradiction between the professed aims of the United States and the real consequences of its policy. In the domino scheme, nations were either a part of the “free world” (the sphere of capitalist and western-friendly regimes), or part of the international communist conspiracy. It was this contradiction, many critics would later point out, that would prove to be the soft spot in America’s rationale for propping up the domino of South Vietnam.

Containment Rhetoric and Vietnam

The creation of artificial countries, or “nation-building,” became the cornerstone of containment policy and the primary strategy for dealing with communism in Southeast Asia. It followed the logic of Truman’s efforts to strengthen weak regimes, like the one in Greece, in order to keep the spread of Soviet influence at bay. Helping small, embattled countries to achieve economic and

social health was the best way to keep the communists from seizing power. American advisors in Vietnam during the 1950s, like Col. Edward G. Lansdale, transposed the blueprint for Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean onto Asia. Lansdale and many other Americans like him, critics would later point out, failed to realize that the problem in Vietnam demanded a political, not a military solution; in other words, it was futile to use military force to defend a weak political situation. But Lansdale really *did* understand the nature of the problem, for all of his efforts were primarily focused on building up the nation of South Vietnam. What he and all the other proponents of nation-building did overlook, however, was that this particular nation was, as Pete McCloskey later pointed argued, an artificial creation. As a congressman who later opposed the war in the late 1960s, McCloskey, looking back from the 1990s, reflected that, while Americans generally thought of South Vietnam and North Vietnam as two countries politically and culturally distinct from one another, the Vietnamese themselves thought of their nation as one country. “Whenever you looked at the map of Vietnam, even in the South, it was the map of the whole country, not just this artificial division. Obviously every Vietnamese thought of his country as one country, so the question was, could the United States support an artificial division and create a new country? We did, and we called it ‘nation-building.’”⁵

The lingo of nation-building went hand-in-hand with the idea of Asian countries as identical pawns in a game, and it complemented as well the idea that all Asians had a homogenous racial and cultural character and that there existed such an entity as “the Asian mind.” Third World primitives were all basically the same, according to this Orientalist logic; if the policy worked in one of their countries—as it had, for example, in the Philippines—then why wouldn’t it work in another? The rhetoric of containment, with its vision of a homogenous Indochina as the crucial row of dominoes in the worldwide chain, positioned Southeast Asia as the testing ground for American theories of nation-building. There, the United States would attempt to find a democracy in its own image and nurture it through the vulnerable period of childhood, through its troublesome adolescence, on to maturity.

“It was precisely because of the repeated definitions of containment, dominoes, intervention and linkages of seemingly discrete foreign policy questions elsewhere in the world,” wrote one historian, long after the war’s end, “that the United States made the irreversible decision to see the war in Vietnam through to the end.”⁶ Uncritically accepted by most of the American public as well as its government, the domino theory during the early 1950s hardened into an orthodoxy that perpetuated the notion of an international Communist conspiracy for the rest of that decade as well as throughout the 1960s and, to some extent, in the early 70s. Political leaders during this time continually employed the rhetoric of containment in order to justify

military and political interventions in the internal affairs of countries in the Middle East, Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia. In nations like Iran, Guatemala, the Congo, Cuba, the Philippines, Chile, Angola, and Vietnam, the United States sought to prevent leftist revolutions by propping up toppling dominoes, or bolstering the right-wing regimes already in power or assisting counter-revolutionary rebels in their efforts to overthrow a Communist government. The assumptions inherent in the Truman Doctrine of the late 1940s would go on to exert virtually undisputed dominion over four successive presidents—each one of whom made crucial decisions regarding the conflict in Vietnam.

President Eisenhower, in spite of his significant differences from the previous administration on issues of domestic policy, fastened onto this particular model of Communist expansion, originally applied by Truman and Acheson to a historically and geographically specific situation—postwar Eastern Europe—and imposed its interpretive logic onto Asia. President Kennedy, who initiated the first significant troop commitments to Vietnam, followed suit. He reasoned that if the United States lost Vietnam, then America would be seriously hampered in its efforts to prevent a general communist offensive in the region. “These people who say we ought to withdraw from Vietnam,” he remarked in September 1963, “are wholly wrong, because if we withdrew from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam; pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya would go, and then all of Southeast Asia would be under the control of the Communists and the domination of the Chinese.” Johnson, at least in his public statements, unquestioningly accepted the theory that he had inherited from his predecessor. “If this little nation goes down the drain and can’t maintain independence,” he queried his audience in August 1965, “ask yourself what’s going to happen to all the other little nations?”⁷ And Nixon, of course, had been an ardent proponent of the domino theory since his days as vice-president, and still held, as late as 1970, to the idea that the loss of South Vietnam would lead to the collapse of Indochina. Fifteen years later, he argued that Vietnam had been “a crucially important victory in the Soviet Union’s war for control of the strategically critical Third World” and that “our defeat in Vietnam sparked a rash of totalitarian conquests around the world.”⁸

Versions of Containment in American Popular Culture

As foreign policy experts constructed their model of international Communism, discussed it among themselves, elaborated on it in publications like *Foreign Affairs*, and devised containment strategies tailored to that model, Americans received a simplified and perhaps sensationalized version of the domino theory when they went to the movies for entertainment or read for pleasure. In 1947, filmgoers were confronted, as they sat down in the darkened theater, with a prototypical depiction of the domino effect in what must have been a particularly alarming

newsreel. The sequence, narrated by a grim voice-over, showed an impassive Joseph Stalin presiding over marching formations in Red Square. “On orders from the Kremlin, Russia has launched a Cold War and the United States is obliged to help Europe safeguard its traditional freedoms and the independence of its nations.” The film then shifts to a crude map of a white Europe bordered by gray seas. The voice, accompanied by shrieking violins, snaps out: “Already an iron curtain has dropped around Poland . . . Hungary . . . Yugoslavia . . . Bulgaria . . . menace to the security and institutions of democratic government!”⁹ A dissonant horn blast and the rapid darkening of each name to the same shade as the USSR indicated that these countries had collapsed to Communism. It was perhaps too late to save Eastern Europe, the reel implied, but it was imperative that the forces of democracy take action to prevent the extension of that creeping blackness. Five years later, a short State Department film transposed the pattern of developments in Eastern Europe onto Indochina. Viewers saw a gray map of the region with a shadowy hammer and sickle superimposed over North Vietnam. “The aim of the Communists,” the voice said, “is to control all of Vietnam.” As the sickle and hammer expanded to cover the entire map, the narration continued: “. . . and after that, *all* of Southeast Asia.” Former National Security Council member James Thomson, Jr., points out that films of this sort were indicative of a general tendency in American culture during the height of the Cold War. “People became entranced by maps and great red lines sweeping southward and then westward,” he remarked. “This great cartographic fallacy, in fact, seized the minds of men at the top, who should have known better.”¹⁰

As American media culture sanctioned the domino theory and repeatedly offered a number of products that illustrated and legitimized its precepts, the notion became entrenched in the consciousness of Americans during the early years of the Cold War and captured the public imagination for a considerable period. “For a time during the 1950s and early 60s,” according to historians James Olson and Randy Roberts, the domino theory “was central to the way Americans interpreted the world.”¹¹ The popular culture of the day, without a doubt, was instrumental in helping to secure a consensus among Americans in their attitudes toward the Soviet Union and Communism in general. As Stephen Whitfield writes, “the values and perceptions, the forms of expression, the symbolic patterns, the beliefs and myths that enabled Americans to make sense of reality—these constituents of culture were contaminated by an unseemly political interest in their roots and causes.”¹² Anticommunism was the keynote theme or primary subtext of many films of the era, such as *Iron Curtain* (1948), *I Married a Communist* (1950), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), *My Son John* (1952), *Red Nightmare* (1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), as well as popular autobiographical works like Whittaker Chambers’ *Witness* (1952) and

the novels of Mickey Spillane. On the surface, most of the above works and others like them seem to be concerned primarily with the threat of internal subversion, or the spread of Communism within America itself, not with events in the outside world. In films and books like these, however, the domino principle is often at work in the interpersonal relationships they portray. In *Red Nightmare*, for example, the father of an average suburban household watches with horror as Marxism takes over the minds of his family one by one. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a science-fiction film, functions as an allegory that likens the spread of domestic Communism to an interstellar plague. Whereas political leaders envisioned nations as dominoes, these films and books made the idea even more compelling and forceful by imagining individual citizens as dominoes who could “fall” if someone close to them surrendered to the pernicious lure of the alien ideology. Popular audiences who might have been unable to grasp the magnitude of a seemingly faraway problem—a communist revolution in some small, faraway country—would have been able to assimilate the idea much more easily when they saw the problem presented in terms of such a forceful analogy. The ways in which these works illustrated the domino effect of communist expansion, on a small scale, magnified far-off developments of seemingly little immediate consequence in ways that dull presidential pronouncements and prosaic foreign policy statements could not.

As films, fiction, and personal narratives continually affirmed the containment paradigm by turning it into subject matter for entertainment, it received more formal or systematic exposition in essays and other nonfiction works. Joseph Alsop, the famous journalist who wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post*, was perhaps its most visible and persuasive popularizer. For American magazine readers of the 1950s, this writer was a figure of great stature and authority, who, because of the position he occupied in United States print culture, was able to make the domino theory digestible and compelling for average reading audiences. In doing so, he exerted a significant influence on American views of the world during the early years of the Cold War, and was a force to be reckoned with by powerful military and political figures desperate not to appear soft on Communism. If Eisenhower came up with the striking image of the domino, then it was Alsop, according to William Prochnau, who gave the theory its “inviolable force.” The journalist “saw the theory in even bleaker terms than the policy-makers. If Vietnam fell, Indonesia would go under, Taiwan would be ‘destroyed,’ Japan and the Philippines neutralized, and the United States ‘forced out of business as a Pacific power.’”¹³ In David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest*, a critical history of the war published while Nixon was still in office, the author assigned Alsop the role of a villain in the shadows. Alsop, in Halberstam’s narrative, is a powerful media figure with an “enormous vested interest in Asian anti-communism” who uses his

magazine to whip up public support for interventionist policies. He is the Washington insider who carries enough weight to have a hand in encouraging Kennedy's decision to commit large numbers of American troops to Vietnam during the early days of his presidency. More concerned with the spread of Soviet influence in the outside world than with communist infiltration of American institutions, Alsop was, as Halberstam describes him, a "forceful advocate of the domino theory" and the primary figure who, for popular audiences, legitimizes the rationale for American intervention in an Asia haunted by the specter of Communism.¹⁴

In 1950, immediately following Mao Tse Tung's victory over the Chinese Nationalists, Alsop published a long essay, in three installments, called "Why We Lost China." The piece was a ferocious attack upon what the author perceived as the Truman administration's failure to prevent the triumph of Communism in the world's largest country. With its emphasis on "the conspiratorial nature of events," the piece certainly did its share in contributing to the climate in which Senator Joseph McCarthy was able to carry out his witch-hunts, as he took up the question raised by Alsop in the essay: "Who lost China?" As of 1950, the term "domino theory" did not yet exist, but that was but a name for a way of thinking about the world that had been extant at least since the late 1940s. Alsop crystallized the essence of the concept in his essay, employing the sort of language that would become standard containment rhetoric throughout the rest of the decade and beyond. He began his piece with the assertion that "the loss of China to the Chinese communists is an event of critical import to every American. China is the key to Asia, and the capture of Asia is the Kremlin's goal. Today, all Asia is imperiled." The fall of China, Alsop assumed, was the first movement in a chain reaction that would affect an entire hemisphere:

Tomorrow, if the Kremlin's drive for Asia scores many further successes—if Japan, for instance, is drawn by China's magnetism toward the Soviet orbit—this country and the world will be menaced by a third world war. Moreover, this immense disaster, neutralizing all the prizes of our Pacific fighting, has occurred at the close of a long period of dominant American influence on Chinese affairs.¹⁵

According to Halberstam, the piece gave currency to "an assumption which was to haunt foreign policy makers for years to come." It was an assumption that lay at the heart of domino thinking and at the heart of the American intervention in Southeast Asia as well—the idea that other countries were "ours" to lose, the idea that the world was divided along a binary line separating democracy from tyranny.

Similar publications followed in the wake of Alsop's landmark jeremiad and brought the peculiarly metaphorical language of anticommunism into general currency. Robert Payne's book

Red Storm Over Asia (1951) stands as perhaps one of the best examples of the type of non-fiction work that many Americans at that time considered “serious” reading material. Somewhat less hysterical and more restrained in tone than Alsop’s seminal essay, Payne’s study of then-recent developments in the Far East nevertheless prophesied a gloomy future for Western-style democracy in the region, employing the sort of image-laden rhetoric that would become standard fare for Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson whenever they spoke of international communism in public. Explaining the map on the inside leaf—a gray Asian continent over which a blood-red tide cascaded downward from Russia and China into Vietnam—the author delineated the gravity of the situation for his readers, comparing the spread of Sino-Soviet influence to natural disasters such as storms, floods, and bursting dams. The two great Communist powers in the North formed a “vast red thundercloud from which a few drops of scalding rain are descending. There are drops in India and Pakistan, in Iran, in Burma and Malaya; there are large splashes in the Philippines and in Indochina.”¹⁶ Payne warned his fellow Americans “that unless radical measures are taken, the raindrops will become a flood.” In the chapter on Vietnam, Payne was very specific as to just what form those radical measures should take. Believing that military aid to the French was an unwise course of action, in that it would further alienate Asian peasantry from the United States, Payne recommended instead a program of foreign aid, cast in a language that would later become typical of the rhetoric of nation-building. Payne recommended “the expansion of the social arm of America until it reaches the villages of Asia”—bringing food and supplies, along with democratic ideals, to those areas particularly susceptible to Communist influence.¹⁷ America had to distance itself from French colonialism in order to win Indochina over to its side. What countries like Vietnam needed, in Payne’s view, was something between the twin poles of Ho Chi Minh and the French puppet Bao Dai—a democratic element, with credibility among the peasants, one associated with neither the injustice of colonialism nor the iron-fisted tyranny of Communism. For Payne, finding and supporting this native democracy was the best way to plug the leaking dike, the most effective way to prop up the wobbling domino.

Like Alsop, Payne employed an apocalyptic, image-rich rhetoric in describing communist expansion. But whereas Alsop was merely reactive, accusing and pointing his finger at the parties he believed guilty for the “loss” of Asia, Payne’s book was proactive. It was much less concerned with blaming anyone than with properly diagnosing and prescribing a remedy for a dire geopolitical situation. Whereas Alsop, like the Dulles brothers, was the model of the old-style, conservative anticommunist, Payne represented a new sort of liberal anticommunism that professed sensitivity to the needs of the Asian peasant. His book was an early, precocious formulation of the sort of “tough” liberalism that Kennedy’s “New Frontier” would later embody.

The progressive vision outlined in *Red Storm Over Asia* captured the imaginations of many American advisors and economic aid workers who came to Vietnam in the early 1950s, but it also earned the contempt of critics who opposed American involvement in Vietnam. As I will go on to show, initial criticism of the type of foreign policy approach took the form of an ironic depiction of persons who read and championed books like Payne's.

Breaking Out of the Containment Mold

Liberal and conservative anticommunism, however much they differed from one another on the issue of colonialism, nevertheless shared a firm belief in the domino principle that pervaded political rhetoric of the late 1940s and early 50s and received its name in 1954. But as the initial chilliness of the Cold War began, gradually, to warm up after the death of Stalin, some of the flaws in the domino theory became readily apparent. As early as 1965, the landmark year in which President Johnson sent a Marine division to Vietnam—the first official combat troops—and also the year in which he initiated his Operation Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam, Hans Morgenthau could write that “it is belaboring the obvious to say that we are not faced with one monolithic Communism whose uniform hostility must be countered with equally uniform hostility, but with a number of different Communisms whose hostilities, determined by different national interests, vary.”¹⁸ But Morgenthau was a scholar, a political scientist with at best only a marginal influence on the decision-making process in the government. President Johnson, clinging tenaciously to the war he had inherited from Kennedy and Eisenhower, also clung to those assumptions that he had inherited from them: the world was a line of dominoes that the big red finger of Sino-Soviet communism was trying to topple. Revolutionaries like Ho Chi Minh were merely Asian Hitlers whose rapacity for land knew no bounds; they would not stop at South Vietnam if the West appeased their aggression. One did not want to be a Chamberlain and repeat the errors of Munich.

As the Eisenhower administration's rationale for an advisory effort to South Vietnam had rested on the Munich analogy and the domino theory, so did President Johnson's escalation of the war rest on the same containment principles. David Levy, in his survey of the debate over Vietnam, points out that those who opposed the war had to dismantle those twin assumptions in order to formulate cogent arguments in favor of withdrawal. Critics like Hans Morgenthau and George Ball “attacked proponents of the war at two of their most heavily relied upon points: the Munich analogy and the domino theory.” Both of these concepts, they pointed out, were rooted in a false causality and a gross distortion of geopolitical realities. The fall of A did *not* necessitate the fall of B, as in an actual line of dominoes:

Theories that posited so neat and predictable a career for aggression—moving, orderly, from one contiguous nation to the next—were too simplistic. If the trouble sometimes spread like that, as it did in Hitler’s case, it did not always. China, for example, was a huge domino that had been Communist since 1949. Was there any sign that the contagion was spreading to India, Pakistan, Burma, the Philippines, South Korea, Japan? Conversely, what was the neighboring domino that had knocked Cuba over into the Communist camp?¹⁹

The most forceful arguments against intervention and escalation attempted to draw attention to these inconsistencies in containment rhetoric. The antiwar critics tried to make it clear to their adversaries that the “if X goes, then Y and Z follow” logic was fundamentally misguided, as it depended on the conception of Communism as a centralized agency. They pointed to those historical examples that, in their view, defied the containment model—Castro’s Cuba, Tito’s Yugoslavia (a communist republic that remained aloof from the Soviet orbit), and the apparent immunity of India to Sino-Soviet influence. It was also a mistake, they argued, to argue that a historically specific phenomenon (the near-conquest of Europe by Hitler) illustrated a universal, timeless principle. As far back as the early 1950s, dissenting voices had advanced the idea of Ho Chi Minh as an “Asian Tito” and suggested that the analogy between the leader of the Vietminh and Adolf Hitler was false. Ho Chi Minh, like Tito, they argued, was merely a nationalist who viewed Communism as the best economic model for his country; he was not interested in subduing neighboring nations and forcing that model upon them.²⁰

The containment paradigm glossed over the political tensions and social inequities within nations that perhaps had far more to do with revolution than agitation or infiltration from outside. These critics seized on what they saw as a fundamental flaw in the right-wing interpretation of the domino theory: the reasoning that, if given a choice between a benevolent Communist and a despotic, Western-friendly, capitalist, the latter was always the lesser of two evils. One conservative radio demagogue had summed up this position several years earlier in the 1930s, during the Spanish Civil War: “[W]e cannot breed rats in abundance without being obliged to use rat poison,” the Monsignor Fulton Sheen bluntly put it, “and so neither can we breed communists without being obliged to use the poison of fascism.”²¹ The idea was that any anticommunist government, no matter how much its views of democracy and human rights were at variance with the basic American values, should be viewed as an ally against Communist tyranny and supported if it seeks assistance in putting down leftist insurgency. Critics pointed out that this short-term solution to a long-term problem only proved disastrous, as the United States’ support for repressive, reactionary dictatorships (namely, the Diem regime in South Vietnam) ultimately

defeated the purpose of intervention—winning the loyalty of the populace. Vietnam, as radical historians would later point out, was merely the first example of a doomed policy which backfired in Iran, Chile, Guatemala, and other places where popular resentment against the United States for supporting the dictators there exploded into violence and enduring hostility. Most importantly, the policy forever gave the lie to the idea that America was the champion of freedom; the shining city on a hill that liberty-loving peoples could turn to in a dark century of totalitarian repression.

But voices like those of Kennan and Ball were not heard in the public arena until after President Johnson had already sent in the first official combat troops. During the 1950s and early 60s, there were few signs in American culture that anything but a general consensus on foreign policy existed. It was not until 1966, in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that Kennan publicly denounced the domino theory and the war. As the decade and the war ground on, a growing segment of the media and the American public began to express similar doubts about the infallibility of containment. Yet it was perhaps only after the momentous events of the early 1970s that concepts like the domino theory lost their validity in the eyes of most Americans. The outcome of the war had indeed led to the triumph of Communism in two of Vietnam's neighbors, Cambodia and Laos, but deep and irreconcilable divisions within what had formerly looked like a monolithic world Communism were now clearly visible. Nixon's opening of relations with China revealed a virtual abyss between the goals of the Soviet Union and China. Vietnam and Cambodia were both nominally communist, but embraced radically different visions of what Communism meant and, by the mid-1970s were engaged in a war against one another every bit as bitter as the Vietnamese war against the Americans. Clearly, by the time Nixon had left office, containment rhetoric was a relic from the past.

Of course, ridiculing the most sacred tenets of containment had been an integral component of antiwar rhetoric of the late 1960s, but these attacks were often couched in the form of two-dimensional slogans that failed to penetrate the logic that governed that model of the world. Not until the 1980s did detailed, formal analyses of the major flaws in the domino theory appear. Historians writing at this time, attempting to counteract what they saw as an increasing tendency on the part of the Reagan administration to revive and rehabilitate the policy which had reigned supreme during the height of the Cold War, identified the domino theory as one of the major factors spurring the United States' involvement in Vietnam and drew their readers' attention to its problems. Leftist historians like Gabriel Kolko believed this an important project at the time, as Reagan tried to reawaken a sense of Cold War urgency in America by pointing to wobbling dominoes in Central America. Kolko described the domino model as a reactionary

scheme of interpretation in which Third World nations move out of the capitalist orbit and toward the planned economy axis. Writing at a time in American history in which the government seemed to be blind to the limitations of its own power, as it had during the Kennedy years, Kolko suggested that the “problem with the domino theory was, of course, its intrinsic conflict with the desire to impose priorities on U.S. commitments, resources, and actions. If a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, then that link has to be protected even though its very fragility might make the undertaking that much more difficult.”²² William Gibson, in a study published the following year, rejected Kolko’s Marxist interpretation, arguing instead that the domino theory did not describe a historical process; it was essentially ahistorical. For Gibson, the theory was grounded “not in the social world of history, where men live and die, but in the lifeless world of Newtonian mechanics.” In the “inevitable, inexorable mechanical process” nations “no longer have real histories, cultures, and social structures. The names of Asian countries become just that—names marking undifferentiated objects.”²³ And in the Cold War America of the early 1950s, the continuous representation of these small Asian nations as “undifferentiated objects,” in books, in newsreels, and in movies, went uncontested as pundits and scholars like Alsop and Payne solidified the cultural consensus on international Communism. The assumptions on which the containment paradigm rested went unchallenged, as there was no real public debate over its merits. In 1956, however, a novel, described by one reviewer as a “nasty little plastic bomb,” appeared and offered a challenge to that paradigm through which Americans viewed their world, thus initiating the interpretive struggle over the meaning of American involvement in Vietnam, and ultimately, America itself.

Rejecting the Containment Paradigm: *The Quiet American*

As American popular culture in the early 1950s reinforced the Cold War orthodoxy of dominoes and containment, it ensured public support for intervention in the affairs of nations threatened with Communist insurgencies. Dominoes had to be prevented from toppling. Yet few Americans, at this time, shared the Eisenhower administration’s concern with the prospect of Communist rule in Indochina; few knew or cared about the goings-on in a far-off place like Vietnam. Americans’ fears about the spread of Communism centered primarily on Eastern Europe. Although there were American correspondents covering the conflict in Indochina, the American media presence there was not significant, so the conflict was at the periphery of public attention. Europeans, however—especially the British and the French—were indeed very taken with the conflict, for the events in Vietnam seemed to be sounding the death-knell for European colonialism. British and French newspapers followed the war much more closely than the American media did. Often, the correspondents who covered the war maintained an antagonistic

relationship to the French military, countering what they saw as a false optimism and deception of the public about the progress of the war. Their reporting contributed to the erosion of the support of the French public for the continuation of the war. Indeed, the stance of these journalists anticipated the sort of bitterness and mutual distrust that would characterize the relationship between American correspondents and their own government a decade later.

The correspondents critical of the French military and their colonial war also began to take critical notice of an increasing American presence in Vietnam. The war, in 1953-54, was largely being financed with American dollars—French soldiers were using American guns, tanks, airplanes, and weapons like napalm. American military officers, sent by Eisenhower, were there ostensibly serving in an advisory capacity to the French. The correspondents often enjoyed the confidence of Vietnamese civilians who looked to an adversarial press as a way to articulate their suffering. It is clear that the majority of the Vietnamese, Communist or not, did not want to see the return of French rule; they simply did not want Westerners in their country telling them what to do. They viewed the Americans as complicit in the crimes of the French and saw them as mere neocolonialists trying to establish markets for American products in their country, while exploiting the natural resources that Eisenhower had specifically referred to by name in his famous “domino” speech. The correspondents, then, often provided a picture of the war radically at variance with the picture that the French command provided. They focused in on its ugliness and brutality and the Vietnamese resentment at the unwanted presence of Americans and French.

Perhaps the most famous of these correspondents was the British novelist Graham Greene. French correspondents like Bernard Fall antagonized their own government; Greene, no less perceptive, aimed his barbs at both the French and the Americans. Particularly odious to him was the rhetoric of anticommunism and nation-building. Americans, for Greene, viewed themselves as outside history somehow, an exceptional nation of do-gooders who were there to tell the Vietnamese what their best interests were. Greene repeatedly criticized what he saw as a sort of blindness in the Americans; they were so caught up in the rhetoric of falling dominoes and chain reactions and forces for democracy that they could not see things as they really were. They imposed the patterns of an earlier conflict onto this new struggle between colonialism and nationalism; the Munich analogy was inapplicable here, but the Americans who arrived in the 50s just couldn’t understand that, and their ignorance was going to do damage both to themselves and the world. Greene’s experiences as a correspondent had perhaps given him a special understanding of these problems that the Americans who arrived there in the early 1950’s could not have had. In the late 1940’s he had covered anti-colonialist struggles in Kenya and Malaysia and covered the war in Vietnam from 1951 to 1954 for the *New Republic*. One aspect of the

struggle that these American advisors of the early 50s did not understand, he believed, was that the domino theory was inapplicable to Vietnam, since the Vietminh were nationalists who wanted independence for Vietnam—they were not Soviet or Chinese puppets. The vision they had for the future of their country happened to be communist, but they were not willing to function as mere pawns in a Soviet-Chinese scheme of world domination. Ho Chi Minh did not have any special loyalty to either China or Russia, in spite of his dedication to Marxist ideology. Vietnamese independence and autonomy was the goal; Russia and China were merely means to an end. Greene put forth these insights and criticisms in his dispatches and reportage, yet his most powerful attack on American policy was carried out in a novel which offered the world a damning portrait of American ignorance wreaking havoc in Vietnam. It was a warning of what might happen if Americans did not let go of their foolish predilection for pseudo-intellectual theories about historical processes like the domino theory.

The Quiet American, published in England in 1955 and in the United States the year following, offered the public a highly critical portrayal of the early U.S. presence in Vietnam and savagely ridiculed the typical American view of world communism as simplistic and reductive. The Americans in the novel—one American in particular—have little understanding of the cultural and historical forces behind Communist revolutions in Third World nations. With their apocalyptic rhetoric of falling dominoes and chain reactions, they grant these countries virtually no autonomy or agency and ascribe their internal struggles to Soviet or Chinese-sponsored agitation as part of a larger conspiracy. The consequences of such irrational clinging to preconceived notions derived from events in Eastern Europe, the novel reveals, will prove disastrous for both Vietnam and the United States. Viewing Vietnam as merely another wobbling domino in a great chain reduces an enormously complex cultural and political situation to nothing but another featureless, black-and-white rectangle in a homogenous array of game-pieces. There are the free dominoes of democracy, still standing upright, and there are the enslaved dominoes that have fallen to communist tyranny. Dominoes, like Vietnam, in danger of falling, must be propped up and strengthened with American aid. The best way to contain Communism, the American believes, is to find the “Third Force” or the indigenous democratic element in Vietnam—between communism and colonialism—and cultivate this Western-friendly power as a valuable bulwark against Sino-Soviet expansion. The Vietnamese, the American believes, will naturally choose democracy over the other two options, because democracy is the natural form of government. Yet this search for a Third Force, Greene shows us, is merely indicative of the American tendency to project its own image onto the rest of the world. It never occurs to the Americans that the Vietnamese may not embrace the same values and beliefs that Westerners do.

And they don't see the potential danger in projecting such romantic ideas about democracy onto Vietnamese nationals, who will call themselves democratic and anticommunist in order to keep the American dollars coming, all the while subjecting their own constituents to the most brutal and degrading forms of repression.

The idea of the Third Force, in reality, was the backbone of the United States' nation-building policy in Vietnam, the cornerstone of containment thinking applied to Southeast Asia. According to Jonathan Nashel, the term was "a catch-all phrase for any real or imagined independent political force wedded to neither communism nor colonialism, one that was pro-American in the optimistic self-projections of Americans like Lansdale."²⁴ Pyle's solution, Fowler shows us, is dangerously simplistic in that it assumes that the condition of democracy is a universal human aspiration, the natural state of mankind. For Pyle, one has only to "find a leader and keep him safe from the old colonial powers."²⁵ This is exactly the same sort of formula that the American policy-makers adhered to in their mad dash to find a satisfactory Vietnamese national to lead the South from the government in Saigon after the Geneva conference had divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. Edward Lansdale's 1955 report to General Maxwell Taylor on the American advisory group's recent activities tells the story, in the harried prose of an official memorandum, of this complicated and frustrating search in the days between Dien Bien Phu and the negotiations at Geneva. The Americans had to find a southerner with popularity enough to match Ho Chi Minh's in the North. Bao Dai, the Emperor of Vietnam, was an unlikely choice, as he had merely been a puppet of the French and had little appeal to Vietnamese. The bewildering complexity of South Vietnam's political scene frustrated the Americans. Who, among the contenders for power, to choose from? The players all agreed that communism was not for Vietnam, but that was all they agreed on. There were various political and religious factions existing in a state of rivalry—Catholics, Buddhists, and the bizarre Cao Dai sect, headed by General The. There was the notorious river pirate and gangster, opium dealer and pimp. There were a number of other Vietnamese military figures, such as the ARVN Chief of Staff, General Binh. But the United States finally settled on Ngo Dinh Diem as the most reliable. Diem would function as that democratic alternative to Communism and colonialism; he would be the Third Force who could win the East for democracy.²⁶ Diem, however, would go on to rule South Vietnam with an iron fist, crushing out all opposition, Communist or not, and proved to be a democrat in theory, not in practice.

Greene's novel, set against the gloomy backdrop of the French Indochina war, depicts the misguided attempt by a young CIA operative named Alden Pyle to impose his theories of tumbling dominoes and Third Forces onto Vietnam in the belief that America can be the midwife

to the infant democracy waiting to be born in the country. His project, however, and the prefabricated notions underlying that project only wind up killing innocent Vietnamese civilians and backfiring upon himself. Pyle's story is related to us by Thomas Fowler, a British journalist assigned to cover the war between the French and the Viet Minh. He is a middle-aged, slightly world-weary man, contemptuous of the young Pyle's naivete and suspicious of the domino rhetoric he thoughtlessly chants like a litany whenever sounded on the subjects of Communism or Vietnamese politics. The irony or the black joke in the title of the novel becomes apparent in the opening scene, in which Fowler is summoned by the French colonial police to the Saigon morgue in order to identify Pyle's body. The only quiet American, it seems, is a dead one. For Pyle, we see, as the narrative flashes back to events leading up to the opening scene, has been anything but quiet. He has been running around the country, spreading propaganda, stirring up trouble, providing plastic explosives to the petty tyrant he foolishly believes will function as the Third Force and bring democracy to Vietnam.

When Vigot, the French detective, questions Fowler about Pyle's murder, the Englishman—who knows good and well that Viet Minh Communists were the assassins—gives the inspector a roundabout but nonetheless truer answer. Pointing to a volume on the bookshelf, Fowler remarks, "He's the man you're looking for, Vigot. He killed Pyle—at long range." The book is *The Role of the West*, by an American author named York Harding. Vigot, confused, requests clarification. "He's a superior sort of journalist—they call them diplomatic correspondents," Fowler explains. "He gets hold of an idea and then alters every situation to fit the idea. Pyle came out here full of York Harding's idea."²⁷ Harding's books are a sort of ill-compounded mixture of gaseous, pseudoscientific theories about history couched in the anticommunist rhetoric of falling dominoes, chain reactions, and containment. The Englishman lays the blame for both Pyle's death and the deaths of the civilians destroyed by his bombs not so much on Pyle himself, but on the culture that shaped his notions; Harding epitomizes or symbolizes that culture. Virtually all of Pyle's ideas, it seems, have come from the two books by Harding that he continually quotes—*The Role of the West* and *The Advance of Red China*—whenever he is confronted with some dilemma that his education and limited experience has not prepared. Pyle and the Vietnamese are the ones who have or will have paid the price for the attempt to rigidly apply an overly simplistic idea to a complicated society that will not neatly fit into Americans' dualistic notions of democracy and tyranny. Bookish theories and sweeping rhetorical gestures can only provide us with imaginative constructs that bear little if any relationship to geopolitical realities. Harding's domino rhetoric is a powerful force for shaping American attitudes and ideas about Southeast Asia, and thereby determining their actions there—

for Pyle, his books seem to possess an authority akin to that of Scripture, and the American in Vietnam acts as the missionary determined to put the word into praxis. What Harding's books cannot account for, and what Pyle fails to realize, however, is that American ideas about indigenous democrats in Southeast Asia are fanciful projections of a national self-image onto cultures which have little in common with Western democracy. Greene's novel illustrates, in a series of illuminating episodes, that Harding's prototypical containment rhetoric represents Vietnam as merely another rectangle in a line of dominoes, effaces its important differences from other Southeast Asian nations, and reduces its internal complexity to a simplistic dualism. Failing to account for those differences and that complexity, the novel makes clear, will make for a misguided and catastrophic policy.

Many of the hostile American reviews that greeted *The Quiet American* objected to a perceived imbalance in what seemed to be an unfair weighting in favor of an anti-American, procommunist view. Robert Gorham Davis argued that "there is no real debate in the book, because no experienced and intelligent anticommunist is represented there."²⁸ Davis referred to the pivotal scene of the novel, what one contemporary critic calls "a point of demonic epiphany."²⁹ The episode functions as a sort of dialogue between the conventional anticommunist position (for which Pyle is the mouthpiece) and Greene's own critical stance, articulated by Fowler, whose wit is quicker and who has a familiarity with and knowledge of the country that the newcomer does not. Pyle stubbornly argues that beliefs and abstractions like Democracy have validity and power in the real world, whereas Fowler points out that such abstractions, whether from the Left or the Right, are often elaborate masks for much more banal realities. The Americans are under the unfortunate illusion, Fowler argues, that the Vietnamese believe in Democracy and Freedom with the same fervor that their Western sponsors do. The American advisory mission and the quest for a Third Force are indeed predicated on that assumption—that Americans are coming to the aid of a beleaguered people. Pyle, like the America he represents, clings to the illusion that the Vietnamese population shares his commitment to democracy. In the same way that the United States has divided up the world according to a binary scheme of fallen and upright dominoes, Pyle has come to Vietnam with the preconceived notion that there are good and bad Vietnamese—democrats and Communists. His experience one night in the countryside outside Saigon, however, reveals something quite different. Nevertheless, he rejects the unsettling reality that Fowler tries to point out to him and retreats once more into the safety of the simplistic fictions that he has brought with him from the United States.

Significantly, the epiphany takes place in the open countryside, away from the city where the European and American influence is dominant. Their distance from the capital parallels their distance from the artificiality of Saigon and their proximity to the truth of the country. This is the “real” Vietnam, where the peasants have no love for white men. As Pyle and Fowler drive back from the Tanyin district to Saigon one evening, Pyle’s Buick breaks down on the road. Since the Viet Minh control the rural areas at night, the two men exposed out in the open are vulnerable to attack, in serious danger of being shot or captured. The only refuge available to them while they wait for the night to pass is one of the nearby small stone guard towers, manned by Vietnamese sentries and placed at regular intervals along the roadside. The two men try to figure out which option is the safer—lying low in the open field or climbing up into the post and waiting out the night in the company of the sentries. The latter seems the obvious choice to Pyle, who clings to the illusion that the South Vietnamese are united in their hatred of Communism. Fowler, however, knows that the danger in seeking refuge in the tower is probably just as great, if not more so, than waiting in the field, for the sentries cannot be counted on.

As they climb up into the tower, Fowler informs Pyle that, in the event that the Viet Minh do approach them, the guards are very likely to hand the two Westerners over to the enemy. “Sometimes the Viets have a better success with a megaphone than with a bazooka,” he explains. Pyle doesn’t understand. Why are the sentries not keeping vigil, looking out their windows? When Pyle grows indignant at what he sees as the guards’ cowardice and lack of patriotism, Fowler wryly asks: “Do you think they know they are fighting for Democracy? We ought to have York Harding to explain it to them.” “You always laugh at York,” Pyle replies. “I laugh at anyone who spends so much time writing about what doesn’t exist—mental concepts.” York Harding’s elaborate pictures of advancing Red tides and global chess games gloss over the problems of some “democracies” in which the democrats are just as bad as or worse than the communists. “You and your like are trying to make a war with the help of people who just aren’t interested,” Fowler explains. Harding’s—and America’s—rhetoric of liberty and the value of the individual are belied by the reality of U.S. foreign policy, which isn’t interested in the Vietnamese individual and looks at Vietnam as merely another “unit in the global strategy.”

But Pyle stubbornly refuses to let go of his belief that all Vietnamese are unanimously opposed to the tyranny of Sino-Soviet domination. “They don’t want Communism,” he protests. Fowler gives Pyle a glimpse of the gap between the fiction that York Harding and American magazines provide and the actuality of the situation. “They want enough rice,” he explains. “They don’t want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as another. They don’t want our white skins around telling them what they want.” Frustrated and bewildered, Pyle tries

to paint the bigger picture, retreating into the prefabricated structure of the domino formula. “If Indo-China goes . . .” he begins, yet Fowler, who has heard it all before, cuts him off: “I know the record. Siam goes. Malaya goes. Indonesia goes. What does ‘go’ mean?” Pyle has no answer; he has not fully thought through the implications of his beloved formula. “Go” of course suggests destruction or obliteration. The Vietnamese will not be able to exercise the freedom of religion or vote, yet, as Fowler explains, the Vietnamese peasant doesn’t “sit in his hut at night and think of grand abstractions like God and Democracy.” He doesn’t share the Western obsession with “isms and ocracies.”³⁰ He merely wants to be able to cultivate his farm in peace and be treated with dignity; so far, the commissars are the only people to have sat down and actually listened to the peasant and treat him honorably, while Americans have supported the colonialists and the violent Third Force rogues.

Greene’s novel both provided a critical perspective on American Cold War strategy and drew the world’s attention to the consequences of its application to the situation in Vietnam—it told an ignorant America just what Americans were doing there. The novel was, of course, a fiction first and foremost, but it was also a *roman à clef* using a thinly-disguised set of characters drawn from real life. Greene confessed in *Ways of Escape* that there was “more direct *reportage* in *The Quiet American* than any other novel [he had] written.” Despite Greene’s vociferous denials to the contrary, most critical studies of the novel assume (with good reason) that the model for Alden Pyle was Edward G. Lansdale, an American Air Force colonel ostensibly attached to the economic aid mission (yet really working for the CIA). Greene maintains that Lansdale “bore no resemblance to Pyle, the quiet American of my story—he was a man of greater intelligence and less innocence.” Lansdale’s accounts of his interactions with Greene, however, hint at much more than the casual meeting described in the latter’s autobiography. Clearly, the two men knew each other and the animosity between them was real. Greene does admit that Lansdale did in fact “lecture” him “on the necessity of finding a ‘third force in Vietnam.’”³¹ Cecil Currey, in his biography of Lansdale, maintains that Greene was, in fact, “the first author to caricature Lansdale’s real-life exploits.” The novel disturbed the man who was the butt of its criticism because offered it an extremely negative and “despairing portrait” of America in Vietnam.³²

Regardless of political perspective, scholars generally agree that the similarities between Pyle and Lansdale, between General The and Ngo Dinh Diem, are undeniable. But Lansdale’s significance within the context of the Vietnam War is a point of ferocious contention among scholars as well as voices outside the academy. In Vietnam War discourse, he has become both symbolic villain and symbolic hero. A radical leftist historian like Richard Drinnon sees Lansdale

as the primary instrument, in Indochina, of a racist foreign policy; he calls *In the Midst of Wars* (Lansdale's autobiography) a "twentieth-century version of Melville's *Confidence-Man*."³³ To Oliver North, however, Lansdale was the Cold Warrior *par excellence*; North portrayed himself, during the Iran-Contra hearings, "as a Lansdale of the 1980s."³⁴ For political conservatives, like North, who maintain that the Vietnam War was a genuine attempt to prevent a dictator from subjugating a peaceful neighbor, Lansdale has become an iconic figure who embodies the benevolence and altruism that, according to them, propelled American intervention in Vietnam.

For those who adopt a much more critical stance toward the history of America in Vietnam, Lansdale embodies the worst aspects of anticommunist zeal in foreign policy: ignorance, ethnocentrism, and an unswerving belief in the universality of American values. Greene's novel, in the critical discourse, is something of a watershed in that it stands as a powerfully prescient depiction of the consequences of the kind of policy that Lansdale implemented. According to Marilyn Young, a leftist historian, Lansdale's campaigns of propaganda and intrigue were undertaken to undermine the provisions of the Geneva Accords (the treaty upon the French defeat), which provided for a temporary division of Vietnam that would be effaced in a 1956 election in which the Vietnamese would decide once and for all on Ho Chi Minh or Diem, the American-sponsored leader in the South.³⁵ Young and other historians like her emphasize the illegality of the United States' actions during this early phase of its involvement in Vietnam and portray Lansdale as the primary instrument of a criminal policy. Critical histories like *The Vietnam Wars* and *Anatomy of a War* view the containment rhetoric employed by Lansdale as a mask for capitalist expansion. Ho Chi Minh, according to this line of thought, had much more political credibility among the Vietnamese than Diem, the dictator hand-picked by America; the U.S. view of Diem as a genuine nationalist or Third Force was an illusion, a projection of American desires, like Pyle's projection of York Harding's theories onto Vietnam. Finally, this school of interpretation dwells on America's complicity in Diem's brutal campaign against opposition, carried out in the name of democracy and freedom. "The United States," one of the more forceful proponents of this school writes, "was scarcely interested in opposing Diem's repression so long as Diem blocked the implementation of the elections agreed on in Geneva, and this both Saigon and Washington did by stating that neither had signed the accords."³⁶

The Quiet American articulated what its author saw as the moral bankruptcy of American policy in Vietnam long before historians like Kolko and Young made the same allegations. Thus, the novel has come to occupy a privileged position as the founding text of the left-liberal literature of the Vietnam conflict. David Halberstam put his finger on the problem that the novel

identified: “The Asians could have nationalism, but nationalism on our terms: nationalism without revolution, or revolutions which we would run for them—revolution, it turned out, without revolution.”³⁷ Gloria Emerson reflected on the novel’s significance in her memoir *Winners and Losers*. She recalls the American attitude during the early years of the Cold War: “All of us were not unlike Pyle,” she remarks. “We talked the way he did. ‘If Vietnam goes . . .’ became an obsession, a blue-eyed marching song.” After the war, she lent the novel to an ex-GI would-be novelist who “did not like it. His platoon had been around Dau Tieng, near the Michelin rubber plantation; like most American troops, he had never seen Saigon or any city in Vietnam. Besides, he said, all the people in the novel were old. He did not see what could still be learned from *The Quiet American* or the conversation in the watchtower between Fowler and Pyle. Almost everything, I said.”³⁸ These sophisticated and historically informed Vietnam authors clearly see Greene’s novel as an ignored warning of impending disaster. That ignorance, Michael Herr implies in *Dispatches*, was intertwined with the kind of exceptionalist thinking that permeated the rhetoric of containment—the “overripe bullshit” about “tumbling dominoes” and “maintaining the equilibrium of the Dingdong by containing the ever-encroaching Doodah.”³⁹ According to the logic of exceptionalism, America was somehow outside history; Americans like Lansdale saw themselves as coming into Vietnam with clean hands, free of the colonialist ambitions of Europe. For Herr, the character in Greene’s novel embodies the arrogance and willful ignorance of history characteristic of Cold War policy. “Maybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Alden Pyle’s body washed up under the bridge at Dakao, his lungs all full of mud; maybe it caved in with Dien Bien Phu,” he conjectures. “But the first happened in a novel, and while the second happened on the ground it happened to the French, and Washington gave it no more substance than if he had made it up too.”⁴⁰

Graham Greene was not the radical leftist that some imagine him to have been, however; he will disappoint the ideologue who looks closely at some statements both in the novel and in his non-fiction. As a European, for example, he expressed deeply ambivalent feelings about colonialism. He sympathized with the men under General Delattre at Dien Bien Phu and admired what he saw as heroism and courage in the face of certain death. He expressed a poignant nostalgia for the presence of French culture and religion in Indochina, all but obliterated by the 1960s. It is important to remember that Greene was, for the most part, a conservative Catholic, of the same religion as the French and the Vietnamese ruling class.⁴¹ It would be similarly misguided to characterize his novel, as some recent critics would have it, as a systematic, politically correct critique of U.S. policy in Indochina. It is a work of art, not a piece of propaganda, thus there is no formal attack on any system of belief. Actually, it seems as if his

opposition to the American presence there stemmed more from a personal antipathy—the disdain of a conservative European for the avatars of a seemingly shallow and infantile culture—than from any clear-cut ideological differences. But his novel stands as probably the most powerful indictment of the domino theory available to a wide reading audience at the time of its publication. A decade would pass before another such thoroughgoing assault on the bedrock assumption behind the decision to intervene in Vietnam was to be put again before the American public.

A Novel of Nation-Building: *The Ugly American*

Greene's novel prompted a vociferous reaction on the part of the American media establishment. Several hostile reviews attacked *The Quiet American* as an insidious piece of Communist propaganda and its author as either an unwitting Soviet stooge or in conscious sympathy with the Communist cause. A.J. Liebling, in a witty and humorous *ad hominem* attack, accused Greene of trying to poison Franco-American relations with his portrayal of an American agent denouncing colonialism and supporting anti-French but also non-Communist nationals. The novel, Liebling noted, reached a wide audience in France with its serialization in a French tabloid and its depiction of American complicity in the deaths of French officers sent the wrong message to the United States' ally in the war against communism. Greene's charges, Liebling argued, were unfounded and largely grounded in personal prejudices and the envy of the old, waning colonial power for the new power on the rise to globalism. But Greene had gone too far in the expression of that envy. "There is a difference, after all," Liebling concluded, "between calling your over-successful offshoot a silly ass and accusing him of murder."⁴²

If *The Quiet American* were merely the first novel to give readers a critical portrayal of American doings in Vietnam, it might be significant in the annals of literary history as a fine work of fiction which happened to sound out a few key notes of the incipient protest movement, a harbinger. Yet it was not only the first novel, but indeed the first book in English—fiction or non-fiction—to protest American intervention in Southeast Asia. Greene had assaulted all the sacred cows of American Cold War culture in his novel—American can-do optimism, cultural infantilism, and shallow sloganeering; he had portrayed the American spook as a bumbling and meddlesome fool; and he had lampooned the simplistic shibboleths—embedded in the rhetoric of dominoes and containment—through which the United States' citizenry viewed the world.

The reviewers certainly made a big noise and gave Greene a bad reputation, but, appropriately, the most sustained counterattack also came in the form of fiction. Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, two retired naval officers who had served in the Philippines, responded to Greene's novel not by attacking the author personally, nor through more sophisticated literary

means (such as parody). They reclaimed and rehabilitated the figure of Edward Lansdale, transforming him from the bumbling idiot Alden Pyle to the heroic figure of Edwin Hillandale, and by attempting to revalidate or revitalize the very assumptions that had gotten Alden Pyle into so much trouble. Lansdale represented the exact sort of approach to Southeast Asian Communism that Burdick and Lederer thought best suited to the region—the same sort of liberal anticommunism for which Fowler had expressed such contempt in the British novel. Burdick and Lederer were dissatisfied with what they saw as the slow, stodgy and conservative stance of the Eisenhower administration and made an implicit argument for a much more aggressive American role in the Third World in their tremendously popular book *The Ugly American*, which appeared two years after Greene's novel.⁴³ This novel expressed an anticommunist position no less staunch than that of the incumbent Republican administration, but argued for an America that reached out to win the hearts and minds of the peasant by promoting social programs in impoverished Southeast Asian countries as a way of containing Soviet and Chinese expansion. The problems of American foreign policy, the two authors believed, largely reflected the malaise of the nation at large—Americans were apathetic, overfed, spoiled buffoons who presented a despicable image of themselves to the rest of the world. Supporting colonialism didn't help, either—when the United States and France became bedfellows, the American commitment to democracy was suspect in the eyes of oppressed peoples.

This novel, although by no means exhibiting the same level of craftsmanship and sharpness of characterization as Greene's, is a rather enigmatic production that resists comprehensive summarization. It does not develop along clear and readily discernible plot lines. Rather, it gives the reader a series of thumbnail sketches of American foreign-service workers, ambassadors, military personnel, and clergy, all in Southeast Asia, yet the focus is on a fictional country called Sarkhan. Sarkhan is not meant to stand for Vietnam in an allegorical sense; it seems, rather, to be an amalgamation of Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia—all of which come into view at various points in the narrative. Sarkhan is presented as what Burdick and Lederer see as the typical or generic Southeast Asian nation, with all the attendant problems of the postcolonial situation. Sarkhan is more like an imaginary construction of Vietnam in that precarious moment just after the departure of the colonial power. The Sarkhanese Communists, Soviet-trained outsiders masquerading as nationalist patriots, are trying to take advantage of the resultant social unrest and instability. They assist the peasant farmers with their problems and this lends their anti-American propaganda credibility. The Americans in the country play out their various roles against the backdrop of this social upheaval and revolutionary violence, and

the reader is invited to position each American as either “good” or “ugly” in accordance with the way he or she responds to the Communist strategy.

Burdick and Lederer had obviously read Greene’s novel and taken several cues from him. While they differed on the issue of Lansdale, they were receptive to Fowler’s criticism that Americans could not understand that the only man who really appreciated the peasant was the commissar, who actually sat down with the peasant and listened to his problems and complaints. Americans had to be more like the commissar—they had to become, in a sense, the enemy. The idea of “becoming the enemy” represented the next phase in containment strategy: counterinsurgency and the creation of the U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets) under the Kennedy administration. Historian Richard Slotkin describes *The Ugly American* as “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of counterinsurgency: it put into vivid prose a convincing interpretation of the crisis of Communist expansion in Asia and offered an appealing scenario of how we might master the situation.” The novel stands, according to Slotkin, as “[o]ne of the most influential critiques of the Eisenhower administration’s lack of counterinsurgency policies.”⁴⁴ The appearance of *The Ugly American* created a stir far beyond the inner circle of the Eisenhower administration, however. Other political and military figures, from John F. Kennedy to William Fullbright, bought and read this best-seller, and their responses to the book were either warmly enthusiastic or bitterly denunciatory. Whereas Fullbright “attacked the book from the floor of the Senate for nearly an hour,” Hubert Humphrey believed that the novel offered a much-needed shot in the arm for U.S. policy in Vietnam.⁴⁵

The novel provided a clear picture of everything its authors viewed wrong with American foreign policy in the secondary battlegrounds of the Cold War. Many of the implicit criticisms that Burdick and Lederer make in their portraits of “ugly” Americans are remarkably similar to some of the swipes that Thomas Fowler takes at the United States in *The Quiet American*. The “ugly” Americans—such as the ambassador Louis Sears, the journalist Joe Bing, and foreign service worker Marie MacIntosh—are all self-centered, smug racists who look down upon the natives as childlike monkeys. They are willfully ignorant of Sarkhanese culture and insist on access to American luxuries like air-conditioning and ice cream in the midst of poverty. They present to the Sarkhanese peasantry an ugly image of overfed, flabby, bloated snobs who have nothing in common with the indigenous people. They are grotesque aliens who cocoon themselves within climate-controlled rooms, guzzling cocktails and associating mainly with the decadent Sarkhanese aristocracy. Yet Burdick and Lederer differ from Greene in that they view these qualities and faults as representative of a cultural degeneration, a national departure from the frontier virtues which made America great; only a return to those values will secure the

triumph of democracy in the world. The interests of freedom, it is clear, are not served by people like Sears, Bing, and MacIntosh, and they do more damage to the anticommunist cause than any work of anti-American propaganda could ever do. They do nothing to help win hearts and minds; in fact, they alienate the peasantry, the crucial pawn in the containment game.

The “good” Americans, on the other hand—like entrepreneur John Colvin, the Jesuit priest Father Finian, the military advisor Tex Wolchek, and ambassador Gilbert MacWhite—are the people we see making a concerted effort to immerse themselves in Southeast Asian culture, to “go native” or get down among the folk and eat their food, speak their language, and respect their customs. The good American has transcended ethnocentrism, racial and cultural bigotry, and prizes the uniqueness of all those heroic peoples striving to keep Communism at bay. For the great tragedy of Communism, according to Burdick and Lederer, is that it extinguishes all cultural difference and subsumes everything under its own dreary red banner. Father Finian, the Jesuit missionary, abandons his religious prejudices against Buddhism in order to forge an effective alliance with the Burmese nationalists. Major Wolchek convinces the French Captain Monet to abandon his Eurocentric military orthodoxy and use the guerilla strategy outlined in Mao’s writings in order to effectively counter the Viet Minh insurgency in Vietnam. Ambassador MacWhite, in contrast to Sears, is well-versed in Sarkhanese history and Marxist theory. Yet the central figure in the narrative is the banjo-strumming, harmonica-playing Colonel Edwin B. Hillandale, the “Ragtime Kid,” sent to Sarkhan from his station in Manila where, as a liaison officer, he helped the nationalist, anticommunist leader Ramon Magsaysay defeat the communist-backed Hukbalahap rebels in a democratic election. He was able to do this, we see, by establishing the credibility of America’s commitment to democracy and freedom in the Philippines. He came there already having mastered Tagalog, and once there he traveled around on his motorcycle like a benevolent pied piper, amusing the Filipinos with his harmonica and relishing *adobo* and *pancit*. Here was no fat-cat colonialist shying away from contact with the natives; here was a genuine American, full of the pioneer spirit and missionary zeal needed to spread democracy.

Whereas Greene insisted that the connection between Alden Pyle and Edward Lansdale was tenuous, Burdick and Lederer openly acknowledged that their Air Force colonel was indeed modeled on the real personage.⁴⁶ If Pyle was a critical caricature of Lansdale, exaggerating those qualities that were doing so much damage in Vietnam, then Hillandale was an immensely flattering portrait that reversed Greene’s critical portrayal. Whereas Pyle is a pedantic adherent of bookish theories, and his main flaw the desire to impose the containment framework onto reality, Hillandale seems unencumbered by such intellectual baggage. Pyle has imported

preconceived notions; Hillendale is the American Adam in perfect harmony with nature and the natives. Indeed, the entire novel is predicated on a rural-versus-urban juxtaposition.

Yet *The Ugly American*, for all its avoidance of direct usage of the rhetoric of containment or references to dominoes, and its disdain for the conservative, Eisenhower brand of anticommunism, is nevertheless grounded in the same assumptions that governed foreign policy up to then—Communism was a monolithic block intending to spread its influence outward all over the globe until its goal of world domination was finally attained nations were all identical pawns in the global struggle. The differences between the authors of *The Ugly American* and the Eisenhower administration their book lambasted were not, after all, ideological. Unlike Greene, who rejected containment rhetoric, Burdick and Lederer did not disagree with the President and the Secretary of State that Communism had to be stopped at all costs. Their disagreements centered on the question of how best to prevent the extension of its influence around the world. Critics of the novel have noted that, underneath *The Ugly American's* overt liberalism and rejection of ethnocentrism, lies a wholehearted acceptance of the containment world-view. Their prototypical domino-theory vision of Southeast Asia attributes the spread of Communism to outside aggression and ignores the role that internal factors play in political revolutions. “Problems such as the elite ownership of land,” Jim Nielson argues, “lack of access to education, a corrupt and repressive political system, and a nearly feudal class division are not obstacles to capitalist victory, according to Lederer and Burdick; in *The Ugly American* these facts do not exist.”⁴⁷ In Slotkin’s view, “Lederer and Burdick treat ‘Asians’ as Hollywood (for the most part) treated ‘Indians’—as if they had a unitary racial character transcending differences of culture and nationality.”⁴⁸ The aspect of the novel that most readily reveals the authors’ uncritical acceptance of the containment paradigm, however, is their belief that one can construct a generic version of a Southeast Asian nation whose problems will represent the problems of all other countries in Indochina; that Sarkhan can realistically function as the prototype of the Southeast Asian domino.

Defending Dominoes: *Aggression from the North* and *The Green Berets*

If the rhetoric of containment played a key role in the formation of American Vietnam policy during the Eisenhower years, and amplified by Kennedy in his decision to boost the personnel levels there significantly, it was, without question, instrumental in the Johnson administration’s decision to go to war—to commit combat troops to South Vietnam and to bomb the North. In February 1965, one month before the first battalion of Marines landed at the coastal city of Da Nang, the State Department issued a publication entitled *Aggression from the North* (more informally known as the “White Paper”) which outlined the U.S. government’s official position on the problem in Vietnam and argued in favor of decisive intervention; it made the case for an

offensive, as opposed to a defensive stance. At this point, the problems inherent in the simplistic picture of international Communism valorized by *The Ugly American* had made themselves apparent to Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Whereas Burdick and Lederer's novel had envisioned a cure-all solution that would halt Communism in any Southeast Asian country, going on the assumption that all of them were more or less the same, *Aggression from the North*, in its introduction, rejects the idea that one solution will fit any country. "Vietnam is *not* another Malaya, where Communist guerrillas were, for the most part, distinguishable from the peaceful majority they sought to control. Vietnam is *not* another Philippines, where Communist guerrillas were physically separated from the source of their moral and physical support. Above all Vietnam is *not* a spontaneous and local rebellion against the established government" (emphasis in original).⁴⁹ Despite the government's shift in its conception of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, however, *Aggression from the North* clung tightly to the rhetoric of containment and relied heavily on the domino theory as a rationale for going to war.

The last point in the quotation above is highly illustrative of one of the basic principles of containment. The domino theory had no room for the notion of a genuinely indigenous uprising against a Western-friendly government like the one in South Vietnam. The Vietcong guerrillas, according to the logic of containment, could not be the main force of a popular insurgency. They were the puppet troops of the Hanoi-based regime, trained and armed by Ho Chi Minh, who was, in turn, trained and armed by the Soviet Union. The insurgency was, as the title made clear, a blatant act of aggression sponsored by North Vietnam, "loosed against an independent people who want to make their own way in peace and freedom." The Munich analogy is implicitly invoked as well. The introduction repeatedly emphasized that a warlike nation had "set out deliberately to conquer a sovereign people in a neighboring state." But the Wehrmacht had openly marched into Poland and France with massive forces, so the historical analogy was tenuous, and the authors of the paper seem acutely aware of this. In order to convince readers that North Vietnam was actually invading the South, the paper emphasized the notion that this sort of aggression was of a "totally new brand": Communism, unlike Nazism, was sneaky, subtle, and clever. Having learned from the example of an "undisguised attack, the planners in Hanoi have tried desperately to conceal their hand. They have failed and their aggression is as real as that of an invading army." The rest of the paper goes on to prove that the aggression is indeed real with an exposition of the "massive evidence" of the North's supplying weapons, ammunition, and other logistical support to the Viet Cong. The evidence has been "obtained by the Government of South Vietnam" and "jointly analyzed by South Vietnamese and American experts."⁵⁰

Aggression from the North employed the rhetoric of containment as a justification for war because its precepts lent a moral sanction to the idea of intervention. Through the containment paradigm articulated in the paper, one could see South Vietnam—what many critics of the policy viewed as an artificial creation of the United States—as a real nation. And it was necessary to construct two Vietnams in order to posit the notion of an invasion; any blurring of the boundary between North and South would lead to the idea of a civil conflict. United States involvement in another country's civil war was clearly unacceptable to the majority of Americans. Stepping in to help a democracy ward off the bullying advances of a totalitarian neighbor, on the other hand, was right and just. According to the White Paper, America's proposed escalation of the war against Communism in Vietnam was to be viewed in the clear-cut terms of World War II. A tyrant was threatening to overrun a weak neighbor; the United States had to go to the defense of that threatened country because justice demanded it and because other tyrants had to be shown that democracy would not stand idly by and let dictators trample weaker peoples underfoot.

Aggression from the North is historically important because it set the Johnson administration on the path to escalation (indeed, it was more of a *post facto* rationalization rather than a plan of action to be followed), but it stands as another landmark in the debate over intervention in Vietnam. Whereas *The Quiet American* first opened up that debate by attacking the tenets of containment, stirring American book reviewers to a fury, and *The Ugly American* set out to revitalize those tenets, *Aggression* attempted to modify the containment model in light of recent developments in order to make American policy relevant to the demands of escalation. As an official publication, unlike the two novels, it served as a target or a focal point for steadily increasing criticism of U.S. policy in Indochina by the antiwar element in the Senate and the House of Representatives (or the “doves”), as well as “antiwar” journalists.

The latter of the two critical factions was perhaps the one with the most real power in United States popular culture, and the Johnson administration, as well as other “hawkish” proponents of the war effort had good reason to fear them. The vociferous objections to the war articulated by political figures like Senators Mike Mansfield and Ernest Gruening, and the persistent questions of Senator William Fullbright, who scrutinized the assumptions on which the decision to intervene rested, were confined to Washington—unless the media chose to put the dissenters in the spotlight and draw the public's attention to them. But journalists critical of anticommunism began to wield as much power in the middle and late 1960s as the right-wing journalists had during the 1950s. Just as Joseph Alsop, during the Truman and Eisenhower years, had the power to galvanize public support in favor of intervention by vividly delineating the necessity of containment, so did radical journalists like I.F. Stone present the American public

with writing that shockingly contradicted the official position. Adversarial reporters like David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan, in the first half of the 1960s, treated the optimistic rhetoric of the military with skepticism, showing that the fight against Communism was not making the progress that General Paul Harkins said it was, but they nevertheless shared the assumptions of containment. I.F. Stone, on the other hand, attacked the assumptions themselves. In his “Refutation of the ‘White Paper,’” published on the same day that the first combat troops arrived in Vietnam (March 8, 1965), he submitted that the State Department’s rationale for escalation—that North Vietnam’s aggressive invasion should be matched with equal force—rested primarily on a fiction. Stone made it clear that he did not dispute that the North supported the guerrillas, but that the figures cited in *Aggression from the North*—figures which documented the number of Soviet or Eastern-bloc made weapons seized from the Vietcong—did not show the whole picture, and created a deceptive illusion of an invasion when the support was actually minimal. But most importantly, Stone attacked the White Paper for its insistence on the reality of South Vietnam as a valid political entity. “The most disingenuous part of the White Paper,” he asserted, “is that in which it discusses the origins of the present war. It pictures the war as an attack from the North, launched in desperation because the ‘economic miracle’ in the South under Diem had destroyed Communist hopes of a peaceful takeover from within.”⁵¹

Stone’s suggestion of the government’s systematic deception—both of itself and of the American public—set the tone for the critical reporting that followed it as the war gained momentum, and was indicative of what would come to be known as the “credibility gap.” It also served as a prototype of the target of right-wing critics who attempted to defend the war—the skeptical journalist who doubts the validity of containment and all its trappings: the domino theory, the Munich analogy, etc. The response of the hawks to attacks on containment such as Stone’s was perhaps best expressed in John Wayne’s 1968 film *The Green Berets*. Based on a 1965 best-selling short-story collection by Robin Moore, Wayne modified the original source to emphasize the enmity of the press toward the military and the government. The year the novel was published, the war was still a peripheral event for most Americans; three years later it was perhaps the central crisis in a series of crises. The crisis, the film makes clear, is one of faith—Americans, under the pernicious influence of cynical, big-city journalists, are losing faith in the once-unassailable doctrine of containment. Reporters like Beckworth, the central protagonist of the film, are losing the war at home with their nay-saying and criticism of the domino theory. The film opens at Fort Bragg, home of the Special Forces, where a few Green Berets are putting on a demonstration for a group of reporters. Many of them ooh and aah at the display of prowess and weaponry, but some attempt to probe through the dog and pony show to the heart of the

matter, asking dangerous questions that attack the foundation of American intervention. When Sergeant Muldoon concludes the demonstration and opens the floor for questions, Beckworth suggests that the Vietnam conflict is really a civil war in which outside powers have no business intervening. It is not an invasion of one country by another. “There are still a lot of people who believe that this is simply a war between the Vietnamese people,” he remarks. “It’s their war. Let them handle it.” Muldoon, incensed at Beckworth’s ignorance, slams various captured Vietcong weapons and ammunition down on the table in front of them—Soviet-made Kalishnikovs, Chinese-made SKS’s, Czech-made rounds—all evidence that the domino theory is no paranoid fiction. The great Communist conspiracy is trying to topple the dominoes of Indochina. The war Vietnam is indeed a smaller episode in a larger global struggle against international Communism. “No, sir. Mr. Beckworth. It doesn’t take a lead weight to fall on me or a hit from one of those weapons to recognize that what’s involved here is communist domination of the world.”⁵² From there, the film goes on to dramatize the “education” of Beckworth, as he goes to Vietnam to cover the war. His experience there transforms him from the cynical, skeptical doubter to a believer in containment. Contrary to what Beckworth formerly believed, the Vietcong are *not* a ragtag popular front with the support of the peasants; they are Soviet-trained outsiders who maintain their grip on the peasantry through terror and brutality.

In *The Green Berets*, Wayne took a text that was primarily a journalistic celebration of the elite American fighting man and turned it into a reaffirmation of the domino theory at a time during which the logic of containment seemed to be falling apart, as it was coming under increasing attacks by journalists and intellectuals. Only a year previous, Carl Oglesby, a Christian writer associated with the peace movement and the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, had published the first major systematic exposure of what he saw as the fatal flaws in the containment paradigm. Far from being a dry, scholarly treatise, however, Oglesby’s *Containment and Change* was exhortatory and confrontational, challenging Americans to question some of their most deeply held beliefs about the Cold War:

If the Cold War is really what most Americans consider it to be, then the Cold War is necessary. If it is necessary, then it may very well be necessary for America to maintain her hold over South Vietnam.

So we have to reach inside our Cold War truths to see if they do not conceal some other truths. We have to be very naïve and ask: What is this Cold War all about? And is it really necessary?

The misguided rationale that Oglesby saw as governing American foreign policy was the domino theory, which, by 1967 (the year of the book’s publication) had reigned supreme twenty years:

“The theory’s implicit description of the way in which the demand for change emerges and is shaped by international events,” he asserted, “is primitive, paranoid, and mechanistic.”⁵³ This distorted model of world affairs, Oglesby went on to demonstrate, was at the root of the government’s adherence to the fiction that America was in Vietnam to help the South resist an invasion from the North. Echoing I.F. Stone’s argument that the “aggression from the North” line was based on a distortion of statistics, he maintained that “this line of argument seems the most dishonest of all. Americans are shown a number and handed a gun. That is not enough.”⁵⁴

For John Wayne, however, a showing of numbers and guns (the captured Vietcong weapons in the film) *was* enough to convince America of the war’s rightness. The debate between Muldoon and Beckworth, in fact, mirrors the conflict between the position in *Aggression from the North* and I.F. Stone’s negation of it. One side argues that the Vietnam War is a Soviet-sponsored invasion of one sovereign state by another, thus, the United States has a moral obligation to defend South Vietnam; the other side insists that the domino theory does not apply here, since the conflict is really a war between the Vietnamese to determine that country’s political future. The United States, according to this line of thinking, has no right to interfere. Yet the film reverses the dialectic, placing the journalist on the defensive instead of the Johnson administration. The government refutes the journalist’s apparently weak, poorly-thought out position with an overwhelming display of physical evidence that civilians can see with their own eyes. These are *real* weapons, not figures on paper. The arguments are roughly the same, but Beckworth does not subject Muldoon’s presentation to the same sort of systematic scrutiny to which Stone subjected the White Paper. This is perhaps representative of what Slotkin sees as the film’s “too-credulous acceptance” of the Johnson administration’s interpretation of the war. “What is interesting about the film,” for Slotkin, “is not its misrepresentation of the war-as-fought but the accuracy with which it reproduces and compounds the official misunderstanding and falsification of the conflict.”⁵⁵

For an administration bent on prosecuting the war to the bitter end as the only alternative to pulling out and losing face in front of the forces of domestic anti-communism, the John Wayne film provided a compelling reassurance of the validity of the containment policy that had taken it to war in the first place. The turgid, flat prose of *Aggression from the North* would not reach a wide reading audience; *The Green Berets*, however, played in thousands of theaters to millions of viewers and eventually grossed well over ten million dollars.⁵⁶ Its mixture of sensationalism and sentimentality—gory scenes of booby-trap deaths juxtaposed with cute Vietnamese orphans in baseball caps—in addition to the reassuring presence of an American screen icon in uniform once again, virtually guaranteed its commercial success. Film reviewers, however, largely rejected

what they saw as the movie's gross distortion of the war's reality. *The Hollywood Reporter* called the film "a cliché-ridden throwback to the battlefield potboilers of World War II, its artifice readily exposed by the nightly actuality of TV news coverage." Renata Adler offered a much more strident denunciation in the *New York Times*: "*The Green Berets* is a film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false . . . that it passes through being fun, through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers in Vietnam or for Vietnam (the film could not be more false or do a greater disservice to either of them) but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus . . . Simplicities of the right, simplicities of the left, but this one is beyond the possible. It is vile and insane."⁵⁷

The tone of the movie reviews is highly revealing of the increasing skepticism on the part of the press toward official claims that the war fit neatly into the containment paradigm, that it was indeed an instance of Communist aggression against a peaceful neighbor. In light of the fact that John Wayne made *The Green Berets* with the official blessing of President Johnson and the cooperation of the U.S. Army, it is perhaps tempting to view the film as the U.S. government's last desperate attempt, carried out while the war was still in progress, to reaffirm the validity of the containment paradigm and to persuade Americans that the domino theory satisfactorily explained why we were in Vietnam.⁵⁸ In the next chapter I will go on discuss the radical interrogation of the anticommunist ideology promoted in such official propaganda pieces like *Aggression from the North* and a film like *The Green Berets*.

Notes

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- ³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference of April 7, 1954," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1958): 73.
- ⁴ Harry S. Truman, "Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey: The Truman Doctrine, March 12, 1947," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1947* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1963): 179.
- ⁵ Larry Engelmann, *Tears Before the Rain: An Oral History of South Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997): 27.
- ⁶ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1985): 75.
- ⁷ Quoted in *Vietnam: A Television History*, WGBH, 1983.
- ⁸ Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985): 12-13.
- ⁹ Quoted in *Vietnam: A Television History*.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in *LBJ*, PBS, 1991.
- ¹¹ James Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1995*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996): 32.
- ¹² Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 10.
- ¹³ William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett—Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles* (New York: Vintage, 1995): 269-70.
- ¹⁴ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972): 165-66.
- ¹⁵ Joseph Alsop, "Why We Lost China," part 1, *Saturday Evening Post* 222, no. 28 (January 7, 1950): 16.
- ¹⁶ Robert Payne, *Red Storm Over Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1951): ix.
- ¹⁷ Payne, *Red Storm Over Asia*, 202.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in David Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 70.
- ¹⁹ Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam*, 73.
- ²⁰ Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988): 91.
- ²¹ Quoted in Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 170.
- ²² Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 77.
- ²³ William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986): 26.
- ²⁴ Jonathan Nashel, "Lansdale and Greene." In John Clark Pratt, ed. *The Quiet American: Text and Criticism* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996): 315.
- ²⁵ Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996): 124.
- ²⁶ Edward G. Lansdale, "Cold War Combat: Tactics After Geneva." In Marvin E. Gettleman, et al. *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995): 82-84.
- ²⁷ Greene, *The Quiet American*, 168.
- ²⁸ Robert Gorham Davis, "In Our Time No Man is Neutral." *New York Times Book Review* (11 March 1956): 1+.
- ²⁹ Brian Thomas, *An Underground Fate: The Idiom of Romance in the Later Novels of Graham Greene* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988): 35.
- ³⁰ Greene, *The Quiet American*, 94-95.
- ³¹ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 89-90.
- ³² Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1988): 197.
- ³³ Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980): 355.
- ³⁴ Currey, *Edward Lansdale*, 347.
- ³⁵ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991): 44-45.
- ³⁶ Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 87.
- ³⁷ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 125.

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- ³⁸ Gloria Emerson, *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985): 299-300.
- ³⁹ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Random House, 1977), 20.
- ⁴⁰ Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, 49.
- ⁴¹ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 187-90.
- ⁴² A.J. Liebling, "A Talkative Something-or-Other." *The New Yorker* (7 April 1956): 154.
- ⁴³ Currey, *Edward Lansdale*, 198-99.
- ⁴⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University Press of Oklahoma) HarperCollins, 1992): 447.
- ⁴⁵ Currey, *Edward Lansdale*, 199.
- ⁴⁶ Currey, *Edward Lansdale*, 200.
- ⁴⁷ Nielson, *Warring Fictions*, 92.
- ⁴⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 448.
- ⁴⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Aggression from the North: The Record of North Vietnam's Campaign to Conquer South Vietnam*, Publication 7839, Far Eastern Series 130 (Washington, D.C., 1965): 1.
- ⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Aggression from the North*, 1.
- ⁵¹ I.F. Stone, "Refutation of the 'White Paper.'" In Gettelman, *Vietnam and America*, 273.
- ⁵² *The Green Berets*. Dir. John Wayne and Ray Kellogg. Warner Bros., 1968.
- ⁵³ Carl Oglesby, *Containment and Change* (New York: MacMillan, 1967): 13.
- ⁵⁴ Oglesby, *Containment and Change*, 11.
- ⁵⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 522-23.
- ⁵⁶ Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam*, 40-41.
- ⁵⁷ Quoted in James Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 208-9.
- ⁵⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 520-21.

CHAPTER 2

THE ANTIWAR LEFT AND THE “IMMORAL AND CRIMINAL” WAR

Morton sat in his foxhole and ate his C-rations, pleasantly he asked his friends about why they burned down the Vietnamese houses—he felt funny about it. Friday morning Morton had asked a squad leader, “Sergeant, should I burn this house?” “Here, this’ll help it,” the sergeant had answered, giving him a jar of kerosene from the kitchen shelf. All right: an order’s an order, Morton had accepted that, but then the sergeant had said, “That’s enough,” and Morton’s disobedient friends had lazily stayed behind and burned the whole village into a tiny replica of Lidice—now, Morton was good-naturedly wondering why.

—John Sack, *M*

“The boys enjoyed it. When someone laughs and jokes about what they’re doing, they have to be enjoying it.” A GI said, “Hey, I got me another one.” Another said, “Chalk one up for me.” Even Captain Medina was having a good time, Carter thought. “You can tell when someone enjoys their work.” Few members of Charlie Company protested that day. For the most part, those who didn’t like what was going on kept their thoughts to themselves.

—Seymour Hersh, *My Lai Four*

Nobody in the world is safe from the “ugly Americans” who come to take their land, their resources, and their cultural identities. Wars like Vietnam are a logical result of the drive for world domination by the American establishment.

—Tom Hayden, *Rebellion and Repression*

Extensive documentation is available, and, I believe, it shows clearly that the American war is criminal, even in the narrowest technical sense.

—Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons of State*

It is our hope that the American people will come to realize that war crimes in Vietnam are not isolated, aberrant acts but the inevitable result of a policy which, in its direction of waging war against the civilians—Vietnamese civilians—is in itself immoral and criminal.

—Veteran’s testimony in *Standard Operating Procedure*

The Antiwar Movement(s) and Vietnam

The American movement against the war in Vietnam is a vast and complex subject in and of itself, characterized by several components (from left-liberal moderates dedicated to working within the system to radical outlaw groups dedicating to destroying it) and factions as well as distinct phases (the moratoriums and demonstrations of the 1965-67 period, the Vietnam veterans’ movement against the war, the terror tactics of the violent Weather Underground). A rich and wide-ranging body of scholarly literature already exists on these and other important aspects and dimensions of the antiwar movement. My intention here is not to rehash or summarize what has already been discussed at great length in analyses like Adam Garfinkle’s *Telltale Hearts*, a history of the antiwar movement and an assessment of its impact on the war and American politics; Jeremy Varon’s *Bringing the War Home*, a study of militant Left groups of the

Vietnam era; or Gerald Nicosia's *Home to War*, the definitive work on the antiwar veterans' movement. What I attempt to undertake, in this chapter, is a discussion of a representative portion of the large and widely varied body of texts in which the antiwar movement has attempted to represent its version of the Vietnam conflict. These texts, which often get a brief mention in historical narratives, are rarely subjected to sustained analysis or close reading. As Jim Nielson points out in his *Warring Fictions*, most of this material has not fared well in traditional courses of study in the literature of the Vietnam conflict, as it is considered too crude, propagandistic, or ephemeral to be worth the bother. Vietnam War literature, when it is studied in the classroom, more often consists of the informal canon of novelists like Tim O'Brien and Philip Caputo.¹ While I question many of the assumptions governing Nielson's study, I agree with him in the belief that close readings and sustained analyses of these lesser-known writings and other relevant media are absolutely essential to understanding the effect of the war on American culture itself, the antiwar movement's cultural activity, its ideological underpinnings, and, more broadly, the relationship between culture and political action. I would like to caveat this last aspect of the discussion by emphasizing that I am not looking to elucidate a simple cause-and-effect relationship between text and history, for example, by looking at instances in which key political actors or historical events have been influenced by key texts, or vice versa. I am not arguing, for example, that hearing Tom Hayden read the *Port Huron Statement* in Ann Arbor in 1962 started a given individual on a path which ended in violent radicalism, or arguing that a particularly well-executed work of imaginative fiction about American war crimes is simply one of the many proofs that such crimes were not aberrations but rather part of a general military policy. Certainly, there are indeed cases in which one can clearly illuminate such causal or mimetic relationships, but such concerns are outside the purview of my study and seem to me more the province of the professional historian, who is better equipped than I to deal with such thorny issues. What I am really examining in this chapter are the ways in which certain readily identifiable tropes, descriptive techniques, and narrative strategies within antiwar texts resurface again and again across generic boundaries. My intention is to point them out and illuminate their various functions within the text in question and their relationship to similar or nearly identical tropes, techniques, and strategies in other antiwar texts, as well as public discourse (i.e. speeches and slogans). One pattern that has become apparent to me in the course of reading this material in conjunction with standard historical literature on the antiwar movement is that many of the writings and productions here seem to be elaborations upon or amplifications of certain slogans ("say no to imperialist war") or terms ("baby killer" or "Amerikkkaa") recognizable to anyone with even a passing familiarity with the antiwar movement. This is not to say, of course, that a

monumental narrative like William Shawcross's *Sideshow*, a denunciatory analysis of Nixon and Kissinger's bombing of Cambodia, or a formidable collection of polemical essays like Noam Chomsky's *For Reasons of State* is merely a "fleshing-out" or refinement of popular gestures toward, say, the bombing of Cambodia or the existence of the military-industrial complex. But it does seem, more often than not, that some of the more familiar slogans and mantras of the period are merely shorthand for some of the complex explanations of or ideas about the Vietnam War in these books, and that is precisely why I believe that this neglected body of antiwar texts demands closer examination—in order to foster a better understanding of this radical interpretive framework, the manner in which it inhabits and works through various texts, and its relationship to American culture at large. I believe that at the time of this writing, when this particular vision of the United States' role in the world is resurfacing and taking a firm hold in popular culture, a better understanding of the "immoral and criminal" interpretation of the war in Vietnam, and more recently, the Global War on Terrorism, is now more than ever necessary. Witness the phenomena of the present movement against the war in Iraq and its relationship with productions like Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9-11*, the "spoken word" albums of Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Ward Churchill; the catalogue of books and "open media" pamphlets offered by now-flourishing radical publishing houses such as the New Press, South End Press, and AK Press. These products and their popularity among certain segments of the American population (many of whom were born long after the last U.S. serviceman left Vietnam) illustrate that the "immoral and criminal" paradigm continues to exert a powerful hold over the imaginations of a core discursive community of Americans, even as it continues to inspire reactions ranging from flabbergasted bewilderment to rage and revulsion in many more. I wish to identify its sources and shed light in some of the ways this "immoral and criminal" view has been articulated in art and discourse, and finally to show some of the ways in which it continues to dominate a certain amount of the discussion over the United States' role in the world today.

The Tet Offensive and the Dissolution of the Cultural Consensus

I don't wish to take up a great deal of space up here with a dry recitation of certain undisputed historical facts. But some reference to and discussion of certain events in the 1965-1974 period (for example, the commencement of Operation Rolling Thunder, the Tet Offensive, the My Lai Massacre, the Cambodian incursion, Kent State, and the Watergate scandal) is necessary in order to contextualize properly the emergence and development of this discourse, primarily because the intensification, or more accurately the radicalization, of antiwar texts, parallels in many respects the intensification of the war itself and the domestic response to it.

In February 1968 the North Vietnamese and their Vietcong allies launched a series of concentrated attacks on major cities in the South: Saigon, Da Nang, Hue, and other areas of great military and political significance. Initiated under cover of the Chinese lunar New Year holiday, which had traditionally served as a respite for hostilities, the offensive was a shocking surprise to the public.² Repeated reassurances from the Johnson administration and the military that the war was going according to plan were belied by a sudden flurry of gruesome and disturbing images of fighting in South Vietnamese cities, expressions of utter bewilderment, despondency, and futility on the faces of the ground troops caught in the chaos of Hue and Khe Sanh. General William Westmoreland had been telling his commander-in-chief, his soldiers, and his countrymen all along that his forces were making steady progress in Vietnam. How, then, could the Communists have planned for and undertaken such a massive operation right under the noses of their enemies?³ The mainstream of opinion held the relatively benign view that the debacle was to be chalked up to mere incompetence and the failure of military intelligence, but to an increasingly voluble and, at the same time, increasingly alienated and angry segment of the American public, the Tet Offensive and subsequent developments in its wake became illustrative of the moral bankruptcy, indeed, the criminality, of the entire war itself. The fact that the guerrillas were able to organize and carry out their plan with such efficiency and force in the South, and the ease with which they were able to exploit the element of surprise, indicated that the U.S. did *not* have the sympathies of the Vietnamese peasant, contrary to what officials claimed. Had the American effort truly won the “hearts and minds” of the rural South, then the peasants would have risen up against the Vietcong. Additionally, a sympathetic peasantry would have given the U.S. military adequate warning of the impending offensive. That they gave no such warning proved, for much of the antiwar movement, that the American presence was unwelcome in the eyes of most South Vietnamese.⁴ It also seemed to lend a great deal of weight to some of the criticisms that combat correspondents like David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan were articulating in their writings about the war: that inflated body counts, falsified progress reports, careerism, and outright mendacity were characteristic of the U.S. military’s conduct in Vietnam.⁵

While the dissolution of the cultural consensus I have already outlined in Chapter One is a complex phenomenon and cannot be attributed to one single event or related series of events—it had already begun by the time President Johnson began bombing North Vietnam and sending ground troops to the South in 1965—there is no question that Tet 1968 marked an acceleration of this dissolution. As the all-out, conventional war between full-strength regular combat units displaced the low-level, unconventional guerrilla conflict in Vietnam, in the United States the gap between the war’s supporters and its critics widened and the arguments between them grew

increasingly heated and confrontational. Though there is much evidence to support the claim that the average American at this time still adhered to the strongly conservative, anticommunist view of the world that had been characteristic of U.S. culture during the 1950s and early 60s, the movement against the war also began to grow more visible and more powerful, intertwining itself with the progressive agendas of various social and political organizations.⁶ Those who had supported or had been active in the civil rights movement in 1964-65 were now directing their attention to the injustice of American imperialism. To be pro-civil rights in the early and middle 1960s was to be on the cutting edge of the Kennedy-Johnson reformist initiative. It would have been considered “radical” only by unreconstructed Dixiecrats like Strom Thurmond or neo-conservative westerners like Barry Goldwater. But Vietnam was where the civil rights movement and the Johnson administration parted company, and as historian Terry Anderson points out, the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement were slowly converging by 1965-66. While not meting out upon them the harsh verbal and physical abuse to which his successor subjected them, Johnson considered the antiwar element to be dangerously radical, even subversive, and the formerly warm relationship between Martin Luther King and President Johnson cooled considerably when the minister decried “the madness of militarism” and voiced his opposition to the war in Vietnam.⁷

To be “antiwar” in 1968 signaled identification to a greater or lesser degree with the Left, perhaps in the same way that an antiwar stance during the late 1930s placed a person on the isolationist, anti-New Deal Right. To be sure, a handful of otherwise conservative Republicans in the House and Senate were articulating positions against the war at the close of the decade, but their arguments were grounded largely in a pragmatic critique, and had nothing to do with the ideological approach of thinkers and activists like David Dellinger or Noam Chomsky. America’s war in Vietnam, for Republicans like Senators Thurston B. Morton or Clifford Chase, was not a morally tainted enterprise; it was simply a wasteful drain on resources better spent fighting communism in a region of the world more vital to American economic and strategic interests.⁸ For some Republicans, no doubt, Vietnam served as a convenient touchstone with which to distance themselves and their party from the failed “Democrats’ war.”

By and large, it was not the isolationist Right or Republican foreign policy pragmatists who were the most vociferous opponents of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It was the vast and disparate agglomeration of writers and activists on the Left that monopolized antiwar sentiment in the late 1960s and early 70s. The most visible figures associated with resistance to or criticism of the war, along with the perceived depredations of capitalism and militarism—from A.J. Muste to William Sloane Coffin, from Norman Mailer to Allen Ginsberg, from Tom Hayden to Jane

Fonda, from James Simon Kunen to Jerry Rubin—all more or less viewed Vietnam primarily as the victim of a belligerent, imperialist superpower's nakedly aggressive drive to expand its sphere of influence. Portraying the war primarily as a criminal action, as a collective evil perpetrated by a sick and hypocritical system riddled with its own glaring inequities of race and class, they tended to frame the war-makers as the tools of greedy capitalist interests. Antiwar rhetoric, when it came from the mouths and pens of older left-liberal Democrats, was often heavily partisan; antiwar rhetoric, when it came from radicals and revolutionaries, was frequently peppered with Marxist terminology which middle-class, "establishment" America found extremely unsettling. Despite the often sharp differences between these people in their approach to the question of the war and the injustice of the system that waged it, they were in basic agreement about ends and means until 1968. With the Tet Offensive, it became increasingly difficult for the relatively moderate antiwar liberals and the radical revolutionaries to find any common ground. If the nation itself was becoming more and more polarized over Vietnam in the first half of 1968, then so was the antiwar movement—and even the Left—itsself. Indeed, it is inaccurate to speak of an antiwar "movement" as a united front bound together by a shared vision and agreed-upon objectives. Events like the march on the Pentagon in October 1967 perhaps exhibited what seemed like unity between the most docile liberals and the most wild-eyed revolutionaries, but such shows of solidarity between the two ends of the spectrum became less frequent after the opening months of 1968. The moderate antiwar liberal position was perhaps epitomized, in image and rhetoric, by Eugene McCarthy. To the left of McCarthy stood middle-aged literary figures Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Mary McCarthy, and Dwight MacDonald, all of whom wrote antiwar literature and participated in peace demonstrations. Liberal Democrat voices attacked the war or Johnson's prosecution of it but did not attack the American "system" as the more radical voices did. Indeed, the deep ideological differences between various factions and individuals opposed to the war's continuation show the difficulty of lumping them all under the monolithic rubric "the antiwar movement." But for practical purposes, we can divide the movement into two factions: the moderates and the radicals. This discussion is concerned primarily with the gradual radicalization of the moderate critique in antiwar discourse.

The political Right generally supported the war, even though they disapproved of the Johnson administration's management of it. Political figures like George Wallace, Barry Goldwater, Mendel Rivers, and Ronald Reagan desired an even more vigorous prosecution of the Hanoi regime than the Johnson administration was willing to deliver. These self-proclaimed friends of the military often, in fact, accused Johnson and his advisors of forcing American troops to fight the war according to a self-defeating strategy with one hand tied behind their backs.

Political oratory was merely one of the forums for rightist expression, however. Popular polemicists like John Stormer, in *The Death of a Nation* (1968), and Gary Allen, in *None Dare Call it Conspiracy* (1972), provided the right-wing perspective to readers looking for coherent and organized interpretations of the Vietnam War along conventionally patriotic and anticommunist lines. John Stormer, adhering to the virulent Joseph McCarthy/J. Edgar Hoover brand of anti-communism, approved of the war in principle. He expressed outrage, however, over Johnson's alleged betrayal of the troops abroad with his ratification of U.S.-Soviet treaties that would supposedly cripple American defense capabilities, as well as his apparent toleration of subversive, treasonous activity at home (represented by the antiwar movement). Stormer also rejected Johnson's liberal social agenda as a recipe for the "death of the nation." The civil rights and peace movements, in his view, were mere fronts through which the communists were trying to divide and conquer the nation from within. Gary Allen echoed President Nixon's contemptuous characterization of student demonstrators when he described organizations like Students for a Democratic Society, the Black Panthers, and Common Cause as a bunch of "schoolboy Lenins and teenage Trotskys" who were "pawns, shills, puppets and dupes for an oligarchy of elitist conspirators working . . . to turn America's limited government into an unlimited government with total control over our lives and property."⁹ Even as public support for the war seriously waned after 1968, the right-wing rhetoric nevertheless found a massive audience among the "silent majority" of Americans who disapproved of the radical Left and what they perceived as its all-out assault on their way of life.¹⁰ By 1972 Stormer's book had sold more than seven million copies; Allen's had sold four million. The conservative interpretation, however, would continue to develop long after the withdrawal of American troops. Returned POWs like Jeremiah Denton and combat veterans like James Webb, as well as historians sympathetic to the anticommunist view, would revisit and celebrate the themes of rightist discourse in personal narratives and novels. Eventually, they would formulate a formidable corpus of texts whose themes would exert a considerable influence upon retrospective interpretations of the war during the Reagan era. I will go on to discuss them in further detail in Chapter Four.

If the Right was, by and large, united on the issue of Vietnam, the liberals were badly split during the war. The conservative wing of the Democratic Party, exemplified primarily by the Johnson administration itself, proclaimed a commitment both to a tough, anticommunist foreign policy *and* an egalitarian, socially progressive domestic policy—guns *and* butter. Dovish liberals (for example, Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy) who rejected Johnson's war still adhered to the nominally progressive social agenda identified with the Democratic Party, even

though they took great pains to distance themselves from the tradition of staunchly anticommunist foreign policy rhetoric associated with Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Johnson himself. Johnson's abandonment of both the presidency and the war in 1969, however, healed the split somewhat as Vietnam came under the management of the Republican Right and Democrats could attack the war without disloyalty to their own party. As Nixon's intensified bombing of North Vietnam and his incursions into neutral Cambodia focused the wrath of the radicals on his administration, most of the liberal Democrats who had supported Johnson's war washed their hands of it and united with their peers in denouncing "Nixon's war." Some of these repentant hawks articulated their perspective in histories of the war, others in biographies and memoirs of Johnson and Kennedy. Many of the themes and ideas about the war central to their discourse would later become staples of Vietnam War literature and film during the Carter years.

At the far Left of the political spectrum stood the radical antiwar voices who denounced the "liberals' war" and dismissed the Democratic Party as irretrievably tainted by a neo-colonial policy. For these radicals, the Democratic Party had blood on its hands, especially after the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and the state violence which characterized the city's response to the demonstrators only fueled the flames of radicalism among the Left. "A movement cannot grow without repression," Jerry Rubin remarked of the police brutality at the convention.¹¹ Unlike the moderate antiwar critics, these New Leftists attacked both the war and the capitalist system that they believed fueled it. Informed by the writings of Marxists like Jean-Paul Sartre and radical critics like the anarchist Noam Chomsky, they argued that the Vietnam War was, above all else, a campaign of imperialist genocide. Repentant liberal hawks like Robert Kennedy and Clark Clifford, in their post-Tet statements against the war, were prone to view the entire episode as a tragic and unfortunate mistake engineered by well-meaning officials. The radical antiwar voices, however, took an entirely different approach. Drawing from a variety of sources as inspiration—from Lenin to Frantz Fanon—they often professed, along with their rejection of American imperialism, solidarity with Vietnamese Communism as well as various other Marxist, anti-colonialist movements for independence in Third World nations like Cuba and Algeria. Sartre's seminal antiwar essay "On Genocide" (1968) is representative of the Western Left's sympathy for and identification with the Vietnamese and other non-white victims of Western imperialism against the overbearing American juggernaut. "When a peasant falls in his rice paddy, mowed down by a machine gun," he writes, "every one of us is hit. The Vietnamese fight for all men and the American forces against all. Neither figuratively or abstractly."¹² This interpretive scheme, which its adherents frequently articulated in rhetoric peppered with Marxist terminology and revolutionary slogans, often cast America as a reactionary empire attempting to

keep a Third World nation within its hegemonic sphere. Claims that the United States was merely protecting South Vietnam's right to determine its own political future, these critics argued, served as convenient masks with which to ensure public support for what was, at bottom, a war with no justification. According to this interpretation, American neocolonialists, like their nineteenth-century antecedents, masked their true objectives—opening new markets for goods, gaining access to raw materials, and establishing strategic advantages—in a rhetoric of disinterested altruism and benevolence. The repentant hawks were willing to admit that the anticommunist ideology of the 1950s and early 60s—the containment paradigm which had pushed America into Vietnam—had been a false and misleading view of the world. But they were not willing to go so far as to say, as the radicals were, that this false consciousness had been deliberately manufactured in order to mask a capitalist conspiracy.

Before Tet, President Johnson's most audible critics within the American political establishment largely confined their arguments within the acceptable discursive boundaries of liberal anticommunism. Many of those political figures made their cases against intervention and escalation in the early and mid-1960s primarily on pragmatic rather than moral or ideological grounds. Senator Mike Mansfield, who was casting serious doubts about the wisdom of U.S. military action in Vietnam as early as 1962, argued that a "position of power" in Southeast Asia against China was "desirable" but not "essential" and that restricting American activity to logistic and advisory support to Ngo Dinh Diem's government was, in the long run, the best way to strengthen that position.¹³ Mansfield accepted the basic premises of containment, merely arguing that direct military intervention in Vietnam was too wasteful a method of containing communism. Undersecretary of State George Ball, in 1965, recognized the undesirability of a Communist Vietnam but argued against further troop commitments in order to avoid "a protracted war involving an open-ended commitment of U.S. forces, no assurance of a satisfactory solution, and a serious danger of escalation at the end of the road."¹⁴ For Ball, the question of whether or not the United States had any moral right to block communism, directly or indirectly, did not merit consideration. For him, as for Mansfield, the question of what was best for *America* took primacy in any discussion of foreign affairs. Other dissenters, both within the administration and in the House and Senate, framed their objections in similar terms. George Kennan, who had given the first formal exposition of containment more than a decade earlier, argued in 1966 that "Vietnam is not a region of major military, industrial importance." The prospect of a communist-controlled South, "while regrettable, and no doubt morally unwarranted, would not, in my opinion, present dangers great enough to justify our direct military intervention."¹⁵ Kennan did not question any of the assumptions about the "morality" of communism or of anticommunist

intervention *per se*. His case against the war rested solely on its dubious practicality. For all these critics, communist revolution in the Third World, without question, still conflicted with American interests. Yet the immediate *costs* of a counter-revolutionary war in Southeast Asia outweighed any of its long-term benefits. Trying to put the kabosh on insurgency in Vietnam would eventually drain America dry of men and material for no good reason. While registering their objections to the waste of American lives and resources in a bottomless pit, they typically skirted the question of the legality or morality of such an intervention. For them, Vietnam was not the crucial place at which the Soviets and Red Chinese were testing American resolve, as President Kennedy had believed. Their assumptions, however, left the acceptability of counter-revolutionary war intact, in theory, at least—as long as it would be waged in a country whose “loss” to communism would prove to have a decidedly adverse effect upon the United States’ ability to achieve its strategic and economic goals.

Other critics outside the political establishment did in fact address the question of the war’s morality extensively and passionately, but many of them articulated their objections in similarly moderate language rife with imagery and symbols culled from an idealized American past. Typically, they envisioned themselves as speaking from within time-honored traditions of American protest and pacifism cogent with the democratic ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Their heroes were Jefferson, Thoreau, and Lincoln rather than Che, Mao, and Ho. Unlike the radical leftist critics who would rise to prominence in the post-Tet years, these critics often wrapped themselves in the flag by engaging with their conservative opponents in a semantic debate over the meaning of “patriotism.” To protest the Vietnam War, they argued, was patriotic; to support it was not. One of the assumptions underlying their rhetoric was that Vietnam was, like the Mexican War a century earlier, an unfortunate aberration from the original ideals laid down by the Founding Fathers. Often, they attempted to make the notion of a Vietnamese revolution palatable to patriotic Americans by drawing parallels between it and the American Revolution itself. For Carl Oglesby, in a 1965 denunciation of the war, heroes of democracy like Jefferson and Thomas Paine, “who first made plain our nation’s unprovisional commitment to human rights,” would have been shocked and disgusted had they been able to “sit down now for a chat with President Johnson and McGeorge Bundy”:

Our dead revolutionaries would soon wonder why their country was fighting against what appeared to be a revolution. The living liberals would hotly deny that it is one: there are troops coming in from outside, the rebels get arms from other countries, most of the people are not on their side, and they practice terror

against their own. Therefore, *not* a revolution. What would our dead Revolutionaries answer? They might say: “What fools and bandits, sirs, you make of us. Outside help? Do you remember Lafayette? Or the 3,00 British freighters the French navy sunk for our side? Or the arms and men we got from France and Spain? And what’s this about terror? Did you never hear of what we did to our own loyalists? Or about the thousands of rich American Tories who fled for their lives to Canada? And as for popular support, do you not know that we had less than one third of our people with us? That, in fact, the colony of New York recruited more troops for the British than for the revolution? Should we give it all back?”¹⁶

Some of the leading lights in the American literati during the mid-1960s advanced similar views of Vietnam as an aberration from the progressive ideals of Jefferson and Lincoln. Robert Bly and David Ray’s *A Poetry Reading Against the Vietnam War* (1966) stands as a representative sampling of the moderate antiwar sentiment in the world of arts and letters at this time. The book, a collection of poems which had been read by some of the most respected and reputable poets on the American cultural scene at three public readings (at Reed College, Portland State, and the University of Washington) that Bly and Ray had organized in March 1966, documents the intelligentsia’s passionate rejection of the Johnson administration’s Vietnam policy. Robinson Jeffers, Louis Simpson, Robert Creeley, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and several others all registered their dissent by attacking Johnson and his cabinet with sardonic allusions to their ignorance and incompetence; they imagined Johnson himself as an uncouth deviation from a tradition of noble and intelligent American leadership. Bly opened the volume with a particularly appropriate quote from a speech given in 1848 by then-Congressman Abraham Lincoln, attacking President Polk’s prosecution of the Mexican-American war. “As to the mode of terminating the war and securing peace, the President is,” Lincoln had said, “wandering and indefinite.” The parallels were obvious. Lincoln’s description of Polk as a “bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man” echoed throughout the satiric depiction of Johnson in the verses throughout the volume.¹⁷ That the war was to be viewed as either a tragic digression from democratic ideals or a temporary fit of national insanity was most clearly delineated in Bly’s introduction. Even as he documented the gruesome and morally repugnant character of the kinds of weapons and tactics that Americans were using in Vietnam (such as plastic-tipped, hollow-nosed bullets), Bly maintained that “[t]hese tawdry, pitiful tricks are a disgrace to the United States of forty years ago, let alone the United States of Lincoln.”¹⁸ Bly’s idea, that Vietnam represented a moral nadir for a nation historically

committed to ideals of freedom and equality, was largely typical of the tone of most antiwar rhetoric prior to Tet.

The Ascendancy of Radicalism in Antiwar Literature

Criticism during the post-Tet phase of the war, however, moved into more subversive terrain. Whereas the dissenters within the political establishment accepted Cold War America's most fundamental assumptions about the evils of communism, much of the antiwar rhetoric after 1968 rejected those assumptions altogether and openly proclaimed sympathy with communist revolution. And while moderate critics like Oglesby and Bly had regarded the war as an aberration from a progressive movement of American history, the newer radicals often undermined the historical assumptions that had made such a view of the American past possible. Denouncing the United States as a greedy, imperialistic power every bit as evil as Nazi Germany, they pointed to another American history, they pointed to a history of exploitation, colonial expansion, and genocide, of which Vietnam was merely the latest chapter. The image of America as the shining city on the hill was an illusion made possible only by blinding oneself to the ugly facts of U.S. history: The Puritans' attempts to wipe out native Americans, Sherman's campaign to exterminate the Sioux, the U.S. invasion of the Philippines at the turn of the century and its attendant atrocities. The knowledge of America's dark past no longer permitted the fantasy that America was the foe of tyrants and the friend of the oppressed, the haven to which all freedom-seeking peoples flocked. In place of that outdated image stood "Amerika," the reactionary thug who propped up fascist dictators and puppet governments in order to maintain its hold on the third world's natural resources and cheap labor. American policy, according to this view, was not the result of a well-intentioned but tragically deluded world-view; it was colonialist exploitation, pure and simple. If the European imperialists had often invoked religious motives in order to put the best face on their exploitative practices, the Americans employed the rhetoric of anti-communism for that purpose. The nineteenth-century colonialists, by systematically destroying the colony's culture and traditions, practiced a kind of figurative genocide; American policy was genocidal in the literal sense of the word. It was every bit as deliberate and brutal as the Nazi campaign to exterminate the Jews. America's war in Vietnam was nothing less than a racial war, an attempt by white Americans to wipe out a stubborn, uncooperative native population standing in the way of U.S. aspirations to global dominance. The radical critics pointed to the campaigns of forced relocation (like the Strategic Hamlet Program), the indiscriminate employment of random artillery barrages in free-fire zones, and the destruction of the Vietnamese ecosystem itself with Rome plows and herbicides as evidence that genocide was both an accepted strategy inscribed within the framework of official policy and a standard practice among the lower

echelons of the military. As for the charge of racism, the radicals often pointed to American soldiers' contemptuous characterizations—typically transcribed for public consumption by war correspondents who talked to grunts in the field—of the Vietnamese as “gooks” and “slopes” as evidence that the war's deepest impulses were inextricably bound up with white American assumptions of racial superiority.

Angry, right-wing polemics like *The Death of a Nation* were, without question, enormously popular with Americans who supported the war in the years of Johnson's presidency, as well as with those who, during Richard Nixon's tenure, rallied around the phrase “peace with honor.” But at the same time, the radical left, which had been virtually silent during the hostile cultural climate of the 1950s, flourished during the late 1960s. Leftist writers found avenues of expression in magazines like *Ramparts* and *Dissent*. Such publications, by no stretch of the imagination, enjoyed as wide a circulation as conservative magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* or *Reader's Digest*, but radical critics of both the war and the American system nevertheless achieved a cultural presence and power at that time which they never had before and have not had since. The *New York Times*, arguably the nation's most famous and prestigious newspaper, adopted a markedly antiwar stance, and several writers on its staff, like columnists James Reston and Anthony Lewis, regularly offered strident denunciations of American policy in Vietnam in rhetoric that often echoed that of the radical Left. Mainstream publishing houses, such as Random House and McGraw-Hill, increasingly began to function as outlets for radical critiques of both the war and, as one critic said, “the system that produced and sustained it.” Books like Noam Chomsky's *At War with Asia* and Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake* discussed the war in terms of U.S. imperialism. Chomsky himself, a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, exercised considerable influence over print culture and intellectual opinion and did much to push the radical leftist critique into the forefront of debate over Vietnam. The veritable flood of books, articles, speeches and films that attacked U.S. imperialism, denounced U.S. war crimes, and empathized with the North Vietnamese and Vietcong during the 1968-1972 period constituted a formidable front of subversive antiwar discourse for the Nixon administration and the hawkish, conservative Americans who backed it.

While the right-wing rhetoric invoked harsh words like “treason” and “communist conspiracy” to paint antiwar demonstrators and revolutionaries as seditious criminals, the new militants on the Left began to employ the same strategy in their efforts to discredit the war and its supporters. Since a good deal of the hawks' rationale for intervention rested on the idea that North Vietnam had initiated a criminal war in its violation of the Geneva Accords (by actively supporting an insurgency in the South), it is not surprising that the radical rhetoric would counter

this notion by arguing that the American “intervention” was really an invasion, and was, therefore, a war crime: America was the aggressor, not North Vietnam. For Bertrand Russell, President Johnson’s Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam was an obscene offense against humanity, a crime of the greatest magnitude. Reading from eye-witness reports of the damage wrought on Hanoi by American bombs, Russell testified against U.S. policy in Vietnam at the International War Crimes Tribunal held in Stockholm in 1967. Other critics pointed to certain historical facts of the war’s incipient stages as evidence that the United States, not North Vietnam or the Vietcong, was the breaker of treaties, the disrupter of elections, and the assassin of sovereign nationals. The 1967 “Proclamation of the Antidraft Resistance” accused the war managers of embarking on an “unconstitutional and illegal” venture without the required declaration of war from the Congress and in violation of the United Nations Charter, which specifically forbid the use of force or the threat of force in international disputes: “Moreover,” the document pronounced, “this war violates international agreements, treaties and principles of law which the United States government has solemnly endorsed.” The violations, in view of the authors of this document, were not capricious acts, but part of a systematic program of criminality that had been going on “for thirteen years” (since 1954).¹⁹

But the most compelling evidence of the war’s illegality and immorality, for many, came not in the dry enumeration of treaties and agreements that the United States had violated. Far more powerful as tools with which to condemn the war convincingly were specific, concrete images of U.S. and ARVN troops engaging in what appeared to be blatantly criminal behavior, committing “actions of the kind which the United States and the other victorious powers of World War II declared to be crimes against humanity for which individuals were to be held personally responsible even when acting under the orders of their governments and for which Germans were sentenced at Nuremberg to long prison terms and death.” In fact, the Antidraft Proclamation leveled charges against the American war managers disturbingly similar to those which U.S. prosecutors had brought against high-ranking Nazi leaders in 1945. The proclamation followed with a catalogue of crimes that could have just as easily been attributed to the Wehrmacht during World War II. The list evoked a chilling picture of a technologically superior, imperial army willfully plundering and destroying a defenseless people: “The destruction of rice, crops, and livestock; the burning and bulldozing of entire villages consisting exclusively of civilian structures; the interning of civilian non-combatants in concentration camps; the summary executions of civilians in captured villages who could not produce satisfactory evidence of their loyalties or did not wish to be removed from concentration camps; the slaughter of peasants who dared stand up in their fields and shake their fists at American helicopters.”²⁰ Images like these

went much further than merely casting doubt on the efficiency of the military or the ability of the Johnson administration to manage the war. They raised doubts about the administration's entire rationale for the war, and they turned the cherished image of America as savior on its head. Johnson himself understood the power of such reporting all too well. When the CBS Evening News, early in August 1965, broadcast Morley Safer's footage of a platoon of Marines using cigarette lighters to burn a village near Nam Khe, Johnson accused the network president of both "trying to fuck" him and of having "shat on the American flag" as well.²¹

Yet television images and written representations of the U.S. military and its allies broadcast and published during and immediately after the Tet Offensive made hooch-burning seem relatively tame in comparison. For the more perceptive American viewers and readers, these representations were likely to raise implications even more disturbing than those which Safer's footage had raised. In February 1968, the NBC Huntley-Brinkley Report showed an audience of twenty million viewers a bloody spectacle which, among several others, seemed to verify the antiwar movement's claims that U.S. policy supported a repressive, unpopular regime hired to help wage war against its own people. NBC's film crew, along with freelance photographer Eddie Adams, caught General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the commander of South Vietnam's police forces, calmly executing a terror-stricken prisoner at point-blank range in the middle of a Saigon street. The television camera lingered momentarily as the body slumped to the pavement, blood spouting from a gunshot wound to the temple. "It was an act of such naked brutality," writes David Levy of the effect of the footage on the American public, "so at odds with civilized notions of justice and decency, that it served graphically to confirm the charges that America's allies in Vietnam were brutal men, morally indistinguishable from the brutal men on the other side."²²

The antiwar movement's response to the images and reports relayed during the Tet Offensive did in fact place a renewed and reinvigorated emphasis on this brutality in its ongoing critique of American policy. Jean-Paul Sartre's February 1968 essay "On Genocide" unequivocally characterized America's war against North Vietnam and the Vietcong as evil, and asserted that the architects and engineers of the war were as every bit as guilty as the men who had sat in the dock at Nuremberg. The bombing of North Vietnam, the defoliation of the South, and the forced repatriation of many Vietnamese farmers, were, to Sartre, the most recent manifestations of the horrible twentieth-century phenomenon that had begun in Nazi Germany. Whereas moderate critics would not go so far as to compare 1960s America with 1940s Germany, believing that Johnson's policies were the result of ineptitude, ignorance, and confusion rather than deliberate malice, Sartre asserted that the confusing vagueness of American objectives in

Vietnam was merely an intentional obfuscation of imperialistic purposes. Hitler, presiding over a totalitarian regime and able to stifle dissent swiftly and mercilessly, could clearly and deliberately make his intentions known. American policy-makers, on the other hand, constrained by the problem of accomplishing such a project in the sight of an open society, cleverly “avoided making such clear statements.” For Sartre, the proof of deliberate malice was in the pudding, for the war-managers’ “genocidal intent [was] implicit in the facts.” The most important of those “facts” was the prevalence of grotesque atrocities:

Young American men use torture (even including the ‘field telephone treatment’), they shoot unarmed women for nothing more than target practice, they kick wounded Vietnamese in the genitals, they cut ears off dead men to take home for trophies. Officers are the worst: a general boasted of hunting “VCs” from his helicopter and gunning them down in the rice paddies. Obviously, these were not NLF soldiers who knew how to defend themselves; they were peasants tending their rice.²³

The destruction of property was one thing; the torture and murder of unarmed, defenseless people was quite another. Television coverage of the war showed the world unsavory pictures of Americans burning down villages, but it did not show the kinds of atrocities that Sartre referred to. Few Americans were likely to suspect, before 1968, that “the boys” in Vietnam were capable of doing such things. Yet many within the antiwar movement nonetheless suspected that they occurred, in the proportions that Sartre described, with an obscene regularity. Yet skimpily sketched accounts in magazines were nowhere nearly as powerful as full-length books that both vividly described such crimes in detail and simultaneously explored the reasons for their occurrence. War crimes would not become a central issue in the arguments among Americans until mid-1969, when a particularly horrible atrocity on the part of the U.S. Army had come to light. But a few writers—novelists, journalists, and “non-fiction” novelists who blurred the distinction between invention and reportage—had already begun to deal with the topic, in a variety of ways, well before 1969. The “literature of atrocity” that they created easily lent itself to supporting a radical leftist interpretation of the war, since it provided detailed substantiation of some of the Left’s most explosively controversial claims about the nature of the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia: that war crimes were a regular occurrence and took place with the tacit or explicit approval of the upper echelons of the military, that the South Vietnamese “ally” was nothing but a flimsy prop put in place in order to create the appearance that the United States and South Vietnam were fighting a common foe together as equals, that the South Vietnamese government’s corruption was emblematic of its status as an artificial creation of the United States

which had no loyalty or resonance with the people of Vietnam. While the left-liberal atrocity literature generally limited its critiques to these premises, the more radical atrocity literature, as well as the more radical rhetoric of Leftist antiwar culture, included along with these notions an eagerness to identify with the Vietcong and North Vietnamese as rebels fighting on behalf of all Vietnamese for social justice against an oppressive invader there for the sole reason of exploiting Vietnamese resources.

Atrocity Narratives: from Fiction to Non-Fiction

That atrocities—or, more specifically, war crimes—figure so prominently in the literature and art of modern conflict should probably not be surprising. The wars of the last one hundred years have no historical precedent in the level of their brutality, in terms of the sheer number of human beings who lost their lives or the amount of property destroyed in them. The gentlemanly codes of conduct that governed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century warfare, as historians Daniel Pick and John Keegan have observed, became obsolete in the age of the machine gun, the flame-thrower, and the atomic bomb.²⁴ Wars, of course, have always been brutal, yet those of the modern era seem particularly atrocious because they have invariably involved, in one way or another, the wholesale and often systematic slaughter of innocent noncombatants. It is no accident that many of the most notable texts associated with the wars of the twentieth century—Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Elie Weisel's *Night*—deal not with combat between the soldiers of opposing armies, but with the mass killing of unarmed civilians by some overwhelmingly powerful military force. Such representations of inhumanity and depravity inevitably provoke a response quite different than that more likely aroused by Audie Murphy's *To Hell and Back* or Eugene B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*, both of which view war from the perspective of the active combatant as opposed to the passive civilian. Such combat narratives rarely deal with the larger reasons for or the moral questions surrounding a given war, focusing instead on the immediate hardships of the miserable infantryman's circumscribed world and the camaraderie between the men sharing those hardships. They also typically refrain from any sort of thoroughgoing vilification of the enemy. Writers like Murphy and Sledge often, in fact, express admiration (however grudging) for their erstwhile enemy and sometimes offer favorable descriptions of his courage and determination. Rarely do combat narratives subject the cause that the enemy represents to any sort of critical examination; whether one's enemy is fighting for National Socialism or Communism or Democracy is relatively unimportant. The combat narrative ultimately tends to view the opponent in terms of his soldierly abilities rather than his ideology. In the literature (and art) of atrocity, on the other hand, what the enemy represents and what he fights for is of the utmost significance, for it is the extent to which

he transgresses the limits of human decency by which the evil of his cause is measured. *Guernica* and *Night*, which document the transgression of those limits by Franco and Hitler, testify to the evil of Fascism and Nazism; likewise, Hershey's descriptions of horribly burned children in *Hiroshima* dim the glow of America's postwar triumphalism and raise doubts about its claims of moral superiority and humanity over its Japanese enemy.

Representations of atrocity, especially those that appear in a time of conflict, are also potential weapons in the propaganda war that is virtually inseparable from armed struggle in the modern era. Representations of atrocity function primarily to demonize or dehumanize the enemy in the eyes of combatants on the battlefield and civilians on the home front. A cruel and barbaric foe is one that is less human and therefore easier for the individual soldier to conceive of killing. Likewise, it is easier to rally the public against an enemy who recognizes no decent limits in warfare. The enemy's inhumanity, his total disregard for the established codes of conduct in combat, strengthens the moral credibility of the war against him. A "just war" invariably necessitates an evil adversary; conversely, an evil army that regularly engages in brutality cannot be the representative of a just cause. Those who opposed the Vietnam War, following this line of reasoning, often seized upon accounts of American soldiers committing atrocities as a means of eroding public support for the continued U.S. presence in Southeast Asia. But as there were no significant representations in mainstream media (either in print or on film), before 1969, of U.S. troops committing torture, rape, mutilation and mass murder, it was easy for many of the war's supporters to discount the very notion of their existence as enemy propaganda.

That changed, however, when investigative reporter Seymour Hersh disclosed the story of the atrocity that, for many of the war's opponents, served to epitomize the American war crime at its most depraved and to function as an appropriately gruesome symbol for the evil of American policy itself. What Americans would, depending on their view of the war, call the "My Lai Massacre" or the "My Lai incident" had involved the wholesale slaughter of hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians by U.S. Army soldiers. On March 16, 1968, a platoon from the 25th Infantry Division marched into a coastal village in Vietnam's Quang Nai province as part of the post-Tet mop-up operations in the countryside. Within four hours, they stabbed, shot, raped, beat to death, and mutilated at least 370 Vietnamese inhabitants of a village dubbed "Pinkville" by American troops for its history of Communist sympathizing.²⁵ The Vietnamese name for the village—My Lai—became inseparable from the words "atrocity" and "war crime" after Hersh uncovered the story over a year later in September 1969. Both U.S. military leaders and the Nixon administration understood perfectly what My Lai would mean for public support of the war as well as for the image of America around the world. First, it would raise unsettling

questions about the nature of U.S. strategy in Vietnam; secondly, it would destroy the image that the U.S. military would have no doubt continued to enjoy: that of the benevolent American soldier as the liberator saving Indochina from Communism and handing out candy to Vietnamese children. This is precisely why, according to one recent study of the massacre, there was “no large-scale Nuremberg-style judicial hearing at which the accused were put on trial for all the world to see. From the government’s perspective,” write Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, “such a trial would have rendered [the government’s] war aims in Southeast Asia untenable.”²⁶ Lt. William Calley’s defense, which rested on the idea that he had merely been following orders handed down from the chain of command, threatened to make many of the same claims that the radical leftist critics of the war had been raising for the past few years. My Lai, as Nixon and General Creighton Abrams (Westmoreland’s successor) feared, would give the radical antiwar voices—indeed, *any* antiwar voices—a substantial credibility that they might not have had prior to Hersh’s uncovering of both the massacre and the military’s attempt to conceal it. The revelation of My Lai was indeed a galvanizing force for the antiwar movement in general, but the antiwar radical Left especially seized upon My Lai and similar incidents as verification of their claims about the imperialistic nature of U.S. policy and purposes in Vietnam. While a few significant antiwar texts published before 1969, like Sartre’s essay (as well as forums like Bertrand Russell’s War Crimes Tribunal) did deal openly and seriously with American war crimes, the My Lai revelation (specifically, Seymour Hersh’s book *My Lai Four*) crystallized an inchoate genre of Vietnam War writing I call, for lack of a better term, the “atrocities narrative.” In the atrocities narrative, the antiwar movement found one of the most effective literary vehicle for expressing of its interpretation of the war’s significance, and more importantly, for protesting the war’s continuation.

Atrocities narratives became one of the most powerful weapons in the Left’s propaganda arsenal. In the same way that Calley’s defense attorneys argued that the crime of which their client was accused exposed the illegitimacy of the entire American project, the literature and cinema of atrocities, with its implicit (or explicit) suggestion that the horrors it depicted were not “incidents” but integral components of the U.S. military’s strategy, undoubtedly helped many fence-sitting readers reach the conclusion that the war was unethical. Whether the narratives involved the rape of a Vietnamese girl or the bombing of a neutral country, the crimes they recounted became the most telling indicators of the war’s immorality for those opposed to it. Many of the war’s most vociferous critics had insisted that the frequent occurrence and the brutal nature of these war crimes were not isolated and unfortunate occurrences, but outward manifestations of the inherent criminality of the American intervention itself. Noam Chomsky,

writing “After Pinkville” (in *At War with Asia*, a 1970 collection of essays most of which had previously appeared in the *New York Review of Books*), asserted that My Lai finally made clear that “the massacre of the rural population of Vietnam and their forced evacuation is not an accidental by-product of the war. Rather it is the very essence of American strategy.”²⁷ Other commentators took less stridently anti-U.S. stances but nevertheless made similar observations. “What this incident (My Lai) has done is to tear the mask off the war,” said Senator George McGovern. “I think for the first time millions of Americans are realizing that we have stumbled into a conflict where we not only of necessity commit horrible atrocities against the people of Vietnam, but where in a sense we brutalize our own people and our own nation. I think it’s more than Lieutenant Calley involved here. I think a national policy is on trial.”²⁸ Atrocity narratives, which explicitly make this connection between strategy and mass murder clear in a variety of ways, typically present the war crime in question as the symbol of the war itself. Brutality is not an aberrant deviation from the otherwise professional and humane conduct of the military; it is, as the title of one book would characterize it, *Standard Operating Procedure*. Narratives like this one (which is actually a collection of narratives) are interspersed with explicit assertions that the horrendous scenes they describe are representative glimpses of the whole war, not merely a grotesque series of freaks and aberrations. The atrocity at the heart of the narrative—usually a hellish conglomeration of mass murder, rape, mutilation, and torture—is to be understood as a very real and specific event, and, at the same time, as a dark synechocoe of the moral void at the heart of America’s anticommunist crusade. With their grotesquely vivid accounts of Gestapo-style executions and Sadean descriptions of unspeakable depravity, atrocity narratives concretized the abstract term “war crime” and offered powerful, unforgettable images of American soldiers as murderers and rapists and of a military in which the conscientious, ethical individual was a lone and often persecuted outsider who risked punishment and reprisals if he dared to raise his voice and cry foul. In atrocity narratives, the “zippos squads” and “baby killers” who revel in destruction and murder usually outnumber the morally upright GIs who refuse to participate in the war crimes. The morally upright, conscientious GI, in this literature, is the voice crying in the wilderness.

Prior to My Lai, the GI (or low-level enlisted man) figures in moderate-liberal antiwar rhetoric largely as the unwitting, hapless pawn of an exploitative system, just as much a victim of the war as the Vietnamese. In many of the atrocity narratives, however, he appears a war criminal every bit as reprehensible as the policy-makers who issue his orders. He is a monstrous, inhuman sadist and a vicious thug who is both an incarnate manifestation of and a willing participant in an evil, imperial policy. Yet the atrocity narrative, ironically, also offered a way for

individual GIs to redeem themselves and wash their souls clean of the war's moral taint by enacting a rite of confession. Kunen's collection of "confessional" atrocity narratives registers the explosion of oral confessions, in public forums, of ex-servicemen who recognized themselves as de facto war criminals. The most famous instance of such a public confessional is the Detroit Winter Soldier Investigations of 1971, which John Kerry organized and presided over. The type of rhetoric emanating from many of the participants in hearings echoed the radical, anti-imperialist literature—charges against the U.S. military of indiscriminate destruction and genocidal policies—this time from former soldiers disillusioned with the war. Former infantry officer Bill Crandell's confession is perhaps representative. Crandell, who confessed to witnessing and participating in killing Vietnamese of undetermined status (civilian or combatant) in a free-fire zone, announced his intention to "demonstrate that My Lai was no unusual occurrence" and that Calley was the rule rather than the exception:

We intend to show that the policies of the American Division which inevitably resulted in My Lai were the policies of other Army and Marine divisions as well.

We intend to show that the war crimes in Vietnam did not start in March 1968 or in the village of Son My or with one Lieutenant William Calley. We intend to indict those really responsible for My Lai, for Vietnam, for attempted genocide.²⁹

The recorded proceedings of a similar public hearing of veteran testimonials, meticulously transcribed, becomes the sum and substance of *Standard Operating Procedure*, published in the same year. Kunen was not a journalist; rather, he was a student radical drawn to and intensely interested in the Vietnam Veterans against the War movement. But the better-known narratives—which I will discuss in greater detail shortly—were written by journalists who either relied on accounts provided by ex-GIs, although some ex-GIs did write them also, or at least collaborated in the writing of them. An army veteran came forward to journalist Daniel Lang with a horrifying story of rape and murder to which he had been a witness; the result was the book *Casualties of War*. Another ex-GI, Ronald Ridenhour, provided Seymour Hersh with most of the material for *My Lai Four*. The struggle of these individuals against a military culture which places unit loyalty above moral integrity (and often threatens potential informers with personal reprisals), in fact, often functions as the larger narrative structure within which the hideous crime itself is embedded. The success of *Casualties of War* and *My Lai Four*, which coincided with (and no doubt partly contributed to) the rise of a group such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War, probably encouraged many other veterans to "unburden" themselves of horrors they had seen or believe they had seen and been powerless to halt. By the time Kunen had put his narrative before the public in 1971, antiwar atrocity literature dominated paperback publishing on

the war. In his preface he notes, somewhat despairingly, that more than thirty full-length books about “America’s criminal policies in Vietnam” had appeared prior to his late addition. “You already know about atrocities,” he warned his readers, “and the testimony that follows is more of the same.” Kunen makes no pretense of offering anything strikingly original or exceptionally shocking: “There is nothing new in the testimony, nothing unusual.” The “importance” of the crime he described, however, lay “in its very typicality.”³⁰ Kunen’s emphasis on the notion that the events he described were not unique marked his text, like most other atrocity narratives, as participants in a larger discourse. If there was a veritable glut of like texts, as Kunen admitted, then their very ubiquity—more than the individual text itself—functioned as a powerful indictment of the war. All that an atrocity narrative like *Standard Operating Procedure* could offer was, as Kunen wrote, “a random swatch in the fabric of the war.”³¹ But the proliferation of such testimonials would prove to an insulated public that the single swatch was merely a microcosmic representative of a larger design. Contemporary reviewers sympathetic to the antiwar movement often understood this general strategy of the atrocity-authors and applauded them more for their adherence to the conventions laid down by previous atrocity narratives rather than for any innovative departure from them. In one of the testimonials included in the collection, former officer Robert Master writes of his intention in participating in the production of material for Kunen’s book—he hopes that his confession will encourage other otherwise reticent GIs to come forward and educate the public: “It is our hope that the American people will come to realize that war crimes in Vietnam are not isolated, aberrant acts but the inevitable result of a policy which in its direction of waging war against the civilians, Vietnamese civilians, is in itself immoral and criminal.”³²

If the military and its apologists were able to make a plausible case, to many Americans, that civilian deaths resulting from artillery and air power were regrettable yet inevitable by-products of any armed conflict (the contemporary term, of course, is “collateral damage”), the nightmarish chronicles of rape, slaughter and mayhem in books like *My Lai Four* and *Standard Operating Procedure* presented the war’s supporters with a perplexing problem. Such texts made clear that Vietnam was not just any war; it was imperialist war, by its very nature exceptionally cruel, degrading, and immoral. For sympathetic readers, atrocity narratives clearly exposed the twisted, racist logic of the entire enterprise. The mean-spiritedness and racism of the American soldiers—so vividly captured in the vile utterances that accompanied the commission of their crimes—seemed to reveal the true face of the war lurking beneath the euphemism-laden rhetoric of officialdom. The visceral impact of the atrocity narratives was perhaps much more powerful than abstract arguments in undermining the official claim that the U.S. was attempting to help a

weak democracy stem an invasion of foreign aggressors. American troops *themselves* appeared as the foreign invaders in these texts. The categorical hatred of all Vietnamese, exemplified in the “mere gook rule” (“if it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC”) that soldiers in atrocity narratives frequently invoke, belies the fiction of a rural populace loyal to the American-supported regime and unified in their hatred of the Communists.³³ Atrocity literature often acknowledges the role of Vietnamese civilians in generating the hostility and resentment in the U.S. troops necessary to unleash the tidal wave of homicidal fury, with their apparent support of the enemy (allowing Americans to walk into minefields, booby traps, and ambushes without warning). Yet that acknowledgment serves rather to indicate the commitment of the South Vietnamese peasant to the cause of independence from imperialism than to justify American reprisals against the villagers. Many of the veterans who wrote about atrocities they had participated in or witnessed frequently explained the implications of such crimes in precisely those terms. William Ehrhardt, author of the antiwar memoirs *Vietnam-Perkasie* and *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon’s America*, describes a search-and-clear operation during which the author shot an unarmed Vietnamese woman who had run away from his approaching platoon. Looking back with horror and shame upon the murder, he remarked that it revealed to him once and for all the magnitude of his own government’s mendacity. He had been sent over as a “liberator” only to discover that he was, in fact, a pawn in the hands of a colonialist power— “In school,” he recalls, “we learned about the patriots and the ‘redcoats.’ In Vietnam I eventually realized that I began to feel like a ‘redcoat.’”³⁴

My Lai Four, *Casualties of War*, and *Standard Operating Procedure* were the most successful nonfiction books of the 1969-72 period to deal with U.S. military atrocities from the antiwar perspective, presented the reading public not merely with sensationalist accounts of incredible horrors as a means of propagandizing against the war, but with devastating critiques of the U.S. military and militarism itself. These texts targeted U.S. policies in Vietnam with all the fervor of the moderate-liberal critics who regarded the war as an aberration from American foreign policy, but at the same time extended their attacks to the inherent evils of the militarism which some radicals of the time saw as having become an increasingly prominent feature of American culture since the beginning of the Cold War. The proliferation of atrocity literature, indeed, paralleled the rise of antimilitarist sentiment among many radical youth on the campuses during the late 1960s and early 70s. What C. Wright Mills had dubbed the “military mind”—“the cast of mind that defines international reality as basically military”—a decade earlier in his 1956 book *The Power Elite* became identifiable with the pro-war, jingoistic, anticommunist mindset that radical youth saw as one of the driving forces behind American involvement in Vietnam.³⁵

For the antiwar leftists of the 1960s, Mills was a prophet whose seminal critique of the military-industrial complex, his basic suspicion of the increasing power of “the warlords” and the dominance of their limited world-view over American culture resonated profoundly with the leftist critique of the war and the society that fueled it. The antimilitarist view found colorful expression in a range of protest songs of the period. Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War,” from the album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963), is one of the most potent early examples. Dylan decries the war-makers who only “build to destroy” and make “the big guns” as well as the “death planes” and “big bombs”—and who hide behind “desks” and “masks” after thrusting a rifle into the narrator’s hands and forcing him to kill his fellow man. The song ends with Dylan wishing death upon the pompous warlords: “And I hope that you die/And your death will come soon/I’ll follow your casket/By the pale afternoon.” A later but no less strident example is Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs,” from the album *Paranoid* (1970). In this apocalyptic narration of an Armageddon-like battle, military brass-hats and Pentagon warlords are wicked, manipulative creatures, “evil minds that plot destruction/sorcerers of death’s construction.”

The use of anti-military rhetoric, according to historian David Levy, was more characteristic of the radical, aggressively left wing of the antiwar movement—composed primarily of draft-age students—than of the “older, quieter protesters” who looked to respected military figures (such as Lt. Gen. James Gavin and Gen. Matthew Ridgway) opposing the continuation of the Vietnam War. The activities of demonstrators participating in Stop the Draft Week of October 1967—“picketing and disrupting draft boards, urban guerrilla tactics, violent confrontations with the police,” along with the public burning of draft cards—targeted the Draft Board, the evil apparatus charged with funneling American youth into complicity with the murderous policies the U.S. government was carrying out in Southeast Asia.³⁶ That the high point of antiwar activity in 1967 was a massive march on the Pentagon should not be surprising, for the giant five-sided structure on the Potomac was the very brain of the war machine itself, the place where the generals got together and decided which targets to bomb or how many more troop requests to submit to the president. For many of the draft-age protesters, the armed services were inherently immoral institutions whose culture and traditions prized unthinking conformity, whose hierarchical structures squashed individual moral integrity, and where the selfish careerism of officers and senior NCOs played fast and loose with the lives of enlisted men. To believe that the army, the air force, the navy, and the marines were merely instruments of national security wholly subservient to civilian leadership was naïve, the radical left held. The military establishment, along with defense contractor-companies like Lockheed, Boeing, and General Dynamics, obviously had vested interests in waging war and perpetuating warlike consciousness

in the American mind. On the campuses, organizations like the ROTC—for many, a symbol of the state university system’s complicity in the arms race—came increasingly under attack, and the clash between the ROTC and antiwar demonstrators erupted, on one campus, in fatal violence. In May 1970, student activists at Kent State University began a series of protests against the bombing of Cambodia as well as the presence of the ROTC on campus. When arsonists set fire to the ROTC building, the governor of Ohio ordered the National Guard to restore order, and the confrontation between the guardsmen and rock-throwing demonstrators resulted in the deaths of four students. While the “silent majority” of Americans felt little outrage at the soldiers’ actions, as James Michener observed with disgust and horror in his book *Kent State: What Happened and Why* (1971), many antiwar youth saw the event as symptomatic of the growth of “the police state” and of the military’s increasing control over civilian life. “America is definitely becoming a police state,” one antiwar veteran and fellow organizer tells Kunen, referring to what he perceives as a campaign of government harassment of veterans attempting to conduct public hearings. “I’m starting to get pretty pissed off, and I know a lot of my friends are pissed off.”³⁷

Atrocity literature, in the immediate contexts of events like Kent State, was all the more powerful and credible for readers already predisposed to the radical antiwar position, for it dramatized, perhaps more effectively than any other medium, the evils of militarism and war-mongering. Kent State demonstrated, for the antiwar radicals, that the U.S. government, with the Nixon administration at the helm, was obviously waging a campaign of terror against domestic dissenters. It required no great leap of the imagination, then, to draw certain conclusions about the government’s use of terror as a weapon against the Vietnamese populace. If the shootings at Kent State were clear examples of the government’s *de facto* policy of violently crushing opposition at home, then the massacres of civilians by the U.S. army were only more brutal manifestations of the same policy in Vietnam, where no free press threatened to expose the killings to the rest of the world. Books like *My Lai Four* and *Standard Operating Procedure* make it overwhelmingly clear to their readers that the terrible atrocities by GIs against the Vietnamese were not incidental or random horrors; they were the inevitable—even desired—result of the U.S. military’s methods of training and indoctrinating its rank and file members. Atrocity literature validated Sartre’s claim that terror—including mass murder and torture—was an integral component of the U.S. strategy for victory in Vietnam. According to Sartre and the left, the Vietnamese conflict was a “people’s war” against imperialism, a fight in which the indigenous forces were applying Mao Zedong’s principles of guerrilla warfare so as to be able to strike out with surprise and lightning speed at the cumbersome foreign invaders. Guerrillas, according to Mao, had to be “fish” swimming in the “sea” of the populace. They were to blend in

with the civilians, to draw their sustenance and their ranks from them. It was inevitable, Sartre claimed, that the imperial army would wage a campaign of terror against the civilian population so as to frustrate the guerrilla fighters' attempts to obtain the peasantry's cooperation. Rape and wholesale slaughter were not grotesque outbursts or sudden eruptions of long-repressed dark impulses, according to this argument; they were tacitly encouraged and implicitly sanctioned by the chain of command both during the soldier's training process and during his tour in Vietnam.

The Atrocity Novels: *M* and *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*

Bombshells like *My Lai 4* and *Casualties of War* did not hit the reading public until the very end of the decade, of course, but the Russell tribunal of 1967 had already broached the subject of war crimes well before the public opinion "turning point" of the Tet Offensive (even though the tribunal was primarily concerned with the bombing of North Vietnam rather than with the murder of South Vietnamese civilians). The two-year lapse between the tribunal in Sweden and the appearance of the books by Hersh and Lang might suggest that writers and readers in the United States were behind the rest of the world in coming to terms with U.S. atrocities. To be sure, hawkish Americans who supported the war persisted in discounting these rumored horrors right up through *Life* magazine's publication of shocking photographs taken during the My Lai massacre, but neither Hersh nor Lang was the first American writer to treat the issue of U.S.-sponsored mass murder and sadism in Vietnam in book-length form. Two American antiwar novels of the pre-Tet period, John Sack's *M* and Victor Kolpacoff's *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* both of which appeared in 1967, stand out in their unflinching depiction of U.S. troops committing crimes against the Vietnamese—specifically, rape, murder, and torture—and their use of such atrocities to launch a damning indictment of the military itself as the primary culprit behind America's "immoral and criminal" war in Vietnam. What these texts hold in common, for readers sympathetic to the antiwar position, is more important than any generic or formal differences separating them. In both, the crimes against the Vietnamese are inextricably bound up with the values and beliefs privileged by, as well as the structural dynamics and training methods of, the military. The climactic event in *M* is the murder of a Vietnamese girl by an American infantryman; Sack shows us that the murder is not a tragic accident but the direct result of precepts inculcated in that soldier during basic training. Kolpacoff's novel, which focuses on the ordeal of a Vietnamese boy tortured by ARVN and U.S. Army personnel, shows us that any effort by a conscientious soldier to stop such an outrage or refuse participation in the crime is automatically thwarted by the authoritarian and antidemocratic structure of the military. In both *M* and *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, the war crime is not a minor episode subordinate to the enveloping story; it is the central event from which the text's larger significance radiates.

Although the two books problematize the relationship between the text and the war in different ways (Sack's "non-fiction novel" blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction, and Kolpacoff's moral allegory flattens, to some degree, historical specificity), we understand the atrocities in them, in some sense, as *real events* existing beyond the printed page. Most contemporary reviewers seem to have understood them as such. "Apolitical" liberal critics, troubled by the intrusion of the contemporary occasion into the realm of art, either dismissed them as propaganda or attempted to construct the texts as ahistorical, universalist representations of the human condition. But for the more radical critics, *M* and *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* indicated quite clearly that the American war crimes they depicted were representative of the general tendency of an immoral and illegal policy.

Sack's *M* (or "Mike" in the phonetic alphabet), originally serialized in *Esquire* magazine in the fall of 1966 and published as a paperback edition the following year, chronicles the journey of Mike Company, understood to be a typical infantry company, through basic and then advanced training to combat in Vietnam. There can be little doubt that the picture of the war that *M* presented is highly unflattering to the U.S. Army. The novel's narrator, a journalist assigned to cover these soldiers during their first year of service, unflinchingly provides the sort of coverage that President Johnson found so objectionable: American troops burning villages, destroying livestock, arbitrarily shooting black-pajama-wearing "VC" and invoking the "mere gook rule" whenever convenient. Yet Sack does not present the book as straightforward reportage objectively describing these events. His approach has much in common with that of the New Journalism (the school associated with "nonfiction novelists" like Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer), in which the writer is often a participant-witness rendering events into a sort of sardonic ethnography. Sack often ridicules his subjects (the officers, NCOs, and trainee-soldiers) and casts their pronouncements on subjects like Communism, patriotism, and the Vietnamese people in a highly ironic light. At the outset of the narrative, he insists on the veracity of his account, telling us that everything he describes in the book really happened, yet at the same time he makes no appeals to journalistic objectivity, allowing himself the license to both mock and express moral indignation. Contemporary reviewers, who for the most part received Sack's novel favorably, were puzzled as to what to call such a book. Leonard Kreigel, in *The Nation*, argued that the book was "not technically a novel but a book of reportage" and one of the finest examples of what has come to be called the 'documentary novel.'"³⁸ The *Washington Star* described it as a "montage of serious reportage, comic strip adventure, lyric poetry, and moral allegory." The narrative technique, as a *Los Angeles Times* reviewer noted, seemed to have more in common with the then-emerging New Journalism than with straight-ahead conventional war

reporting. “If there is a non-fiction novel,” he wrote, “Sack’s book comes closer to being it than Capote’s *In Cold Blood*.” Other reviewers noted the stylistic affinities between *M* and *Catch-22*. The *New York Times*, for example, described the book as a “blackly humorous” look at the war, and the *Christian Science Monitor* praised its successful admixture of comedy and lunacy in the manner of Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut. Most of the “black humor” in the text, in fact, derives from the narrator’s contrasts between pious military rhetoric about the moral courage of the ideal soldier and the vicious sadism of the actual soldier. Significantly, it is Demirgian, the soldier who most completely abandons his inhibitions against cruelty who becomes, by the end of the novel, voted “best in the battalion” by the division commander. The narrator, who knowingly deflates the army’s public relations-engineered fabrication of the heroic GI-as-liberator, sends his “apologies to Ernie Pyle.”³⁹ For the GIs of *M* are not the rough-and-tumble, stubble-faced common heroes of *Brave Men*; they are brutal bullies on a frenzied rampage of senseless, wanton destruction. Public skepticism toward early accounts of American soldiers raping and pillaging in Vietnam, to a large extent, rested precisely on this mythological conception of the American soldier which World War II journalists like Ernie Pyle and cartoonists like Bill Mauldin had created. Yet it was not merely Sack’s attack on the mythic image of the soldier that undermined official claims about the morality of intervention. More dangerous to those claims was Sack’s exposure of those mechanisms that produced and sustained that brutality in the American soldier. *M* showed readers that the cruelty and destructiveness of U.S. troops in Vietnam was neither natural nor accidental—it was deliberately and artificially engineered in order to satisfy a specific military objective. Atrocity, as Jean-Paul Sartre writes in his contemporaneous essay, is U.S. policy.

The Vietnam sequence, in which we see U.S. troops blatantly committing war crimes, accounts for less than half of the entire narrative. The major portion of *M*, in fact, deals with the company’s training at Fort Dix in New Jersey. We watch the mass of raw recruits make the gradual transformation from a fragmented bunch of whining civilians into a well-oiled killing machine. As the company prepares for barracks inspections, attends classes on Communism, learns the “spirit of the bayonet” and the fundamentals of marksmanship, Sack focuses in on the effects of the training on Private Demirgian. At the beginning of the novel, Demirgian is the quintessential “slacker.” He is a draftee, contemptuous of the military and resentful of authority in general. The thought of killing other human beings makes him queasy. He goes to great lengths—walking in front of the rifle-range, asking another private to break his jaw, refusing to salute the flag and officers—to get himself discharged. Yet he remains unable to break free and eventually succumbs to the training and the army’s colonization of his consciousness. By the end

of the narrative he has been transformed into the perfect soldier, able to kill without qualms. Demirgian's final utterance—"I'd like to burn the whole country down and start again with Americans"—reveals the completeness of his metamorphosis.⁴⁰ Although Sack insists on the truthfulness of his narrative, Demirgian's transformation is perhaps too radical and complete, too exaggerated to be taken seriously at face value as a *fact*. Here, perhaps, is the point at which Sack's facts become subordinate to his fable—indeed, where what is interpreted (the "moral allegory") subsumes what is merely reported. In its depiction of the army's turning of an average American teenager into a savage killer, Sack's novel eerily anticipated the telling remark made by the distraught mother of one of the GIs who participated in the My Lai massacre: "I gave them [the Army] a good boy, and they made him a murderer."

The moral allegory in *M* does indeed point to some answers for the troubling question that would become the cornerstone of the debate over My Lai between the war's supporters and its critics—indeed, the cornerstone of the argument between the prosecution and the defense at Lieutenant Calley's court-martial. Who bore the responsibility for war crimes? One or another answer was inextricably bound up with a particular view of the war's legality and morality. Did responsibility lie with individuals who, as military and pro-war spokespersons maintained, acted on their own, outside the bounds of firmly established rules of engagement? Or did military culture itself, as many on the Left argued, tacitly condone and even promote such behavior as an important part of an anti-"people's war" strategy? Sack's novel quite readily lent itself to support for the latter position. As an indictment of the U.S. Army as an inherently evil institution, it clearly implied that the primary responsibility for atrocities lay with the training and indoctrination methods that tacitly encouraged genocidal terror-war. *M* anticipated what military figures like Army Secretary Stanley Resor would say in defense of their institution after My Lai—that soldiers "operate under detailed directives which prohibit in unambiguous terms the killing of civilian noncombatants"—and thoroughly dismantled it.⁴¹ Sack's heavy focus on the rote-method pedagogy of basic training and infantry school demonstrated the relationship between that training and the conduct of American servicemen in Vietnam. The humane and rational "detailed directives" exist only on paper, for show; the drill sergeants of *M* snicker at them in amusement. The real directives that they provide on the training field and in the classroom make a much deeper impression on the raw recruits on their way to Vietnam. As one of them says encouragingly to a private who appears to relish twisting his blade in the belly of the dummy during bayonet training: "That's the way to handle those people. Grab 'em by the balls. If *you're* grabbing *them* you're going to feel no pain."⁴² Ostensibly, the reference is to the Vietcong, but it becomes clear, as the novel progresses, that the sergeant's instructions apply to

all Vietnamese. The only way to deal with Vietnamese civilians, in the drill sergeants' view, is through the use of terror. Sack here anticipates one of Sartre's primary contentions in "On Genocide"—that the U.S. military, in its realization of the futility of conventional strategy as a response to an anti-colonialist people's war, has turned to a *de facto* use of torture and genocide as a means of controlling the civilian population. Similarly, Sack acknowledges the role of *officially sanctioned* racism in such a strategy. The soldiers learn their racism and contempt for the Vietnamese—exemplified in the "mere gook rule"—during the training and indoctrination process at Fort Dix, well before they even set foot on Vietnamese soil. In short, Sack's small book shows its readers that the hideous crime at its climax—the murder of a little girl—is the inevitable, even desired, result of the American soldier's military training, not an accident which occurs in spite of it. The military, in *M*, is little better than a vast school for brainwashed murderers. The result is a picture of a mechanistic bureaucracy attempting to instill in the trainees a mindless and uncritical acceptance of official truth-claims as facile answers to the complicated political and moral questions raised by American intervention in Vietnam. During the Communism classes, the recruits internalize an idiotically simple view of the world that the instructors articulate in stereotyped containment rhetoric. The Vietnam-as-domino scenario, it becomes clear once the company arrives in country, cannot account for the complexities of Vietnam's internal political dynamics. Yet the soldiers of Mighty Mike, who have been inculcated with the official version of events, are only dimly aware of divided loyalties among the civilian populace. The army, supposedly the defender of freedom against tyranny, holds nothing but contempt for democratic values. It functions most effectively through the subordination of the individual conscience to the will of the state. And finally, the ritualized violence and brutality which forms the backbone of its training and indoctrination process serves to desensitize impressionable recruits to human suffering.

The Prisoners of Quai Dong, unlike John Sack's "nonfiction" novel, is a work of pure imagination by a writer who, by his own admission, had never set foot in Vietnam or had any military experience whatsoever.⁴³ Kolpacoff's novel is a startlingly brutal depiction of an interrogation session featuring a small group of American soldiers, their South Vietnamese attaché, and the victim, a young Vietnamese boy. The entire sequence of events, which spans a period of not more than two days, transpires at a stockade, the fictional Quai Dong, located within a garrison situated in an area not too distant from Saigon—a "pacified" area, we are told, heretofore characterized by a relatively low level of enemy activity. The description, however, soon becomes exposed as a euphemism when we realize the extent of the hostility in the countryside surrounding the camp. The message is clear: Americans are not welcome in the land

they claim to be liberating. When the Americans catch a teenage boy on a road near the base with hand grenades and medical supplies, they suspect him of transporting supplies for the Vietcong, and he is brought in for interrogation. For the past few weeks prior to the boy's capture, enemy activity near Quai Dong has been on the rise. There have been mortar attacks against the garrison, and more significantly a jeep and its occupants have been ambushed and killed on a certain stretch of road not far from the camp. The camp commandant, using a carrot-and-stick approach, exerts pressure on the executive officer, Lieutenant Buckley, to neutralize the threat: if he finds and destroys the source of the attacks, he can get a medal and a promotion (a pay raise being attendant to the promotion). Failure equals no award and no promotion. Buckley, a reprehensible, soulless lackey whose motives are entirely self-serving, becomes resolved to accomplish this mission and win the promised booty. In order to find and destroy the enemy, he needs to obtain actionable intelligence as to who has been conducting these attacks and pinpoint the location of the source of the mortar fire that pounds the base intermittently. The best way to do this is, he knows, to capture a guerilla or guerilla sympathizer and use whatever methods are necessary in order to get good information. We are made to understand from the outset of the action that torture, in the eyes of the interrogators, is an acceptable and fairly routine technique of extracting information, a matter of course. It is not a grotesque aberration; it is in fact clearly regarded as standard operating procedure for the American military men in this novel. What makes the practice even more objectionable is the way in which the Americans force their South Vietnamese ally into complicity by getting *him* to do the dirty work while they stand back and watch (although the Americans coldly discard their ARVN assistant when he fails to satisfy their bloodlust and no longer serves their purposes). Kolpacoff's depiction of the torture is suitably hideous, and calculated to inspire feelings of revulsion and horror in the reader. The naked Vietnamese boy is subjected to repeated cutting and gouging—in the armpits, in the back, in the stomach, and in the groin—by means of a small knife. When the knife proves ineffective, the torturers rig lead wires up to a generator.

The prism through which we view these events is the narrator, Lieutenant Kreuger, whom we are invited to sympathize with, at least initially. Kreuger is a prisoner in the Quai Dong military stockade. His narrative voice—articulate, nuanced, reflective, self-doubting—establishes him as a sensitive and intelligent man in the reader's eyes, an educated man and most likely an officer, and when we read of his miserable plight in the stockade and see him doing hard labor in the scorching sun, ordered around by a bunch of sadistic MPs, we guess that this man is the victim of some great injustice. Later, we learn that he has been demoted and sentenced to hard labor by a court martial for "refusing to obey an order under fire" and "aiding and abetting the

enemies of the United States.”⁴⁴ As Kreuger describes the actual offense for which he was punished, it becomes clear that we are to understand him as an essentially moral and humane man caught up in a sinister death-machine which compels him to participate in murder, and his refusal to obey the order stands as his heroic resistance against such compulsion. For obeying orders in this novel is akin to obeying the orders of Nazi commanders. Virtually every directive that comes from military authorities in this novel is morally objectionable. Kreuger’s moral integrity is tested twice in the novel; the first test he passes, and as for the second, it is clear that he fails and tricks himself into believing that he has passed.

In the first instance of his disobedience to the chain of command, he refuses an order to supervise the slaughter of an unsuspecting and vastly outnumbered enemy element in the open. While the order is perfectly legal according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice and even the Geneva Conventions—after all, it constitutes a legitimate use of force against an armed enemy combatant—it jars with Kreuger’s sense of fair play and decency. The battalion-sized “hammer-and-anvil” operation he describes as the instance of his initial clash with an unjust command hierarchy is meant to trap the enemy (actually, a few tired Vietcong stragglers) on the floor of a valley. Once the enemy is in the target area, it is Kreuger’s job to have his men unleash overwhelming firepower upon it (immediately prior to the event, Kreuger, formerly a platoon leader, has assumed command of a company of two hundred soldiers after his commander has been killed in action) and decimate the guerillas. Kreuger’s role in the operation is to command the “hammer” or the lead element maneuvering and closing with the “remnants” of an enemy “outfit” once the anvil (the other four infantry companies) is in position. At the moment of execution, Kreuger looks through his field glasses at the Vietnamese and when he sees their faces the word “enemy” becomes a meaningless abstraction to him. He watches them take the brunt of the “anvil” element’s mortar attack and is appalled by what he sees. He then hears the order for him to move in and attack the dazed and wounded survivors once the barrage has subsided. Instead of obeying the order his commanding officer gives him, he pulls his men back, thus leaving the valley open and allowing the enemy to escape: “We opened up one end of the valley like a hinged door and withdrew up the side of the hill to our left. The Vietnamese were quick and they fled through the gap before the outfits on the hills understood what had happened.”⁴⁵

Kreuger escapes a more severe sentence—presumably a firing squad—at his court martial when the commandant learns that he can speak a good deal of Vietnamese. He is confined to the stockade and periodically used as an interpreter for communications between various locals and the Americans on the base. Eventually, his jailers stop using him, Kreuger suspects, because they have decided that he is disloyal, unreliable, and untrustworthy, not a team

player. Suddenly, after a long period of anonymity, during which his skills as an interpreter decay, Lieutenant Buckley, the executive officer, calls upon Kreuger to assist him in the interrogation of a captured Vietcong suspect, the aforementioned boy. Kolpacoff sets up the ensuing interrogation in order to expose the rottenness and moral bankruptcy which lie, according to the leftist “immoral and criminal war” paradigm, at the heart of the entire war in Vietnam.

That the refusal to obey orders is a moral act becomes clearer when we confront the evil of the military mind in the persons of Sergeant McGruder and Lieutenant Buckley, and their morally handicapped (because of his status as a collaborator with the Americans) South Vietnamese henchman Sergeant Nguyen. By obeying the mandates of superiors to kill or torture, one makes a sort of Faustian bargain, as in Lieutenant Buckley’s case, whereby promotions and awards are readily available to those who do the military’s dirty work. By disobeying orders, on the other hand, one earns punishment and rebuke—one is busted down in rank, thrown into the stockade, and made to suffer the indignity of having former peers and subordinates gloat at your misfortune as they take pleasure in ordering you around. Lieutenant Kreuger’s second moral test comes when the command element uses the carrot-and-stick approach on *him*, presenting him with two equally unsavory choices: by helping Buckley and McGruder get the information they need out of the boy, by whatever means necessary, he can earn release from imprisonment, reinstatement of his former rank, and the possibility of having his disgraceful insubordination wiped from the record. Failure to help, Buckley and the commandant suggest, will result in no change to his present situation as a jailbird and an officer stripped of his rank and authority.

There is no question that the military, in this novel, is clearly a corrupt and morally debased organization. Officers and senior NCOs (all of them white in this novel) are cruel, authoritarian, racist tyrants who consider the Vietnamese as less than human and take the ‘inscrutable Asian’ stereotype to heart. Sergeant McGruder, for example, ignorantly calls their South Vietnamese aide, Lieutenant Nguyen, “the Chinaman.”⁴⁶ And the Americans do not trust their ARVN accomplice completely, in spite of their initial pretense to an equitable relationship as military allies. It becomes clear rather quickly that this is the entire reason behind Kreuger’s presence in the hot corrugated-tin shack while the torture is taking place. Kreuger is there so that Buckley and McGruder, who don’t know Vietnamese, can make sure that Nguyen doesn’t protect the boy or merely pretend to interrogate him long enough to stall and appease the Americans’ anger. “We’d be fools to trust Nguyen,” Buckley tells Kreuger and McGruder, betraying his suspicion that their supposed ally is not sincere about the anticommunist crusade and is merely dissembling in order to prevent the murder of one of his countrymen. Since Nguyen and the boy are “both Vietnamese” he expects that “they’ll try to stick together.” While Buckley and

McGruder begin the interrogation using Nguyen as the torturer and chief inquisitor—perhaps under the ruse of ‘letting the Vietnamese fight their war while we observe and advise’—Buckley soon grows impatient with the slow pace of the session and moves to take command of the situation. The arrest of Lieutenant Nguyen reveals the way things *really* work between the Americans and the South Vietnamese. It is the Americans who are in charge, with the ARVN as their lackeys and puppets. When the chips are down, and Lieutenant Nguyen, even though it is *his* country, is falling short of American expectations in his performance, the illusion of South Vietnamese authority is quickly brushed aside. When Buckley, holding the knife now in a threatening manner, tells Nguyen to get out of his way and let him continue the interrogation as he sees fit, Nguyen momentarily resists, protesting that the Americans don’t know how to deal with Vietnamese. Buckley threatens to arrest him if he doesn’t stand aside. Nguyen, as if forgetting himself and his role as an American lackey, suddenly bristles and shouts “I am a Vietnamese!” as if to remind the Americans that they do not own Vietnam and they have no right to order a South Vietnamese Army officer around like a slave. But Buckley makes clear who is really pulling the strings: “As long as you’re at Quai Dong you’ll do what we tell you,” he replies. “You’re nothing but what I say you are,” he continues, humiliating Nguyen and putting him back in his proper place. Kreuger, watching the entire scene wordlessly, feels a brief bit of admiration for Nguyen and his stand against Buckley but soon afterwards feels ashamed of the man for his pathetic capitulation to the Americans.⁴⁷ Nguyen attempts to intercede on behalf of the prisoner once more, attempting to save his life near the end of the interrogation (which has, under the auspices of Buckley and McGruder, degenerated into wanton, pointless cruelty), lunging at McGruder, who is administering a savage beating that will kill the boy if continued. McGruder slaps Nguyen, who collapses ignominiously on the floor, “dazed and bleeding.” Buckley then brings two American sentries into the room, and has Nguyen arrested and finally thrown into the stockade.⁴⁸ In this scene Kolpacoff offers us a dramatic illustration of the point Noam Chomsky would make a few years later about one of the ways in which the American intervention reveals itself as a colonialist enterprise. Implicitly setting the United States up on an equal moral basis with Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany, Chomsky notes that these powers effectively used indigenous collaborators in order to dominate the peoples of the lands they conquered: “The Russians do not use the Soviet army directly to enforce order in Czechoslovakia, and even the Nazis relied largely on native forces to control the occupied territories of Europe.” The difference is that the occupation by the United States (whose motives in Vietnam, Chomsky seems to imply, are even more rapacious than the other two military dictatorships he names) is marked by an unprecedented “inability to create a native structure that

has sufficient legitimacy to control the domestic population.”⁴⁹ The “native structure” breaks down completely in *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, and that is why Lieutenant Nguyen must be tossed aside as the Americans begin to implement their clumsy and heavy-handed methods of controlling the “domestic population” (the Vietnamese boy and the villagers who allow the Vietcong to stage attacks against the base in their areas).

The only possible force which might halt the continuation of this atrocity, now that Nguyen is out of the picture, is Dr. Mason, an army surgeon who, as a captain, outranks Lieutenant Buckley. Mason enters the action when Buckley and McGruder become alarmed that the boy appears to be dying as a result of the wounds inflicted on him during the torture. They summon Mason, who examines the boy without asking many questions regarding as to how the boy incurred such wounds. He knows that the child has been tortured and attempts to get him out of the clutches of Buckley and McGruder by ordering the patient to the infirmary. Buckley stops him, telling Mason that they are in the middle of a critical interrogation which cannot afford to be interrupted. “It’s finished,” Mason replies, attempting to use his status as a superior in order to shut Buckley’s operation down. “I’m the medical officer of this godforsaken command, and the health of the inmates is my responsibility, not yours.” Buckley tells him that the child is not an inmate, but a Vietcong “prisoner of war.” Mason, enraged, tries to use his rank in order to save the boy’s life, but to no avail:

“You exceed your authority, Lieutenant!” Mason cried. “As an Army doctor I have the rank of captain, and I’m telling you to stand aside and stop interfering! You run your camp. I don’t tell you how. Don’t try to tell me how to treat my patients.”

It was the first time I had ever seen Mason lose his temper.

But it did no good.

“It isn’t my authority,” Buckley replied in a quietly menacing voice. “I’m acting under the major’s special orders. You know how things are here, Doctor. I’m surprised at you. You can remove the prisoner if you’re willing to answer for it to the major, personally.”

Mason watched him, and didn’t say anything.

Buckley reached into his pocket for a cigarette. “They need doctors in worse places than Quai Dong.”⁵⁰

Mason, of course, backs down in shame when threatened with the possibility of a transfer to much more hazardous duty. What emerges, when we consider the moral dilemmas of the only two potentially decent human beings in the novel, is a picture of the military as an institution

which crushes any attempt to act beyond the narrow parameters of its false definition of right conduct, as an institution where atrocities are regularly condoned and where threats of retribution keep silent those who might otherwise expose such horrors to civilian authorities. “One of Kolpacoff’s objectives,” as Jim Nielson (an ardent admirer of this novel) argues, is to show how difficult it is for an ordinary soldier first to define what is morally proper and second to act upon this recognition, given the pressures imposed upon him by military command and given the military’s sanctioning of torture.” For Nielson, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* “dramatizes the dilemma of acting morally in a war where American strategy was inherently immoral.”⁵¹ To a lesser extent (only in that none of the characters in John Sack’s novel are as complex or articulate as the character’s in Kolpacoff’s), much the same can be said for the dilemma of Demirgian in *M*.

In his depiction of moral men imprisoned within an antihuman institution and oppressed by an immoral military hierarchy, Kolpacoff is quite clearly drawing on classic strains of antimilitarist sentiment in twentieth-century American fiction, from *Three Soldiers* to *Catch-22*. But the portrayal of the military in *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* is much darker than the one that either John Dos Passos or Joseph Heller offer; one that is also virtually humorless. The United States Army in Vietnam, in this novel, comes across as little better than German S.S. troops in Poland or Czechoslovakia—an image which conforms thematically to the conventions of anti-imperialist literature on Vietnam (recall Sack’s reference to the massacre at Lidice in *M* or Chomsky’s frequent comparisons of the United States to aggressive, militarized states like imperial Japan or Nazi Germany). It is an invader or occupier whose noisy and deadly presence is intensely resented by the indigenous population—this first becomes evident in the frequency of attacks on the garrison at Quai Dong. As if to ridicule the notion of South Vietnam as “pacified” and friendly towards U.S. soldiers, rather than seething with resentment towards them, one character remarks that a “column of G.I.’s would draw fire from any village in the district.”⁵² The Americans, of course, wildly overreact to such fire by bringing overwhelming, indiscriminate force to bear on the Vietnamese, killing civilians and enemy alike and destroying everything in sight. When the interrogation of the Vietnamese boy produces the name of a village, Bien Thieu, the commandant of Quai Dong sends a few foot patrols there to investigate. When Kreuger later inquires as to the outcome of the operation, Sergeant McGruder gives a reply which could have come straight out of one of the G.I. confessionals in *Standard Operating Procedure*: “All I know is our patrols drew fire when they got near the village, and they called down the cobras [attack helicopters]. One of them was hit, but the rest flattened the place with rockets. When it was over our guys went in and cleaned it up.”⁵³ That America is an unwanted invader becomes even more clear, however, in the boy’s ultimately suicidal determination to resist the Americans’ attempts to

force him into revealing any information whatsoever to his tormentors; his dedication ennoble him, and the South Vietnamese lieutenant, by contrast, appears as a puppet of the Americans, a pathetic sellout, a collaborator and traitor to his countrymen, who are fighting for independence and freedom from domination by the imperialists. It is the Vietnamese boy (probably a young Vietcong guerilla) who is the real hero of this novel. Kreuger is merely a witness to his martyrdom, the guilty veteran, like the later real-life veterans of the Winter Soldier Hearings, who must purge his soul of this shame by a public confession.

Non-fictional Atrocity Narratives and Antimilitary Rhetoric

I turn next to a closer examination of the four antiwar nonfiction books of this period (Jonathan Schell's 1968 *The Village of Ben Suc*, Daniel Lang's 1969 *Casualties of War*, Seymour Hersh's 1970 *My Lai Four* and James Simon Kunen's 1971 *Standard Operating Procedure*) which I have discussed previously as a prelude to my analysis of the atrocity novels. They are significant, I believe, insofar as they continue the development of the atrocity narrative as a distinct genre. All three paint a very unflattering picture of American operations in Vietnam. What I find most significant in them is that they all state (or re-state, in later cases) in various ways some of the major themes of leftist antiwar literature—the notion of American involvement as imperialist aggression and the idea that murder and torture are representative of American tactics—but that this thread becomes increasingly radicalized as it runs through the course of this three-year period. One of the ways in which this radicalism manifests itself is in the steadily growing hostility toward the military and the government. I will try to extrapolate this thread in the ensuing discussion.

Originally appearing in a 1968 *New Yorker* serialization, *The Village of Ben Suc* is a first-person account of Operation Cedar Falls in early 1967. The objective of Cedar Falls was to conduct a massive sweep of the area just northwest of Saigon (commonly referred to as the “Iron Triangle”) and rout all Vietcong and Vietcong supply networks among the villages of the region.⁵⁴ Schell, who as a correspondent accompanies the battalion under Lt. Col. Alexander Haig's command from the briefing room to the field, dramatizes the results of the operation upon one of these villages, Ben Suc, and the picture that emerges is not a pretty one. Although Schell pretends to refrain from commenting upon the significance of the events he witnesses, his summary (in his second *New Yorker* piece, published later in the same year) of the situation in Vietnam is loaded with adjectives and adjectival phrases denigrating the South Vietnamese government and ARVN and casting the Americans as “destroying, seemingly by inadvertence, the very country we are supposedly protecting” and shows us where his sympathies lie. In fact, he is rather explicit on that subject: “Like many Americans, I am opposed to the American policy

in Vietnam.” Schell does not demonize the American military to the extent that later narratives do. Although he condemns their actions, he empathizes with the lower-level soldiers, and stops short of condemning the majority of them:

As I came to know the American men who were fighting there, I could only feel sorrow at what they were asked to do and what they did. On the other hand, I could not forget that these men, for the most part, thought they were doing their duty and thought they had no choice, and I could not forget, either, that they were living under terrible stress and, like fighting men in any war, were trying to stay alive and hold on to their sanity. . . . If our continuing escalation of the war is wrong, the guilt is surely not theirs alone.⁵⁵

While later narratives like *Casualties of War* and *Standard Operating Procedure* do in fact demonize the majority of soldiers who “do their duty” while canonizing the conscientious minority who refuse to follow orders, Schell avoids such a contrast. There is room in his writing to grant the average soldier the benefit of the doubt.

Nevertheless, they do emerge as brutes and interlopers in *The Village of Ben Suc*. In the almost universally recognizable pattern of American intrusion into the Vietnamese pastoral, the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces enter into the village like bulls in a china shop, carelessly wreaking havoc and destroying the villagers’ personal belongings. The undisciplined, boorish ARVN soldiers actually loot and steal goods under the pretense of confiscating supplies that could be given to the enemy. Schell’s portrait of the ARVN troops falls in line with the depiction of them in Kolpacoff’s novel and the assessment of their status as indigenous lackeys of the colonialists in Chomsky’s critique: “For the most part, the Americans dealt with the Vietnamese soldiers, and the Vietnamese soldiers dealt with the people.”⁵⁶ The hierarchy of imperialism emerges once again—the invaders use native forces to control the occupied or colonized population.

The Americans “accidentally” kill civilians, justifying their deaths with the certainty that anyone who tries to flee the American and South Vietnamese presence must be a Vietcong. It is clear, Schell shows us, that such deaths are not occurring as a result of a few unbridled, jumpy yahoos reacting to sudden movement, but that the killing comes as the result of the larger strategy of the operation. For loudspeakers mounted on American helicopters repeatedly inform the villagers—in Vietnamese—that they are “surrounded by the Republic of Vietnam and Allied Forces. Do not run away or you will be shot as V.C. Stay in your homes and wait for further instructions.”⁵⁷ Apparently not capable of imagining, as Schell suggests, that some villagers

might run away simply because they are frightened of all the tanks, helicopters, and armed men surrounding them and apparently readying to plow through their dwelling places, the American soldiers behave in accordance with this blanket directive toward fleeing persons. When a young man of unknown age rides a bicycle down a long path toward the outer edge of the village and is gunned down by an American soldier manning the perimeter, Schell focuses in on the reactions of the soldier and the unit toward the killing. The description of the dead bicyclist and the explanation of the surrounding circumstances are clearly meant to evoke the reader's sympathy for the victim. He lies in a ditch, crumpled like a rag doll, blood leaking from a head wound, dead eyes staring up at the sky. Schell describes him as dressed in the black pajama-like garb of the NLF but also notes that this is also the typical garb of the Vietnamese peasant. The blind and apparently willful ignorance of the Americans becomes clear when they invoke the "mere-gook rule" in order to quash any doubts about the status of the victim as an enemy. "That's a V.C. for you. He's a V.C., all right. That's what they wear. He was leaving town. He had to have some reason" they all conclude, nodding their heads in approval. The unit's justification of the killer's action comes off as smug, arrogant, and self-righteous. An engineer who witnesses the shooting remarks, "I'm not worried. You know, that's the first time I've ever seen a dead guy, and I don't feel bad. I just don't that's all." He follows, we are told, "with a hard edge of defiance in his voice" with a vigorous affirmation of the validity of the shooting: "Actually, I'm glad. I'm glad we killed the little V.C." The reaction of the killer himself is a little more interesting in that Schell suggests that he suffers from twinges of doubt about his action, giving an account of himself, at Schell's prompting, after a long pause "of deep thought." His explanation at first reveals uncertainty as to the rightness of the killing, but the encomium from his unit suppresses these doubts and he emerges as little better than a bloodthirsty hayseed: "Yeah, he's dead. Ah shot him. He was a fuckin' V.C."⁵⁸

The American officers in the narrative are no better; in fact, they are in many ways worse. While they maintain cheerful attitudes, speak in measured tones, using euphemistic language and eschewing vulgarity, it is clear that they are to be held to a higher standard of accountability than the GIs because of their status as planners and decision-makers. Schell's portrait of them almost resembles Herman Melville's satirical portrait of nineteenth-century missionaries in *Typee*. They are convinced of the justness of their cause as a civilizing mission and they seem genuinely to believe that they are trying to help the Vietnamese and to save them from the evil of Communism. While Schell's emphasis on their naïvete and optimism saves them from being as reprehensible as Nazis, they nevertheless come off as a bunch of zealous do-gooders arrogantly trying to impose their will on people who are perfectly content with their lives

as they are. But Schell's sardonic tone toward the commanders throughout his report bespeaks a barely concealed contempt for them, and his assessment of their conception of themselves and the operation hints at a calculated brutality. Although the euphemism "pacification" hides the reality of obliteration—for the village of Ben Suc itself is to be eradicated and the villagers relocated to a strategic hamlet—Schell is not deceived by such semantic acrobatics. "For several reasons," he writes of his reaction to the initial briefing, "the plan itself was an object of keen professional satisfaction to the men who devised and executed it. In a sense, they reversed the search-and-destroy method. This time," he notes with irony, "they would destroy first and search later—at their leisure, in the interrogation rooms."⁵⁹ Thus the outrageous destruction taking place in the rural village will not reach its miserable conclusion until, Schell hints, the Americans and the ARVN soldiers begin the process of extracting information from villagers whom they designate as persons of interest. So while the demolition of the village, the uprooting of the populace and the accidental shooting of a fleeing suspect might not constitute material sordid enough for a bona fide war crime, Schell is clear that the destruction of Ben Suc is the prelude to torture.

In Daniel Lang's *Casualties of War*, what we have is beyond question a war crime and an atrocity, one that is far more horrifying and depraved than the torture of the Vietnamese boy in Kolpacoff's novel insofar as it seems to represent wanton bestiality and pointless cruelty. It is a mere assertion of dominance through sexual aggression and a manifestation of misogynistic and racist violence (the phallic connotations of the hunting knife used to stab the victim repeatedly are obvious; similarly, we are repeatedly told that the American soldiers think of their Asian victim as less than human). Rather than a strategic use of violence with the pretense of gaining actionable military intelligence (as in *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*), we have sadism and brutality as ends in themselves—at least that is how the soldiers see it. But Lang makes clear that, however these individual rapists and butchers see themselves and their actions, they are merely part of the American strategy in Vietnam. As the torture in Kolpacoff's novel becomes an allegorical representation of America in Vietnam, so the rape/murder atrocity in Lang's narrative becomes a metaphor for the imperialist subjugation of the Vietnamese.

Lang's nonfiction narrative, the result of a lengthy interview with a Vietnam veteran, recounts the brutal gang-rape and murder of a Vietnamese village girl by a squad of American infantrymen in 1966, as told by "Former Private First Class Sven Eriksson" (which, like all the other names in the book, is a pseudonym). Eriksson emerges as the lonely conscientious witness, compelled to confess to the world his erstwhile proximity to this horrible crime and his guilt at having stood by during its commission. Lang establishes him as a sympathetic figure at the outset, giving us an overview of his background, ensuring that we know Eriksson is not merely a

malcontented coward attempting to stab his former comrades in the back with a vicious slander. In Lang's description Eriksson appears earnest, too simple for outright fabrication. He has been honorably discharged and has seen "a fair amount of action"—which establishes him as credible witness in the same way that combat veteran status would later confer authority on the participants in the Winter Soldier investigations.⁶⁰

While this is ostensibly a nonfiction narrative, the protagonist (Eriksson) and the villain ("Sergeant Meserve") seem almost like stock characters from World War II fiction and films. Eriksson is the sensitive, somewhat innocent "new guy" with Meserve as the hard-bitten, experienced NCO who intimidates anyone who would question him by constantly reminding them that their survival depends on his skills—and his whims. The account of the rape and murder follow the standard atrocity narrative plot, later formulated into a literary convention in *My Lai Four*, wherein a typical patrol degenerates into depravity. The story is as follows: Eriksson's platoon leader assigns him to a five-man reconnaissance patrol to look for "signs of Vietcong activity" over the course of five days.⁶¹ The operation has been conceived at the battalion level and is regarded as important by the platoon leader and the chosen patrol. When the patrol leader, Sergeant Meserve, briefs his element on the concept of the operation and the specifics of maneuver, communication, rules of engagement, and priority intelligence requirements in an "all business" manner.⁶² Their reconnaissance objective is a complex of caves and bunkers which are suspected of hiding "caches of enemy equipment" or perhaps enemy personnel themselves. Meserve explains that they are to "avoid any shooting matches with the enemy except in self-defense"—their primary purpose is to collect information. Unexpectedly, Sergeant Meserve, upon concluding the briefing, promises that the squad will get a morale booster to make the mission more enjoyable. At the outset of their patrol, they will kidnap a girl from a nearby village, drag her along for the duration of the five days "avail[ing] themselves of her body, finally disposing of it, to keep the girl from ever accusing them of abduction and rape—both listed as capital crimes in the Uniform Code of Military Justice." Meserve leaves no ambiguity as to his intention of murdering the victim once the squad has had its fun with her. As if anticipating the criticism that this situation perhaps strains the reader's credulity (Meserve, an experienced NCO, taking a squad on a reconnaissance patrol, intends to drag a potentially noisy hostage along with them?), Lang includes quotations from the testimony of two other pseudonymous soldiers (and comrades of Eriksson's) which bolster the protagonist's account of Meserve's surprise ending to the businesslike briefing. Given the nonchalant attitude of the squad toward Meserve's remarks, Eriksson assumes that he is joking. But his relation of the disturbing remarks to a friend give him pause, for he discovers that Meserve "had exhibited a

mean streak toward the Vietnamese” and previously “had shot at and wounded one of them, giving as his reason afterward that he had ‘felt like it.’”⁶³

Meserve proves his seriousness when the squad raids the “hamlet of Cat Tuong” and one of the soldiers produces a pretty young girl named Mao (Lang informs us that the victim’s name was revealed in the ensuing trial) who is distinguished by her gold tooth. The description of the kidnapping is particularly grating and generates a feeling of revulsion for the perpetrators: “The mother wept and pleaded, and her daughters, clinging to one another, cowered against the wall.”⁶⁴ The squad continues on, behaving in a most obstreperous and objectionable manner, randomly shooting water buffalo and gleefully destroying property along the way. When they find a hilltop which Meserve deems suitable for a “command post,” the gang-rape begins after the squad enjoys a “hearty snack.”⁶⁵ When Eriksson’s turn comes at last, he refuses—he is the only man out of the five who does refuse. Meserve becomes furious, insulting the private and questioning his heterosexuality, and while the insults do not bother Eriksson, the threat of being killed by Meserve and then reported back to the rear as a KIA genuinely frightens him. However, he maintains his integrity and refuses to succumb to such intimidation (Lang tells us that the other soldiers tried to excuse themselves during the trial by referring to Meserve’s implied death-threat had they refused to participate in the crime). At the end of the patrol, Meserve attempts to foist the job of killing Mao onto Eriksson, who refuses once again. Meserve’s vicious lackey, Corporal Clark, enthusiastically volunteers for the job, plunging his large hunting knife into her. Eriksson describes his experience of the murder as hearing a sickening “deer-gutting” sound. When, barely alive, she begins to get up and crawl away from her tormentors, all four rapists open fire at her and blow her head apart. As if to cap this nightmare with a particularly gruesome flourish, Corporal Clark discovers a glimmer of gold amidst the gore and, laughing, asks Meserve if he wants the gold tooth as a souvenir.

On continuing the patrol, a firefight with the Vietcong results in no friendly casualties but necessitates a return to the base for more ammunition and supplies. While in the rear, Eriksson reports the incident to his lieutenant, but the lieutenant initially dismisses it as insignificant. “Better relax about the Vietnamese girl, Eriksson. The kind of thing that happened to her—what else can you expect in a combat zone?”⁶⁶ To his credit, the lieutenant shortly thereafter does remove Eriksson from under the control of Meserve and reports the incident to his superior, and thus the investigation ensues. While the fact that an investigation does follow the incident, and that Meserve is brought on charges, might seem to vindicate the military justice system, Lang makes it clear that the CID investigating officials are incompetent bunglers and that true justice is not the object of the military court system and that the sympathies of the military jury lie with

Meserve. During the course of the legal proceedings, all the vindictiveness seems to center on Eriksson rather than Meserve. He is accused of “seeking to evade infantry duty” and fabricating the “charges against Meserve and the others in order to escape further assignments to hazardous infantry missions.”⁶⁷ “In all four trials,” Lang writes, “defense lawyers made a studied effort to depict Eriksson as less than lion-hearted, presumably on the theory that proving him to be craven would automatically exonerate their clients.”⁶⁸ Conversely, the prosecutor asks the defendants softball questions during the trial, and nothing but praise and kudos are heaped upon Sergeant Meserve and Corporal Clark by the chain of command—including the platoon leader, as well as Captain Vorst, Meserve’s “lifer” company commander. When the prosecutor asks Vorst whether he would accept Meserve back into the unit even if he were convicted, the captain replies thus: “Well, yes, sir, I think if someone has been found guilty of murder, they should be punished, but, knowing Meserve as an individual, I would accept him back in the unit, yes, sir.”⁶⁹ At the conclusion of the narrative, we are told that all of the defendants are found guilty “of one crime or another” (something, Lang implies, less than the crimes of rape and premeditated murder) and given sentences of eight to ten years—shockingly light punishment for the crimes in question. Eriksson is disgusted with the outcome and the approving attitude of the jury toward the rapists and murderers. One of his final observations about the implications of his experience involves a recollection of a conversation with some MPs (he has been transferred out of the infantry and into an MP unit after the trial). When he tells them of the murder and the trial and his role in the incident, he is perplexed by their attitude: “One MP, I remember, told me he could have understood it if I’d gone to bat for a GI who was murdered, but how could I do it for a Vietnamese?” The irony of this MP’s forgiving attitude toward his fellow soldier is apparently lost on the simple Minnesota farm-boy Eriksson, but not on Lang or his intended reader: “But he was very tolerant about it. He said it was only human to make mistakes.”⁷⁰

The implications of the court-martial’s outcome are obvious, and it is here where Lang reaffirms some of the central precepts in the leftist critique of/attack upon the military and militarism. First, the book’s denouement, as well as the rape and murder scene imply that anti-Asian racism and the belief in Western superiority, which are deeply embedded in conventional American society and the U.S. military, enable the GIs to view the Vietnamese as less than human, which makes it easy to commit atrocities against them and also makes it easier for military authorities to dismiss such crimes as insignificant. Secondly, the military emerges as a corrupt institution, the moral equivalent of a crime syndicate whose members attempt to protect each other from charges of wrongdoing and in which loyalty to the unit takes precedence over individual moral integrity. In such an organization, there is the constant force of “negative peer

pressure” which compels the average soldier to disobey his conscience and obey the immoral directives of his superiors. Those who stand up against such superiors and refuse to participate in such evil risk ostracism at best, or death at worst. Thirdly, there is the continuous reminder in the narrative that the horrible crime we are witnessing is *not* an isolated incident, but a regular occurrence in Vietnam when it comes to American behavior. As Lang writes of Eriksson’s tale, “He told me that beatings were common—random, routine cuffings that he saw GIs administer to the Vietnamese.” And such behavior is implicitly condoned by vague policy directives:

Occasionally, official orders were used for justifying gratuitous act of violence. Thus, early in his tour of duty, Eriksson recalled, GIs in his unit were empowered to shoot any Vietnamese violating a 7 p.m. curfew, but in practice it was largely a matter of individual discretion whether a soldier chose to fire at a stray Vietnamese hurrying home a few minutes late to his hooch. . . . Similarly, it was permissible to shoot any Vietnamese seen running, but, as Eriksson put it, “the line between walking and running could be very thin.”⁷¹

Lang has Eriksson going on to describe a summary execution of two prisoners, a corporal’s attempt to strangle another prisoner with a rubber poncho, and other crimes—all tolerated by a chain of command which turns a blind eye to them and fostered by a morally sick military culture which permits and even encourages them. It is the very chain-of-command structure, Lang records Eriksson observing, that enables otherwise law-abiding, normal American men to act in barbaric and atrocious ways and then invoke the Nuremburg defense: “That was the thing about the chain of command—you couldn’t tell who was to blame for what,” he explains. “It had nothing to do with a man’s being responsible for his own behavior. Just as long as he stayed in line, just as long as he kept the set-up going, he could do whatever he wanted.”⁷²

Seymour Hersh, in *My Lai Four*, is concerned with precisely the same issue—the question of responsibility for war crimes—and draws, for the most part, the same conclusions, although the atrocity in question here takes place on a much larger scale, involving hundreds of victims and a company-sized element (roughly 150 to 200 soldiers) of perpetrators. While Hersh leaves some wiggle room for the reader to doubt that what happened at My Lai was in fact the norm for American soldiers’ conduct during the Vietnam War, the pattern in the narrative—tension leading up to the atrocity, the atrocity itself, the whistleblowers coming forth, followed by an initial investigation of the crime by a man of moral integrity, and the military’s institutional attempt to bury the report—pretty much follows the same pattern in Lang’s book. Hersh’s portrait of the Army is much darker than Schell’s, and arguably more so than the one in *Casualties of War* (if only for the scale of the crime it describes in comparison with the latter).

These soldiers (apart from the conscientious minority of heroes in the narrative) actually enjoy the senseless killing that they engage in at the behest of their superiors.

I do not wish to take up an inordinate amount of space with a lengthy description of the massacre here—the best recent comprehensive account of the event and its impact on American public opinion is found in Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim’s *Four Hours in My Lai* (1992)—with which I will assume the reader has some basic familiarity, but a brief summation of the circumstances surrounding the publication of the story is perhaps in order. What has come to be known as the “My Lai Massacre” (the March 16, 1968 slaughter of between 300 and 400 civilians in Vietnam by Lieutenant William Calley’s Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, Americal Division) entered public knowledge when Hersh began to publish a series of articles on the subject for the *New York Times* in late 1969.

After a brief historical sketch of the Quang Ngai Province, in which Hersh is careful to emphasize the region’s long-standing tradition of revolt and rebellion against occupying powers (the Chinese, the French, and the Saigon government, successively), we then get a highly critical overview in the first chapter of American tactics and strategy—scorched earth policies, the establishment of free-fire zones, the use of body counts to measure progress—along with a clear emphasis on the racism and ignorance of American soldiers. “Young GIs soon learned,” he writes, “that there were Army names for Vietnamese too: gook, dink, and slope.”⁷³ The Americans understand nothing of Vietnamese peasant culture, and this often proves frustrating for the Americans and disastrous for the Vietnamese. He quotes soldiers as making ugly, racist remarks. “You can’t help these dinks,” one GI says to Hersh. “They like to live like pigs in hovels, and even when you build them new houses, they won’t live in them.” He is referring here to an expensive American-built housing project, intended for some peasants they planned to relocate, and the peasants’ subsequent rejection of the dwellings as fit living spaces for obscure and mysterious cultural reasons.⁷⁴

Likewise, Hersh makes numerous references to the cruelty and bloodthirstiness of American GIs at all levels. “Even worse than the misunderstandings,” he writes, “were the deliberate cruelties and implicit assumptions of superiority on the part of the Americans.”⁷⁵ For the enlisted men, the mere-gook rule is in effect during all operations. “Anything that’s dead and isn’t white is a VC.”⁷⁶ Officers hunt Vietnamese “in the free-fire zones, shooting at anyone who move[s] below.” Similarly, they organize contests and foster a spirit of competition between units to increase the number of kills.⁷⁷ A typical example is Hersh’s indignant recital of Colonel George S. Patton III’s outrageous antics, which include wearing a peace medallion at a farewell party while “carrying the polished skull of a Vietcong with a bullet hole above the left eye.”

Hersh quotes a military doctor's assessment of the warmongering commander: "He is simply the product of the misbegotten and misguided idea that a single-minded dedication to destruction is to be highly rewarded." The doctor goes on to recall something he observed while serving with Patton's battalion—an incident in which "two Vietnamese women on bicycles were run down and killed by a U.S. helicopter." He adds, bitterly: "The Army later exonerated the pilot." Patton clearly comes across as a morbidly sick—and, because of his position, dangerous—personage, according to Hersh's description of him:

He would exhort his men before combat by telling them, "I do like to see the arms and legs fly." He once told his staff, "The present ratio of 90 percent killing and 10 percent pacification is just about right." Patton celebrated Christmas in 1968 by sending cards reading: "From Colonel and Mrs. George S. Patton—Peace on Earth." Attached to the cards were color photographs of dismembered Vietcong soldiers stacked in a neat pile.⁷⁸

But his bloodthirstiness, the entire first chapter makes clear, is neither anomalous in the military hierarchy nor is it frowned upon by superiors. When a liberal congressman makes a complaint to the Pentagon after reading of Patton's crudities, a general writes him back, "airily brushing aside the congressman's concern" and invoking the standard defense that the military tends to take refuge in when dealing with such objections from civilians—the civilians who don't know what it's like to command a combat outfit in a "kill-or-be-killed environment" should take their own lack of experience in that type of situation into consideration before passing judgment on the warriors (the recent furor over the remarks of General Thomas Mattis—the Marine combat commander of Operation Iraqi Freedom, who said "It's fun to shoot people"—and the subsequent rallying of the military and supporters of the military around, him mark a replaying of exactly the same controversy).

The reason I focus on Hersh's highly unflattering overview of American Vietnam-era military culture is to foreground his suggestion, throughout the book, that the burden of the guilt for the My Lai massacre does not rest on the shoulders of Lieutenant Calley alone. It goes to the very top of the chain of command—from the Colonel Pattons who foster an environment in which such dehumanizing brutality is not only permissible, but actively encouraged with such blustery, warmongering rhetoric, as well as the Pentagon generals who pooh-pooh a politician's qualms about it, trivializing and ridiculing his genuine concerns over the ethical soundness of such behavior. The real villains in *My Lai Four* are not Calley and his soldiers but senior officers like these, who not only valorize tactics and rules of engagement which lead the individual soldier

to see the Vietnamese as less-than-human and rural Vietnam as one big free-fire zone in which the “mere gook rule” applies to any dead native, but actively attempt to suppress any criticism of their institutionalized brutality and close ranks, invoking a gangster-like code of silence when their murderous mentality reaches its logical extremes in the stomach-churning atrocities which the soldiers under their command see themselves as licensed to commit. And such crimes are by no means uncommon; they are woven into the very fabric of American strategy. In the prelude to his narration of the My Lai horror, Hersh makes it clear to us that what we are about to read of is not a grotesque aberration from the norm of soldierly conduct in Vietnam, it *is* the norm, as his interview with a soldier from another unit illustrates. “The indiscriminate slaughter of Vietnamese women and children was commonplace in his unit,” he observes, and then goes on to situate this soldier’s testimony within a burgeoning multiplicity of similar tales coming from GIs who have been discharged and begun to talk of their experiences once they are safely home and away from and out from under the control of the military hierarchy, which might reward their candor with punishment or rebuke.⁷⁹

As Hersh himself has hypothesized, the publication of his stories and then his full-length book paved the way for the explosion of GI confessionals and public hearings (with considerable GI participation) on American war crimes in Vietnam. “My reports took on a life of their own,” he recalls. “The veterans in Detroit, independent of me, decided to speak up independently and tell their own stories. I had nothing to do with it.”⁸⁰ Although Hersh denies any direct participation in the organization of such hearings, he nevertheless suggests that his reports were the spark which started the fire. Perhaps the most memorable example from the explosion of atrocity confessions is Kunen’s *Standard Operating Procedure* (1971), a collection of GI testimonials interspersed with the author’s observations about the impact of their testimonies upon the media and various political figures, as well as his exploration of the implications of the crimes he records. This text perhaps marks the culmination of radicalism in the atrocity narrative in that its attack on the war is the one most solidly grounded in the leftist critique. Whereas it is clear that novelists like Sack and Kolpacoff as well as journalists like Schell, Lang, and Hersh are actively against the war or maintain antiwar sympathies, generally speaking they do not pursue the implications of their observations to their logical conclusions. They never really probe the deeper reasons behind the brutality of American military policy, the racism of the American GIs, or the corrupt and degenerate status of the South Vietnamese government and the undisciplined boors who carry out its repressive directives. Kunen, having already identified himself in his previous book, *The Strawberry Statement* (his account of the 1969 student takeover of Columbia University) as a “college revolutionary,” is consciously political, and his purpose is overtly

propagandistic. He is not content with the testimonies themselves standing on their own; he feels compelled to offer analysis and commentary on them in order to illuminate the connections between the war and the Leninist conception of imperialism (manifest in the American presence in Vietnam) as merely the logical extension of capitalism. Kunen lets us know exactly where he is coming from, ideologically: he confesses that he has immersed himself in left-wing literature, has given money to antiwar organizations, has been “arrested twice, and subjected myself to the proud pain of tear gas.”⁸¹ In Chomskian fashion (albeit in not in scholarly prose but in revolutionary argot) and invoking Frantz Fanon’s critique of Western imperialism, Kunen rejects the theory of Vietnam as nothing but a mistaken and misguided deviation from a noble tradition of defending freedom against tyranny, or, as repentant former hawk Democrats would retrospectively term the war later in the 1970s as a “tragedy without villains.” Vietnam is but a continuation of America’s four-hundred-year campaign of subjugation and oppression of non-white peoples. The attack on the war becomes an extension of an attack on the notion of American benevolence and an attack on the “emptiness” of American life. Kunen’s version of the foundational myth makes any conventional notion of patriotism seem impossibly ignorant. Kunen’s hard and unforgiving look at what he sees as the origins of the nation condemns its first settlers and all those who followed them: the “wretched refuse of other teeming shores—a sorry collection of reprobates, draft-dodgers, debtors, visionaries, fanatics, lunatics, criminals, and losers in general” who, upon arrival, “began committing genocide on the natives, and utilizing slave labor to build the country.”⁸² Why would anyone want to fight a war on behalf of an imperialist power which is merely masking its motives beneath the rhetorical smokescreen of anticommunism, and carrying out genocide once again against little brown people?

For Kunen, there is absolutely nothing tragic about America’s role in the war or American deaths in the war. Because it is an immoral and criminal war in which the Americans, like Nazis invading Eastern Europe, are the aggressors, we cannot view the American participants as victims, in the same way we would not view the killing of Nazi storm-troopers by resistance fighters as tragic or regrettable. The American-Nazi analogy is in fact explicit and repetitious throughout the collection of atrocity accounts. Raping, pillaging, murdering, and torture are not deviations from policy but rather, as the title suggests, standard operating procedure, and virtually every serviceman engages in it regularly with the approval of the chain of command. The only GIs who escape the condemnation of the ad hoc tribunal and the outrage of the antiwar movement are those, like the ones testifying at the proceedings recorded in the book, who come forward to cleanse themselves of their crimes and confess, offer up vivid depictions of their former savagery so as to vilify the war in the public eye, bring public opinion against the war, and thus mobilize

the public against an administration which continues to commit such crimes against the Vietnamese people. The Nazi analogy, however, is not limited to the GIs actually carrying out the genocidal policies against the Vietnamese, nor is it limited to the political and military leadership. It is applicable to the American people themselves:

I always used to wonder how it was possible for the German people to allow what was done by their country, and wonder whether the American people could ever condone such limitless evils.

Now I know. The answer to the first question is *it's easy*; and to the second, *we are right now*. We have to face that, for the differences between our crimes and those of the Nazis are technical. They used ovens; we use bullets, bombs, poison, and fire. They killed six million; we, only about one million—so far.⁸³

The American people, whom Kunen goes on to describe as distracting themselves from the crime of Vietnam with mindless diversions like changes in clothing fashions, football games, and romance novels, are here accorded the same status of those “good German burghers” who pretended not to notice the smell of burning human flesh coming from the nearby concentration camps. As if anticipating the inevitable emergence of the “tragic” conception of the war, Kunen, after offering a brief and informal survey the criminal history of American expansionism, rejects this notion as flaccid and intellectually dishonest:

We've encircled the globe, we've taken everything, put millions in bondage, murdered countless more. What more can we do? When will someone stop us?

Long drunk on the success of its power, this nation is rotting from within, and through its clouded consciousness we are beginning to feel the pain, pain so great we cannot but think we may be dying, may need to die.

There's no tragedy in that, not in the classic sense, because there's nobody of sufficient character, no great man, the State incarnate, caught in the implications of his past, to bear out his fate. No, all we've got for leaders are some honky-dude flunkies, liars, power-mad conscience-less shit-heads.⁸⁴

It is not merely the Vietnam War that is the problem; it is America itself (or, as the radicalized spelling of the country's name has it, in order to signify the connection with fascism and racism, “Amerikkka”). Kunen makes the New Left connection between America's war-mad sickness and

its repression of sexuality. Likewise, the “average man”—Marcuse’s “one-dimensional man” lives blindly in a state of false consciousness, “so oppressed with the awareness of his own utility, insecurity, his blatant and undeniable expendability” clinging “with religious ferocity to the belief that entire races are inferior to himself.”⁸⁵ What else could one expect from such a society but death, destruction, and enslavement?

Cinema of Atrocity: *Hearts and Minds*

Michael Renov’s critical survey of 1960s-early 70s political cinema is useful as a guide to the wealth of independently distributed antiwar films which hit the (mostly) art-house screens during this time. Prime examples from the 1969-71 period include such productions as *In the Year of the Pig*, *Only the Beginning*, *Seventy-Nine Springtimes*, and *The People’s War*. Renov describes these films as “political documentary” and notes that they generally consist of collages of material—U.S. anticommunist propaganda films, footage of combat in Vietnam, military training films, footage of Vietnamese civilians suffering—in which certain segments are strategically juxtaposed with others so as to produce a heavily ironic contrast between Americans’ stated objectives in Vietnam and the material results of the American presence there. “Visual documents from past and present are thus allowed to interrogate one another,” writes Renov, of the collage technique in films like these. That the films position themselves as antiwar, there can be little doubt. Renov describes these filmmakers as “politically engaged” and quotes Emile de Antonio, director of *In the Year of the Pig*, regarding the intent of the film. “There are no lies in the film,” he says, admitting his propagandistic intent. “There are prejudices in the film. I wanted the Vietnamese to defeat the United States, and the Vietnamese did defeat the United States.”⁸⁶ The romantic depiction of Ho Chi Minh and the National Liberation Front as underdogs fighting for freedom and independence against French and American imperialism are standard fare for these films, bringing the intellectualized valorization of Vietnamese Communism found in the writings of Noam Chomsky and Frances FitzGerald to the screen in dramatic terms for a greater and perhaps more visceral (because visual and aural) impact.

Perhaps the best-known, most coherent, and commercially successful—if we can assume this based on the fact that it was the only one to hook a major distributor (Warner Brothers)—of the antiwar “political documentary” films of the early 1970s is Peter Davis’s *Hearts and Minds* (1974). Although the film adheres to the leftist critique of the Vietnam War, unequivocally demonizes the American military (the grinning Colonel Patton appears in Technicolor, spouting violent crudities; a soldier confesses to enjoying the “daily grind” of killing Vietnamese and General Westmoreland blandly makes a racist observation about the Asian view of life as “cheap and plentiful”), and projects a romantic image of the Vietcong as liberators as well as an image of

the Vietnamese as victims of American brutality, we cannot un-problematically position this film as an “antiwar” piece in the same sense that the earlier films were—insofar as these films saw release while the war was still raging and made persuasion of the public toward American pullout or the inevitability of a Communist victory their general objective—because *Hearts and Minds* reaches the public after the United States has ceased its role as a combatant in Vietnam. It is a film, however, which suits perfectly the radicalized mood of that era (the post-American stage of the Vietnam War, and the general malaise of suspicion and distrust toward the government in the wake of the Watergate scandal) and celebrates American citizens—like the proud and loving mother of a deserter—who have come to reject the official explanation for the war and demand that the “real” villains (the generals and politicians) be called to account. Suitably, Daniel Ellsberg—the perfect emblem of an American’s journey from innocent faith in the anticommunist crusade to relentless doubt and questioning of its practice, appears several times in the film, at one point reciting the litany of “lies” that every Cold War president from Truman to Nixon had been telling the American public, the recent and (recently disgraced) president being the worst offender.

Hearts and Minds is, rather, a cautionary film, a retrospect upon the war which points to the “lessons” of Vietnam. There are several, and not all of them are explicitly stated, but at least two are clear: Americans should never confuse legitimate movements for independence within emerging post-colonial entities with countries falling as “dominoes” to Communism, and they should not trust political and military leaders who employ the rhetoric of anticommunism in order to garner public acceptance of their bloody agendas. These are lessons which should, if absorbed and reflected upon properly, prevent the American people from allowing their government to trick them into another such imperialist, immoral, and bloody venture. But Davis’s pessimistic assessment of American culture makes clear that propensities for racism, militarism and fascism are too deeply rooted in American society to give the sympathetic viewer much hope that Americans will in fact learn anything from their Vietnam experience. After a series of biting clips in which Davis lets average Americans expose themselves as know-nothing boors preoccupied with frivolities—he interviews a truck driver who is so ignorant of the situation in Vietnam he guesses, when pressed about his knowledge of the American role, that Ho Chi Minh is an ally of the United States; an air-headed cheerleader blithely tells him she doesn’t understand or care about Vietnam, as she is only concerned with things that affect her life immediately; he interviews a man in Western garb eating barbecue who dismisses the notion that Vietnam has had any effect on his life or on the American dream—he has one of the repentant Vietnam veterans he interviews neatly voice this concern over the American failure to come away from the Vietnam

disaster any wiser. “Do you think we’ve learned anything from all this?” Davis asks Randy Floyd, a former Air Force pilot, who has just tearfully confessed his guilt over dropping ordnance on the Vietnamese countryside and knowingly killing civilians and destroying their homes. “I think we’re trying hard *not* to learn anything from it,” Floyd says, wiping his eyes.⁸⁷

As I have discussed previously, the romanticizing of the Vietcong/NLF and the North Vietnamese is common in antiwar polemical literature and in later examples of the atrocity narrative like *Standard Operating Procedure*, as well as in these antiwar films. *Hearts and Minds* is no exception, and this sympathetic treatment of the “underdogs” as liberators and progressive revolutionaries is woven into the film’s overall leftist, antimilitarist, anti-anticommunist stance. But whereas the earlier antiwar films (mostly foreign productions) like *In the Year of the Pig* take the benevolence of the Vietnamese Communists for granted, as something that needs no explaining to a European or otherwise non-U.S. audience, *Hearts and Minds*, directed by an American director and aimed primarily at an American audience, undertakes the valorization of Ho Chi Minh and his southern allies in such a way as to garner the average, conventionally patriotic American’s approval of them and at the same time illustrate the public’s failure to recognize genuine historical parallels between the heroes of the American war for independence from colonialism and the Vietnamese “heroes” of the same type of war. During an American Revolutionary War display (which includes men in British and colonial American military uniforms and bearing Revolutionary-era weaponry) on a summer day in Central Park, Davis walks around with camera and microphone interviewing participants and spectators, all of whom are clearly conventional in their attitudes about American history and the Vietnam War. One of the men, in a Continental Army uniform, gives a dramatic lecture to the crowd:

What we’re trying to get you to understand is that these people were giving up everything they had—putting their lives and property on the line—in order to defeat an oppressive invader. It was a nasty conflict. Some people remained loyal to and supported the British. In some ways, it was like a civil war.⁸⁸

The irony is lost on the man in the Revolutionary War uniform, but not lost on Davis. Substitute “American-backed government” for “British” and the man could just as easily be talking about the Vietnam War. The NLF guerillas are heroic like the original American revolutionaries in that they have given up the comforts of a normal life for a hard and dangerous existence in the jungle, at the mercy of the Americans’ terrible weapons. Any objection regarding the possibility that not all Vietnamese want to live under Communist rule is swept away by the implicit comparison between Vietnamese loyal to the GVN and the British loyalists of the Revolutionary War. Davis

here tries to make it easier for the average viewer to understand *why* the antiwar Left might take a stance on the NLF which would seem repugnant to most Americans, even those who rejected the official rationale for the war. When one compares a GVN with supporters of the British troops or traitors like Benedict Arnold, the conventionally patriotic American is given pause. But the pessimistic Davis ultimately suggests that the lesson will not sink in. When he asks one man, appropriately dressed in a British uniform, if he sees any parallel between the Vietnam War and the American Revolution, the man's expression becomes hostile and he replies, sharply: "Men are killing and men are getting killed. That's the parallel." There is no point of comparison beyond that. The man's hostility to Davis's question and his resistance to any sort of reflection recalls Randy Floyd's remark: "I think we're trying hard *not* to learn anything from it."⁸⁹

The Americans who *have* learned something of value from their experiences in Vietnam, in Davis's film, have done so at a terrible price. They have, like Randy Floyd, condemned themselves to live with a heavy burden of guilt and shame for the rest of their lives, or they have, like the double amputee Bobby Mueller, resigned themselves to living out the remainder of their lives in irreparably damaged bodies. Floyd's wound is psychic, and Mueller's is physical, but what both share is a deep disillusionment with the country that sent them into the war. Floyd tells us how he gradually, as a result of his Vietnam experience, came to regard the anticommunist dogma of his conventional American upbringing as jaundiced and mendacious—to the point where he can no longer trust his government. Mueller tells us that the loss of his legs and his athletic abilities hurts him deeply, but what hurts him even more is his inability to love his flag and country anymore. As David Grosser points out, in his analysis of *Hearts and Minds*, veterans like Floyd and Mueller are positioned within the film in order to lend the antiwar movement the experiential credibility that only disillusioned veterans' voices can provide. By presenting the plight of these victims—Vietnamese as well as American—of anticommunist ideology and U.S. militarism, Davis hopes to get his audience to empathize with the antiwar position.⁹⁰

Walking Wounded: Images of Damaged Veterans

By the early 1970s, the American part in the drama of Vietnam was coming toward its end; all major combat units had been withdrawn by the end of 1972. Although domestic unrest over the war generally dwindled rapidly after Nixon suspended the draft and began pulling back from Southeast Asia, the war and its aftermath did not cease to occupy American culture. As we have seen, the thematic concerns of the atrocity narratives and war crimes tribunals and various hearings and public discussions of American war crimes and their implications culminated in *Hearts and Minds*, which flickered across movie screens in the United States a year after the Nixon administration and the representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam signed the

Paris Peace Accords. Literature, drama, and film in sympathy with the aims of the antiwar movement began to shift the focus from wartime atrocities to other aspects of the Vietnam War, or, perhaps more accurately, other aspects of the war's legacy. The most important of these was the theme of the returned veteran as "damaged goods" or as a permanent casualty. These veterans of an unjust and illegal war had become spiritual, moral, and physical cripples, like Mueller; or haunted, like Floyd, by nightmare memories of the horrors he had witnessed and participated in, his mind and body slowly wasting away from the drugs he had learned to take in Vietnam along with the deadly toxins that he was exposed to in the bush unwittingly.

The "damaged veteran" figure, of course, is not new in twentieth-century American literature and film about war. A handful of films from the late 1940s and 1950s about World War II veterans in postwar society focus on this theme. Two perhaps familiar examples are *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1947), in which three veterans, all wounded in one way or another—physically, psychologically, or both—attempt to adjust to civilian life with varying degrees of success, and *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1956), in which Gregory Peck plays a businessman haunted by his combat experiences during the war. In literature, perhaps the earliest prototype of the "damaged veteran" narrative is Dalton Trumbo's antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun* (1936), which features a horribly disabled landmine casualty as its protagonist—a blind, deaf, and dumb veteran of World War I who has become reduced to little more than a conscious torso incapable of doing anything for himself. But narratives about damaged Vietnam veterans do not generally focus on this type of casualty; the physical wound, in representations of damaged Vietnam veterans, is not as important as the psychic wound, and the psychic wound of Vietnam veterans has a political significance, whereas the nightmares and flashbacks in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* are not to be understood as anything but the inevitable response of an average man to the reverberations of a traumatic experience. The political significance of the Vietnam casualty becomes clear once we look at the literature (and, to a much lesser extent, film) in which this "damaged veteran" figures prominently. The psychic casualties are the manifestations of participation in an immoral and criminal war during which the veteran lived in an atmosphere of routine, officially condoned brutality and atrocity.

An entire body of professional (as well as amateur) psychological and sociological literature about Vietnam veterans as sufferers from "post-traumatic stress disorder" surfaces during this period and permeates representations of veterans in the early and mid-1970s.⁹¹ The PTSD veteran-victim, according to the bulk of the literature, is not only burdened with guilt and shame and remembered horrors but prone to violent and sometimes deadly outbursts. In, Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), one of the more recent expositions of Vietnam

service-related PTSD for the lay audience, the “berserk” status of the traumatized veteran is central. Combat veterans who have entered “berserk” states in Vietnam (akin to the wild, adrenaline-charged frenzies of the famed medieval Nordic “berserkers”) become psychotic walking time-bombs who might snap at any minute under the spell of a flashback and murder innocent bystanders. “If a soldier survives the berserk state,” writes Shay, “it imparts emotional deadness and vulnerability to explosive rage to his psychology and a permanent hyperarousal to his physiology—hallmarks of post-traumatic stress disorder in combat veterans.”⁹² Other symptoms of PTSD include, as Shay writes (referring to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III-R* and the World Health Organization’s *Classification of Mental and Behavioral Disorders*), hostility and mistrust toward others, depression, withdrawal, paranoia, and estrangement. From 1972 through 1976 the image—one might even say stereotype—of the veteran as a “walking wounded” or traumatized, lingering casualty, exhibiting pretty much these same characteristics (along with the tendency toward unpredictable and explosive violent rages) shuffles across the stage in plays like David Rabe’s *Streamers* and *Sticks and Bones* (both 1972), appears as a major character in a wide range of films, from low-budget shockers *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and Bob Clark’s *Death Dream* (both 1974) to Hal Ashby’s sentimental drama *Coming Home* (1976) and Martin Scorsese’s violent urban thriller *Taxi Driver* (1976). This figure inhabits the pages of popular novels like Thomas Harris’s *Black Sunday* (1974) as well as more “literary” novels such as Tim O’Brien’s *Northern Lights* (1975) and Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974), as well as memoirs such as Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976).⁹³ Even though the “damaged veteran” representations peaked during this period, this character enjoyed a long afterlife well into the 1980s and 1990s. Stephen Wright’s bleak novel *Meditations in Green* (1983), which recounts the struggles of a Vietnam veteran battling a heroin addiction inextricably bound up with his war experiences, and Lewis B. Puller’s autobiography *Fortunate Son* (1991), an exceedingly dark first-person account of a crippled veteran’s gradual descent into alcoholism and suicidal despair, are two examples of the endurance of this type in fiction and non-fiction about Vietnam veterans. Certainly the “damaged veteran” image has been employed as an interpretive framework and applied to the veteran during the post-Cold War period in at least one instance, as a cursory referencing of two Timothy McVeigh “unauthorized biographies” makes clear. Films about the Persian Gulf War and its aftereffects often deal in the same “damaged veteran” and “walking time bomb” imagery. In *Courage Under Fire* (1995), the combat veterans—both officers and enlisted men—deal with their painful memories in the aftermath of the conflict by drugging and drinking. A Lieutenant Colonel and former tank commander (Denzel Washington), haunted by the knowledge of his responsibility for the deaths of comrades in a friendly-fire

incident during the war, takes to the bottle and turns away from his wife and children; a similarly hard-drinking NCO (Lou Diamond Philips), guilty about his role in the fragging death of a female officer (Meg Ryan), commits drunken suicide by positioning his car on a train-track. William Lustig's low-budget horror film *Uncle Sam* (1997), in which an enraged Gulf War veteran goes on a bloody and maniacal rampage after recovering from severe burns incurred during combat), is perhaps the successor to the equally tasteless *Death Dream* (which is a sort of updated screen version of W.W. Jacob's classic horror tale "The Monkey's Paw" with a dead Vietnam veteran as the mangled son returning to his parents). No doubt, as the current war in Iraq continues to produce its share of psychological and physical casualties the "damaged veteran" image will begin to enjoy a resurgence of vogue in film and print. As Dr. Shay makes clear, the larger significance of PTSD and the "damaged" status of Vietnam veterans ultimately involve a judgment or series of value judgments upon the war itself. One of the veterans interviewed in *Achilles in Vietnam* seems to sum up Shay's assessment of America in Vietnam for him: "It was all evil. All evil. Where before, I wasn't. I look back, I look back today, and I'm horrified at what I turned into. What I was. What I did. I just look at it like it was somebody else."⁹⁴ The traumatizing of the veteran and the persistence of his memories of evil and atrocity inscribe the war itself, once again, as immoral and evil.

I turn finally to Stephen Wright's 1983 novel *Meditations in Green*, one of the more radically experimental texts about the Vietnam experience, which takes as its main concern the notion of the spiritually and/or physically damaged Vietnam veteran's plight in a society that seems to want to forget the shame of the war, and drugs and drug addiction play a major metonymic role in the narrative. *Meditations in Green* eschews the formal conventions of more accessible narratives like *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* or *Dog Soldiers* and opts for the dark surrealism of an experimental antiwar Vietnam novel like William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed* (1969), but whereas in Eastlake's novel the political critique is not necessarily in the forefront of the narrative, Wright's novel is much more aggressively leftist. And whereas Eastlake's narrative voice is often playful and comic, Wright's is bitter and sardonic. The experimentalism of a surrealist novel like *The Bamboo Bed*, likewise, has little to do with politics, other than a vague association with countercultural experimentalism and the avante-garde. *Meditations in Green*, on the other hand, is structured in accordance with the description of the traumatized consciousness in the literature of PTSD. "Traumatic memory is not narrative," writes Dr. Shay. "Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments." Shay might have benefited from a reading of *Meditations in Green* (Wright is in fact a Vietnam veteran), in

between all of his interviews with PTSD victims, for this conception of traumatized memory is precisely what informs the nonlinear structure of the novel, which appears to the reader (at least initially) as just such a series of disconnected fragments. In this novel the fragments are flashbacks to horrible scenes from the war which continually bubble up to the surface of the narrator's consciousness and haunt him during his struggle to build a meaningful and fulfilling life after his return from Vietnam. Wright's study of former soldier James Griffin, who ekes out a miserable, drug-plagued existence in post-Vietnam America and struggles to cope with the evil memories which resurface persistently from the depths of his consciousness, explores the demoralization of its protagonist, and by implication, the demoralization of the veteran, echoing the notion prevalent in PTSD literature that the specific nature of Vietnam combat trauma engenders the ruination of the soul. As in Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, heroin in Wright's novel functions as a many-faceted symbol—of corruption, of the immorality of the war and its lingering, poisonous influence, and of the psychic scars and trauma of war. On the face of the narrative, and perhaps most importantly, heroin serves a more concrete purpose: it is the protagonist's chief method of repressing his shameful, painful memories of the time he spent in Vietnam.

I close my chapter with this novel, first of all because it is now entering the ad hoc “canon” of Vietnam novels and beginning to enjoy, after praise from contemporary literary giants like Don DeLillo (who describes the novel's achievement, in a blurb on the back cover of the 2005 reprint, as a precise rendering of “that brutal hallucination we desperately wanted to end”), the same “serious novel” status that *Going After Cacciato* has enjoyed for many years. So as the novel enters the literature curriculum and is taught in more courses it will no doubt play a significant role in the formulation of students' conception of the nature and meaning of the Vietnam War. I close with this novel secondly because it seems to me to sum up, in a retrospective way, the primary thematic concerns and narrative strategies of “immoral and criminal war” discourse. It depicts the U.S. military as corrupt and brutal. It depicts the Vietnamese as victims of American and American-backed repression. It takes the regularity and ubiquity of American atrocities and war crimes for granted. And it works through the political implications of the “damaged veteran” scenario, leading the reader to draw more or less the same conclusion arrived at by the Vietnam-era Left and the burgeoning PTSD industry of the 1970s.

As Griffin seeks personal peace and reconciliation in the 1970s after the war, suppressed remembrances of absolute horror well up without warning and present themselves with utmost clarity. This was something conservatives hated, for they believed that such an emphasis presented a disgraceful image of the military and reinforced the notion that soldiers in Vietnam

were murderers who used dope to bury their shame and guilt. Former president Nixon, writing in 1985, confidently rejected the notion that the majority of “American soldiers were addicted to drugs, guilt-ridden about their role in the war, and deliberately used cruel and inhumane tactics.”⁹⁵ For by this time—in the 1980s—the conservative movement was gaining ascendancy in American political and popular culture. When the Right concerned itself with Vietnam veterans and their issues, it often vehemently denied the antiwar movement’s claims regarding the effects of war and military service on the human being (i.e., that it was morally degrading, dehumanizing, and exploitative). As I will show in Chapter Four, conservatives (to include Vietnam veterans who rejected the ideological stance of the Left and antiwar veterans toward the war) maintained that most American veterans of the war were now well-adjusted, productive members of society, proud of their service in Vietnam. *Meditations in Green* refuses to participate in such a political rehabilitation. The novel offers its readers a sordid picture of a drug culture pervasive among low-level enlisted personnel; it depicts field-grade American officers as calmly planning torture, genocide, and the wholesale destruction of Vietnam’s ecological system; finally, it depicts the veteran’s inability to make a smooth transition from the war to civilian life as the measure of his sensitivity and humanity.

The novel focuses only on the activities of a single unit, the 1069th Intelligence Group, during a specific period of the war (the year 1969) as filtered through James Griffin’s memory. Yet the conversations among both the enlisted men and the officers often imply certain truths of the larger war that lurk beyond the perimeter of the 1069th’s compound, beyond the temporal boundaries of the year 1969, and beyond the rim of the narrator’s memory. Informed by much of the black humor of Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, the novel is perhaps much darker in its vision of the military. Wright’s army—specifically the 1069th Intelligence Group—is not so much governed by absurdity as it is by evil. Wright’s officers—Captain Raleigh and Major Holly—are the moral equivalent of Mafia hit men or Nazi thugs. Their insistence on cleanliness and neatness seems obscene in light of what goes on inside the compound, which, as Griffin finds out shortly after arriving to his first duty assignment, is “interrogation”—the euphemism for torture. The walkways are bordered with “white fencing and tulip bulbs” at the commandant’s insistence: “Whenever the General came up on one of his periodic briefing visits Major Holly liked to show him around the compound, impress him with the order, the cleanliness, the growing beauty of the 1069th’s physical appearance under his command.”⁹⁶ Lackeyism and brown-nosing prevail among the officers, who are only concerned with punching the tour ticket necessary for their professional development. Winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese is a laughable proposition; they are more concerned with winning the hearts and minds of superior officers who

can boost their own careers. The General himself is a fussy and exasperatingly petty tyrant probably modeled after the insufferable General Dreedle of Heller's *Catch-22*. He enjoys belittling Major Holly, asking him to bend down and wipe mud and dog-shit off of his boots while he meditatively puffs on a cigar; the servile Major Holly, willing to do anything in order to get on the General's good side, obliges, but then of course Holly's frustration flows rather freely down the chain of command. "Humiliation," as one of the NCOs in the book remarks gruffly to Griffin, "Goddamned army runs on it."⁹⁷

While material of this kind might seem the bland and somewhat clichéd stuff of *Beetle Bailey* comics or *Gomer Pyle*-type barracks farce, there is plenty of horror in the novel, and it is all the more disturbing because of its casual side-by-side juxtaposition with such silliness. Since most of the action in the novel takes place in a rear-area base camp, in which the soldiers enjoy a reasonably fair standard of living, the horror, for the most part, is not that associated with combat and the heat of battle, as it is in more conventional war narratives (although there are a few scenes in which Griffin experiences the terror of mortar attacks, and he is wounded at one point when ordered to accompany a foot patrol out into the jungle on a rescue mission for some downed pilots). Rather, what disturbs Griffin the most is his vivid recollections of the goings-on in the "interrogation section," a euphemism for "torture chamber": the screams of the victims, the sights of the terrible injuries inflicted upon them by their American tormentors, the smells of burning flesh and torture victims soiling themselves in their agony. Reading *Meditations in Green*, or at least certain parts of it, is almost like reading a surrealistic, drugged-out version of *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*. As in Kolpacoff's novel, as well as in the nonfiction atrocity narratives, torture and brutality are policy, simply the ways things are done. Upon arriving at his first assignment, he learns firsthand of what philosopher Hannah Arendt has called, in a famous phrase describing the Nazi Adolph Eichmann, the "banality of evil." Captain Raleigh, the chief of the interrogation section sits at a desk regaled with homey pictures of wife and kids while a Vietnamese woman—"a detainee"—in a cage against the opposite wall lies semi-conscious in a pool of her own urine. The officers refer to the interrogation section as "the Dental Clinic" in a grim joke that simultaneously obscures and hints at the hideous methods that the interrogators employ in order to extract information from suspected Vietcong and Vietcong sympathizers. Indeed, the novel's moral center of gravity is an extremely disturbing account of American and ARVN officers conducting the brutal interrogation of a prisoner, using electrocution. In the somewhat implausible but nevertheless revolting climax to this scene the man's scrotum becomes a charred, smoking husk.⁹⁸

Wright's choice of a rear-echelon military intelligence unit rather than a combat unit doing bush patrols as the focus of the novel may very well have been the result of his own particular experience as a veteran; nevertheless the choice reflects a desire to make the sort of implications about Vietnam that a standard combat narrative cannot. Intelligence is the brains of the army, where all the planning takes place. Atrocities which happen in the field—of the My Lai type, for instance—might result from combat fatigue and stress and therefore have some mitigating factors attending them; the atrocious tortures in Wright's novel look even more systemic and cold-blooded than those in Kolpacoff's novel.

The Afterlife of the “Immoral and Criminal War”

I have tried to show in this chapter how a certain frame of reference coalesced in the context of specific historical and cultural circumstances, and the sort of “cultural work” (or perhaps more accurately, *counter-cultural* work, if we accept the reasonable assumption that Left ideology has never enjoyed the privileged position that liberal and moderate conservative ideology enjoys in American culture) that literary and filmic genres like the radical polemic, the atrocity narrative, and the political documentary have performed.

Although the historical and cultural circumstances which spawned the discursive formations affiliated with the “immoral and criminal war” view no longer exist, there is no question that the above-mentioned genres and the political stances inscribed within them have continued to perform the same type of counter-cultural work that they did in the late 1960s and early 70s. If anything, the radical critique became more refined and elaborate during the post-Vietnam era, as committed leftists like the historian (and former antiwar activist) Gabriel Kolko pondered the war from the vantage point of the temporal downstream. Kolko's magisterial Marxist analysis/history *Anatomy of a War* (1985), which sanctifies Ho Chi Minh and elevates the Vietnamese revolutionaries to heroic status even more unabashedly than Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake*, has since become the Ur-text of Vietnam War historiography for subsequent scholars like the left-leaning Marilyn Young, whose *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* bears the unmistakable stamp of Kolko's influence. At least two major Hollywood Vietnam War films of the Reagan era, Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), generally follow the basic plot conventions of the atrocity narrative, although Stone's film is the one which adheres to these conventions almost to the letter. The innocent and generally morally upright protagonist witnesses the wanton killing of a Vietnamese woman, which is generally looked upon with approval by all in the unit except for the conscientious minority of the protagonist himself and Sergeant Elias. In Kubrick's film, the protagonist sinks to the level at

which he is compelled to shoot a young Vietnamese girl at point-blank range while his comrades cheer him on. Kubrick's film, like Sack's novel, focuses primarily on the dehumanizing, degrading effects of military regimentation upon the individual human being and then goes on to illustrate the concrete effects of this brutalization and dehumanizing in Vietnam.

Chomsky's popularity has increased rather than waned with the passage of time. His pronouncements on the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, in forums like *The Bill Maher Show* and in the two recent documentary films about his life and work, echo his pronouncements on the war in Vietnam three decades ago. Radical political documentary in the manner of *In the Year of the Pig* and *Hearts and Minds* has, of course, enjoyed a resurgence in the films of Michael Moore, whose two most recent productions, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9-11* (2004), employ the same techniques of collage and strategic juxtaposition of images to generate an internal cross-examination of dominant ideology. The latter of the two examples is practically a direct descendant of *Hearts and Minds*. The clearest example of the recent resurgence of interest in American military atrocities and war crimes has been the flurry of television and print news coverage over the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, and since then, the other Global War on Terrorism-related scandals involving detainee abuse at Guantanamo Bay. Since April 2004, when the story emerged, a veritable industry of Abu Ghraib-related commentary and analysis has sprung up and continues to churn on a year after the revelation. Indeed, in the immediate wake of the scandal, the ever-reliable Seymour Hersh quickly produced a book-length narrative detailing his investigation of the scandal and his tentative tracery of responsibility all the way up the chain of command from offending soldiers like Lyndie England and Charles Graner to prison commandant Janice Karpinski to General Tommy Franks to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and finally to President Bush himself. Hersh's *Chain of Command* bears an almost uncanny resemblance in its narrative shape to *My Lai Four*, or to be fair, I should say the pattern of crime, cover-up and punishment in the Abu Ghraib scandal parallels that of the My Lai Massacre in almost a mirror-image of itself, although admittedly the scale of the crimes at Abu Ghraib are nowhere near approaching those of My Lai.

Notes

¹ Jim Neilson, *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998): 7-9.

² I rely here on the standard accounts of the Tet Offensive: see Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1983): 529-581 for a summary of the events. The most comprehensive to date remains Don Oberdorfer's *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

³ Clarence R. Wyatt offers an analysis of the ways in which the clash of official optimism and the realities of Tet illustrate this "credibility gap" in his study *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 168-69.

⁴ According to Frances Fitzgerald, who offers a favorable view of the National Liberation Front, the guerilla movement's "achievement" during Tet "testified to the strength of its organization." In other words, the NLF resonated with the southern populace whereas the Americans and GVN did not. See *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1972): 219-20.

⁵ See Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988). He provides a thoroughgoing discussion of reporters' early troubles with MACV; of especial interest is his account of the refusal of General Paul Harkins (Westmoreland's successor) to come clean about the defeat of the ARVN by the Vietcong during their first decisive engagement. 280-89.

⁶ David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70s* (New York: Basic Books, 2000): 225. Frum offers a succinct formulation of the political demographic during the late 1960s and early 70s: "Thirty years of economic progress had transmuted the labor-farmer Roosevelt majorities into the rural-suburban Nixon majorities."

⁷ Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 140-41. The MLK quotation is taken from this source.

⁸ Neilson, *Warring Fictions*, 119.

⁹ Gary Allen, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (Rossmore, CA: Concord Press, 1972): 33.

¹⁰ Karnow, *Vietnam*, 615. Nixon's "silent majority" speech was televised on November 9, 1969.

¹¹ Quoted in Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 226.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, "On Genocide." *Ramparts* (February 1968): 69-70.

¹³ "Mike Mansfield Questions American Policy." In Robert J. McMahon, ed. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, 1990): 184.

¹⁴ "George Ball Dissents, 1965." In McMahon, *Major Problems*, 234.

¹⁵ "George F. Kennan Criticizes the American Military Commitment." In McMahon, *Major Problems*, 265.

¹⁶ "Carl Oglesby Denounces the 'Liberals' War, 1965." In McMahon, *Major Problems*, 478.

¹⁷ Robert Bly and David Ray, *A Poetry Reading Against the Vietnam War* (New York: American Writers Against the War, 1966): 4.

¹⁸ Bly and Ray, *A Poetry Reading*, 6.

¹⁹ "Proclamation of the Antidraft Resistance, 1967." In McMahon, *Major Problems*, 485.

²⁰ "Proclamation" 485.

²¹ David Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 142.

²² Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam*, 145.

²³ Sartre, "On Genocide," 67-69.

²⁴ See Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalization of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996): 165-78.

²⁵ Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim's *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin, 1992) is the definitive account of the My Lai massacre.

²⁶ Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 363.

²⁷ Noam Chomsky, *At War With Asia* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1970): 64.

²⁸ Quoted in Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 13.

²⁹ Quoted in Douglas Brinkley, *Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War* (New York: William Morrow, 2004): 347. Brinkley's overview of the Winter Soldier Investigations and Kerry's participation in them (pp. 346-77) is useful. According to Brinkley, Kerry himself was "uncomfortable" with some of the radical rhetoric employed by fellow participants and organizers. He loved the allusion to Paine's *American Crisis* in the title "Winter Soldier" and saw his models as "Paine, Jefferson, Lincoln" as well as MLK. He did not care, however, for the "activists who quoted Vladimir Lenin or Mao Zedong for inspiration." 348.

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- ³⁰ James Simon Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure: Notes of a Draft-Age American* (New York: Avon Books, 1971): 13-14.
- ³¹ Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 13-14.
- ³² Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 73.
- ³³ The invocations of the “mere gook rule” in the confessional literature are too numerous to list. Mike McCusker’s testimony in *Standard Operating Procedure* should suffice as a representative example: “Every dead Vietnamese was counted as Vietcong, because they would not be dead if they were not Vietcong, whether they were ninety years old or six months old.” ³⁴
- ³⁴ The quotation is not from the memoirs but from Erhardt’s brief appearance in the 1983 PBS documentary film *Vietnam: A Television History*.
- ³⁵ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956): 222. Mills’s chapter “The Warlords” remains one of the most comprehensive analyses of militarism and the American military system available. Mills defines militarism as “‘a case of dominance of means over ends’ for the purpose of heightening the prestige and increasing the power of the military.”
- ³⁶ Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam*, 136-37.
- ³⁷ Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 30.
- ³⁸ Quoted in Neilson, *Warring Fictions*, 123.
- ³⁹ John Sack, *M* (New York: New American Library, 1967): 13.
- ⁴⁰ Sack, *M*, 168.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 13.
- ⁴² Sack, *M*, 43.
- ⁴³ Information on Victor Kolpacoff, other than the brief overview of the author’s career on the back flap of the novel (which is the source of my claim) is virtually nonexistent. Kolpacoff has apparently been silent since the publication of *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*.
- ⁴⁴ Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 47.
- ⁴⁵ Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 47.
- ⁴⁶ Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 51.
- ⁴⁷ Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 143-44.
- ⁴⁸ Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 158-60.
- ⁴⁹ Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (New York: New Press, 2003): 287.
- ⁵⁰ Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 166-68.
- ⁵¹ Neilson, *Warring Fictions*, 117.
- ⁵² Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 211.
- ⁵³ Kolpacoff, *The Prisoners of Quai Dong*, 209.
- ⁵⁴ A comprehensive account of Operation Cedar Falls available in Schulzinger 199-201.
- ⁵⁵ Jonathan Schell, *The Real War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000): 191-92. *The Real War* collects Schell’s two 1968 *New Yorker* pieces *The Village of Ben Suc* and *The Military Half*.
- ⁵⁶ Schell, *The Real War*, 98.
- ⁵⁷ Schell, *The Real War*, 87.
- ⁵⁸ Schell, *The Real War*, 92-93.
- ⁵⁹ Schell, *The Real War*, 80.
- ⁶⁰ Daniel Lang, *Casualties of War* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969): 12.
- ⁶¹ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 21.
- ⁶² Lang, *Casualties of War*, 24.
- ⁶³ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 26-27.
- ⁶⁴ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 29.
- ⁶⁵ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 34.
- ⁶⁶ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 58.
- ⁶⁷ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 90-91.
- ⁶⁸ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 89.
- ⁶⁹ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 97.
- ⁷⁰ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 104.
- ⁷¹ Lang, *Casualties of War*, 18.
- ⁷² Lang, *Casualties of War*, 67.

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- ⁷³ Seymour Hersh, *My Lai Four: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1970): 7-8.
- ⁷⁴ Hersh, *My Lai Four*, 8.
- ⁷⁵ Hersh, *My Lai Four*, 8.
- ⁷⁶ Hersh, *My Lai Four*, 13.
- ⁷⁷ Hersh, *My Lai Four*, 9.
- ⁷⁸ Hersh, *My Lai Four*, 9-10.
- ⁷⁹ Hersh, *My Lai Four*, 13.
- ⁸⁰ Quoted in Brinkley, *Tour of Duty*, 346.
- ⁸¹ Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 364.
- ⁸² Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 369.
- ⁸³ Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 365.
- ⁸⁴ Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 369.
- ⁸⁵ Kunen, *Standard Operating Procedure*, 369.
- ⁸⁶ Michael Renov, "Imaging the Other: Representations of Vietnam in Sixties Political Documentary." In Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1997): 262.
- ⁸⁷ Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds* (Warner Brothers, 1974). The director's commentary track on the 2002 Criterion Collection DVD edition of this film is illuminating. Interestingly enough, Davis, anticipating the criticism, professes that his objective was never to demonize the military or veterans. He describes his own experience in the U.S. Army during the 1950s in positive terms. I might add that *Hearts and Minds* is the only one of these Vietnam-era political documentaries to remain in print either in VHS or DVD format. None of the other films were available for viewing, and I relied on the accounts of them in Dittmar and Michaud's extremely useful anthology of critical essays on Vietnam War films.
- ⁸⁸ Davis, *Hearts and Minds*.
- ⁸⁹ Davis, *Hearts and Minds*,
- ⁹⁰ David Grosser, "'We Aren't On the Wrong Side, We Are the Wrong Side': Peter Davis Targets (American) Hearts and Minds." In Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, 277.
- ⁹¹ B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley attribute the "creation" of PTSD and the explosion of PTSD psychological and sociological literature in the early 1970s to the antiwar movement's steadily increasing influential role among psychiatrists. "Prominent members of the APA held antiwar sessions at the organization's conferences," they write. "Some delivered papers on the responsibilities of therapists to be antiwar advocates." The authors identify famous Yale psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, a "zealous opponent of the Vietnam War," who "tirelessly spread the word that Vietnam veterans would prove to be a national nightmare" as one of the major players providing the impetus in the revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* to include PTSD. See *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (Dallas: Verity Press, 1998): 141-43. Burkett and Whitley's approach is admittedly unfriendly to the antiwar movement and the Left in general, and involves an extensive attempt to expose many of the "traumatized" veterans interviewed by Lifton, Mark Lane, and other antiwar writers as fakes who either never set foot in Vietnam or never saw combat.
- ⁹² Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994): 98.
- ⁹³ Director John Frankenheimer turned Harris's novel about a terrorist attack on the Superbowl into a blockbuster film of the same name in 1977. Bruce Dern plays an embittered and disgraced Vietnam veteran who agrees to help the Palestinian terror group planning the attack, out of the desire for revenge against the country that sent him to war and ruined his life.
- ⁹⁴ Quoted in Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 185.
- ⁹⁵ Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985): 10. The above-mentioned *Stolen Valor* is largely an elaboration upon this point.
- ⁹⁶ Wright, *Meditations in Green*, 283.
- ⁹⁷ Wright, *Meditations in Green*, 94.
- ⁹⁸ Wright, *Meditations in Green*, 103-9. This torture scene is exceptionally brutal and is far more graphic than anything in the previous atrocity literature of the 1960s and early 70s.

CHAPTER 3

THE LIBERAL CENTER AND THE “TRAGEDY WITHOUT VILLAINS”

The adage echoes down the corridors of time, applying to many individuals, in many situations, in many ages. People are human; they are fallible. I concede with painful candor and a heavy heart that the adage applies to me and my generation of American leadership regarding Vietnam. Although we sought to do the right thing—and believed we were doing the right thing—in my judgment, hindsight proves us wrong.

—Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect*

It was all a sad accident, he would have told them—chance, high-level politics, confusion. He had no stake in the war beyond simple survival; he was there, in Quang Ngai, for the same reasons they were: the luck of the draw, bad fortune, forces beyond reckoning. His intentions were benign.

—Tim O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato*

The Vietnam story is a tragedy without villains.

—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage*

The Post-Vietnam Era and Liberal Apologetics

As the American role in the Vietnam War diminished after Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho signed a cease-fire agreement early in 1973, public discourse and popular culture in the United States shifted its focus toward other subjects. A number of domestic, rather than Southeast Asian, problems—a rising crime rate, a slowing economy, and a mounting energy crisis—increasingly became the focus of books and magazine articles on “current events” as well as films and television programs (as the rising popularity of urban crime/police dramas indicated). Americans turned their attention inward. For the Vietnamese, of course, the conflict was far from over. Their temporarily interrupted civil war would continue less than two years after the departure of the United States, ending with North Vietnam’s seizure of Saigon and its re-unification of the country under the DRV banner in April 1975. The cease-fire agreement was, in fact, little more than a shaky truce during which the Nixon administration could provide itself with a “decent interval” between the U.S. withdrawal and the inevitable North Vietnamese seizure of the South. This would create the illusion, for Nixon, of having achieved “peace with honor”—in other words, of having honored his commitment to President Thieu’s South Vietnam while complying with the wishes of both his constituency and the Congress, both of which were firmly set against the continuation of any U.S. involvement in the war. As far as public opinion in the United States was concerned, “Vietnam” was over when the Hanoi government released the last American prisoners of war one month after the agreement had been signed.

When President Thieu declared in the spring of 1974 that the war had begun again, the American media, preoccupied with the Watergate scandal, took little notice. Watergate itself, for those who had been fierce opponents of the “immoral and criminal war” during the days of U.S.

involvement, stood as the supreme vindication of their arguments, even more, perhaps, than the publication of the *Pentagon Papers*. But even though one of the charges against the president considered during the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings concerned his allegedly illegal bombing of Cambodia, the ongoing war in Vietnam was no longer at the center of public attention. With U.S. troops no longer in the South, and with American bombs no longer pounding the North, the urgent “immoral and criminal war” paradigm’s hold on public discourse and print culture gradually faded as that which had sustained it—the American presence in Southeast Asia—drew to a close. In place of the militant, incendiary rhetoric of the antiwar Left arose a conciliatory rhetoric associated with the political center. The centrists calmly called for “healing” the wounds in an America sundered by the upheavals of the previous decade, for “moving past” the tragic episode in order to focus on resolving those domestic problems which had persisted into the 1970s; for turning inward so as to reflect and reconsider the national purpose in the world.

This vision of Vietnam as an American tragedy became the chief mode through which historians, novelists, filmmakers, politicians, and their publics remembered the war during the 1970s. In the popular culture of the period spanning 1975 to 1980, several notable—both commercially and critically successful—films, novels, and memoirs offered highly sympathetic portraits of veterans, which attempted, without excusing the atrocities that some of them had participated in, to convey a new understanding of the problems they had faced in Vietnam as well as the problems they had faced upon arriving back in the United States. The first veteran-authored texts on Vietnam to win significant critical approval—Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* (1977) and Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978)—both attempted to convey the frustration, confusion, and physical suffering of the foot soldier and implicitly asked readers to take certain mitigating circumstances into consideration before allowing the harsh judgment inscribed within the leftist atrocity narratives to stand unchallenged. Films like Hal Ashby’s *Coming Home* (1978) and novels like Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* (1979) focused on the plight of the returned veteran: his inability to readjust to civilian life, to deal with physical handicaps incurred during his service, or to cope with the nightmares of violence that haunted his shattered mind. In the same way that these texts countered the demonization of the veteran that had been a staple of rhetoric in the “immoral and criminal war” mode, others offered a much less condemnatory reassessment of those Americans who had occupied the policy-making and war-managing positions during the war. Michael Herr’s memoir *Dispatches* (1977) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) both depicted high-ranking officers as either dismally stupid or hopelessly mad (rather than as cold-blooded, calculating butchers); similarly, they suggested

that the American role in the war had been undertaken in good faith, and that the excesses of U.S. military power were symptomatic of a general loss of control, a “collective nervous breakdown,” as Herr put it.¹ Likewise, popular histories of the war, like Gloria Emerson’s *Winners and Losers* (1976) constructed the American intervention as an enterprise forged in the spirit of ignorant optimism and its primary architects as deluded do-gooders who, because of deeply ingrained prejudices and illusions, could not foresee the consequences of the clash between the American and Vietnamese cultures.

The “tragic” view of the war, without question, dominated representations of Vietnam in American popular culture during the Carter years, and whenever the late war was the subject of public discourse, this centrist interpretation usually supplied the keynote themes: forgiveness and reconciliation between former enemies, rejecting accusation and vilification in favor of sympathy and understanding, and moving beyond ideology or partisan politics toward the establishment of a new national spirit of consensus. Avoiding the extreme judgments of both the far Right and the radical Left, the adherents of the centrist interpretation (most of them of a moderate-liberal political orientation) eschewed divisive rhetoric and finger-pointing, attempting instead to seek common ground between those groups which had hurled abuse at each other in the recent past: the hawks and the doves, the hard-hats and the demonstrators, the draft-dodgers and the veterans, as well as the Vietnamese and the Americans. The centrist view represented a compromise between the political extremes insofar as it accepted some of the basic principles of each position while softening or modifying them considerably. Like the “immoral and criminal” paradigm, the centrist paradigm, for example, accepted the notion that the war had been flawed from its very inception. But whereas the leftists had shouted that the American intervention had been a *crime*, the centrists maintained that it had been a *mistake*. And, like the hawks who had supported the American presence in South Vietnam until the bitter end, the centrists generally believed that the ideal for which Americans had originally gone to Vietnam—defending freedom from tyranny—had been noble and beautiful. But whereas the conservatives clung, even after the war, to the containment paradigm as a valid model of geopolitical relations for post-Vietnam America, the centrists argued that containment itself, which had seduced the United States into needlessly expending its resources and its sons in a faraway land, was a fundamentally flawed view of the world. One had to abandon outmoded concepts like the domino theory and the Munich analogy so as to preclude a repetition of the “mistake” that had been made with Vietnam.

The tragic paradigm’s emphasis on the notion of a morally ambiguous war (in which neither side was wholly “good” or entirely “evil”) functioned as a conciliatory gesture toward the two extremes of the hard Left and the far Right. The former had harped on U.S. atrocities against

the Vietnamese, the latter on Communist atrocities against American prisoners of war and Vietnamese civilians. The tragic vision appeared to take a neutral, objective stance toward the question of war crimes, emphasizing, in effect, that “both sides did terrible things.” One of the most common methods of establishing the moral ambiguity of the war, in centrist interpretations of Vietnam, is the characterization of American motives, as well as the warriors themselves (from top-level generals and policy-makers to combat soldiers), as multifaceted, complicated mixtures of good and evil (rather than as sadistic killers or pure-hearted knights). In the tragic literature that concerns President Johnson and his administration, the protagonists are typically represented as such. The same applies to the films and literature dealing with the war from the fighting man’s perspective. The Marines in Vietnam, according to *Dispatches*, are comprised of an “amazing” mixture of “incipient saints and realized homicidals, unconscious lyric poets and mean dumb motherfuckers with their brains down in their neck.”² The entire American effort in Southeast Asia, as Herr sees it, is remarkable for its duality of purposes, its wavering between “extremes of peace and violence.” Americans in the war show their “cruelty” but also their “tenderness.” As one nameless pilot in the narrative remarks with poignant irony: “Vietnam, man. Bomb ‘em and feed ‘em. Bomb ‘em and feed ‘em.”³

In mainstream foreign policy discourse of the late 1970s, the most common theme touching Vietnam-United States relations was a tendency to postulate, in retrospect, a moral equivalence between the two former enemies during the war. Doing so, as Jim Nielson has pointed out, “simultaneously acknowledged and elided the notion of U.S. culpability” by representing American and North Vietnamese war crimes as equal in their gravity.⁴ As President Carter made clear in 1977, the United States had indeed caused a great deal of unnecessary suffering in Vietnam during the course of the war, but so had the communists. Hence the unfairness of premier Pham Van Dong’s demand for war reparations as a condition for the normalization of relations between the U.S. and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Americans, according to the president, had no reason “to apologize or to castigate [them]selves or to assume the status of culpability” since “the destruction was mutual.”⁵ Such arguments attempted to undermine the Left’s claims to moral authority by de-romanticizing the Communists, but the centrist position was also willing to admit, as the Right was not, that the U.S. record in Southeast Asia was badly marred by shameful and atrocious excesses. According to this line of reasoning, *both* the Americans and the Vietnamese were responsible for the havoc wrought by the war. The implication was clear: Both parties were equally guilty for the destruction of the war, so assigning blame was impossible.⁶

If Carter's leveling of the moral distinctions between the former enemies rattled the die-hard leftists who refused to assent to such a revisionist version of the war as history, then his proposed program of amnesty for the wartime draft-dodgers angered the conservatives and proud veterans who felt that such a move implied a moral equivalence between the young men who fled to Canada and their peers who answered the call of duty to serve with honor in Vietnam.⁷ Carter responded by complicating that which appeared black-and-white to the rigid ideologues. In his view, Vietnam had presented Americans with a "profound moral crisis" for which the wars of the previous fifty years had left them unprepared.⁸ According to conventional wisdom, the world wars and the Korean conflict had presented the United States with clear-cut, morally unambiguous cases in which a stronger nation unjustly imposed its will upon weaker neighbors. Leaders, political and military, as well as soldiers, had not been required to deal with complicated moral dilemmas before making decisions and acting (although a look at the literature of the world wars and Korea demonstrates that this was clearly not the case). In Vietnam, however, a host of troubling questions confronted decision-makers at the highest and lowest levels, as well as those who faced the possibility of becoming involved in the war involuntarily through conscription. For the military personnel in Vietnam, distinguishing friend from foe in a conflict that seemed more like a civil war than a case of outside aggression became the chief obstacle to decisive action as well as the primary source of the misery and suffering endured by both sides. For the potential draftee, there were several legitimate doubts about the morality of the war, since the government never made an entirely convincing case for the notion of "aggression from the North." Accordingly, from the tragic perspective, both labeling veterans as "murderers" or "baby-killers" and branding draft-evaders "cowards" or "traitors" was improper and unfair. The conscientious objectors who fled the country rather than take part in what appeared to them an immoral war were probably acting in good faith, as were the equally conscientious young men who felt that serving the nation in a military capacity was the right thing to do. Since the utterly confusing conflict provided no easily discernible clues to people of goodwill and intelligence who sincerely wished to do the right thing, passing judgment on those who had acted according to the dictates of conscience, whether they had been combat soldiers or student demonstrators, and punishing them with exile or crippling stigma was unwarranted.

The ostensible purpose of Carter's conciliatory rhetoric and his concomitant policies was to try to reunite a nation broken by its most tumultuous internal conflict since the Civil War. At the same time, no doubt, he desired to help place an America whose prestige had been severely tarnished by the Vietnam debacle on a more friendly footing with some of its former Cold War enemies. Carter's vision of the war's significance, as it was for many of its other centrist

interpreters, was essentially one of redemption through suffering. Vietnam figured, in this view, as a grave trial by fire, a dark and sad chapter in the nation's history. But the America who emerged from it would be better, wiser, and more humane than the one who had entered it.

The containment paradigm of the 1950s and early 60s had looked forward to future problems in Southeast Asia. Its adherents and its critics had argued over its merits and its flaws in the shadow of a possible war with the Soviet Union. The rhetoric of the "credibility gap" and the "immoral and criminal war" functioned as interpretive tools through which to view the conflict in Vietnam as a crisis of the present. But the view that held sway over much of American political discourse, literature, and film on Vietnam during the late 1970s was wholly retrospective. It functioned as an interpretive lens through which to look at the war as a historical development of the most profound significance: America's first defeat. Historians, along with members of the foreign policy elite, groped for "lessons"—however bitter—which might redeem the massive destruction and waste of human life. For the adherents of the tragic paradigm, the greatest good resulting from the disaster would be a new wisdom that marked the maturity of the national spirit. The wiser America would have learned from the Vietnam experience about the limits of its power and, at the same time, would have begun to shed those ingrained containment-bred prejudices which led her to intervene in the first place. If the redemption of wisdom, in classical tragedy, could only come about after the great pain and suffering of the hero, then America's new awareness of itself would redeem the horror of the war.

The theme of redemptive wisdom surfaced in many retrospective assessments of the Vietnam conflict, from books and articles to public addresses. Ralph White, in the closing chapter of his *Nobody Wanted War* (1970), asked the simple question, "What can be one to prevent other wars?" The answer, for White, lay in the six great lessons that Americans could take away from their tragedy: 1) Americans should avoid leaping to conclusions about communist aggression in developing countries, 2) Americans should view facile generalizations about falling dominoes and monolithic conspiracies with skepticism, 3) America should not intervene by force in the Third World "unless 'the people' clearly want our help and other countries share that perception," 4) Americans should define our goals in terms of social equality rather than in terms of military superiority, 5) Americans should educate themselves "in tough-minded empathy (not sympathy) with the Communist point of view," and 6) Americans should recognize the danger in whipping up jingoism and pseudo-patriotic hysteria.⁹

White's cool pragmatism stood in contrast to the impassioned eloquence of a speaker like John Kerry, but their message, at bottom, was basically the same: What could America learn from Vietnam? Kerry, a decorated war hero who returned to the United States opposed to the

war, testified on behalf of Vietnam Veterans Against the War before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1971. Softening the militant tone of the initial portion of his address, he ended with an appeal to the center, calling for reconciliation and healing, urging his listeners to “pacify [their] own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more.” His last words articulated a vision of the war as a great, if painful and costly, lesson that the nation would be better for having learned:

So, when, thirty years from now, our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys asky ‘why,’ we will be able to say ‘Vietnam’ and not mean a desert; not a filthy, obscene memory, but mean, instead, the place where America finally turned, and where soldiers like us helped in the turning.¹⁰

Half a decade later, long after the U.S. had withdrawn from Vietnam, former war correspondent Michael Herr articulated a similar vision in *Dispatches*. Vietnam was, hopefully, the “turnaround point” at which Americans’ misguided idealism and their arrogant belief that it was their anointed task to civilize the rest of the world had been checked once and for all.¹¹ By the time *Dispatches* had been published, the theme of Vietnam as redemptive wisdom gained through suffering had already established itself as a staple in public discourse on the war and its legacy.

That such a rhetoric of redemption and reconciliation, of “lessons” and “mistakes,” should rise to prominence at such a time in American history is perhaps not surprising. The war was, for all practical purposes, over in the spring of 1975. The few remaining American military and civilian personnel left in Vietnam by then had scrambled aboard helicopters on April 9 and fled the country as the North Vietnamese closed in on the southern capital of Saigon during the last phase of their drive to take control of the South. The final televised images of America in Vietnam—frantic Vietnamese desperately trying to climb aboard overstuffed airlifts, sailors pushing helicopters off the crowded decks of an aircraft carrier into the South China Sea—seemed to epitomize the tragic futility and pointless waste of blood and treasure that had characterized the entire war. For many Americans, the events of what has since come to be known as “the sixties” had seemed to have run their course; the country was beginning to wake, as President Ford said in his first State of the Union address, from its “long national nightmare.” If he was referring specifically to the Watergate scandal, Watergate was but the culmination of or the final act in the long and painful drama that had begun, for many, with the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. With the end of the war and the gradual disappearance of the polarized domestic atmosphere that had accompanied it, it was perhaps inevitable that American discourse would grow less belligerent and more civil on both sides of the political spectrum, that

the moderate center would come to the forefront of American politics, and that a spirit of introspection, forgiveness, and reconciliation among the residents of a house once divided would become the hallmark of public discourse in the years following the fall of South Vietnam.

Fatalist History and the Rhetoric of Inadvertence

The roots of the centrist interpretation stretch back well before 1975, to the period immediately after the Tet Offensive. Even as the atrocity narratives proliferated, as famous intellectuals clamored for war crimes trials, and as the radical leftist interpretation of the war reached its apex in books like *My Lai 4* and *At War with Asia*, other voices—primarily those of certain historians and foreign policy intellectuals—were laying the foundations of the “tragic” paradigm. During the early months of 1968, many “fence-sitters,” who remained undecided about the war, as well as many hawks who had generally been supportive of it, began to come out in favor of gradual or immediate withdrawal and a negotiated settlement with the North Vietnamese. As early as May 1967, Robert McNamara had made it plain to Johnson that he could no longer continue to support the president’s Vietnam policy in a memorandum that “crystallized [his] growing doubts about the trend of events and set the stage for the increasingly sharp debate that followed.”¹² McNamara’s public expressions of confidence in the progress of the war had already begun to conflict with his private worries for some time prior to the crucial memorandum; for most of the world outside administration circles, the military and political failures that Tet exposed came as a surprise. Their startling recognition of the hollowness of official optimism, perhaps, led many of the major media luminaries to perform such abrupt about-faces in their attitudes towards America in Vietnam. News anchorman Walter Cronkite surprised many viewers (and upset Johnson) by publicly abandoning his neutrality and declaring the war unwinnable in a special television documentary that CBS aired shortly after his two-week fact-finding trip in February 1968. “It is increasingly clear,” he observed, “that the only rational way out would be to negotiate—not as victims, but as an honorable people who . . . did the best they could.”¹³ To what extent the media’s attitude influenced the administration’s is unclear, but there can be little doubt that the cumulative effect of McNamara’s resignation and Cronkite’s reversal was to cause many other key figures to reverse or drastically revise their previous positions. The “Wise Men”—President Johnson’s advisory panel of distinguished statesmen, retired generals, and foreign policy experts—suddenly renounced their strongly hawkish views and urged the President to “take steps to disengage.”¹⁴ Many of the administration’s top cabinet members and advisors—Clark Clifford, Harry McPherson, Bill Moyers—came to similar conclusions. Clifford, McNamara’s replacement, quickly came around to his predecessor’s viewpoint after a revealing question-and-answer session with the Joint Chiefs. The wave of reversals perhaps crested with Robert

Kennedy's announcement of his candidacy for the presidency on March 16. Kennedy, a former hawk who had vigorously supported his deceased brother's stance toward communism in Southeast Asia, came out on an antiwar platform vowing to withdraw U.S. troops immediately if elected. In March 1968, the president himself declared that he would not seek re-election. His stated reason for declining a second term—laying aside personal interests and partisan causes in order to bring closure to the war as quickly as possible—probably belied his primary motive: that of escaping the dreaded possibility of going down to posterity as the first American president who lost a war.

As many of the liberal anticommunists—from journalists to administration personnel—who had supported intervention in Southeast Asia during the early and middle 1960s began reversing their stances on the war after the Tet Offensive, they grasped at explanations for the failure of the Kennedy-Johnson policy in Vietnam. Many of these repentant hawks had been directly affiliated with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and involved to a greater or lesser extent in the war's decision-making processes. Given the Left's clamorous demand for war crimes trials in the late years of the war, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that many of the officials in question attempted to portray the war as a tragic mistake for which no one can be held accountable. The ensuing self-exculpatory narratives they produced form a substantial body of literature that advances a particular interpretation of Vietnam, one designed in large measure to exonerate the original architects of the war without attempting to validate the war itself. These were the men—as the title of David Halberstam's 1972 book would phrase it with pointed irony, "the best and the brightest"—who, swept up in the dream of the New Frontier, had constructed America's Vietnam policy in the belief that the fate of democracy rested on holding the line in Southeast Asia. Unlike the Joseph McCarthys and Barry Goldwaters, however, they were fiercely committed to democratic ideals, staunchly supportive of social progress and civil rights, and strongly in favor of civilian control of the military. These liberal hawks were, in the view of Halberstam and several other contemporaneous writers, flawed giants. The great irony in their downfall was that they went to war more out of fear of the Right than out of fear of Communism. Fearing that, if they looked like spineless appeasers of Sino-Soviet desires for expansion their beloved social programs would be vetoed out of existence, they intervened in Vietnam and Laos so as to be able to achieve the grand ideals of the Great Society. For Halberstam, these reluctant warriors ended up losing everything—the war as well as their noble dreams of social change:

There was a sense of irony here, as if each player had lost; not just a major part of his personal reputation, but much of what he had truly believed in and wanted, much of what he had manipulated for in the first place. Johnson of course had

never wanted to go to war; he had become a war president reluctantly in large part because he feared that otherwise he would lose the Great Society. He had instead gotten the war, but the Great Society was stillborn; it lacked the time, his resources, his second term to bring to it any genuine effectiveness. Which he was bitterly aware of. . . .

For McNamara, the great dream had been of controlling the Pentagon and the arms race, but the war had ruined all that. War Secretaries do not limit the power of the military, and to a large degree he had lost control. The war absorbed so much of his time, his energy, his credibility, that he had little to give to the kind of controls he might have wanted. It was not by accident that his name would come more to symbolize the idea of technological warfare than it would civilian control of the military.¹⁵

The story of America and Vietnam, “in its origins, development, conduct, and denouement,” as another writer put it, “fits models of literary tragedy provided by Aristotle, Seneca, Shakespeare, and Hegel.”¹⁶ *The Best and the Brightest* indeed constructs its subjects—Johnson, McNamara, Bundy, Dean Rusk, Maxwell Taylor—on such a scale. They are not villains or monsters; they are men to be pitied. Halberstam censures them as fools, to be sure, but he never accuses them of wantonness or willful butchery. They are not bloodthirsty war-mongers but reluctant warriors dragged by a series of fateful circumstances into the conflict they wished so desperately to avoid. Despite his gadfly role against the military as a correspondent in Vietnam, the author shares many of the beliefs of the liberal hawks during the war’s early phase. Halberstam himself was a repentant hawk who, prior to his realization that Vietnam was a “quagmire” for America, enthusiastically supported the anticommunist crusade of Kennedy and Johnson. Emphasizing the notion of an “inherited” war, he paints a sympathetic picture of a man who “had always dreamed of being the greatest domestic President in this century,” and who “had become, without being able to stop it, a war President, and not a very good one at that.”¹⁷ The Johnson of *The Best and the Brightest* is a towering figure; enormously complex, tempestuous, stubborn; alternately vindictive and affectionate, generous and stingy; full of arrogance and hubris but also plagued with self-doubts and insecurities. A man whose vision of an America where compassion, equality, and racial harmony prevail was ruined by a war he never desired, he is indeed the stuff of tragedy.

One word, in fact, which recurs with significant frequency in conciliatory histories like *The Best and the Brightest* is “tragedy.” Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who served as one of President Kennedy’s close advisors, delivered the earliest full-blown (and perhaps definitive)

expression of the repentant hawk's view of the war as early as 1967, in his essay *The Bitter Heritage*.¹⁸ According to this little book, the entire Vietnam episode is a "tragedy without villains." As James Olson and Randy Roberts have pointed out, Schlesinger's underlying premise in this foundational text is that the war "resulted from unfortunate decisions made by well-meaning officials."¹⁹ Kennedy, Johnson, McNamara and the others really believed that they were acting not only in the best interests of America, but of the entire free world, according to Schlesinger. Indeed, Johnson's earlier characterization of the unselfish motives behind America's intervention in Vietnam echoes throughout *The Bitter Heritage*. "We want nothing for ourselves," the president had said in 1965, "only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way."²⁰ Reading such assertions of altruism through the carnage, destruction, and deception of the intervening four years, Schlesinger nevertheless heard the ring of sincerity in them. American leaders had not *deliberately* violated any international laws by intervening, as those who had branded Johnson and McNamara war criminals often argued. A sincere, disinterested desire to protect South Vietnamese independence, for this historian, led to a chain of events that ultimately spiraled out of control. Nobody could have foreseen that, and therefore nobody should be blamed:

In retrospect, Vietnam is a triumph of the politics of inadvertence. We have achieved our present entanglement, not after due and deliberate consideration, but through a series of small decisions. It is not only idle but unfair to seek out guilty men. President Eisenhower, after rejecting American military intervention in 1954, set in motion the policy of support for Saigon which resulted, two Presidents later, in American military intervention in 1965. Each step in the deepening of the American commitment was reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary. Yet, in retrospect, each step led only to the next, until we find ourselves entrapped today in that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia—a war which no President, including President Johnson, desired or intended. The Vietnam story is a tragedy without villains.²¹

The first two words in this passage (which would later serve as the title for Robert McNamara's self-exculpatory memoir) imply, of course, that what is now clear in hindsight was all confusion and chaos earlier. The decision-makers, blinded by the immediacy of events, were unable to see what their innumerable "small decisions" would eventually lead to. Other key words here, like "inadvertence" and "entrapped," similarly undermine any notion of responsibility, either individual or collective. *The Bitter Heritage* effectively conjures up a picture of innocent, idealistic American leaders unintentionally stumbling through history into a swamp of moral

uncertainty and frantically attempting to disentangle themselves and their country from a fatal snare. In Schlesinger's interpretation of history, America's involvement in Vietnam was the result of deterministic forces "set in motion" by events beyond the control of its leaders. His "tragedy without villains" scheme almost reads like a naturalistic novel whose characters are driven to commit crimes by their own illusions and their irresistible compulsions. Like Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, the Lyndon Johnson of *The Bitter Heritage* has blood on his hands, but the reader's response to the "murder" is complicated by the knowledge that the protagonist has in some sense been trapped by circumstances of which that crime was the inevitable result. In the same way that Dreiser presents Griffiths as a victim of the delusions and desires instilled in him during his formative years, Schlesinger presents Johnson as the victim of "the bitter heritage" of World War II-era notions of foreign policy—the domino theory, the Munich analogy, the idea that unchecked aggression in one corner of the world would only embolden power-hungry dictators to make further advances against liberty. Schlesinger and subsequent apologists for Kennedy and Johnson were quick to point out that the political figures who led the United States into Vietnam had come of age during World War II or the years immediately preceding it. They had acted in Vietnam, according to this explanation, in good faith. Unable to conceive of a civil conflict whose ambiguities brooked no comparison with the Europe of the 1930s, they misread the anti-colonial struggle of the NLF as a conventional invasion, like that of Germany into Poland two decades previous. However one might criticize the policy-makers' limited understanding of Vietnam's complex cultural and political dynamics, they could hardly be deemed criminals for acting on genuine concerns and deeply held convictions. The tragedy of Vietnam, for Schlesinger, was one of wisdom come too late. By time the flaws in the logic of containment had become apparent to the men who had acted on its precepts, the war had taken on a life of its own, grinding on like an unstoppable, uncontrollable machine of destruction. Schlesinger's characterization of the war as tragedy, as William Gibson points out, renders "thirty years of American intervention in Vietnam" as "a Greek play in which the hero is struck down by the gods. In the face of the incomprehensible, absolution: fate decreed defeat."²²

A veritable horde of like-minded accounts, interpreting the war within the same conceptual framework, followed closely on the heels of *The Bitter Heritage*. Eric F. Goldman's *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (1969) anticipated Halberstam's portrait of the potentially great man ruined by Vietnam. Goldman lamented the downfall of an idealistic and progressive New Deal liberal who, if not for the war—a war he had not initiated, but rather inherited—could have been one of the greatest American presidents of history. Townsend Hoopes, in *The Limits of*

Intervention (1970), painted a similar picture of Johnson as the unfortunate heir of the Vietnam albatross. The great Texan appears, in Hoopes' narrative, as a well-intentioned but unsophisticated man focused almost entirely on domestic policy. He is a homespun president with little knowledge of geopolitics or the dynamics of international power relations, a man "from the beginning to the end, uncomfortable and out of his depth in dealing with foreign policy." For Hoopes, as for Schlesinger and Halberstam, Kennedy, Johnson, and their advisers were trapped in the prison-house of their own World War II- and Cold War-era notions of good versus evil and of morally unambiguous crusades against totalitarianism. "Like everyone else in the United States over forty," these men

were children of the Cold War in the sense that their thinking had been decisively shaped by that phenomenon. Still relatively young and impressionable when they emerged from the wholesale fighting of World War II, they had found that the fruit of victory was a bitter bipolar enmity stretching around the globe, and apparently restrained from the plunge into final holocaust only by a delicate balance of terror. They had lived in this political-military frame of iron for the better part of twenty years, urgently preoccupied with mortal struggle against a formidable Communist structure.²³

Goaded by their convictions into providing logistical aid and advisory support to Diem's regime, they slid down the "slippery slope" of intervention and become entrapped in a bloody civil conflict that nothing in their experience had prepared them for. Hoopes' metaphor of the slippery slope echoes Halberstam's notion of Vietnam as an insidious "quagmire" or as a torrential, muddy river that has begun to pull the United States slowly under. By the time it became clear to the liberal anticommunists that Vietnam was *not* a conventional case of dictatorship versus democracy, oceans of blood had already been spilled and America had already been plunged into civil strife. The damage, had, in effect, been done.

Former State Department official Chester Cooper, also employing the Bunyanesque image of a pilgrim America sinking into a swamp of uncertainty, described the war as a "tragedy of errors" in his book *The Lost Crusade* (1970). The title alone reaffirms the tragic thesis that the war was indeed a morally earnest enterprise, a genuine "crusade" to save the world from communism, however misguided or ill-informed. Cooper writes of a group of men full of "earnest hopes" for the cause of freedom, ultimately thwarted by their own confusion, ignorance and propensity for self-delusion and unfounded optimism. They were lured into an ever-deepening and increasingly destructive conflict by an illusory light at the end of the tunnel—a tunnel which became a labyrinth. Putting "the best gloss possible" on the corruption and

instability of the South Vietnamese, hoping that heavier bombing would bring Hanoi to the negotiating table, and expecting that injecting more U.S. troops into the South would stiffen the RVN's resolve and create an unacceptable rate of attrition for Hanoi, the "Johnson administration became lost in its own maze."²⁴

Several common themes recur throughout these historical narratives: Vietnam presented an ignorant and naive America with a dilemma for which there had been no historical precedent. Confronted with the unknown and the unconventional, the nation responded in a conventional fashion dictated by its experience in past wars. The very unconventionality and the moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War were precisely what lay behind the mayhem, the brutal violence, and the heavy-handedness of the American manner of waging it. Berserk with confusion and bewilderment, like an elephant in a tar-pit, the United States, according to these histories, reacted spasmodically and irrationally in the face of the unknown. In "tragic" narratives, the war often figures as a sort of fevered frenzy of violence, a fit of temporary insanity, in which America is not even aware of what the country is doing to itself or to Vietnam. How can we hold someone fully accountable, the fatalist historians implicitly ask, for actions committed in a deluded or deranged state? Only hindsight enables the myriad mistakes and fateful "small steps" to emerge clearly in the light of retrospective analysis. In the "tragic" histories, the political and military leaders who initiated and sustained the war are not mendacious charlatans or power-hungry war-lovers but earnest and sincere men who unwittingly fell under the spell of a dangerous illusion.

Despite the infinite ideological nuances and shadings of tragic texts in their interpretation of Vietnam, the tragic view generally took for granted the notion that the war had been, in some fundamental way, *wrong*—in its conception as well as its execution. Yet it never went so far as to suggest that Kennedy, Johnson, any of their cabinet officials or military subordinates knowingly did anything immoral or illegal. The "tragedy without villains" scheme, as its name implies, had little room for any sort of recrimination. If Kennedy and Johnson had blundered into Vietnam without intending to wreak wholesale havoc, then they were guilty, at the worst, of manslaughter, not premeditated murder. Rhetoric like this stood in sharp contrast to the demands for accountability in antiwar forums like the International War Crimes Tribunal (1967-68) and the Winter Soldier Investigation (1971), whose participants insisted that the government's deceitfulness was the clearest indication that the war-planners and managers, as well as the servicemen who committed atrocities against the Vietnamese, knew full well what they were doing. As an oblique response to these serious accusations, writings in the tragic mode frequently elaborated upon a context of extenuating circumstances within which the actions of those who

participated in the war, whether they were powerful presidents or lowly infantrymen, should be properly understood. Some of the most common explanatory threads in tragic texts run thus:

- ◆ The intensely pressurized atmosphere of anti-communism in which liberals of the early 1960s had to operate forced liberals with socially progressive ideals into responding to Communist expansion in such a heavy-handed fashion.
- ◆ The general ignorance of Americans regarding Asian affairs made the intelligent construction of an Indochina policy virtually impossible, and so the United States was doomed to plow blindly through Southeast Asian history, goaded on by the preposterous notion that the Vietnamese thought like Westerners.
- ◆ There was a vast cloud of moral ambiguity surrounding the questions of whether to intervene or escalate, and U.S. leaders had no precedent either in their own experience or in history which would prepare them to deal with those questions.
- ◆ The seeming inability to tell a friend from a foe boggled the minds of both presidents and privates. It nearly always hampered clear judgment and often resulted in bloody disaster. It was as hard for President Kennedy to tell whether Diem was a friend of democracy or an uneducable tyrant as it was for a field soldier to tell whether a villager was a Viet Cong sympathizer, an RVN loyalist, or a neutral bystander refusing to take sides.

Tragic texts elaborate upon these basic themes in a variety of ways. Histories like Schlesinger's and Halberstam's delineate the circumstances that had determined the war-managers' policies; memoirs, novels and films by and about American veterans of the conflict also submit, both implicitly and explicitly, evidence of mitigating circumstances to the court of world opinion. The popular memoirs, novels, and films which followed in the wake of these fatalist histories often took up these themes and elaborated upon them as they applied to the American fighting man in Vietnam. Herr's *Dispatches* complicated the picture of the veteran in New Left mythology as a sadistic rapist and baby-killer by redrawing the grunt as a mixture of tenderness and brutality, of sainthood and devilry. Likewise, by depicting the war as an episode of collective insanity, the book undermined the notion that the military carried out atrocities with due and deliberate consideration or implemented a genocidal policy. Caputo, in *A Rumor of War*, also sought to present a human image of the veteran to some of the two-dimensional stereotypes of Vietnam veterans that both the patriotic conservatives and the radical flag-burners had promulgated: "By the time Saigon fell in 1975, a lot of 'hawks' had an almost cartoonish view of the Vietnam veteran as a drug-addicted, undisciplined loser, the tattered standard-bearer of America's first

defeat. The Left drew an equally distorted picture of him as, at best, an ignorant hardhat with a gun, at worst as a psychopath in uniform.” Caputo, as he later explained in the postscript to the 25th anniversary edition of the book, intended to explode these stereotypes by forcing his readers to confront the ethical ambiguities of the war, by thrusting them “into the confusing, disturbing emotional and moral no-man’s-land where we warriors dwelled.”²⁵ In attempting to make sense of U.S. atrocities against the Vietnamese, writers like Caputo and filmmakers like Francis Ford Coppola often envisioned Vietnam’s jungle as a manifestation of nature’s essential cruelty, a place where the Western soul gradually casts off its thin cloak of civilized humanity and begins to degenerate to the level of the bloodthirsty savage. *A Rumor of War* and Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now*, reading the war through Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), both suggested that the brutality of the American military man in Vietnam was attributable to an atavism latent in all human beings. Both raised troubling questions about the appropriateness of judging “uncivilized” conduct committed in a savage world where “civilized” guidelines appeared laughable. While both Caputo and Coppola were extensively critical of American policy, they also made it abundantly clear that the primeval environment of Vietnam, where the normal restraints of civilian life did not exist, was primarily responsible for the murderous conduct of U.S. troops fighting there. Finally, O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, which has, since its publication, become the best-known and most widely read novel of the Vietnam conflict, is also probably the clearest expression of the “tragic” view from the field soldier’s perspective. Through O’Brien’s rendering of the thoughts and dreams of his protagonist, he vividly delineates some of the hopelessly bewildering moral dilemmas that the average trooper faced in the ground war. The soldiers of *Going After Cacciato* are benign but ultimately benighted warriors who, lacking the education or mental sophistication of their draft-card-burning peers back home, do not possess the ability to make ethically sound decisions in a strange and confusing war where easily recognizable “good” allies and readily identifiable “evil” enemies do not exist.

Putting the War Behind Us: The Carter Era and Public Memory

That the “tragedy without villains” had displaced the “immoral and criminal war” by the middle of the decade is perhaps most evident in the coverage of the event which seemed, for many observers, to mark the Vietnam War’s symbolic closure: the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Army in April 1975. The images and analogies that historians like Schlesinger, Hoopes, and Cooper had already employed while the war was still underway pervaded editorials on the war’s last chapter, in newspapers of all political persuasions. Commentators sounded most of the tragic historians’ staple themes: the end of Vietnam as the end of an American innocence; a coming to self-knowledge; an attainment of spiritual maturity; a new awareness that America’s

power to make the world safe for democracy was beset by considerable limitations. The mainstream media's interpretation of Vietnam, virtually across the board, echoed Schlesinger's primary thesis: the war, the newspaper editorials read, had been grounded in the noblest intentions, but mishandling and mismanagement, as well as a profound ignorance of the nature of communism, had led to the sad catastrophe. The *Christian Science Monitor*, for example, found the fatal flaw in the war's execution rather than its conception. "Many voices, including this newspaper," its editor wrote, "regard the Communist victory as a tragedy, believing the United States involvement in Vietnam to have been honorable, although the conduct of the war in both its political and military phases was fraught with mistakes and misjudgments." Even Anthony Lewis, in *The New York Times*, repeated the quagmire thesis: "The early American decisions can be regarded as blundering efforts to do good. But by 1969 it was clear to most of the world—and most Americans—that the intervention had become a disastrous mistake." Many who had been some of the war's most militant critics during the late 1960s were, by the mid-1970s, writing the Vietnam story along the lines that the tragic historians had lain down: the war-managers and military men had gone into Southeast Asia with the best intentions, but their best-laid plans ultimately proved inadequate and misguided. The *Washington Post* also echoed the "good America, bad war" reasoning of the moderate antiwar liberals, and redeemed the horror of America's longest conflict by configuring Vietnam, as America's fall from unselfconscious innocence into self-knowledge. "For the fundamental 'lesson' of Vietnam surely is not that we as a people are intrinsically bad, but rather that we are capable of error—and on a gigantic scale. That is the spirit in which the post-mortems on Vietnam ought now to go forward."²⁶ That spirit would indeed pervade the ensuing flood of "post mortems"—the post-Vietnam novels, memoirs, and films of the late 1970s—which many critics have regarded as the most aesthetically significant and enduring literature and cinema about Vietnam. Texts like *Dispatches*, *A Rumor of War*, *Going After Cacciato*, and *Apocalypse Now* would reject the moralizing leftist rhetoric and radical critique of American policy in favor of a humanistic stance which valorized ambiguity over certainty, the apolitical over the ideological, the timeless and the universal over the historically specific. The ascendancy of these texts to an elevated status in American culture signified that the divisive "immoral and criminal" rhetoric, by the late 1970s, no longer occupied a central position in the public imagination.

1977 is the year that many Vietnam War scholars view as an *annus mirabilis* for the literature of the conflict. It might also serve as a convenient reference-point to date the tragic paradigm's displacement of its predecessor. Zalin Grant, in his adulatory review of *Dispatches*, saw the publication of Herr's book as one of the clearest indications that the accusatory, finger-

pointing rhetoric of the New Left had passed its heyday. Herr, for Grant, offered a much more complex and sophisticated picture of the Vietnam episode than those who had clamored for war crimes trials during the late 1960s and early 70s. Grant welcomed *Dispatches* as a refreshing alternative to the rhetoric of the radical antiwar movement, which had achieved its dominion, as he recalled, “largely as the result of the ascendancy of the *New York Review of Books* and its chief polemicist, Noam Chomsky.” The Chomskian (or “immoral and criminal war”) perspective, Grant argued, was dated and “inappropriate now that the war was over.” Yet the radical leftist perspective had been “unsatisfactory” for other important reasons, primarily because it had fostered bad art. Its “self-righteousness and finger-pointing” had created a two-dimensional, didactic literature peopled with evil Americans and heroic Vietnamese; an endless string of mediocre atrocity narratives and anti-imperialist polemics which were formulaic, predictable and aesthetically uninteresting.²⁷

For Grant, the radical antiwar literature looked hopelessly dated and irrelevant by the late 1970s. It had doomed itself to oblivion by dealing too much in that which was ephemeral: namely, the politically fashionable and the historically specific. Only apolitical, de-historicized representations of the war, which sought to deal with larger questions of the human predicament unlimited to place or time, could hope to be of any relevance for generations of readers to come. For those future readers, Vietnam would not be a lived memory but a page in a history book. If the would-be creators of a Vietnam War literature hoped to have anything to say to tomorrow’s children, then they would have to go beyond politics, beyond ideology, to write about the eternal themes. The great merit of *Dispatches*, for Grant, whatever its other faults, was that it sought to do exactly that. Grant’s seminal essay was merely one out of several reviews that hailed the arrival of Herr’s memoir, yet it was perhaps the best expression of literary culture’s new attitude toward writing about Vietnam. As liberal humanism (the centrist ideology of the 1950s New Criticism) came to re-exert its temporarily interrupted influence over American letters, rewarding those authors who exhibited solidarity with its precepts, literary culture—the world of writers, reviewers, and publishers—functioned as one of the most significant forces, after Schlesinger, working to establish the war in the public memory as a “tragedy without villains.”²⁸

***Dispatches*: “No Clear Outline of History, No Certain Ideology”**

The publication of Michael Herr’s memoir—a loosely-organized collection of discursive reflections on the significance of events like the siege of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive, based upon a series of articles the author had written ten years earlier as a war correspondent for *Esquire*—signaled that a sea-change in the ideology of mainstream literary culture had indeed taken place since the early 1970s. Literary culture had, toward the middle of the decade, begun to

reassert the liberal humanist view of the role of literature and the aesthetic as existing on a plane above that of politics. Grant's assessment of the book, with its emphatic praise for its apparent transcendence of ideology, was typical of the tone of Herr's critical reception. Most reviewers focused purely on the aesthetic aspects of the book, as opposed to the political implications of what it depicted. C.D.B. Bryan, in *The New York Times Book Review*, praised *Dispatches* as the inaugural moment of a true Vietnam War literature. For Bryan, no other book "so far has even come close to conveying how different this war was from any we fought—or how utterly different were the methods and the men who fought for us." Herr's distinctive prose style, which "derives from the era of acid rock, the Beatles' films," and the "druggy, Hunter Thompson once-removed-from-reality appreciation of the Great Cosmic Joke," is his primary achievement insofar as it matches the crazed atmosphere of the Vietnam War.²⁹ Raymond Sokolov's review in *Newsweek* assessed the memoir along similar lines, characterizing *Dispatches* as a prime example of "Saigon and the Viet boonies refracted through the sensibility of the New Journalism" in the "souped-up, seemingly offhand, freaked-out" style of a Tom Wolfe.³⁰

Other critics saw Herr's fatalist rendering of Vietnam as the "mature" interpretation of the war in literature, which the passage of time and the cooling of passions had made possible. Roger Sales, in the *New York Review of Books*, for example, noticed the text's overwhelming suggestion that deterministic forces had pulled or sucked the United States into Southeast Asia against its own will. Titling his review "Hurled into Vietnam," Sales echoed Schlesinger's reading of Vietnam as an American tragedy in which the only villains are impersonal forces: blundering ignorance and historical destiny.³¹ Both Elizabeth Pochoda and Paul Gray, in their reviews, sounded one of the main themes of the fatalist historians—that of the Vietnam War as the failure of western rationalism. For Pochoda, *Dispatches* represented a "tapping into a general psychosis."³² For Gray, Herr presented Vietnam for what it really was: a surreal never-never land, an "irrational place" that was "beyond the grasp of logic."³³

Whatever aspects of the text these critics focused on, they commonly viewed *Dispatches* as one of the first genuinely literary or aesthetically meaningful treatments of Vietnam, precisely because it avoided the simplistic certainties of the ephemeral propaganda that both the Left and the Right had churned out during the war. *Dispatches* dealt in ambiguities and offered no solutions; it suggested rather than explained, and it eschewed moralizing. There was no passing judgment on the behavior of the U.S. Marines portrayed in the book; neither was there any righteous indignation toward the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. As a "literary" rather than a propagandistic production, *Dispatches* avoided the crude didacticism that was anathema to the liberal humanist critics.

Herr's book also exhibited the "literary" qualities of complexity, self-reflexivity, and technical sophistication that the polemical and propagandistic texts had lacked. Whereas the moralistic denunciations of the war quickly became dated, *Dispatches*, by rising above the ideological battles of the war years, guaranteed itself a lasting position in American literature. Herr's text, sprinkled with allusions to authors like Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, and Herman Melville, rose above the historical moment and placed itself along a thematic trajectory not specifically limited to the Vietnam War, these critics supposed. John Le Carre's highly favorable review, for example, saw *Dispatches* not as an exploration of a historically specific conflict but as a continuation of the tradition of Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and George Orwell. Rather than being a book specifically about Vietnam, it was a book with a more universal theme, that of "men and war in our time."³⁴ The more traditional critics praised Herr's self-conscious homage toward literary tradition, while younger critics, observing the rise of radically new conceptions of narrative in American fiction, also praised those linguistic and structural innovations that would eventually secure the text a niche in the canon of American postmodern literature: the striking conceits and surreal images, the highly wrought and distinct prose style laced with grunt slang and phraseology, the distinctly postmodern representation of time and space. But what reviewers and critics of all types found most admirable in the book was its refusal to provide certainties—either moral or historical—about the war itself. *Dispatches*, rather than propagandizing for either the Right or the Left, "insists an uninitiated reader be comforted with no politics, no certain morality, no clear outline of history."³⁵ Without moral or historical certainties, there could be no easy answers for what one historian would call "the question of American war guilt."³⁶ Certainly, *Dispatches* captured the absurdities specific to the Vietnam experience as *The Red Badge of Courage*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Catch-22* had captured the absurdities of their wars. Yet the recognition of war's absurdities does not necessarily constitute a negation either of a particular war or war in general. *Dispatches* refused to offer a clear-cut, readily identifiable denunciation of American purposes in Vietnam. Herr's Americans are naïve and silly, blissfully ignorant of history, but they are hardly evil imperialist invaders. Herr does not set up a "bad American, good Vietnamese" dichotomy; indeed, he even suggests that Vietnamese civilians were not the passive, innocent bystanders that the atrocity narratives had depicted.

At the same time, however, there is little in *Dispatches* to comfort the conservatives who maintained that the war could and should have been won but for the betrayals of the military by the media and the antiwar movement. Herr depicts the officials running the war as hopelessly blind to reality, paints (as if to belie the fiction of South Vietnam as a legitimate political entity) a picture of a Saigon so rotten with corruption one has to be "pathological" to find any redeeming

qualities in it; and ridicules containment rhetoric as nothing but “overripe bullshit” about “tumbling dominoes” and “maintaining the equilibrium of the Dingdong by containing the ever-encroaching Doodah.”³⁷ But *Dispatches* ultimately favors neither a radical leftist nor a rigidly conservative view of the war, as some more recent ideologically oriented critics have noted, registering their frustration with Herr’s inability to commit his text wholeheartedly to one position or another and criticizing his apparent neutrality in dealing with a war the immorality of which no one should be in doubt.

Dispatches, in the end, appeals to the political center rather than to the Right or the Left, and the text’s centrist perspective often resembles that of Schlesinger and other “tragic” historians, insofar as Herr emphasizes the role that chance and irrational behavior played in the war and suggests that historical determinism propelled America into Vietnam. He often repeats the mishandled-and-mismanaged-war thesis with his suggestion that U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia might have benefited the people of the region enormously had not the course of events taken a turn for the worse: “There was such a dense concentration of American energy there, American and essentially adolescent, if that energy could have been channeled into anything more than noise, waste, and pain it would have lighted up Indochina for a thousand years.”³⁸ The story here is one of tragically wasted potential; the vitality and vibrancy of the young superpower might have brought civilization and technological progress to the backward nations had mutual misunderstandings not stood in the way. The emphasis on American “energy” and “adolescence” also echoes Graham Greene’s initial characterization of Alden Pyle as boyish and innocent, full of energy—the typical American Cold War crusader who acts in good faith but whose inability to comprehend the complexities of Vietnam consigns his efforts to failure. The basic innocence of Americans in Vietnam—from marine grunts in the field, to spooks like Edward Lansdale and Robert Komer, to William Westmoreland himself—resurfaces throughout *Dispatches* consistently, in Herr’s choice of revealing quotations from grunts and generals. Like Schlesinger’s war-managers, a well-intentioned but ignorant bunch who had no idea how closely Vietnamese communism was intertwined with nationalist aspirations—optimistic rationalists who put their faith entirely in numbers, charts, and a vague notion of progress—the Americans in *Dispatches* are clumsy innocents abroad who break everything they touch. At several points during his recollections, the narrator recalls with poignancy the civilian officials’ optimism and idealism. He compares the “Mission” (CIA headquarters in Saigon) to a vast “intertwined ball of baby milk snakes.” For the most part, he muses, “they were that innocent, and about that conscious.” The MACV Pacification workers, who concentrated their efforts on winning the loyalty of the South Vietnamese peasantry, were like religious fanatics in their missionary zeal

for saving the country from communism: “They believed that God was going to thank them for it.”³⁹

Herr’s characterization of the American effort in Vietnam as an enormous enterprise in self-delusion invites the reader to view the terrible waste of life and resources as sadly futile, a war of idealistic purpose degenerating into a mad folly and spiraling out of control. As one of the major texts in the literature of the “credibility gap,” *Dispatches* vividly documents the abyss between the truth-claims of the war-managers, with their “books and articles and white papers” and the experience of the witness among combat troops. Yet Herr, unlike the Seymour Hershes, Bob Woodward, and Carl Bernsteins, never points to any criminal conspiracy of deception. The credibility gap is to be blamed, if anything, on the old, incurable American optimism. Officials like Westmoreland delude *themselves* first and foremost, and their ridiculous pronouncements, so at odds with reality, are merely symptoms of their disease. Thus Herr shies away from any blanket condemnation of the military in the manner of the antiwar rhetoric of the militant Left. The war managers and the generals are not the vicious, Nazi sadists or calculating murderers of the “immoral and criminal war” paradigm; they are trapped within their own prisons of optimism, forever chasing an illusory light at the end of the tunnel. “By the time that Westmoreland came home that fall to cheerlead and request-beg another quarter of a million men, with his light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel collateral,” Herr recalls in an anecdote, “there were people leaning so far out to hear good news that a lot of them slipped over the edge and said that they could see it too.”⁴⁰ The emphasis here on American innocence and ignorance essentially absolves the war-managers of guilt or responsibility in the same way that Schlesinger and the other tragic historians had absolved the Johnson administration.

Similarly, his conception of Vietnam as an insidious quagmire creates a sense of the war as a foreordained disaster, for which fate and historical destiny, rather than individual Americans, are to blame. The recurring references to ignored omens and portents in the text establish the notion of the American war-planners and managers as unwitting actors in a predestined scheme of disaster written in the stars. Accordingly, Vietnam becomes a tragedy of unheeded or misinterpreted prophecies. “One day in 1963,” Herr recounts in an anecdote which becomes emblematic of the policy-makers’ lack of prescience, “Henry Cabot Lodge was walking around the Saigon Zoo with some reporters, and a tiger pissed on him through the bars of its cage. Lodge made a joke, something like ‘He who wears the pee of the tiger is assured of success in the coming year.’ Maybe nothing’s so unfunny as an omen read wrong.”⁴¹ *Dispatches* thus presents Lodge and the rest of the Kennedy administration decision-makers as myopic, incompetent fools rather than as a vicious gang of deliberately conspiring criminals.

Herr also developed the centrist interpretation in other significant ways that the tragic historians had not explored. *Dispatches* places a heavy emphasis on the madness of the war in Vietnam, the irrational, orgiastic character of its violence, and the derangement of everyone caught up in it—combatants as well as observers, who move around in an expressionistic nightmare “like crazy people.”⁴² The memoir’s technique of stringing together jagged, non-sequential fragments of narrative (“illumination rounds”), as well as the rambling, seemingly crazed garrulity of its voice complement the theme of the “insane” war, which Herr expounds upon throughout the text.⁴³ We are confronted with nightmarish hallucinations, drug-crazed, psychotic marines (“doped to the eyeballs”) who chase seemingly invisible enemies, and lunatic officers who believe that it is necessary to destroy Vietnam physically in order to save it from communism. Herr describes Saigon during the Tet Offensive as a “city gone berserk” and the offensive itself as a “huge collective nervous breakdown,” a period of “total hysteria and no rules.”⁴⁴ American and ARVN forces squash the communists in Hue and Saigon “with total panic” and “maximum brutality.” Herr likens the U.S. military in Vietnam to a gargantuan, mindless machine that “could do everything but stop.”⁴⁵ Things are completely out of control, and the perpetual state of intoxication in which the Americans, their allies, and their enemies seem to operate contributes greatly to the confusion. Drugs are everywhere in *Dispatches*. Soldiers and correspondents alike constantly smoke marijuana and ingest LSD, not as a means of escape, but as a way of either heightening the aesthetic experience of combat or working themselves into a feverish, euphoric state that provides them with the courage to enter the breach. Tracer rounds chasing helicopters, nighttime artillery bombardments that light up the sky, and billowing bursts of napalm are beautiful but deadly psychedelic light-shows. Similarly, the music of the drug culture continually underscores these bizarre visual extravaganzas. The feedback-drenched guitar pyrotechnics of the Jimi Hendrix Experience and the surrealistic freak-rock of Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, which can be heard on portable tape players in any place from airborne choppers to dug-in bunkers, complement the lunacy and chaos of the fighting (Hendrix, a former paratrooper for the 101st Airborne, serves as the archetype of and model for the crazy black grunts, the “wiggly spades” and the “solid soul brothers smoking joints in the fields of Vietnam”). Finally, the memory of the war is like a terrifying flashback, an unreal nightmare from which the narrator is attempting to awake: “While we were there and the war seemed separate from what we thought of as real life and normal circumstance, an aberration, we all took a bad flash sooner or later and usually more than once, like old acid backing up, residual psychotic reaction.”⁴⁶

The cumulative effect of all these references to lunacy, both in the individual and in the mass, both congenital and drug-induced, is to suggest that the war is something akin to an episode of national, or collective, madness. Contemporary reviewers like Gray, Sales, and Pochoda, in fact, read *Dispatches* in exactly those terms. Herr's emphasis on madness and psychosis as determining factors in the war neatly cohered with the centrist interpretation in that it avoided ideology-based critique and implicitly blamed the conflict on mysterious circumstances beyond the control of the participants rather than on political systems or military strategies. The ire that writers on both the Right and the Left have expressed toward the picture of Vietnam and the war in *Dispatches* is a fair indication of the book's position along the ideological spectrum. Joseph Rehyansky, writing for the conservative *National Review*, objected to Herr's presentation of crazed, dope-smoking military men as a shameful disservice to the majority of troops who performed competently and bravely, and dismissed the work as "left-wing agit-prop."⁴⁷ Chomskian critic Jim Nielson, on the other hand, has argued that this idea of the Vietnam War as "part of a general psychosis, without further historical or ideological questioning, makes it seem an aberration rather than an extension of Cold War militarism, irrationality rather than a coldly calculated policy of aggression."⁴⁸

Herr undertook his most innovative elaboration of the liberal historians' "tragedy without villains" paradigm, ironically enough, by undermining historical certainty itself. Just as the tragic historians retreated from accusatory gestures by fashioning histories governed by accident and inadvertence, Herr's description of the dizzying multiplicity of conflicting historical statements, without privileging any of them, undercuts the moral certainties of both the Right and the Left. As Schlesinger unwittingly implies in *The Bitter Heritage*, ideology and the writing of history are inextricably linked. The debate over Vietnam among Americans, after 1975, is fundamentally an argument over conflicting statements regarding historical events. Making a case for either the morality or the immorality of America's role in the war inevitably revolves around certain claims about what happened and why. To say, for example, that the Vietnam War was first and foremost a *civil* war is to argue that Americans illegally interfered in something that was none of their concern. To say, on the other hand, that North Vietnam was conducting an illegal invasion of the South upholds the idea of intervention as a morally sanctioned action. The antiwar Left held that the NLF represented an indigenous popular force; the hawkish Right maintained that the guerrillas were merely Hanoi-controlled puppets. The Right held that South Vietnam was a real country in its own right with a will of its own; the Left held that it was an artificial creation of the United States set up to protect American interests in Indochina.

Generalizations like these, of course, often set the terms of the debate between doves and hawks, but more specific claims also became sites of interpretive struggle as well. The war's critics, for example, held that President Nixon's ordering of U.S. troops into "neutral" Cambodia and his bombing campaign in that country constituted war crimes; Henry Kissinger, in contrast, maintained that Cambodia's leader, Norodom Sihanouk, had provided his tacit approval before the administration made any move, thereby legitimizing both the bombings and the incursion. Similarly, the Left held that Nixon's operations in Cambodia created the instability that was ultimately responsible for the ascendancy of the Khmer Rouge in 1975 and their subsequent reign of terror and genocide. The Right, however, claimed that the antiwar element had betrayed Cambodia by tying the president's hands, cutting aid to the Nixon-supported regime there under Lon Nol, and effectively abandoning a defenseless people to the power-hungry communist Pol Pot. Political positions regarding the war inevitably rest on claims like these. Very few will deny a raw fact; it is the *significance* of the fact that is always in contention. Texts concerned with the history of the Vietnam War, whether they are conventional histories, novels, or memoirs, are also engaged in an interpretive struggle among themselves over the significance of given facts. They address the same questions, albeit in more formalized rhetoric and elaborate terms, and their answers inevitably bolster a particular view of the war's morality or immorality. This is precisely why a *definitive* history, complete with knowable causes and effects, is indispensable to absolutist thinking on both the far Right and on the far Left. Liberalism, which rejects absolutism, is loath to present us with a historical narrative with no room for uncertainties and ambiguities.

Herr proposes no such definitive account. The history of American involvement in Vietnam, as *Dispatches* presents it, is one of untraceable origins as well as one with unintended consequences. It possesses a "poison history, fucked in its root no matter how far back you wanted to run your trace."⁴⁹ And as Herr shows us, that trace can be extended backwards virtually infinitely. The welter of conflicting interpretations and claims to truth (none of which the narrator commits to) forecloses on the possibility of constructing a definitive history and thereby subverts the moral certitude of those who would assign blame:

You couldn't find two people who agreed about when it began; how could you say when it began going off? Mission intellectuals like 1954 as the reference date; if you saw back as far as War II [sic] and the Japanese occupation you were practically a historical visionary. "Realists" said that it began for us in 1961, and the common run of Mission flak insisted on 1965, post-Tonkin Resolution, as though all the killing that had gone before wasn't really war. Anyway, you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam

was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter; might as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils. Maybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Alden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge at Dakao, his lungs full of mud; maybe it caved in with Dien Bien Phu. But the first happened in a novel, and while the second happened on the ground it happened to the French, and Washington gave it no more substance than if Graham Greene had made it up too. Straight history, auto-revised history, history without handles, for all the books and articles and white papers, something wasn't answered, it wasn't even asked. We were backgrounded, deep, but when the background started sliding forward not a single life was saved by the information. The thing had transmitted too much energy, it heated up too hot, hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire there was a secret history, and not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring it out.⁵⁰

Virtually all of the major themes central to the tragic interpretation are present in this oft-quoted passage. The war figures as the "turnaround point" at which Americans were finally able to recognize the limits of U.S. power as well as the danger inherent in some of their national myths (City on a Hill, Manifest Destiny) and prejudicial tendencies (the diabolization of both the wilderness and the non-whites who inhabit it). Vietnam thus figures not as a land with a people but as a painful trial through which the United States must pass, a "lesson" it must learn in order to reach maturity. Here the narrator makes the conciliatory gesture so common in late 1970s discourse on Vietnam; the war, in *Dispatches* and other contemporaneous texts, becomes allegorized as an American journey to self-knowledge. The aftermath of the war is a "coming to terms" with this dark underside of the American character, a healing which allows the nation to grow and move on past the tragedy. The notion that we "might as well lay it" on the Puritans, since it was they who established those myths and perpetuated those prejudices, precludes the possibility of blaming any living persons for the war. The frontier mentality and the "metaphysics of Indian-hating," to use Herman Melville's phrase, which Americans have inherited from their forbears, the narrator tentatively suggests, were much more decisive factors in the formulation of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia than the actions or decisions of any single person in a position of power during the Cold War. The idea of Vietnam as an extension of Puritan racism, and as its inevitable doom, repeats the fatalist thesis of the tragic historians that deterministic forces, much vaster and far more powerful than the war-planners' designs, propelled

America into Indochina. And there is the suggestion, central to Schlesinger's rendering of history, that wisdom came too late to prevent the tragedy. By the time the war-planners and managers had realized how deeply they were "backgrounded," the nation was deeply involved in the conflict and had already suffered the expense of many thousands of lives, which made rapid extrication highly problematic. The war had by then developed an uncontrollable momentum of its own, and so "not a single life was saved by the information."

But even as Herr recapitulates the thematic strands that Schlesinger had inaugurated in his history, he undercuts the idea of "history" itself in this passage, as well as in other important segments of the text. As one of the seminal evocations of the "postmodern condition" in American writing, *Dispatches* participates in the discourse of epistemological skepticism toward "grand narratives" incipient in American "postmodern" fiction of the late 1970s.⁵¹ Herr's text abandons traditional assumptions about the accessibility of history (namely, the notion that it is possible to transmit a coherent and value-free assemblage of historical facts in a chronological sequence that makes meaningful patterns in the flux of events appear self-evident). One of *Dispatches*' distinctly "postmodern" features, in fact, is its skepticism toward teleological histories, or historical narratives that pattern themselves upon a series of meaningful cause-and-effect relationships. The narrator, in the passage above, openly acknowledges that such projects are epistemologically impossible.⁵² While Schlesinger, Cooper, and Hoopes saw the war's history as ruled by chance, predetermined by deep-rooted flaws in American character, or as the inevitable outcome of many fateful "small steps," they nevertheless clearly outlined a knowable history, positing traceable causes leading to definite effects. The task they put before themselves was to flesh out and illustrate the relationships between the innumerable decisions and actions that put Kennedy and Johnson on the fateful path to war. Herr's skepticism toward the validity of such narrative schemes, on the other hand, leads him to undermine the notion of *any* kind of definitive, knowable rendition of the past.

Seminal "postmodern" novelists contemporary with Herr, like Robert Coover and Ishmael Reed, undercut the relationship between language and history, or between representations of history and history itself, with playful, if gross, distortions of an allegedly unassailable historical record. Herr, on the other hand, showed his readers how the history of the Vietnam War is contingent upon the political perspective of the historian. Ostensibly, he refers to three groups, each focused on a particular view of the war's nature and significance: the "Mission intellectuals," or the "spooks" of the early advisory effort; the "realists" who construct President Kennedy as the primary architect of the intervention; and those who blame (or credit) Johnson for the war. Clearly, the narrator views the conflict of interpretations among these

groups with an ironic eye. They are all interested, no doubt for political purposes, in advancing definitive statements regarding the chronological origin of the war, yet the dates they provide are obviously arbitrary. They base their claims to certainty on the exclusion of certain “facts” or phenomena from their narrative schemes. The narrator notices, for example, that those who believe that the conflict really began in 1965 conveniently ignore “all the killing that had gone on before” that time. Conventional historiography and its “standard methods” are suspect. It cannot provide, with any certainty, a neat beginning for the Vietnam War, so no one can blame it on a particular administration. The origins and, consequently, the responsibility for the orgy of destruction and bloodshed lie with neither identifiable individuals nor particular administrations, but rather in the distant and inaccessible past. For the “tragedy without villains” paradigm, the importance of the postmodern attitude toward history (or, more accurately, the accessibility of history) lay in its political and moral implications. Problematizing the notion of the historian’s ability to relate the disparate phenomena of history into a unified and coherent explanatory narrative inevitably complicated the ideologue’s attempt to make clear and definitive moral judgments about the war. Naturally, Herr’s hacking away at the foundation of historical certainty was, of course, highly problematic for both leftists and conservatives, whose interpretations of and attitudes toward the war rested solidly on definitive (though widely conflicting) statements about history. Herr refused to provide a clearly identifiable series of villains and heroes; he rejected both the rightist certainty of the evil of Communism and the leftist certainty of U.S. evil.

Heavy Heart-of-Darkness Trips: *A Rumor of War* and *Apocalypse Now*

A Rumor of War, Philip Caputo’s recollection of his Vietnam tour of 1965-66 as a lieutenant in the Marine Corps, was, second only to *Dispatches*, the most consistently praised Vietnam War memoir to emerge during the late 1970s. Like its peer, it met with a considerable number of highly favorable reviews in influential publications like *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*. The book’s chief attraction, for many of its contemporary reviewers, was its conspicuous avoidance of the narrowly ideological in treating a subject that tended to generate polarized interpretations along ideological lines. Theodore Solotaroff, after pointing out the dark and gruesome aspects of the narrative, coaxes readers potentially repelled by the idea of an “endless chronicle of demoralization” or a “long indictment” by assuring them that Caputo did not sermonize.⁵³ William Styron praised Caputo’s memoir as a “powerful story of a decent man sunk into a dirty time” and lauded his extraordinary handling of the eternal themes: “fear and courage” as well as “death and man’s confrontation with the abyss.”⁵⁴ The conservative *National Review* warmed up to the memoir just as enthusiastically as the left-liberal *New York Review of Books*. “Caputo hasn’t written a leftist harange,” wrote Kieth Mano, who saw the text as “more

or less apolitical. It transcends the hawk-dove face-off. It's about young men under unreasonable stress: more persuasive for that."⁵⁵ *A Rumor of War*, was, in short, a non-political book on a highly politicized subject. It had, as its prologue asserted, "nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, national interests, or foreign policy."⁵⁶

To readers looking for aesthetically sophisticated, less overtly political treatments of Vietnam as a subject for enduring literature, *A Rumor of War*, like its peer *Dispatches*, offered a welcome change of pace. Caputo's explicit rejection of divisive rhetoric in favor of a liberal humanist approach to the Vietnam War's "ambivalent realities" struck a responsive chord in these critics. For them, *A Rumor of War* transcended the slogans, clichés, and ephemeral ideological battles of the war years to create something that would endure beyond the specific historical moment out of which it had come. For Caputo's ultimate concern was not with the validity of a particular interpretation of a particular war, but with a few eternally recurring truths about war itself. The individual experience of war, as Caputo understands it, is a disorienting descent into a dark and primitive world where the civilization's artificially imposed laws do not exist; a world in which virtually anything is permissible. Gradually the soldier discovers that if he is to survive physically intact, he must discard the civilized notions of decency he has imbibed from home, church, and school. To be sure, the ferocious passions fueling the civil war in Vietnam created conditions particularly conducive to atrocious behavior: "Twenty years of terrorism and fratricide had obliterated most reference points from the country's moral map long before we arrived," the author points out in his prologue.⁵⁷ But more important than the historically specific nature of the political struggle in the country, for Caputo, is the eternal war between the light and the dark within the hearts of *all* men. In a jungle environment like the one in Vietnam's central highlands, the gradual loosening of civilization's bonds gives the darkness—the savage, cruel tendencies latent in the human heart—a decided advantage, according to him.

A Rumor of War's pessimistic assessment of the human situation echoes that of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (which Caputo quotes from in an epigraph at the head of one of his chapters). The pessimism is not only instrumental in providing a philosophical context for his depiction of American atrocities against the Vietnamese; it also establishes a profoundly fatalist view of history in which human agency is virtually absent and progressive social transformation is impossible. War is the natural state of mankind, and the peaceful intervals in history are merely short breathing spaces punctuating otherwise continuous spasms of irrational violence. Civilization's hold on humanity is tenuous, according to Caputo; in much of the world life is indeed nasty, brutish, and short. Caputo quotes the military theorist Jomini in order to foreground this view of eternally recurring conflict: "The greatest tragedy of mankind is war, but as long as

there is mankind, there will be war.” The Vietnam War, in the larger scheme of things, is merely an unexceptional and relatively minor chapter in the bloody continuum of history, a mere rumor of a war rather than a conflict on a grand scale. Caputo’s reflections on his experiences as a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* (subsequent to his discharge from the Marine Corps) assigned to cover conflict in Lebanon, the Golan Heights, and the Horn of Africa undergird this belief in the permanence of war and reaffirm the sort of deterministic interpretation of history that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., had advanced in *The Bitter Heritage*. In line with his rejection of the overtly political, he instructs the reader that his book “ought not to be regarded as a protest.”⁵⁸ His injunction against reading the narrative as such is, of course, an integral component of his anti-ideological stance, but it is even more important as a buttress for the deterministic framework through which we must interpret the events he describes:

Protest arises from a belief that one can change things or influence events. I am not egotistical enough to believe I can. Besides, it no longer seems necessary to register an objection to the war, because the war is over. We lost it, and no amount of objecting will resurrect the men who died, without redeeming anything, on calvaries like Hamburger Hill and the Rockpile.

It [*A Rumor of War*] might, perhaps, prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war.

But I don’t think so.⁵⁹

In this predetermined universe, no war narrative has any significant power as a cautionary tale, however much it de-glorifies combat or attempts to represent death and dismemberment on a battlefield honestly. At one point, Caputo vividly describes the adrenaline-charged elation that he felt during his first descent by a helicopter to a hot landing zone. Going into a firefight for the first time, he is ecstatic, despite having already read frightening descriptions of combat in war narratives and having been told of unbelievable horrors by two older relatives who had fought in World War II: “I had read all the serious books to come out of the World Wars, and Wilfred Owen’s poetry about the Western Front. And yet, I had learned nothing.” Contrasting his own and his platoon’s naïve eagerness for confrontation with the older NCOs’ sober caution, he concludes that “every generation is doomed to fight its war, to endure the same old experiences, suffer the loss of the same old illusions, and learn the same old lessons on its own.”⁶⁰ Thus, humanity is caught up in an endless cycle of conflict, with little hope of rising above the ignorance and greed which perpetuates it. Just as in Schlesinger’s fatalist history, successive generations, according to Caputo, are unable to learn anything from the mistakes and tragedies of their predecessors.

As Jim Neilson has convincingly demonstrated, the pervasive liberal humanism of the late-1970s cultural and academic establishment fostered a reading of both *Dispatches* and *A Rumor of War* as timeless representations of eternally recurring, universal phenomena rather than as critiques of historically specific policies. Within this interpretive framework, they became books not so much about the Vietnam War in particular but about war in general. Caputo's memoir, as he says in his prologue, is primarily about "about the things men do in war and the things war does to them."⁶¹ His concise gloss on the book's central subject not only abstracts the historically specific into the trans-historical, it also reveals his real subject: American atrocities, or, as he translates it into de-historicized terms, "the things men do in war." The emphasis on the relationship between American war crimes and the effects of the war on those who committed them gives a fair indication of his attitude toward the question of the war criminal's guilt. In order to understand the awful things men do in war, he maintains, one must first understand the awful things that war does to them. The subject of American war crimes had been, of course, the special province of the atrocity literature of the late 1960s and early 70s. But none of the "tragic" writers, from Schlesinger through Herr, had really dealt with the subject at length or offered an extensive exploration of its implications. Caputo, while not the first of the postwar veteran-memoirists to deal with the issue, *was* the first to position it at the center of his narrative, and he was the first "tragic" writer to examine it from the perspective of one who had, by his own admission, directly participated in an atrocity. The central question underlying the memoir is more or less the same one that the atrocity narratives of the latter years of the war had posed: "How could young American men have committed such horrible crimes against innocent civilians?" The atrocity-authors had provided those answers that bolstered up their leftist interpretation of the war: Responsibility lay with the military, as evident in its desensitizing training methods; with the war-managers, as evident in their fiendish genocidal strategy; and with American culture itself, the inherently racist and imperialist character of which made such crimes possible. Caputo, dissatisfied with what such glib generalizations, attempts to address the issue of atrocities in a manner that he feels does justice to its complexity and avoids the extremes embodied in both the condemnatory view of the Left and the congratulatory view of the Right.

The heavy use of literary allusions in *A Rumor of War* becomes instrumental in articulating that complexity. Herr's proliferation of references to past masters like William Blake, Herman Melville, and Graham Greene indicated his self-conscious designation of *Dispatches* as a "literary" production, as did Caputo's use of epigraphs culled from the Bible, Shakespeare, Roman historians, and British soldier-poets like Wilfred Owen. Without doubt, these two writers *were* anxious to exhibit their familiarity with cultural heavyweights in order to

gain the acceptance of the critical establishment and at the same time debunk the perception of the Vietnam veteran as an inarticulate avatar of cultural infantilism. But the references to classic texts in these memoirs served a more important purpose. Most of the allusions foreground certain thematic concerns closely intertwined with their authors' apolitical perspective on the Vietnam War. In each case, the thematic thrust that a given reference suggests works to promote an overall vision of the Vietnam War as a war of inadvertence governed by fate, a "tragedy without villains." In *Dispatches*, for example, the allusion to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* acknowledges the tragic fulfillment of a prophecy unheeded by a proud and arrogant nation; likewise, the invisible presence of Melville's *Moby-Dick* in the book links crazy Ahab's quest to subdue malignant nature with America's "mad cartographer's project" in Vietnam. The suggestion is that since Americans in Vietnam were either ignorant or insane, they cannot be held fully accountable for their actions. In *A Rumor of War*, the quotations from the Roman writer Vegetius and Shakespeare's *Henry V* underscore Caputo's emphasis on the abyss between the innocent youth's glorified expectations of combat and its terrible realities; the analogy between the adolescent boy and the arrogant, idealistic young nation readily suggests itself. More importantly, however, Caputo's reading of the war through Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* works to establish an analogy between Kurtz's moral deterioration in the lawless African jungle and the American soldier's descent into "a brutish state" in the elephant grass of Vietnam. Like the ivory traders of Conrad's novel, Caputo and his men come to a primitive world as the representatives of a nation with a civilizing mission, only to be transformed by the savagery of the wilderness and the absolute freedom it provides into brutes themselves. The brutality of U.S. troops is attributable more to forces in nature itself than to the results of military training or deliberately genocidal strategies.⁶²

The use of Conrad's heart-of-darkness scenario is thus instrumental in the attempt to absolve the American soldier of guilt or responsibility for war crimes. Caputo does indeed explicitly dismiss, at the outset of his narrative, the possibility of holding anyone accountable for his role either in fighting or orchestrating the war. The text is, the author claims, specifically *not* to be read as an accusatory gesture toward any of the war managers. Although highly critical of Kennedy, McNamara, Johnson, and Westmoreland, *A Rumor of War* is not, as the author says in his prologue, "an indictment of the great men who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men."⁶³ The actions of the war-planners and managers are to be understood as blundering *mistakes* made out of stupidity rather than *crimes* committed out of deliberate malice or greed. Caputo's attitude toward his own actions as a platoon leader, not surprisingly, parallels his stance toward the generals and the policy-making

elite. Like his former superiors in Washington, as well as his fellow soldiers, he has been figuratively “indicted” or stigmatized as a war criminal by the antiwar left for his participation in the conflict. But he has also been literally indicted by Marine Corps prosecuting authorities in accordance with the Uniform Code of Military Justice, for a very real and specific crime: the premeditated murder of two Vietnamese civilians. While not seeking to exonerate himself of the murders or reinvent himself as a misunderstood martyr for an unjustly maligned cause, Caputo does offer the accused soldier’s plea for understanding and sympathy to his readers, as Michael Herr paraphrased it, the warrior’s plea to the civilian who condemns him: “Put yourself in my place.”⁶⁴ While he goes to considerable lengths to express horror and shame at his role in the deaths of the boys Le Dung and Le Du, it is quite clear that he considers the sort of masochistic self-abasement of the ex-GI authors in the confessional atrocity narratives as inappropriate. Similarly, he considers the designation “premeditated” as unfair; symptomatic of a fundamentally limited comprehension of the foot soldier’s awful predicament in Vietnam. “My purpose,” he makes clear to the reader, “has not been to confess complicity in what, for me, amounted to murder, but, using myself and a few other men as examples, to show that war, by its nature, can arouse a psychopathic violence in men of seemingly normal impulses.”⁶⁵ His lawyer, during the preparation for his court-martial, dismisses the lieutenant’s “turgid essay on front-line conditions” as evidence for his defense, insisting that a jury will only be interested in the “facts” of the case—one is reminded of Sartre’s insistence that the murderous “intent” of Americans is “implicit in the facts.”⁶⁶ But mere “facts” are not enough for Caputo; they cannot convey the truth of the matter. The narrative project of *A Rumor of War*, as Milton Bates suggests, is to provide a meaningful context for those “facts” by figuratively filling in the “conspicuously blank” square on the investigating officer’s report labeled “Explanatory or Extenuating Circumstances.”⁶⁷ The formal charges against the lieutenant, we learn, have long since been dropped—more a move on the part of the Marine Corps to avoid embarrassment than a genuinely deserved exoneration—so this plea is ultimately not to the court-martial, but to the court of readerly opinion, which must take those circumstances into consideration as it adjudicates guilt or innocence for his part in the atrocity that functions as the climax of the narrative.

Caputo, in establishing these explanatory circumstances, delineates of difference between the safe and comfortable world in which civilian morality is possible and the harsh world of the jungle, which exposes its puniness and artificiality. Throughout *A Rumor of War*, there is an intense emphasis on the Vietnamese landscape, which is seductively beautiful but treacherous and deadly. It teems with poisonous snakes, vermin, and bizarre diseases, and there are also the snipers, mines, and booby traps, as well as searing temperatures able to cook a man’s brain in his

skull. This emphasis on the inhospitable character of the jungle environment, in fact, contrasts sharply with the blandly generic physical descriptions of Vietnam available in the leftist atrocity literature (in polemics, for example, like Sartre's essay). In such texts, American soldiers are continually intruding upon a sort of Vietnamese pastoral. Tranquil scenes of snail-hatted farmers bending over their rice paddies, where water buffaloes ruminate in muddy fields and mysterious jade-green mountains hover in the distance, become the sites of horrific violence when the obstreperous Yankees arrive and begin ransacking the hootches and interrogating villagers in pidgin Vietnamese. The noisy and violent American machine comes in rudely to disrupt the peaceful Indochinese garden. Atrocity literature, for readers who had not been in the Vietnamese bush, would naturally give rise to the image of a giant superpower attempting to squash an agrarian peasant country with its monstrous, technologically-driven strength. In *A Rumor of War*, on the other hand, it is the mammoth Vietnamese jungle which swallows up the tiny Americans and their bulky equipment. The Vietnamese landscape, rather than the American men and machines moving upon it, is huge, overpowering, and monstrous. This juxtaposition of the bewildered and puny American stumbling along in the vast jungle with the wily and agile guerrilla who moves with utmost ease below the thick canopy of green attempts to enlist the reader's sympathies on behalf of U.S. troops. More importantly, it serves to problematize the condemnatory depiction of them as giant bullies imposing their will upon the helpless Vietnamese. The civilian critics who made such facile characterizations (as well as the rear-echelon staff officers who charged him with murder), Caputo emphasizes, had little conception of the kind of world in which American foot soldiers had to live and move; hence the unfairness of their judgments. Caputo's descriptions of the Vietnamese bush, like Conrad's descriptions of the African jungle, emphasize the notion that the primordial world is a place where civilian (or civilized) morality inevitably breaks down, where it is revealed as nothing but an artificial veneer masking man's innate savagery. Contrasting the comfortable stateside world from which the critics cast their aspersions on the "murderers" with the bestial swamp through which he and his men had to trudge, Caputo ascribes the Marines' brutality to their prolonged immersion in this green hell:

The air-conditioned headquarters of Saigon and Danang seemed thousands of miles away. As for the United States, we did not call it "the World" for nothing; it might as well have been on another planet. There was nothing familiar out where we were, no churches, no police, no laws, no newspapers, or any of the restraining influences without which the earth's population of virtuous people would be reduced by ninety-five percent. It was the dawn of creation in the

Indochina bush, an ethical as well as a geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state. The descent could be checked only by the net of a man's inner moral values, the attribute which is called character. There were a few—and I suspect Lieutenant Calley was one—who had no net and plunged all the way down, discovering in their bottommost depths a capacity for malice they probably never suspected was there.⁶⁸

The analogy between a soldier like Calley and Conrad's Kurtz is fairly obvious. The unremarkable character of both prior to the manifestation of their brutality reminds one of Hannah Arendt's phrase regarding the "banality of evil."

Although the most terrible of Kurtz's deeds are left to the imagination and Calley's have been nakedly exposed, we still know that both the officer and the ivory trader have plunged to the depths of depravity and cruelty—the gory explicitness of a book like *My Lai Four* makes awfully clear what Marlow had ominously hinted at. And both, finally, are capable of such sinister actions because they have no sufficient inner moral net. Caputo, it is quite clear, does not intend that the reader should draw a direct analogy between himself and Kurtz; Kurtz represents what Caputo *could* have become had he stayed in the bush longer. For although the young lieutenant of *A Rumor of War* has committed murder, he has not "plunged all the way down"—he has not completely abandoned himself to the dark instincts which compelled some to commit crimes more bloody and depraved than summary executions. The narrator of *A Rumor of War* has seen himself edge toward "the horror" but has returned from the precipice to tell of his own experience and what he has learned from it. As Thomas Myers points out, no simple comparison between Kurtz and Caputo is adequate, since Caputo, unlike Kurtz, "returns as the custodian of his own memoir and chronicler of his own evil and penance." The narrator of *A Rumor of War*, then, is "both Kurtz and Marlowe" at the same time.⁶⁹

Yet Caputo's implied comparison between the shadowy Belgian merchant of *Heart of Darkness* and the American soldier in Vietnam nevertheless works toward the same purpose that Marlow's half-sympathetic presentation of Kurtz does: he complicates the question of the murderer's guilt insofar as he suggests that the responsibility for atrocities ultimately lies not entirely with a specific policy or individual, but with the atavistic tendency in all human beings. To be sure, Caputo assigns *some* of the blame to the nature of U.S. military strategy in Vietnam, in the same way Conrad implies that colonialism itself is *partially* responsible for Kurtz's monstrous deeds in the Belgian Congo. Yet ultimately, in *A Rumor of War*, the "darkness" made manifest in the American soldier's cruelty is older and more profound than any imperial policy or

military strategy; it lies dormant within each of us, and only the catalyst of a primitive and lawless environment like Vietnam is necessary to sever the threads that bind us to civilization and its puny morality. If the civilians who sanctimoniously judged the soldier's crimes and labeled him "baby-killer" had had to exist in similar conditions, the argument runs, they would have acted similarly. Jim Neilson points out that Conrad's implicit argument in his novella is "that even the most civilized of us, when removed from civilization, will revert to the savagery of Africans." Caputo's argument is precisely the same, only he substitutes the Vietnamese for Africans. "Reading the Vietnam War through *Heart of Darkness*," Neilson continues, "can thus serve to excuse the excesses of U.S. militarism—which becomes not the results of a calculated policy but the product of a hostile and uncivilized landscape and people, a jungle fever in which the Americans degenerate to the level of the Vietnamese."⁷⁰

A Rumor of War was commercially successful at the time of its original publication but primarily held interest for only a relatively small audience: reviewers and literary critics, Vietnam veterans looking for voices to represent their views, and lay readers hungry for books on a then-unfashionable subject. The qualities that attracted literary critics to the memoir, moreover, were likely to put off popular reading audiences who might have found Caputo's penchant for learned allusions intimidating. Francis Ford Coppola's immensely popular film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), on the other hand, brought this concatenation of Joseph Conrad and the Vietnam War to the massive American movie-going public. Both a critical and a commercial success, the production had all the earmarks of popular American movie-making: dazzling special effects, loud music, flamboyance, bombast, and a generous dose of graphic violence. Yet at the same time, *Apocalypse Now* was a "serious" film, full of references to high-culture artifacts like James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, and T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men." And it dealt with subjects weightier than normal for popular cinema. Among the film's thematic concerns were the inner war between man's animal nature and his civilized aspirations, or, as one of the characters in the film phrases it, the "conflict in every human heart between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil." Coppola's ostensible subject—the Vietnam War—had already been treated in American cinema of the late 1970s, but films like *Coming Home* focused primarily on the returned veteran's plight in the United States rather than on the depiction of combat in Vietnam. Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) did include some brief combat sequences, as well as scenes of Americans' captivity in Vietnam (in both cases, the film presents them as flashbacks), but for the most part dealt, like Hal Ashby's film, with the return of the physically and psychologically wounded veteran to an indifferent America. *Apocalypse Now*, however, was the first major film to appear after 1975

concentrating entirely on the war in Vietnam, where the whole of the action takes place. It was also, significantly, the first postwar film to place the subject of American war crimes at the forefront of its concerns. The plot of the film largely revolves around the mission of U.S. Army Special Forces Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), whom CIA/MACV officials have assigned to assassinate an American war criminal, the renegade Special Forces officer Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). The crime in question—the execution of four South Vietnamese operatives he suspected of acting as double agents—is the only one the Army is officially concerned with, yet the executions seem minor transgressions compared with the other horrors Kurtz is responsible for. He has set himself up as a god-king over a Montagnard tribe in a remote area near the Cambodian border, where he and his followers engage in pagan blood rituals and human sacrifice. In roughly the same way that Caputo makes sense of his own actions against the Vietnamese (as well as the crimes of Calley and others), Coppola interprets the significance of Kurtz's sick and morbid atrocities through Conrad's philosophical framework. The colonel has been cut off from the command structure far too long, and no restraining influence exists to curb his excesses; he has gone over the edge, as a mysterious tape-recording of one of his bizarre soliloquies tells us. "He's out there all by himself, operating without any decent restraint," Willard learns during his initial pre-assignment briefing in Saigon. The room in which the briefing takes place, where Willard, a CIA spook, a three-star general and his staff officers ponder the mystery of Kurtz as they eat a shrimp and steak dinner, is synonymous with Caputo's "air-conditioned headquarters." It is representative of the civilized world, juxtaposed with the brutish, Hobbesian world in which Kurtz—sent there by the same men who condemn him as a murderer—is forced to operate. The thrust of Coppola's take on the question of American war crimes, indeed, largely parallels Caputo's, insofar as both employ *Heart of Darkness* as a sort of master narrative that explains the cruelty of whites (or "civilized" peoples) whenever they find themselves in primitive surroundings, among primitive peoples, for lengthy periods of time.

As with *Dispatches* and *A Rumor of War*, the film's liberal usage of literary and philosophical allusions is instrumental in its transformation of the Vietnam War from a historically specific conflict to an incidental setting for the playing out of a timeless and universal drama (and the film's affinity with some aspects of *Dispatches* should not be surprising in light of Herr's collaboration with Coppola and co-writer John Milius on writing the screenplay). The reference to *The Golden Bough*, for example, clearly invites the viewer to interpret Willard's ritualistic slaughter of the renegade colonel, interwoven with the tribe's ritualistic slaughter of a bull outside the ruined temple in which Kurtz has enthroned himself, as an illustration of one of Frazer's key themes—the myth of the god-king sacrificed to make way for his successor. Both

Frazer and Weston operate on the assumption that history is a cyclical process and that human nature is basically constant beneath the shifting façade of cultures and epochs through the centuries. Key modernist writers like Frazer, Weston, Eliot, Oswald Spengler, Carl Jung, and James Joyce (along with their popular explicators, such as Joseph Campbell), *have* tended to operate under such assumptions. In *The Golden Bough*, *The Waste Land*, *The Decline of the West*, and *Ulysses*, history appears as a manifestation of eternally recurring mythic patterns rather than as a succession of specific and discrete periods. Coppola, with his self-conscious on-screen parading of some of these sources (the camera lingers over the books in Kurtz's study, so that viewers may see their titles) was clearly aligning his film with this cyclical, mythic conception of history and human nature that liberal humanist discourse privileges.

Joseph Conrad, however, is Coppola's most important modernist touchstone. As in *A Rumor of War*, *Heart of Darkness* remains an invisible but controlling influence within *Apocalypse Now*. Conrad is never mentioned in the film credits, yet Coppola's debt to the novella is clear to anyone who has read it. The linkage between *A Rumor of War* and *Heart of Darkness* is primarily thematic rather than structural, but *Apocalypse Now* appropriates both the form and the content of the novella. Granted, there are obvious departures in the film from its source: Conrad's context, for example, is the ivory trade in the Belgian Congo near the turn of the century, not an Asian war in the twentieth; neither has his narrator, Marlow, been sent to assassinate Kurtz (indeed, Conrad's Kurtz is already dying when Marlow arrives at the station). But the similarities between the novella and the film, for most reviewers, are more important than their differences. The quest symbology, the river-voyage as a metaphor for the journey to the darkness at the center of the human soul, the descent into the primitive subconscious, and the gradual transformation of the civilized man to the savage barbarian all work toward roughly the same ends in both texts. Both the merchant and the colonel are indeed flowers of civilization, fine humanitarian men, accomplished and learned, which makes their degeneration all the more shocking and disturbing for the trading company managers in Belgium as well as the Army generals in Saigon. And both stories end, finally, with Kurtz's attempt to impart to the narrator some understanding of "the horror." What that famous repeated phrase the dying god-king whispers exactly means is never clearly specified in either text, but it *is* clear that each Kurtz has somehow come face to face with something—some inner demon summoned up by the surrounding brutality of the war, some terrible void below the darkest depths of the psyche—that recognizes no spatial or temporal boundaries. The unspecified horror, ultimately, is something particular neither to geographical location nor historical moment. It is more profound and far-reaching than either the murderous exploitation of African slave labor or the slaughter of innocent

Vietnamese. This is how Conrad's modernist/liberal-humanist explicators, at any rate, have traditionally interpreted the story. Robert Lee's study *Conrad's Colonialism*, for example, takes an ahistorical, universalist approach to the novella typical of literary criticism before the onslaught of post-structuralist theory: "Africa per se is not the theme of *Heart of Darkness*, but is used as a locale symbol for the very core of an 'accursed inheritance.'" ⁷¹

Coppola and Milius followed suit, tailoring their production to meet liberal humanism's criteria for high seriousness. For the director, the journey down the Nung River, like the one down the Congo in the novella, was first and foremost a psychological metaphor for the atavistic regression to the primitive. "I started moving back in time, because I wanted to imply that the issues and themes were timeless," he remarked in an interview shortly after the film's release. "As you went further up river, you went deeper into the origins of human nature." For Milius, the status of the film's protagonist as a mythic Everyman-figure was much more important than any notion that he might represent Americans in Vietnam: "Willard is Adam, Faust, Dante, Aeneas, Huckleberry Finn, Jesus Christ, the Ancient Mariner, Captain Ahab, Odysseus, and Oedipus." ⁷² The ultimate effect of this emphasis on the timeless and the universal, Frank Tomasulo has argued in his penetrating critique of the film, is the glossing over of many of the unsettling questions surrounding the morality and legality of American involvement in Vietnam. In its attempt to transcend ephemeral political issues and focus instead on the perennial truths of the human situation, the film avoids confronting the deeper "ideological implications" of the atrocities it depicts. For Tomasulo, *Apocalypse Now* blames everyone (and hence no one) for the policy decisions that created the conflict. ⁷³

By no stretch of the imagination, however, does Coppola attempt to excuse American war criminals offhandedly or dismiss critics of brutal military policies as propagandists. There is clearly much in *Apocalypse Now* that fosters a critical view of twentieth-century neo-imperialism, just as there is much in *Heart of Darkness* that argues the evils of nineteenth-century colonialism. Many of the novella's critics have convincingly argued that Conrad *does* attempt to expose colonialism's philanthropic pretensions as hypocritical. ⁷⁴ Likewise, it is not a stretch to argue that Coppola moves toward exposing the "rapacious and pitiless folly" of Americans in Vietnam. We see U.S. military vehicles bulldozing a Vietnamese village as American troops herd resentful inhabitants into trucks, to be moved presumably to some miserable, barbed-wire hamlet; we see drunken, frenzied troops ogling Playboy bunnies at a USO production while poor Vietnamese children watch the spectacle from behind the chain-link fence which keeps them out. Coppola's irony is most savage, perhaps, when Kurtz remarks, shortly before his death: "We train young men to drop fire on people, but won't allow them to write 'fuck' on their airplanes because it's

obscene.” But ultimately, the brutality of Kurtz—in the novella as well as in the movie—is less the product of imperialism than the result of a long isolation in an alien world that awakens the ugly beast lying dormant in civilized man. Tomasulo, who holds to the “immoral and criminal war” thesis, takes Coppola to task for his rejection of uncompromising radical critique in favor of a conciliatory, apolitical approach to the subject of Vietnam. The film, he argues, turns “the real-life specificity of U.S. imperialism into an abstract and philosophical cinematic meditation on good and evil, light and dark.” The film’s failure to take an “unambiguous stand on the imperialist involvement and illegal conduct of the Vietnam conflict” is tantamount to “fence-sitting” for critics, like Tomasulo, on the Left. *Apocalypse Now*, according to this view, is a socially irresponsible film because it “does not help Americans understand the history of their Indochina involvement or prevent future neocolonial incursions.”⁷⁵

Indeed, the film’s refusal to provide a clear-cut position on America’s role in Vietnam—either condemning or vindicating it—has angered ideologues on both sides. Those on the left feel that Coppola has acted to some extent as an apologist for the military, insofar as he separates Colonel Kurtz’s sadism and brutality from the norms of Army conduct and portrays the generals condemning his “unsound” methods as beyond the pale of morally permissible conduct in war. They also object to what they perceive as the film’s ethnocentric focus on American, as opposed to Vietnamese, suffering. Those on the right, however, decry what they see as an excessively negative depiction of U.S. servicemen as poorly disciplined, trigger-happy, drug-taking louts. Some scenes in the film unfairly suggest, they argue, that most troops recklessly took drugs in combat environments. Drugs, as in *Dispatches*, surface frequently in *Apocalypse Now*. The crew of the PBR which takes Willard down to Kurtz’s station smokes marijuana while cruising through enemy territory; one of the crew members is shown spaced out on acid during a mortar shelling, and in the same scene several soldiers sit around getting high while listening to loud rock music on a cassette player. Conservatives also take issue with a perceived emphasis, in many scenes, on the notion that American combat troops would often see the Vietnamese as less than human. Colonel Kilgore’s Air Cavalry battalion, for example, has a beach party, complete with surfboards, ice-cold beer, and grilled steaks before going in to strike a guerrilla-controlled village. During the assault, helicopters chase down a fleeing woman while the pilots and gunners scream racist epithets and obscenities. Similarly, Willard calmly shoots an old Vietnamese woman on a riverboat, who has already been grievously wounded by the PBR’s machine gunner during a routine stop conducted to search the boat for weapons and supplies en route to the enemy.

Apocalypse Now, in short, leaves both left and right unsatisfied; it makes its appeal primarily to the liberal center. There are elements in the film that lend credence to both an

antiwar *and* a hawkish position. The film's admixture of these contradictory stances seems to represent an attempt to reconcile opposites, a conciliatory gesture from the political center which tries to appease both sides and bring the divided audience (read: nation) together again. The ambiguous combination of politically opposing views parallels the centrist thesis that "everyone was right" about Vietnam and that the truth about the war is "somewhere in the middle." Coppola's stated purpose in making the film, that of "putting the war behind us," reveals his participation in the Carter-era rhetoric of "healing the wounds."⁷⁶ In many ways, *Apocalypse Now* was the most visible and memorable example of the trend in late 1970s popular culture toward the apolitical and away from the divisively ideological.

***Going After Cacciato*: "They Did Not Know Good From Evil"**

Of all the novels and memoirs by Vietnam veterans that appeared in the late 1970s, none garnered more immediate critical acclaim than Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978), winner of the National Book Award in Fiction for 1979. The novel, often described as a chief example of the "magical realism" mode of fiction, recounts the whimsical imaginings of Specialist Four Paul Berlin, a soldier stationed during the war as an observation post lookout at the American garrison in Quang Ngai. Intertwined with Berlin's recollections of and reflections on his experiences as a "ground-pounder" (infantryman) prior to his present duty are the threads of an elaborate and thoroughly preposterous fantasy he begins to construct out of boredom. The fantastic series of episodes, which transpire as his unit searches for a deserter ("Cacciato") across Asia, through the Middle East and Europe to Paris, gradually become the components of a substantial narrative able to stand on its own. As Berlin creates this fiction, he revises, amends, and elaborates upon it; he also reflects upon the creative process he is engaged in. The "story-within-a-story" structure of the novel, as well as its self-conscious recognition of its own artifices, immediately placed it within the genre of meta-fiction emerging in the 1970s. O'Brien had gone beyond the limitations of the two staple modes of postwar veteran-writers—the conventional combat novel and the personal narrative (the latter of which he had written with 1973's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*)—to produce a highly sophisticated, innovative novel which esteemed critics like John Updike would hail as a literary landmark. Updike, in his review of the book, ventured that the narrative's verisimilitude in regard to the portrayal of the Vietnam conflict was one of its great strengths as a work of art. "As a fictional portrait of the war," Updike remarked, O'Brien's novel was "hard to fault, and will be hard to better."⁷⁷ But the predominant note in contemporary reviews of the text was praise for O'Brien's *transcendence* of the war—his capacity to rise above its ideological battles as well as its historical specificity—rather than for his faithfulness to historical detail. That *Going After Cacciato* was a novel of the Vietnam War, for many critics, was all but

forgotten. Indeed, to read it as such became the mark of reductive simple-mindedness. As the *New York Times* review put it: “To call *Going After Cacciato* a novel about war is like calling *Moby-Dick* a novel about whales.”⁷⁸ Pearl K. Bell described O’Brien’s text a highly imaginative work in the tradition of “picaresque fantasy” and an attempt to reach for “bigger literary game” than that sought by run-of-the-mill Vietnam War novelists like Winston Groom.⁷⁹

As Jim Nielson points out, the primary reason for the novel’s ascendancy in literary culture and its hallowed place in the canon of Vietnam fiction, was in fact, its apolitical approach to the war.⁸⁰ *Going After Cacciato*, like *Dispatches* and *A Rumor of War*, offered a recognizably centrist interpretation of Vietnam. Elaborating upon many of the same thematic strands intertwined with the “tragedy without villains” scheme, O’Brien appealed, like Schlesinger, to the notion that a mystic fate, rather than the economics of imperialism or the evils of communism, brought America into Vietnam: “It was all a sad accident, he would have told them [the Vietnamese]—chance, high-level politics, confusion.” Ascribing Paul Berlin’s presence (as well as America’s) in Vietnam to “the luck of the draw, bad fortune; forces beyond reckoning,” O’Brien invoked the staple themes of the fatalist historians. He also implied, throughout his novel, that misguided but genuinely benevolent idealism was the primary motive of American soldiers like Paul Berlin: “His intentions were benign. He was no tyrant, no pig, no Yankee killer. He was innocent,” Berlin tells himself in the observation tower as he remembers certain painful episodes during which his comrades behaved badly toward Vietnamese civilians. The novel provides a few examples of the troops’ humanitarianism in order, as it were, to demonstrate that benignity and innocence; one of the more significant recollections involves an attempt to win hearts and minds with the administration of medical treatment to sick and wounded villagers in the province. O’Brien’s description of the scene, and his recounting of Berlin’s inner musings, encapsulate the essential vision of blundering idealism which desires good for fellow human beings but cannot help alienate the people through its own arrogance of power. It is clear, throughout the episode, that the Americans see themselves as liberators rather than conquerors, liberators hungry for some sign of appreciation from the people they are trying to save. As he helps the company medic treat a young girl for an unsightly skin infection, gently dabbing iodine on her sores, his attempt to gauge her response—to find any welcome sign of gratitude, of friendship, or love—tells us that he will find his service in Vietnam purposeful only if the Vietnamese like him and think of him as a protector and friend. Mingled with this is the painful knowledge of the suffering that other Americans have already caused her. Oddly enough, O’Brien’s infantryman becomes like LBJ himself: the tragic buffoon intensely desiring the love

of both the Vietnamese and the Americans but alienating them with heavy-handed and inept use of brute force.

In spite of its use of the novel-within-a-novel framing device and its “experimental” nature as a work of meta-fiction, *Going After Cacciato* was, arguably, a far more reader-friendly text for popular audiences than either *Dispatches* or *A Rumor of War*. The novel was not merely easier for most people to read; it was also able to articulate the moral ambiguities surrounding Vietnam as seen through the eyes of one seemingly more qualified to act as the representative voice of America in Vietnam than either the correspondent or the senior officer. *Cacciato* attempted to give readers the perspective of the common enlisted foot soldier as opposed to that of the sophisticated, ironic journalist who delves into epistemological problems or of the officer-memoirist who recounts his experiences in a stately prose style reminiscent of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. Some early critics even found O’Brien’s transcendence of the political or the narrowly partisan more complete and satisfactory than Caputo’s or Herr’s. For Dale Jones, O’Brien’s highly ordered narrative technique was preferable to Herr’s insofar as it afforded a clearer and saner exposition of some of the “issues and questions” regarding the war. Jones saw O’Brien as a novelist able to rise above the “confusion and bloodshed of the conflict” unlike Herr, who seemed to remain “mired in the war’s violence and insanity.” Herr’s “emphasis on American insanity” ultimately weakened *Dispatches* insofar as it creates a picture of lunacy and chaos that did little to further the reader’s understanding of the war’s moral dilemmas.⁸¹ O’Brien’s insistence on the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined, on the other hand, stood as a positive alternative to Herr’s blurring of those boundaries. For Jones, *Going After Cacciato* offered a much clearer presentation of the reasons “why one served in Vietnam” as well as a more compelling evocation of the individual soldier’s personal courage and a thorough understanding of his responsibilities and hardships. Jones’s reading of the novel draws our attention to O’Brien’s heavy emphasis on the average foot soldier’s moral confusion and his bewilderment in the face of a conflict for which history has shown him no precedent. Paul Berlin’s uncertainty is bound up with the internal conflict between his patriotic impulse to protect democracy from tyranny and his uneasy sense that the war cannot be reduced to those simplistic terms. As such, *Going After Cacciato* is probably the most coherent expression, from the foot soldier’s point of view, of the Vietnam War as the sort of “profound moral crisis” that Jimmy Carter had referred to. O’Brien renders the war as a “tragedy without villains” by providing a sympathetic cultural context for his soldiers in much the same way that Schlesinger and the liberal historians delineated the black-and-white world of Munichs and evil dictators that had irrevocably shaped the beliefs and convictions of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. The

soldiers in *Going After Cacciato* make their mistakes in good faith, out of noble intentions. One might even say that the novel does for the infantrymen who served in Vietnam what *The Bitter Heritage* does for the Kennedy-Johnson administration policy-makers and war-planners. It does not attempt to lay blame on servicemen by presenting them as vicious killers, but neither does it attempt to elevate them as heroes by contrasting them with demoniac and sadistic Vietnamese Communists.

The title of the novel's thirty-ninth chapter, "The Things They Didn't Know," refers both to the severely circumscribed nature of the Vietnam-era infantryman's world-view (or, simply put, his prejudices) and, at the same time, the disorienting uncertainties under which he had to operate. O'Brien here uses the word "know" in two senses: to comprehend or understand as well as to possess or enjoy. "They did not know the terms of the war, its architecture, the rules of fair play," the omniscient narrator reflects, putting the soldiers' excesses in the context of their poor understanding of hazily-defined official rules of engagement and guidelines for the treatment of captives: "When they took prisoners, which was rare, they did not know the questions to ask, whether to release a suspect or beat on him."⁸² It is also necessary for the reader to understand what the soldiers did not *have* in Vietnam: "They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it a victory. No sense of order or momentum." In contrast to the "order" of previous wars stands the senseless chaos of Vietnam, where there was "no front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels."⁸³ Neither did the troops have any great or inspiring leaders. In place of the heroic figures of the World Wars—Pershing, Patton, MacArthur—stand bland businessmen like McNamara and Westmoreland; in place of grandly decisive battles like D-Day or the Battle of the Bulge, the grunts in Vietnam knew an endless round of harassment ambushes, inconclusive fire-fights, and operations which accomplished nothing: "No Patton rushing for the Rhine, no beachheads to storm and win and hold for the duration." Most importantly, troops in Vietnam did not know what it was, as soldiers of previous wars supposedly had, to rally around a notion worth fighting for: "They did not have a cause."⁸⁴

One could easily make the case that O'Brien's catalogue of things that Berlin and his comrades neither understood nor possessed draws upon a series of myths about the "good war" which have more basis in popular representations of World War II than in factual accounts of it. But O'Brien must accept these myths uncritically in order to set Vietnam troops apart from their predecessors and thereby elicit the reader's sympathy on behalf of Berlin and his comrades (and, by proxy, *all* American soldiers who served in Vietnam). We are encouraged to pity, rather than condemn, men who were forced to inhabit a world of contingency and uncertainty and who may

have committed crimes against the Vietnamese simply because they did not know any better or because their rage and frustration at the apparent pointlessness of their suffering drove them to kill and maim innocent bystanders. O'Brien explains, on the one hand, the "enabling ignorance" of the American soldier—the cultural limitations that enabled him to dehumanize the Vietnamese and act brutally toward them—and on the other, the feeling of helplessness and confusion in a war where World War-II era certainties about good and evil, about who was a soldier and who was a civilian, did not exist. The soldiers of *Going After Cacciato* parallel Schlesinger's policy-makers and war-managers insofar as the wrongs they perpetrate against the Vietnamese arise out of stupidity and blindness rather than out of calculating malice; likewise, they are prisoners of a World War II outlook, expecting clear victories and defeats as well as recognizable distinctions between good guys wearing white and bad guys wearing black. In the same way that *The Bitter Heritage* attempts to explain the tragedy of the war in terms of the Kennedy-Johnson milieu's ethnocentrism and its limited understanding of post-World War II geopolitical realities, O'Brien constructs the American GIs' mistreatment of the Vietnamese civilian as the result of ingrained prejudices, biases, and misunderstandings over which he had little control.

O'Brien begins his meditation on the GIs' ignorance anecdotally, by relating a brief account of Paul Berlin and his comrades attempting to clear a village during a routine patrol, and by drawing a number of conclusions from the episode, which, it is clear, the reader is to understand as typical or representative of pacification operations of this kind. Stink Harris, appointed with the task of herding all the villagers together in a clearing (so as to keep them out of the way while the rest of the squad searches the surrounding area for evidence of guerrilla presence or enemy weapons/supply caches), exhibits the blustery awkwardness of the frightened American youth attempting to get the inscrutable Asian primitives to cooperate with those who have been sent there to protect them from communism:

“*Lui lai, lui lai!*” Stink would scream, pushing them back. “*Lui lai,*” you dummies . . . Back up, move!” Teasing ribs with his rifle muzzle, he would force them back against a hootch wall or fence. “*Coi chung!*” he’d holler. Blinking, face white and teeth clicking, he would kick the stragglers, pivot, shove, thumb flicking the rifle’s safety catch.⁸⁵

The opening of the scene is all too familiar to anyone who has read *My Lai Four* and similar narratives. It is the tense prelude to the terrible blood-bath of leftist atrocity literature: American soldiers screaming in pidgin Vietnamese, pointing their weapons at villagers passively sitting or lying on the ground with their hands on their heads, while their comrades storm through hootches and overturn rice-bins in their search for the elusive enemy. One wrong move from a villager,

one baby who will not stop crying, is enough to push the GIs over the edge and unleash an orgy of killing and destruction. But O'Brien undercuts the potential for horror here by casting Harris and his fellow soldiers as quasi-comical characters, blundering idiots who are much more frightened of the villagers than the villagers are of them. Harris is terribly afraid, as his pallor and his chattering teeth indicate, but even his fear appears ridiculous as both the villagers and the other GIs present laugh at his antics. The picture of him holding an open dual-language dictionary in one hand and an M-16 in the other, casting a nervous eye back and forth between page and crowd while barking commands in improperly pronounced Vietnamese punctuated with obscenities in English, is clearly meant to be funny. Neither the villagers nor the American soldiers appear very threatening, and the episode provides comic relief. More importantly, however, it serves as a springboard for reflection upon the inability of low-level enlisted troops to communicate with Asians as the determining factor in the war's outcome. Harris's mounting frustration and excessive behavior is directly related to his failure to enunciate or inflect Vietnamese words properly. This handicap was characteristic, the ensuing reflection implies, of the vast majority of American field soldiers in Vietnam:

Not knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved or respected or feared or hated. They did not recognize hostility unless it was patent, unless it came in a form other than language; the complexities of tone and tongue were beyond them. Dinkese, Stink Harris called it: monkey chatter, bird talk. Not knowing the language, the men did not know whom to trust. Trust was lethal. They did not know false smiles from true smiles, or if in Quang Ngai a smile had the same meaning it had in the States. "Maybe the dinks got things mixed up," Eddie once said, after the time a friendly-looking farmer bowed and smiled and pointed them into a minefield. "Know what I mean? Maybe . . . well, maybe the gooks cry when they're happy and smile when they're sad. Who the hell knows? Maybe when you smile over here it means you're ready to cut the other guy's throat. I mean, hey, this here's a different culture."⁸⁶

Here O'Brien sounds one of the recurring thematic concerns of American combat narratives about the Vietnam War: the notion that the profound cultural differences between Americans and Vietnamese (both Communist and non-Communist) was one of the chief sources of misery and strife for those on both sides of the conflict. A few recent critics of Vietnam War writing have lambasted canonical authors like Greene, Herr, O'Brien and Caputo for perpetuating certain harmful Asian stereotypes—the very ones, the argument runs, which initiated and sustained the

war in the first place. One stereotype that often surfaces in American literature of the Vietnam conflict is that of the “inscrutable Oriental,” the mysterious, duplicitous, and sneaky Asian.⁸⁷ Greene’s paternalism and Eurocentrism, for example, render the Vietnamese as childlike and capricious primitives who continually frustrate rational attempts to understand their needs and desires. The Vietnamese rarely even appear in *Dispatches* except as shadowy blobs of indefinable mystery; Herr remarks that the attempt to glean Vietnamese emotions or intentions by looking at their faces was like “trying to read the wind.”⁸⁸ O’Brien, without question, also participates in the same rhetoric of “inscrutable Orientals” in *Going After Cacciato*, and his discussion (in free indirect discourse which relates the workings of Paul Berlin’s consciousness for the reader) of the culture gap and its unfortunate consequences is perhaps the most extensive in any novel or memoir by an American Vietnam veteran. To be sure, the racism in these texts is a residual trace of Anglo-American culture rather than a deliberate and malicious attempt to stigmatize or slur on the part of these authors (whose politics, in each case, could easily be characterized as left-liberal). But in the Vietnam War literature and film of the late 1970s, the theme of the culture gap or racism often becomes useful in highlighting the “tragic” aspects of American intervention and establishing the notion of U.S. troops as benign but ignorant warriors, thereby mitigating whatever atrocities they may have committed during the war. *Going After Cacciato*, like *Dispatches*, recognizes the role that cultural differences played in the way American soldiers fought the war, but it does so, oddly enough, in order to undermine the notion of their guilt or responsibility. O’Brien places the blame for atrocities on impersonal, deterministic forces that existed long before the Vietnam-era soldier, forces that had played a significant role in shaping his consciousness and his perception of Asians long before he ever set foot in Southeast Asia. Had the unfortunate language barrier (a circumstance beyond the control of either side) not existed, the Vietnamese and the Americans might have understood each other. If American soldiers were racists, they were not individually responsible for their prejudices, which had been shaped by impersonal forces much larger and more powerful than the individual.

The notion of Vietnam as a tragic Babel where linguistic and cultural barriers (rather than genuine ideological ones) bred hatred and violence—that it was all a big misunderstanding between two peoples who should never have been enemies—complements the novel’s emphasis on the centrist thematics of forgiveness and forgetting. Indeed, *Going After Cacciato* articulates a vision of post-war relations between Vietnam and the United States which parallels that of the Carter administration: one in which reconciliation, amity, and mutual understanding prevail between the two nations. Like Carter’s America, Berlin undercuts his own apologetic gestures to the Vietnamese with a steadfast refusal to admit any genuine culpability for his own (and, the

context leads us to infer, his country's) part in the conflict, but the apologetic gesture is nevertheless *there* (where it is noticeably absent in the discourse of the ideologues). Berlin's imagined post-war visit to the province where he fought includes a dialogue or question-and-answer session during which the former enemies attempt to clear up misunderstandings and resolve their differences once and for all; this session perhaps sums up its centrist sympathies and makes its alignment with the tragic interpretation most clear. O'Brien relates Berlin's dream of what he will do years later when hostilities have subsided:

After the war, perhaps, he might return to Quang Ngai. Years and years afterward. Return to track down the girl with gold hoops in her ears. Bring along an interpreter. And then, with the war ended, history decided, he would explain to her why he had let himself go to war. Not because of strong convictions, but because he didn't know. He didn't know who was right, or what was right; he didn't know if it was a war of self-determination or self-destruction, outright aggression or national liberation; he didn't know which speeches to believe, which books, which politicians; he didn't know if nations would topple like dominoes or stand separate like trees; he didn't know who really started the war, or why, or when, or with what motives; he didn't know if it mattered; he saw sense in both sides of the debate, but he did not know where truth lay; he didn't know if communist tyranny would prove worse in the long run than the tyrannies of Ky or Thieu or Khanh—he simply didn't know. And who did? Who really did? Oh, he had read the newspapers and magazines. He wasn't stupid. He wasn't uninformed. He just didn't know if the war was right or wrong or somewhere in the murky middle.⁸⁹

He maintains, throughout the imaginary encounter, that the moral wrongs of the war became clear for soldiers like himself only in hindsight. Here Berlin's personal travail becomes analogous to Carter's national moral dilemma. Bred on the black-and-white certainties of the war against Hitler and Mussolini, both Berlin and his country are deeply divided—wracked by internal struggle—over a war in which both sides seem to present compelling arguments. In the plainsong of unsophisticated, folksy speech, O'Brien echoes Herr's epistemological skepticism regarding the "fact-figure crossfire" or the competing truth-claims of all involved in the argument over the origins and nature of the Vietnam War. Unlike the pro-war hawks clamoring to bomb Vietnam back into the Stone Age, and yet equally unlike the campus radicals shouting "Out Now," Berlin stands "somewhere in the murky middle," unable to commit himself to either position with any certainty. Whereas the ideologues would denounce this apparent fence-sitting as feeble-

mindfulness or moral cowardice, in *Going After Cacciato* (as well as in O'Brien's other Vietnam War fiction) this indecision and uncertainty are positive attributes which make the protagonists more fully human. Berlin is uncertain about the rightness or the wrongness of the war not because he is stupid or uninformed, but because his perspective is larger than that of the flag-waving hard-hats and flag-burning radicals back home. Seeing the war firsthand, he can discern "sense in both sides of the debate"—echoing David Eisenhower's suggestion that "everyone was right, and everyone was wrong"—insofar as he has enough wits to recognize the damage the American presence is doing to Vietnamese society but at the same time has seen too much communist brutality to be able to dismiss anticommunism as a hollow ideology or a mask for imperialist aggression.

The Persistence of the Tragic Interpretation

In the late 1970s, Americans did indeed appear to be seeking middle ground over the issue of the late conflict, to be looking for areas of agreement and accord on a subject which had given rise to the most violent and tumultuous internal discord since the Civil War. That Jimmy Carter, a centrist liberal whose inoffensive "forgive-and-forget" attitude toward the Vietnam-era divisions in American society helped win him the presidency in 1976; that a psychology of the Vietnam veteran, which revolved around notions of "healing the wounds" and putting the war behind oneself, developed and proliferated in popular discourse; that Michael Herr, Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, Hal Ashby, and Francis Ford Coppola were able to reach wide audiences, win critical accolades, and achieve substantial commercial success for their non-ideological, non-recriminatory representations of the Vietnam War seems to indicate that citizens of the United States had begun to move past the crises of the 1960s and early 70s towards a new consensus. Yet even as the conception of the late war as a "tragedy without villains" began to reach the zenith of its popular appeal at the end of the decade, another interpretive paradigm was taking shape in histories, novels, and films which offered an entirely different view of Vietnam's significance, one violently at odds with the tragic interpretation. In contrast to the apolitical, conciliatory tone of tragic discourse, the rhetoric on Vietnam that would come to dominate the 1980s was aggressively partisan, advancing a rightist view of the war's meaning, blaming villains, praising heroes, reasserting the Cold War-era contrast between the "free world" and the "evil empire" of communism, and ultimately seeking to banish the notion of the Vietnam War as either a military or a moral defeat for America. The conservative interpretation of the Vietnam War as a "noble cause" (pushed to the forefront of public consciousness and popularized with the arrival of Ronald Reagan in the White House) eventually displaced the centrist "tragedy without villains" as the staple mode of popular representations of the war.

The tragic interpretation lost its firm grasp on American consciousness as the rightist revision of the war took root and flourished in popular culture during the Reagan era. Yet it survived well beyond its late 1970s heyday, persisting throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, as key texts on Vietnam produced in those decades indicate. What eventually became, for popular audiences outside of the academy, the definitive, best-selling, and most widely known history of the war, depicted the conflict in largely the same terms that historians like Schlesinger and Halberstam had a decade previous. Stanley Karnow's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Vietnam: A History* (1983), which the *Washington Post Book World* described as the "most complete account to date of the Vietnam tragedy," recapitulated many of the basic arguments of the fatalist historians and presented the American intervention as the result of blundering benevolence. Karnow, himself a "repentant hawk" war correspondent in the mold of journalists like Halberstam and Neil Sheehan, attempted to portray Vietnam as "a human tragedy of appalling proportions." The apolitical bent of this interpretation was made clearer further on in his preface: "Like everyone else involved in it, I was emotionally scarred by the war, and for me to claim detachment from the experience would be dishonest. But I approached this book without a thesis to promote or a cause to plead."⁹⁰ Yet Karnow, despite his claim to the contrary, does have a thesis, one that begins to take shape in his historical overview of Vietnam as a country with its own long history. Discussing the importance of venerable traditions in Vietnamese culture of rebellion against foreign invaders—traditions of which the American policy-makers who propelled their nation into Vietnam knew little or nothing—Karnow inevitably repeats the thesis that misguided idealism and the tendency to confuse nationalism with Soviet-dominated communism—in short, "enabling ignorance"—served as the catalysts for America's entrance into the conflict. PBS turned Karnow's narrative into a multi-volume visual documentary of the war for television viewers the following year: *Vietnam: A Television History*. Like Karnow's narrative, the series attempted to present a "balanced" view of the conflict by including, without appearing to privilege, at least four different perspectives on Vietnam: that of Communist victors living in the DRV, that of anticommunist Vietnamese exiles living in America, that of Americans who opposed the war, and that of Americans who supported the war. The subjects interviewed ranged from Vo Nguyen Giap to Henry Kissinger; from former ARVN soldiers to Vietnamese civilians who had served in the NLF; from a former U.S. Marine bitterly disillusioned over the war and another Marine officer proud of his participation in the battle for Hue in 1968. *Vietnam: A Television History* also attempted to present a "balanced" view of the politically sensitive subject of war crimes. Interviewing Vietnamese civilians who alleged that they had been terrorized by U.S. troops, along with veterans of the units in question who denied the allegations,

the series left the viewer to decide whether the truth lay in the accusations of the villagers, the impassioned defenses of the Americans, or “somewhere in the murky middle.” Unlike the evil, grinning bomber pilot of *Hearts and Minds*, who says that he enjoys killing the Vietnamese, most of the soldiers interviewed in this series (the most memorable of them former Marine Pfc. Jack Hill) maintain that intense stress, awful conditions, and battle confusion—rather than bloodthirsty, genocidal strategies—were responsible for the civilian deaths that did occur.

Attempting to please everyone, both Karnow’s book and its companion series inevitably displeased a considerable number of people. Karnow and PBS came under fire from conservative groups, like Reed Irwin’s *Accuracy in Media*, for their perceived distortion of the historical record and their unflattering view of U.S. servicemen as trigger-happy murderers. Those on the left, on the other hand, objected to what they saw as the series’ bland whitewashing of U.S. atrocities and its gullibility in regard to the Hue Massacre of Tet 1968 (the execution of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians by the Communists during their occupation of the city), an event which many on the antiwar side maintained was nothing but U.S.-engineered propaganda. Karnow’s appeal, however, was to neither extreme, but rather to the centrist sympathies of a wider readership. His “balanced” view of the war, indeed, echoed Carter’s notion of Vietnam as mutual destruction and Schlesinger’s vision of benevolent motives gone awry. Acknowledging that the United States “did indeed rip South Vietnam’s social fabric to shreds” and agreeing with the Left’s “criticism of American imperialism” had much merit to it, he nevertheless maintained that the original U.S. commitments to defending South Vietnam were “motivated by the loftiest of intentions.”⁹¹

A quarter-century since the war’s end, the “tragedy without villains” view arguably survives both the leftist denunciation and recrimination of the Johnson-Nixon era and the rightist revision of the 1980s and early 1990s as the definitive conceptual framework for the conflict in popular culture and public discourse. “Today,” historian David Levy observed in 1995, “the noun most commonly linked to ‘Vietnam’ is ‘tragedy,’ and ‘tragic’ is perhaps the most commonly used adjective.”⁹² As I have attempted to show throughout this chapter, the designation *tragic* has often served to denote a non-vindictive, conciliatory view of the war. Indeed, if that word has been the adjective most commonly used to describe the war in recent years, it is no doubt because the tendency, in the growth of the new relationship between Vietnam and the United States, has been to move in the direction of compromise, reconciliation, and harmonious coexistence. The most important development in this relationship has been, of course, the United States’ normalization of relations with Vietnam in July 1995. In his official announcement of the event, President Clinton, invoking some of the staple metaphors of tragic

rhetoric, urged the two nations to “move forward and bind up the wounds from the war.” Significantly, the move toward normalization was not solely engineered by the liberal Democrats who, like Clinton himself, had opposed America’s involvement in Vietnam. Normalization had broad bipartisan support among both conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. Perhaps nothing illustrated the bipartisan character of the initiative better than the fact that its two strongest supporters, Senator John Kerry and Senator John McCain—both Vietnam veterans—had sat on opposite sides of the ideological fence twenty-five years earlier: Kerry had, upon returning home from the service, become active in Vietnam Veterans Against the War; McCain had returned, as a ex-POW, holding strongly to the staunchly anticommunist, patriotic, pro-Nixon view that had sustained him during his prison years.

The appearance of Robert McNamara’s memoir *In Retrospect* in 1995 attempted to establish Vietnam once again as a terrible “tragedy” from which important “lessons” can be drawn. Anticipating attacks on his sincerity and accusations that, through his book sales, he is profiting from the suffering he caused, the former Secretary of Defense, in explaining his purposes, trundled out the rhetoric of “healing the wounds” in his preface: “The wounds remain unhealed and the lessons unlearned. It was to assist in the healing process, and to accelerate the learning process, that I wrote the book.” Claiming that *In Retrospect* was “the book [he] planned never to write,” he goes on to explain that he arrived at the decision to abandon that earlier resolution because of the alarming decay of trust between the American people and their government he has sadly seen fester in the years since Vietnam: “I have grown sick at heart witnessing the cynicism and even contempt with which so many people view our political institutions and leaders.” Admitting that this public cynicism does indeed have deep roots in the Vietnam War, he goes on to explain, throughout the rest of his book, how what appeared to many people to be a criminal conspiracy of deception and murder was really a tragedy of misguided idealism. His purpose is to answer, once and for all, how he and his “associates in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations”—an “exceptional group of young, vigorous, intelligent, well-meaning, patriotic servants of the United States”—made the erroneous and ultimately disastrous decisions revolving around Vietnam. Like Caputo, McNamara wants to put his actions “in context”—to admit responsibility for death and suffering, but not to admit to cold-blooded murder. “We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation,” he submits. “We made our decisions in light of those values.” Finally, McNamara invokes the tragic vision of the war as an episode of redemptive suffering for America. Like Herr’s

“turnaround point,” McNamara’s vision is of Vietnam as an instructional, however painful, chapter in American history:

I want Americans to understand why we made the mistakes we did, and to learn from them. I hope to say, ‘Here is something we can take away from Vietnam that is constructive and applicable to the world of today and tomorrow.’ That is the only way our nation can ever hope to leave the past behind. The ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus wrote, ‘The reward of suffering is experience.’ Let this be the lasting legacy of Vietnam.⁹³

The nonpartisan, centrist “healing” rhetoric of figures like President Clinton and Robert McNamara has echoed in American popular culture of the 1990s as well, in films like *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Rules of Engagement* (1999). The reappraisal of the war-manager as a tragic rather than villainous figure has even been extended to Richard Nixon, the president who, before his death in 1994, had been either conspicuously absent from or a contemptible figure on the margins of the fatalist histories. President Clinton’s eulogy at Nixon’s funeral signaled the trend toward a more generous reassessment of the former head of state than that accorded him during the Watergate scandal, noting his positive achievements, such as the opening of relations with the People’s Republic of China. Oliver Stone, who had made his reputation on antiwar films like *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1990), offered, in *Nixon* (1995), a portrait of a tortured soul whose unhappy childhood and burning jealousy of the Eastern Establishment were the demons driving him to make war on the rest of the world. “History will treat you far more kindly than your contemporaries,” says Stone’s Henry Kissinger (Paul Sorvino), who attempts to console a weeping Nixon (Anthony Hopkins) in the Lincoln Room after he has signed his resignation.

Many of the major literary texts on the war produced in the last decade have either, like Tobias Wolff’s memoir *In Pharaoh’s Army* (1994), attempted to soften the horrors of Vietnam with humor, or to emphasize, like many Vietnamese exile narratives, the faults of both sides. Le Ly Hayslip’s *Heaven and Earth* (1989), Duong Thu Huong’s *Paradise of the Blind* (1993), and Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrows of War* (1995) are some of the most notable examples in this mode. *Heaven and Earth*, the autobiography of a Vietnamese-American woman who married an American Army officer in order to escape both the poverty of South Vietnam and the destruction of the war, details the horror of the author’s rape and torture by the NLF guerrillas who terrorized her village and includes other episodes which, for her, illustrate the moral bankruptcy and hypocrisy of the Communist revolutionaries who claimed to fight for all Vietnamese. Hayslip also casts a sharply critical eye, however, on the corruption of the U.S.-supported RVN, the

narrow-mindedness and brutality of her American husband (an alcoholic who physically abused her), and the spiritual emptiness of American consumer culture. Emphasizing the evils of both sides, rather than propagandizing against communism or railing against imperialism, Hayslip ends her book with a prayer for mutual understanding, forgiveness, peace and goodwill between the two former enemies. *Paradise of the Blind*, a bleak picture of life in the postwar DRV (banned in Vietnam immediately upon its publication), extols the romantic vision at the core of the country's founding revolutionary ideals but at the same time offers a plea for democratic political reform. Finally, one of the most remarkable novels of the Vietnam conflict to appear in the last decade, *The Sorrows of War*, perhaps stands as the clearest example of the Vietnamese attempt to "put the war behind us"—to look at past suffering and strife from a balanced perspective, to move beyond ideological sloganeering and partisanship toward a broader compassion for *all* who suffered as a result of the war. Ninh's "apolitical" vision of a conflict characterized by moral uncertainty parallels O'Brien's. For Kien, the protagonist of the narrative, the morality of North Vietnam's war against America and the RVN is anything but clear-cut. A university student drafted into the infantry to fight in the South, Kien does not share the ideological fervor of the commissars; he suspects, indeed, that the constant sloganeering is nothing but an attempt to squelch any legitimate doubts or critical analyses of North Vietnam's purpose in fighting the ARVN and the U.S. Yet his doubts about his country's cause conflict with the conclusions about America that some of his combat experiences provide for him. These Vietnamese exile texts, significantly, have offered up unpleasant representations of American heavy-handedness and South Vietnamese corruption and repression, yet they have also deflated the American leftists' romantic image of the Vietcong and the NVA as peasant heroes by focusing unflinchingly upon their brutal treatment and terrorization of Vietnamese civilians. Thus Vietnamese writers, along with American writers, have attempted to go "beyond politics" in order to reconcile differences between peoples formerly at war. The emergence of this non-ideological thrust in 1990s Vietnamese exile literature, which appears far removed from the officially-sponsored and government-approved art of the years during and immediately after the war, along with the normalization of relations between the two nations, appears to suggest that the centrist compromise over the war may come to prevail in the public discourse and popular culture of both Vietnam and America.

If the "tragedy without villains" view becomes the primary paradigm through which future generations look back upon the war, then it is perhaps because that, as the generation that fought and protested the war fades, the fierce ideological battles of the 1960s and 70s fade with them. Indeed, if the tragic view's inevitability is symptomatic of time's tendency to soften

ideological fervor and moral outrage, then perhaps no better illustration of that tendency exists than President Clinton's remarks during his recent visit to Vietnam. "Obviously, the war divided Americans and divided the Vietnamese, in a lot of ways," White House press secretary Jake Siewert remarked, invoking the tragic staples of "healing the wounds" and "putting the war behind us": "But we're not here to reflect upon the history at any great length or to highlight those divisions. If anything, this is meant to heal those divisions and point the way toward a new future." Looking back upon history, Clinton put Lyndon Johnson—the president whose policies he had once protested so vociferously during the 1960s—in a kinder light. The first American head of state to visit Vietnam since the communist victory in 1975, he had also bitterly opposed the "immoral and criminal" war and denounced Johnson and Nixon in his days as a student at Oxford University. Yet his experience in the White House, as a commander-in-chief of U.S. forces who had ordered U.S. troops into battle, had apparently mellowed his views on the Vietnam-era war-managers. He has, since, come around to an appreciation of the incredible difficulties and agonizing decisions that a war president faces. "I now understand how hard it was for him," Clinton remarked of Lyndon Johnson, a leader whose war he professed to despise but whose vision of a "Great Society" he claimed as one of the greatest inspirations behind his own political career.⁹⁴

Notes

¹ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Random House, 1977): 70.

² Herr, *Dispatches*, 31.

³ Herr, *Dispatches*, 10-16.

⁴ Jim Nielson, *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998): 144.

⁵ Quoted in Noam Chomsky, *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* (Boston: South End Press, 1979): 320.

⁶ Steven Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996): 19-21.

Hurst provides the historical context for the administration's initial decision to seek normalized relations with the DRV and the subsequent turnaround in their position. As he shows, the drive for normalization had its genesis in the Ford administration, with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, whose initiative fell dead for the same reasons it would fail under Carter—the inability of either side to come to an agreement or compromise over the U.S. demand for a satisfactory accounting of POW/MIAs and the Vietnamese demand for postwar reconstruction aid.

⁷ Susan Frakner, "After the Pardon," *Newsweek* 31 January 1977: 28-29.

⁸ Quoted in Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 126.

⁹ Ralph K. White, *Nobody Wanted War: Misperception in Vietnam and Other Wars* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970): 332-336.

¹⁰ Quoted in Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984): 357-58.

¹¹ Herr, *Dispatches*, 49.

¹² Robert S. McNamara, with Brian Van der Mark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995): 266. McNamara quotes at length from the May 19 memo and discusses Johnson's contemptuous dismissal of it. Drawing on several observations about the resolve and determination of North Vietnam, the growing disenchantment with the war in the domestic sphere, and the threat to regional stability posed by continued conflict in Vietnam, the Secretary of Defense came to the unpalatable conclusion that a conventional victory for the U.S. was out of the question; the president would be forced to "choose among imperfect alternatives."

¹³ Quoted in William Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media & Military at War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998): 120-21. As Hammond makes clear, the overall mood of the American news media toward the war, by the end of February 1968, was one of unrelieved gloom. *Life*, on the 23rd, provided an exceptionally pessimistic assessment of the situation, predicting a "looming bloodbath" at Khe Sanh. The headline, "Wherever We Look, Something's Wrong," was typical of Tet-era magazine and newspaper coverage. In spite of the media's gloomy forecast for the war, as the Louis Harris and Gallup polls showed, "the majority of Americans went their own way." The public was, by and large, "unwilling to repudiate the war," however much they disapproved of the way in which President Johnson was handling it.

¹⁴ Quoted in David Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 146. For a more extensive account of this senior advisory board's relationship with Lyndon Johnson and the administration's Vietnam policy, see Stuart Isaacson's *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

¹⁵ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972): 656-57.

¹⁶ John Clark Pratt, ed., *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years, 1941-1982* (New York: Penguin, 1984): 35-37.

¹⁷ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 658.

¹⁸ Schlesinger's book originally appeared in 1967 and was followed by two revised editions; one in 1968 and one in 1969. I quote from the 1969 edition.

¹⁹ James Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam 1945-1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991): 271.

²⁰ Quoted in Robert J. McMahon, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Company, 1990): 228.

²¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1968* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969): 48.

- ²² William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1985): 434-35. I am here indebted to Gibson's comprehensive overview of early historical accounts of the Vietnam War and his penetrating critique of the centrist rhetoric of absolution in Halberstam, Schlesinger, Cooper, and Hoopes. Gibson, throughout his study, illuminates the severe shortcoming of the tragic view of Vietnam and shows us how "the intellectual convolutions taken to preserve the sense of rational men acting in a rational system [have reached] unbelievable proportions." In order to "sustain the central assumption that the war was simply a series of mistakes or miscalculations by rational men," as he demonstrates, these historians "must discount a lot."
- ²³ Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of U.S. Intervention: An Inside Account of How the Johnson Policy of Escalation in Vietnam Was Reversed* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc.): 9. During the 1960s Hoopes served, from 1965 to 1967, as a Deputy Assistant for International Security Affairs, and from 1967 to 1969 as Undersecretary of the Air Force.
- ²⁴ Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1970): 465-67.
- ²⁵ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997): 349-50.
- ²⁶ Quoted in Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 433.
- ²⁷ Zalin Grant, "Vietnam as Fable," *New Republic* (25 March 1978, 21-24). Grant's overview of Vietnam War literature up to the publication of *Dispatches* attempts to map some of the major ideological shifts in fiction and non-fiction on the war throughout the 1960s and 70s. Clearly right-of-center in his politics, Grant's assessment of radical antiwar/atrocities literature is rather dismissive.
- ²⁸ For an excellent analysis of the relationship between commercial and academic literary culture, the publishing industry, the politics of canon formation, and Vietnam War literature see Jim Nielson's excellent study. Nielson's thesis is that the centrist ideology of liberal humanism, which has, until only recently, molded the literary canon of college English programs in the United States, has largely discouraged politicized treatments of the war in fiction. Liberal humanism (which Nielson identifies with critics like Irving Howe and Lionel Trilling) typically favors literature preoccupied with "eternal" and "universal" themes over writing generated in order to advance partisan causes or positions on historically specific issues. The consequences of liberal humanism's dominance for Vietnam War literature (and literary studies in general), Nielson holds, is a watering-down or a blunting of ideological critique.
- ²⁹ C.D.B. Bryan, "The Different War," *New York Times Book Review* (20 November 1977): 1+.
- ³⁰ Raymond Sokolov, "Heart of Darkness," *Newsweek* (14 November 1977): 102-04.
- ³¹ Roger Sales, "Hurled into Vietnam," *New York Review of Books* (8 December 1977): 34-35.
- ³² Elizabeth Pochoda, "Vietnam, We've All Been There," *Nation* (25 March 1978): 344-46.
- ³³ Paul Gray, "Secret History," *Time* (7 November 1977): 119-20.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Neilson, *Warring Fictions*, 54.
- ³⁵ Quoted in Neilson, *Warring Fictions*, 56.
- ³⁶ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 356.
- ³⁷ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Random House, 1977): 20.
- ³⁸ Herr, *Dispatches*, 44.
- ³⁹ Herr, *Dispatches*, 44-45.
- ⁴⁰ Herr, *Dispatches*, 46.
- ⁴¹ Herr, *Dispatches*, 50.
- ⁴² Herr, *Dispatches*, 8-9.
- ⁴³ "Illumination rounds" are powerful flares that burn for a minute or more and, when fired into the sky, are capable of lighting up large areas at night. They are typically employed by mortar platoons seeking to acquire enemy targets in the dark. Herr uses the illumination round as a metaphor for his short bursts of prose—they provide fragmentary glimpses of the war which illuminate some larger meaning or thematic strand in the narrative.
- ⁴⁴ Herr, *Dispatches*, 39.
- ⁴⁵ Herr, *Dispatches*, 70-71.
- ⁴⁶ Herr, *Dispatches*, 214-15.
- ⁴⁷ Joseph A. Rehyansky, "A Mortal S.I.W.," *National Review* (17 March 1978): 356-57.
- ⁴⁸ Nielson, *Warring Fictions*, 142.
- ⁴⁹ Herr, *Dispatches*, 43.
- ⁵⁰ Herr, *Dispatches*, 49.

- ⁵¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Postmodern Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 45-49. Hutcheon does not specifically discuss *Dispatches*, but her insights on contemporaneous postmodern novelists are relevant to Herr's text. Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) characterizes *Dispatches* as a seminal postmodern text, but his cursory remarks lack the substantiality of a well-developed, useful analysis.
- ⁵² Kate Beaird Meyers, "Fragmentary Mosaics: Vietnam War Histories and Postmodern Epistemology," *Genre* (Winter 1988): 535-52.
- ⁵³ Theodore Solotaroff, "Memoirs for Memorial Day," *The New York Times Book Review* (May 29 1977): 9.
- ⁵⁴ William Styron, "A Farewell to Arms," *The New York Review of Books* XXIV: 11 (June 23 1977): 3-4, 6.
- ⁵⁵ D. Keith Mano, "Best of the Season," *National Review*, XXIX: 34 (September 2, 1977): 101-2.
- ⁵⁶ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xiii.
- ⁵⁷ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xviii.
- ⁵⁸ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xiii.
- ⁵⁹ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xxi.
- ⁶⁰ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 81.
- ⁶¹ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xiii.
- ⁶² Conrad's influence upon Caputo has been noted by a number of critics and reviewers. In 1977, *Newsweek* noted the connection between the novella and the memoir: "This is news that goes beyond what the journalists brought us, new from the heart of darkness. It was long overdue." Randall Kennedy, writing for the *New Republic*, compared the protagonist of Caputo's next production, the novel *Horn of Africa* (1980), to Conrad's Kurtz. More recently, Jim Nielson has observed the parallels between the descriptions of the jungle (along with the conception of "savagery") in *A Rumor of War* and those in *Heart of Darkness*.
- ⁶³ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xiii.
- ⁶⁴ Herr, *Dispatches*, 31.
- ⁶⁵ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xviii.
- ⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, "On Genocide," in *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal Founded by Bertrand Russell* ed. Peter Limquenco, Peter Weiss, and Ken Coates (London: Penguin Press, 1971): 362.
- ⁶⁷ Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 235-36.
- ⁶⁸ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xx.
- ⁶⁹ Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 90-91.
- ⁷⁰ Nielson, *Warring Fictions*, 129-30.
- ⁷¹ Quoted in Frank P. Tomasulo, "The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Prowar and Antiwar Film." In Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995): 154-55.
- ⁷² Tomasulo, "The Politics of Ambivalence," 156.
- ⁷³ Tomasulo, "The Politics of Ambivalence," 157.
- ⁷⁴ A representative example of this view of the novella is available in Wilson Harris' "The Frontier on Which *Heart of Darkness* Stands," in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988): 262-68. Harris' essay, a rebuttal to Chinua Achebe's famous attack on Conrad, maintains that the text, in spite of its colonialistic bias, is indeed a condemnation of imperialism.
- ⁷⁵ Harris, "The Frontier on Which," 268.
- ⁷⁶ Harris, "The Frontier on Which," 146.
- ⁷⁷ John Updike, "Layers of Ambiguity," *New Yorker* (March 27, 1978): 130.
- ⁷⁸ Richard Freeman, "A Separate Peace," *New York Times Book Review* (February 12, 1978): 21.
- ⁷⁹ Pearl K. Bell, "Writing About Vietnam," *Commentary* (October 1978): 74-77.
- ⁸⁰ Nielson, *Warring Fictions*, 157-59.
- ⁸¹ Dale W. Jones, "The Vietnams of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien: Tales of Disintegration and Integration." *Canadian Review of American Studies* (Winter 1982, 309-20): 318.
- ⁸² Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978): 270.
- ⁸³ O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 270.
- ⁸⁴ O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 270.

⁸⁵ O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 260.

⁸⁶ O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 261.

⁸⁷ Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 114-17. Christopher provides a concise history of French, English, and American stereotyping of Asians throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the background for her critique of racist stereotypes in Vietnam War narratives.

⁸⁸ Herr, *Dispatches*, 14.

⁸⁹ O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 263-64.

⁹⁰ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1983): xii.

⁹¹ Karnow, *Vietnam*, 439.

⁹² Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam*, 177.

⁹³ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, xxi.

⁹⁴ "Clinton Opens 'New Chapter' in Vietnam," *St. Petersburg Times* (Friday November 17, 2000): 2-A.

CHAPTER 4

THE HAWKISH RIGHT AND THE “NOBLE CAUSE”

Mythology, half-truth and falsehood concerning events in Vietnam abound and, unless corrected, will enter the textbooks for the miseducation of our children.

—Guenter Lewy, preface to *America in Vietnam*

So, to those in the media, in the arts, and in education who continue to perpetrate the clichés, I wish you enlightenment. To the vast majority of Americans who served honorably and heroically, in the most moral war in which this nation has ever engaged in, I wish you peace, prosperity, happiness, and vindication.

—John Del Vecchio, preface to *The 13th Valley*

Why, then, were we in Vietnam? To say it once again: because we were trying to save the Southern half of that country from the evils of Communism.

—Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*

The American withdrawal and the Communist victory were an unmitigated tragedy for the 40 million people of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Before our withdrawal, they had a chance for a better life under governments supported and influenced by the United States. Today, because we failed to meet our commitment to them, they suffer under one of the most brutal regimes in the world.

—Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams*

And yet after more than a decade of desperate boat people, after the killing fields of Cambodia, after all that has happened in that unhappy part of the world, who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just?

—Ronald Reagan, 1988 speech at the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial

The Hawkish Right and Vietnam

That the end of the 1970s and the Carter era saw a significant shift toward conservatism in U.S. political and popular culture is generally not a matter of contention among historians who have written about the period. Conservatives themselves (Newt Gingrich, for example) freely admit that this was the case.¹ William C. Berman, in his study of rightward political and cultural trends in America since the 1970s, focuses on many of the agencies and forces working within American society to engender that change: political action committees, a powerful and well-financed religious right wing exerting its influence over American culture through televangelism, the rising prominence of think tanks like the Hoover Institution, and the ability of rightist organizers to mobilize public opinion in support of conservative positions on social and cultural issues.² I am not necessarily concerned in this study with all of these well-documented aspects and dimensions of the rise of the right in American politics and culture. What I *am* particularly concerned with here is the ascendancy of the rightist interpretation of the Vietnam War and the

various ways in which several key texts running across the generic spectrum actively or indirectly promoted this interpretation. Of course I realize that the conservative vision of what the Vietnam experience meant intertwined with other components of the rightist agenda, such as backing the opposition to Communism in Latin America, and I will bring those issues into the discussion whenever and wherever relevant. I have focused, in the previous two chapters, on how bodies of texts about Vietnam articulate specific political positions on the war in line with either a broadly-defined leftist narrative or centrist-liberal narrative. My main focus in this last chapter will be similar, only here I will examine the rightist discourse on Vietnam, its main thematic concerns, its development in relation to the historical context, and the narrative strategies that a broad range of texts have employed to persuade their readers and viewers that the American fight against Communism in Vietnam was not an immoral act of naked aggression or a misguided, mistaken undertaking, but a just and noble, however maligned and misunderstood, cause. Some of the most important thematic concerns of the rightist narrative of Vietnam and its legacy involve a direct response to or countermanding of what the Right perceived (and still perceives) as the Left's propagandistic and falsified portrayals of a U.S. military in which atrocity and brutality is policy, of U.S. servicemen as either moral cretins willingly participating in an evil enterprise or hapless pawns from the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder caught up against their will in a war orchestrated by the rich, of South Vietnamese as "puppet" allies, or of the heroism and benevolence of the Vietnamese Communists. The rightist view, unlike either the leftist or centrist view, assumes *a priori* the evil of Communism and the necessity of defeating it. This assumption forms the backbone of rightist or "hawkish" discourse on the Vietnam War.

In this final chapter I will try to show the ways in which various hawkish texts on Vietnam—from novels and films to historical narratives—work through these issues (the justness of the war against Communism, the viability of South Vietnam as an independent entity, the heroism and nobility of the American military) in different ways and with varying degrees of success. Lastly, I will touch briefly upon a series of post-war Vietnamese (and Cambodian) exile narratives that have lent credence (wittingly or unwittingly) to the rightist understanding of what the Vietnam War was all about.

Cold War Rhetoric and American Culture During the Reagan Era

By the end of the 1980s, there was a discernible trend toward casting aside leftist and liberal explanations of the Vietnam War in favor of an explanatory myth with conservative ideological underpinnings. Haynes Bonner Johnson, in his *Sleepwalking through History: America in the Reagan Years* (as the title hints, an unsympathetic assessment of the fortieth president's tenure) describes the 1980s as a time of "surging public interest in the past" but at the same time of great

ignorance of the past. Cultural historian Michael Kammen, in *The Mystic Chords of Memory: Transformation and Tradition in American Culture*, observes that, during the 1980s, “books, films and media programs about Vietnam” were busy “creating a new mythology in which the U.S. government disappeared as a devastating force” and “the Vietnamese people ceased to be victims”—in short, a conservative myth of the war was displacing the reality.³

The “immoral and criminal war” and “tragedy without villains” versions of Vietnam had exerted their greatest influence during the eras of Watergate and the Carter presidency, respectively; the conservative myth would emerge during the Reagan era and putatively displace its predecessors. Just as each of the two earlier narratives of Vietnam rested on definite (although not always explicitly articulated) ontological assumptions about the United States and its role in the world, the right-wing narrative rested on its own set of core beliefs—which Ronald Reagan made explicitly clear to the American public during his first presidential campaign. The most important of them was that the American superpower, though far from perfect, had always been and would continue to be a benevolent force guaranteeing human freedom and dignity in a world that would otherwise be brutish and nasty, a world where dictators and tyrants would bully the weak with impunity and exercise unchecked power over those unable to defend themselves. World War II usually stood in such triumphal rhetoric as the greatest example of this exercise of American power, and here the Right and the Center agreed with one another (the extreme Right and the far Left often dissent from the popular consensus on World War II).⁴

The conservatives, however, parted company with the centrist and left-of-center liberals when they included Vietnam in the narrative of American benevolence. While the right wing did not envision the Indochina conflict as a “good” war in the same sense as World War II (for reasons which I will discuss in the following pages), conservatives *were* convinced that America’s war against Communism in Vietnam, like the campaigns against European fascism and Japanese imperialism, had been a righteous crusade with morally unambiguous imperatives—a “noble cause” as Ronald Reagan would term it in a November 1988 speech (and as he had done several times previously).⁵ Although by no means were left-liberal views on Vietnam silenced after 1981—witness the popularity of films like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, both of which questioned the hawkish version of Vietnam—it is safe to say that the Reagan vision of America having had just cause to fight the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong guerrillas would gradually become dominant in representations of the Vietnam War during the 1980s. Since powerful elements of the cultural Right in the media and entertainment industry would have a sympathetic administration in the nation’s capital for the greater part of that decade and shortly into the following, conservative interpretations of the Vietnam War and of American history in

general, inevitably, received more favorable treatment in Hollywood and other apparatuses of cultural production than they had in the previous ten years. As regards publishing, Jim Neilson asserts that, since the late 1970s, there has been a “rightward tilt” that is “plain to see” in publishing by the major houses (i.e. Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins). Neilson, citing cases like Warner’s refusal to publish one of Noam Chomsky’s critiques of U.S. foreign policy or Simon & Schuster’s unwillingness to publish an expose of the decision-making at Ford Motors regarding the dangerous Pinto model, argues that corporate pressure on publishing firms and their subsidiaries not to publish texts with views antithetical to their interests led to a narrowing of limits for acceptable discourse. As the main subject of Neilson’s book, of course, is Vietnam War narratives, the implications for published materials on Vietnam is obvious.⁶ The implication for film production is similarly plain, since generally more people will go to see a movie about Vietnam than read a book about it.

Although Neilson and critics like him—who might be called members of the “Chomsky School”—have valuable insights to offer, I do not find his model (heavily influenced by Chomsky and Herman’s *Manufacturing Consent*, a critique of corporate propaganda in American media) of a culture industry completely dominated by right-wing business interests thoroughly convincing, and I do not mean to suggest, by citing Neilson, that a passive American public simply accepted a different narrative of the Vietnam War story because it was imposed upon them by an entertainment industry working in collusion with a right-wing administration and greedy corporations. Certainly, business and political pressures exert their influence to a great extent over outlets of expression, and it would be foolish to deny that they have a vested interest in what does what doesn’t get said. But the public’s abandonment of leftist and liberal narratives probably had more to do with the unfolding of certain domestic and global historical developments during the period of the post-Vietnam, post-Détente phase of the Cold War. The political and cultural Right came to power at that moment in history precisely because of a confluence of events which seemed to necessitate a national rightward turn. William C. Berman, citing opinion polls and other data, affirms that the majority of Americans during the late 1970s and early 1980s were indeed moving toward conservatism and ascribes this to a number of factors: “the persistence of inflation, intense cultural conflict, growing opposition to welfarism, and a tax revolt.” There was a general feeling, among vast segments of the American middle and upper class during the late 1970s, that big government was “unworkable, inefficient, or delivering services that had nothing to do with them.” Finally, there was the sense that the struggles and crusades of the 1960s and early 1970s had degenerated into dangerous excesses.⁷ Conservatives played on the perceptions that these excesses had not been curbed by a liberal, permissive Carter

administration, and that they had been tacitly permitted to linger as harmful influences that had the potential to undermine both the country's social stability and its status as a benevolent world power. These voters elected Reagan to office in a landslide on a platform that articulated ordinary Americans' frustration at what they perceived as burdensome taxation and government ineffectuality, as well as perceived leftist and countercultural frivolities and the tolerant liberal attitudes that allowed them to flourish.

Reagan garnered much of his appeal for his stance on domestic issues (his professed contempt for big government, tax-and-spend liberalism, and the welfare state), but his vision of a foreign policy radically at odds with that of the previous administration played as great, if not an even greater, role in his coming to power. Reagan and the conservatives still held firmly, in the post-Vietnam era, to the fundamental precepts associated with the ideological axis of Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater and the California Republicans during the war years. At a time during which the Soviet Union seemed to be making great gains in the world through armed aggression or the support of armed revolutionary movements, vast segments of the American public found this hard-line stance appealing.

One of the fundamental tenets of the Reagan Right was that Communism remained the greatest threat to the survival of freedom in the modern world. In the minds of a great many Americans, by the early 1980s there was ample reason to believe that this was indeed true. Perhaps the Republicans had been right about Communist intentions all along; perhaps the counterculture and protest periods had been nothing but youthfully innocent attempts to deny the harsh realities of geopolitical dynamics. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rise of Soviet-backed leftist guerrilla movements in Africa and Central America, and the harsh crackdowns by Moscow on the Solidarity movement protesters in Eastern Europe seemed to lend a great deal of weight to Reagan's claim that the Soviet Union was indeed a malignant imperial power bent on ruling the globe with an iron fist. In the rightist vision of the future, a showdown between the two powers was inevitable; force, if the occasion demanded, would have to be met with force, since force was the only language that the Communists knew and understood. In contrast to the liberal establishment, which put the premium on diplomacy and discourse in resolving international disputes, and in stark contrast the American Left, which recoiled from virtually any use of military power in order to safeguard U.S. interests, the Reagan Right insisted on the grim necessity of using military muscle as a means to effect positive change in the world.

The Reagan Right, drawing Americans' attention to the spread of Communism and anti-American sentiment among the troubled regions of Central and South America, as well as in parts of Africa, also revived the domino theory that had supposedly been discredited by the appearance

of rifts between the two major Communist powers and Vietnam, as well as by events like the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. The domino principle, as conservatives pointed out, was alive and well in regions of even more immediate concern than Southeast Asia. New “dominoes” like El Salvador and Nicaragua had fallen or appeared to be in danger of falling. The Soviet Union itself seemed to show its true colors as an imperial power when, in 1979, it invaded and occupied Afghanistan—and kept troops in that country for a decade before pulling out. In this new litany of falling dominoes, the specter of Vietnam always hovered in the background like a bad omen, for conservatives usually insisted that Russia was only emboldened to perpetrate such an outrage because they knew that an America without the strength or resolve to see Vietnam through would not lift a finger to protect Afghanistan. Even if the domino theory was not *literally* true, then, in the sense that the fall of a particular nation to Communism meant that neighboring nations would eventually fall, it was true insofar as an American defeat in one spot meant more vigorous Soviet prosecution of an expansionist campaign elsewhere.⁸

As a result of these threats—real and imagined—to U.S. security, a wide variety of figures across the broad spectrum of the right wing were able to convince many Americans that the leftist and liberal dogmas of the 1960s and 70s had been utterly discredited by events since 1975. Worse yet, America’s passive acceptance of them had severely weakened the national will during that interval. A nation that chose to let its military muscles atrophy would soon be challenged by tyrants who perceived its weakness and lack of resolve. The Communist menace was no mere paranoid fantasy. America *could* and *should* have won the war in Vietnam, the rightist argument ran; losing that war had done incalculable damage to the image of the United States as a formidable world power and given a clear signal to Communist expansionism: America would not resist Soviet- or Chinese-backed insurgent aggression against weak non-communist regimes. President Reagan made his position on Communist expansion completely clear—no other American president in history exhibited, in his public utterances, the degree of unequivocal contempt for Communism that he did. Reagan’s anticommunist rhetoric embodied a belligerency that liberals like Lyndon Johnson and right-of-center moderates like Dwight Eisenhower had refrained from adopting out of fear of hampering their ability to reach compromises and agreements with these two major powers. His black-and-white, Manichean vision of a mortal struggle between good and evil echoed throughout American mainstream discourse, amplified by the culture industry, which provided a generally sympathetic array of images and micro-narratives on the Vietnam War throughout the 1980s and into the early 90s. The Vietnam War often figured as a sort of disgraceful chapter of self-betrayal and faint-

heartedness in the larger narrative of America's late-twentieth-century struggle to vanquish the forces of tyranny.

Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome

One of the greatest challenges that the right wing faced during the initial stages of its ascendancy was overcoming what George Bush, Sr. would later call the "Vietnam Syndrome." The phrase was shorthand for what a number Republican-affiliated foreign policy shapers both in government and private think-tanks saw as the downward spiral American credibility (as a formidable power able to match rhetoric with action) had been taking since 1975 and the fall of Saigon. Marilyn Young—no friend of the Reagan/Bush agenda—describes the Vietnam Syndrome as a "grave reluctance to send American troops abroad" and "close questioning of administration interventionist appeals," along with the lingering notion that the Vietnam War was "fundamentally wrong."⁹ From the rightist perspective, the malaise had resulted from America's shameful abandonment of its commitment to defend South Vietnam from foreign aggression, which had merely encouraged aggressors who might have otherwise kept their designs in check. Since the loss of Vietnam to Communism, the United States appeared to the rest of the world to be what the Vietnamese Communists had originally said it was—nothing but a paper tiger. Overcoming the Vietnam Syndrome, quite simply, meant reasserting American power and putting these emboldened tyrants to rout. In a narrow sense, this entailed the massive re-arming of America and the beefing up of its forces, as well as the assumption of a more active role in the affairs of nations threatened with Soviet-backed insurgencies, Soviet aggression from outside, or a combination of both.

Yet the new Cold Warriors of the Reagan era were also keenly interested in overcoming what they saw as a "Vietnam Syndrome" in the popular psyche, too. They rejected what they saw as the defeatist and decadent attitudes associated with the 1960s cultural revolutions and made a concerted effort to eradicate their lingering influence over American culture. The antisocial ethos of the drug-oriented counterculture, the contempt for American institutions in the rhetoric of radical political and social movements, and the anti-Western tendencies in academic and intellectual circles (especially in the humanities and social sciences) that had permeated much of American life by the early 1980s were at the root of the malaise. Conservative writers (both academic and popular), legislators, clergy, and activists, from Allan Bloom and Robert Bork to Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly, took it upon themselves to identify these poisonous influences so as to be able to root them out, as their continued presence boded badly for the prospect of American security and prestige in the future.

Just as the chief spokespersons of the antiwar movement had sought, during the waning years of the war, to dominate public discourse on Vietnam through an aggrandizing campaign of words and images, Reagan-era conservatives sought to replace the notion of Vietnam as a malicious crime or a tragic mistake with the idea that the war had been a “noble cause.” In the skewed and distorted account favored by the American Left (as the Right often paraphrased it), the Vietnam War was a story in which the United States figured wrongly as the villain and the Vietnamese communists figured as both victims and heroes. The “happy” ending came, in the leftist narrative, with the triumphant Vietnamese routing the American imperialists. (To be sure, the various accounts of the war by leftist historians are more nuanced than this reductive summation would suggest, yet those who reject leftist accounts out of hand often sum up their opponents’ views in such a way as to bring those aspects of the radical antiwar version that would seem most repugnant or subversive to the average American to the forefront of attention.) In the view of the Right, America’s role in the drama of the Vietnam War was neither that of the evil villain (as the leftists would have it) nor of the deluded, tragic fool (as the centrist liberals would have it). It was that of the honest, well-intentioned crusader cheated out of a conventional victory by a cynical, sneaky foe more adept at psychological warfare, double-dealing, and deception than conventional war-fighting on a physical battlefield, a foe which broke treaties and casually trampled upon agreements in order to achieve power. The accomplices in this narrative of betrayal were those civilians at home whom rightists accused of lending aid and comfort to the enemy via demonstrations of solidarity with him, along with certain elements in the press and television news, whose skewed reporting demonized Americans and portrayed Vietnamese Communists as rebels conducting a legitimate resistance against foreign aggression.

In the same way that the leftist narrative had reached the height of its influence on the media and other outlets of expression at a particular historical moment, during which a certain set of circumstances and events (namely, the revelation of the My Lai massacre, the bombing of Cambodia, the publication of the *Pentagon Papers*, and the Watergate crisis, all of which more or less contributed to an erosion of trust between the public and the government) seemed to validate the assumptions embedded within the radical critique of the war, the rightist narrative achieved its greatest influence over the American imagination at a time when Ronald Reagan and George Bush saw fit to reassert the very national power and prestige (via the invasion of Grenada, the bombing of Libya, the invasion of Panama, and the victory over Iraq in the first Gulf War) which were being threatened by Communist expansion and which had been so severely damaged with the denouement of the Vietnam War.

Without question, the Vietnam War was a sore spot for conservative anti-communists during the late 1970s and 1980s. Just about every public figure identified with conservative politics—from actor Charlton Heston to former president Richard Nixon—commented extensively on the war and expressed deep misgivings about its outcome.¹⁰ The idea of the rich and powerful United States as ultimately failing to win a decisive victory against Communist aggression in a small, primitive country seemed a good argument for historical pessimism. Was the loss in Indochina a harbinger of American decline? Had a nation once renowned for its rugged pioneer virtues become emasculated and enervated through too much paralytic intellectualizing and morbid self-criticism? If the largest free nation on the face of the earth could not defeat Communism in Vietnam, then how could it be expected to stand up to the more aggressive Soviet imperialism of the post-Vietnam era?

In order to deal with new Soviet threats, either real or perceived, it was necessary to re-establish the United States' reputation as a formidable military power, one able to back up its rhetoric with enough muscle to make other superpowers to American security think twice about attacking the interests of America or its allies. But in order to rebuild and rearm the national defenses which had, presumably, grown flaccid during the 1970s, it was necessary to mobilize public opinion in favor of such a move, since it would be the public's tax dollars which financed this defense build-up. Consequently, the anticommunist Right had to wage war on the cultural front, just as the radical Left had done (albeit for the opposite purpose) a decade earlier. It was necessary to revive the idea of the United States as a significant force for good in a world shadowed by Communist evil. The war against Communism was, first and foremost, a *moral* war, a war between two mutually exclusive value systems. Conservatives, by and large, agreed that one of the ways to re-engage the idea of the moral validity of anticommunism was to wrest the story of the Vietnam War from those who had heretofore monopolized the telling of it—the radical leftists, who (they believed) had deliberately aided and comforted the enemy by echoing his rhetoric and openly displaying solidarity with him, and the liberal elites of the Kennedy-Johnson circle, who had engaged in a half-hearted war, sending U.S. troops into battle while placing absurdly inordinate restraints upon them.

In the conservative view, popular culture, when it came to Vietnam, was permeated with a morbid defeatism, at best; at worst, it seethed with a sickly sense of self-recrimination—what Vice President Spiro T. Agnew had referred to, back in 1969, as the “spirit of national masochism” foisted on the public “by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals.”¹¹ The same bleeding heart liberals and pointy-headed professors who were directly or indirectly responsible for losing that war, many on the Right complained,

were the same ones who had been controlling the outlets of expression and influencing popular opinion for so many years.¹² They were the ones writing and publishing the novels, producing and releasing the films, and writing the histories that schoolchildren and college students read. As if to add insult to injury, the same people responsible for this defeatist culture made themselves out to be heroes of conscience, waxing nostalgic about their “days of rage” while refusing any measure of dignity to those who did their duty in Vietnam and suffered far greater hardships than any protesters throwing rocks at National Guardsmen on a university campus.

The 1980s, for the conservative movement, was an opportune time to reclaim history. A host of novelists, historians, and filmmakers with ambitions sympathetic to the cultural aims of the American right, as regarding Vietnam, launched a steady (though not centrally directed or organized) counteroffensive on the cultural battlefield toward the end of the 1970s and throughout the following decade. They made films; they wrote memoirs, novels and histories that contested—often passionately and forcefully—the assumptions embedded in the leftist “immoral and criminal war” and the liberal “tragedy without villains” interpretations. Gradually the vision of America’s war in Vietnam as a moral crusade seeped into American consciousness and, for a time, set the tone for representations of the conflict in U.S. media culture. The ascendancy of this revisionism by no means escaped the unfavorable notice of those at odds with the Reagan vision of Vietnam. Liberals and those who stood (with varying degrees of distance) left-of-center were unsparing in their criticism of those they believed responsible for this shift away from what they saw as irrevocable, ugly truths about the history of American involvement in Vietnam. The re-writing of Vietnam along rightist lines, they argued, only facilitated a militarist outlook and paved the way for more bloody and bungled interventions in the Third World.

Reclaiming the Image of the Military and of the Vietnam Veteran

Political conservatives were largely pleased by what they saw as America’s recovery from a long sickness of self-hatred and the loss of the sense of a national purpose. One of the most powerful and influential groups of conservatives with a considerable amount of influence on the military were high-ranking retired military officers with Vietnam experience behind them. Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp, Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., and Lieutenant Colonel David C. Hackworth were a few of the senior officers who, during the late 1970s through the early 1980s, published influential books on their Vietnam experiences. These texts could not be called straightforward historical narratives. They tend more or less to blend autobiography or memoir with historical analysis, attempting to address the question of “what went wrong” in Vietnam, why the United States lost the war, if indeed it had lost the war militarily (which, by and large, these writers treat as a dubious proposition). The main task men like Sharp and Summers set out

to achieve in their writing is the exoneration of the U.S. military and its performance in Vietnam. In their view, the military too often served as a scapegoat for the failings of an incompetent civilian leadership. Although some of them express disdain for the antiwar movement, they generally do not view the protests and demonstrations as having lent the enemy any real battlefield advantage (although it is conceivable that these senior officers, who generally seem to view certain elements of the antiwar movement as beneath contempt, did not want to give the protesters credit for having achieved anything). The primary target of these officers is, rather, the liberal Johnson administration, and, to be more specific, Robert McNamara, and the intellectual arrogance he represents to them—although they rarely lay blame on him straightforwardly.

The most famous senior American field commander of the Vietnam War, William Westmoreland, recognized that the military leadership often perceived itself as the scapegoat for failures in Vietnam. In his autobiography *A Soldier Reports*, Westmoreland argued that this perception was accurate and that the blame was unjustified, as “the military quite clearly did the job that the nation asked and expected of it.” The former general remained “convinced that history will reflect more favorably upon the performance of the military than upon that of the politicians and policy makers.”¹³ Admiral Sharp was perhaps more forthright, in his *Strategy for Defeat*, accusing the “political leadership” of knowingly throwing the armed forces into a fight that they would not allow them to win. This timidity or lack of resolve to apply maximum combat power in the most effective manner possible was due, Sharp speculates, to a number of factors, among them the politicians’ “naïve hope” that an all-out war was avoidable by a continuous willingness to negotiate truces for good behavior (which the enemy cynically exploited), an “obsessive” fear of heavy U.S. power resulting in large-scale Chinese or Soviet involvement, and a misplaced concern about “so-called world opinion.” In so many words, Johnson and his technocrats were a bunch of nervous nellys afraid of letting the fighting men do the job the best way they knew how. Sharp calls these irrational obsessions with Chinese or Soviet involvement “inexcusable” and charges that the men who suffered from them “effectively throttled the military’s ability to conclude successfully the commitment into which that leadership had drawn us.”¹⁴ Harry Summers, less polemical or moralistic than Sharp, nevertheless blames the Johnson administration for the disunity and stifling of political will in the United States that undermined the war effort. He describes the administration’s decision to grant student draft deferments as a fundamentally stupid and self-defeating move, as it only guaranteed the growth of antiwar and antimilitary sentiment on campuses. Quoting a relevant passage from Clausewitz to illustrate his point, he also passes judgment on McNamara’s academic, “cold-blooded” approach to war, as its futile attempts to euphemize the gory realities of military conflict only

“prepared the way for the reaction that was to follow.”¹⁵ The administration, in other words, set itself and the military up for failure when it decided not to mobilize full public support for the war. Summers, like his colleagues, charges that Johnson’s failure ultimately cost lives and dragged the war on much longer than it had to have been fought. What these books have in common is the theme that surfaces again and again in rightist discourse on the Vietnam War: over-educated, prissy civilians half-heartedly sent the armed forces into battle and then insisted on micromanaging the war from the White House, rather than letting the field commanders prosecute the campaign as they saw fit. To blame the disastrous results of such a policy on the military, according to this interpretation, is ignorant and unfair.

Since these retired officers wrote the above books with a relatively small audience in mind, and it is conceivable that they did not enjoy a very wide readership beyond the officer corps of the U.S. military, it would be a stretch to say that their publication led to a sea-change in attitudes toward the armed forces. It is probably more accurate to say that they were symptomatic of this change.¹⁶ That the change was real and palpable, however, is beyond question. In the preface to a 1989 edition of *A Soldier Reports* (first published in 1976), Westmoreland expressed his deep satisfaction with the apparent reversal of fortune for the image of the military. For one thing, the rebellion, turmoil, and anarchic behavior that had rocked the universities twenty years earlier were nowhere to be seen. “I am now welcomed as an invited speaker on college campuses,” Westmoreland reflected, whereas during the previous decade he often found himself “the target of discourtesy and abuse.”¹⁷ In the greater public sphere, patriotic rhetoric and unabashed flag-waving were back in fashion in a way they had not been since the 1950s. Americans, it seemed, had begun to snap out of the self-hatred and self-doubt that the antiwar Left held as the proper attitudes for citizens toward their country’s role in the world. Youth culture no longer pulsed with the powerful dissident currents that had coursed through it during the later years of the war; college students were now far more complacent and focused on personal success than on radicalism and reform. Gone were the harangues against the supposedly imperialist character of U.S. foreign policy or its perceived double-standard in dealing with human rights violations. For figures like Westmoreland, needless to say, these were encouraging signs that the country was coming to its senses again.¹⁸ For those associated with the military and defense establishments, the demise of radicalism in youth culture signaled definite and welcome changes in the attitudes of young people toward the military.

If antimilitarist sentiment in youth culture was beginning to dissolve by the early 1980s, then what was most symptomatic of these wider changes in the American cultural landscape was the gradual transformation of the public’s perception of the Vietnam veteran, or, as the former

general described it, the “attitude of the American people toward the fighting man who served in Vietnam.”¹⁹ In other words, the military’s image was improving because the Vietnam veteran’s image was improving. Westmoreland’s generic designation “fighting man” referred in a blanket fashion to *all* Vietnam-era service-members, male and female: Army and Marine Corps infantry grunts plodding through mud and elephant grass, Air Force pilots and ground crews handling dangerous ordnance and risking captivity or death over North Vietnam, Navy brown-water sailors patrolling the rivers of the South, and military doctors and nurses caring for the wounded in field hospitals. The public’s attitude toward Vietnam veterans, if popular culture and discourse are any indication, had undergone an almost complete reversal by the early 1980s, and the revaluation of Vietnam veterans led to a revaluation of the military in general (which was useful in a political culture mobilizing for a more intensified Cold War). The shift in public attitudes toward veterans probably had more to do with the veteran’s own reassessment of himself than anything else. Historian Michael Lind, in his attempt to de-bunk popular notions about alienated and disturbed Vietnam veterans, finds that the majority of vets “feel neither guilty nor bitter about their roles in America’s failed campaign against the totalitarians in Indochina.” He also describes the common notion that it is Vietnam veterans who, after having witnessed firsthand the horrors of an allegedly immoral war, are now opponents of war, as a falsehood. Lind cites a 1980 poll in which 71 percent of Vietnam veterans surveyed found pride or satisfaction in looking back on their Vietnam service. Veterans, he also notes, citing polls on their attitudes towards the Persian Gulf War and other U.S. armed interventions since Vietnam, generally “show greater support for U.S. military intervention abroad than do other Americans.”²⁰

In order to understand the glamorization of the military during the 1980s, is important to remember that the overall image of the uniformed services had taken heavy blows during the Vietnam era, especially in the wake of events like the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, the massacre of civilians at My Lai, and the National Guard’s shooting of students at both Kent State and Jackson State universities in 1970. These key moments, for the antiwar movement (and, eventually, for a considerable portion of the American public), had seemed to expose the inhuman, authoritarian ideology that the military’s detractors claimed formed the bedrock of the military world-view. Likewise, military culture’s privileging of conventional morality, conformity, discipline and sobriety seemed deeply at odds with the value systems of the counterculture and the various New Left stances which were gaining steadily wider appeal after 1968. By the early 1970s, military service as a career choice, without question, was decidedly unpopular (and probably seemed utterly insane after the end of the draft). Armed forces recruiters had great difficulty in meeting their enlistment quotas, and ROTC participation on

college campuses dropped to all-time lows. After suffering what one senior Army officer described, in a landmark essay from 1971, as the complete “collapse of the armed forces” during the Vietnamization period, the military (no longer reliant on conscription for a guaranteed supply of recruits) was beginning to go through a long malaise of undisciplined ineffectuality and low morale during most of the 1970s.²¹

But the armed forces gradually recuperated during the 1980s, as the Reagan administration nursed them back to health, increasing defense spending and placing a heavy emphasis, in public rhetoric, on the interdependence of a strong, healthy military and a strong and healthy country. The Department of Defense launched a campaign of slick recruitment advertising permeated with images of heroic young individuals overcoming obstacles both symbolic and material. These advertisements featured scenes of intensive training playing out against backdrops of aggressive rock music. The advertisements were successful, as young people during the 1980s voluntarily enlisted in the armed forces in record numbers for peacetime. Whereas college students during the previous decade had been burning down ROTC buildings, throwing rocks at National Guardsmen, and calling police officers fascist pigs, many college students during the Reagan era were participating in ROTC programs and considering military careers. No doubt the stagnant economy of the late 1970s and early 80s, along with the advertisements, also helped make service more attractive, yet the influence of a number of films of the period, set in military environments and dealing with military themes, was no doubt equally significant. Films from *An Officer and a Gentleman* to *Iron Eagle* offered youngsters highly appealing, glamorized portrayals of life in the armed forces, suggesting the possibility of finding redemption and meaning in the disciplined world of the barracks or in the crucible of combat.²² Youths of the 1980s were, as several observers have pointed out, generally more conservative than the generation preceding them, and in many cases did not share the activist, socially conscious convictions that had shaped many of their parents’ early lives. Haynes Johnson notes these changes on the college campuses in his history of the Reagan years: “Anti-Americanism, if it had ever really been that, was replaced by patriotism, flag burning by flag-waving. During the hostage crisis American flags hung from Kent State dormitory windows and students talked about ‘nuking’ Iran.”²³ Cultural critic Douglas Kellner posits the influence of pro-military films like the 1986 *Top Gun* as decisive in the shaping of what he sees as a militarist mentality in Reagan-era youth: “One wonders how many pilots and soldiers who joined the military and fought in the Panama invasion, the Gulf War, and other military escapades [of the following decade] were influenced by such cinematic propaganda.” For Kellner, the film industry of the 1980s subserviently glorified the military and the Reagan view of America’s role

in the world, serving as a sort of pernicious indoctrinating apparatus: “Hollywood films, like the Hollywood president, are not innocent entertainment, but lethal weapons in the service of dominant socio-economic forces.”²⁴

Westmoreland also noted, during his experiences as a guest speaker on campuses, that many in the audience were remarkably free of the biases of the previous generation. He found this an encouraging sign. “Our young people of college age,” he remarked, “have now become earnest students in search of the truth about the war.” Whether or not they were rejecting “falsehood” in favor of “truth” about the history of Vietnam is, of course, a matter for debate, but there can be little doubt that many college students of the Reagan era were rejecting both the centrist apologetics associated with the tragic view and the radical rhetoric of the Vietnam-era left (which Westmoreland describes as the incoherent ravings of a bunch of malcontent “propagandists”).²⁵ And, like the high school and college students growing up in their shadow, many adult Americans were also beginning to re-examine their own experiences along with the historical record, which, according to Westmoreland (and, as we will see, several other like-minded writers), provided no justification for the idea that either American policy or the conduct of the armed forces in Vietnam had been criminal or immoral.

As a result of the Right’s *kulturkampf* on behalf of the “true” version of the war, the story of America in Vietnam had begun to take an entirely different shape in the public memory by the time the third edition of *A Soldier Reports* appeared. An increasing number of people had “come to realize that the American effort was,” contrary to the leftist or liberal interpretations of the war, “highly idealistic, an attempt by a great power to prevent the subjugation of a small country by Communist aggressors.”²⁶ The view of what Nixon had called the “silent majority” had finally, it seemed, prevailed in popular culture. Even a few prominent “repentant radicals”—persons who had protested the war during the 1960s and early 70s but who had since changed their minds on the issue—set the tone for the revision of the Vietnam War as told in the history books. Former antiwar leftists like Norman Podhoretz and David Horowitz would each write a number of books in which they humbly recanted their former follies and confessed to having finally come around to seeing the wisdom of attempting to resist Communist expansion and of retaining a strong military.²⁷ There was even a sense, among some of the repentant radicals, of guilt at having taken part in—directly or indirectly—the shabby treatment of veterans and the badmouthing of the military during the years of the war.²⁸

As the military’s image improved, so did the image of the Vietnam veteran—both the blue-collar enlisted man and the college-bred junior officer who had been baptized with fire in combat, who lost comrades to snipers, mines and booby traps, and who came through hell, as the

rightist myth would have it, to return to a thankless, indifferent nation. By the end of the 1970s, unflattering portrayals of the Vietnam veteran as a social undesirable—a racist, a misogynist, a deranged misfit, a drug-addled freak or an alcoholic, self-pitying slob—were no longer *de rigueur* in the novels, films, and television shows dealing with the war's legacy. A 1980 collection of essays by sociologists and psychologists on the subject of the Vietnam veteran takes note of this transformation again and again throughout the study. The editors' observations in the preface are particularly revealing:

As the Consortium [for the study of Vietnam veteran issues] was formed back in 1975 the attitude of the country was considerably more hostile toward the Vietnam veteran in contrast to today. Myths about the violent, drugged, inferior, shiftless, and disturbed characteristics of Vietnam veterans are waning. Vietnam veterans and their advocates have risen to positions of importance in government and the private sector. The special problems and circumstances of the Vietnam warrior are finally receiving attention.

They go on to make statements such as “More and more Vietnam veterans are standing up today and saying that they are proud of serving their country” and “Today Vietnam veterans are not tolerating any more negative stereotypes and mistreatment in the press, but the press is treating the Vietnam vet differently, too.”²⁹ The overall impression one gets from the book is that, while there are several legitimate cases of combat-induced psychological trauma which have severely hampered some vets' ability to readjust into society, the majority of Vietnam veterans are nowhere near as traumatized and much more well-adjusted than the prevailing media treatments and public myths of the early 1970s would have the reader believe. This is an important notion in rightist discourse on Vietnam, not merely because it signals a renewed appreciation of an unfairly maligned hero, but because it serves to undermine the Left's portrayal (in, for example, the atrocity narratives discussed in Chapter Two) of military service as morally degrading and psychologically damaging to normal human beings.

The film industry by the late 1970s was also revising its image of the Vietnam veteran. In place of the psychopathic killer alienated from the mainstream of American life (appearing in films like Tobe Hooper's 1974 *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Martin Scorsese's 1976 *Taxi Driver*) American cinema offered ennobled, righteous, tragically misunderstood and unjustly maligned heroes whose Vietnam experience defined them in a positive way. Films like *First Blood*, *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action* and *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* depict the Vietnam veteran as a lone Prometheus fit to fight the bloody battles that his weak, effeminate civilian counterparts did not have the stomach for. Critic Michael Klein asserts that these films “create

the illusion” that the U.S. would have won the Vietnam War had the political will been there to do it. “In these films,” he says, “Vietnam has become the setting for fables that ideologically reproduce their time with clear implications for foreign policy.” In other words, movies like *Rambo: First Blood Part II* advocate an aggressive, interventionist foreign policy with the “lone Prometheus” figure a sort of stand-in for heavy-handed unilateralism. Klein goes on to recall Reagan’s enthusiastic reaction to a viewing of the Stallone film, and argues that this case demonstrates, rather frighteningly for him, that “what is at stake is not only the memory of the past but the consciousness that will affect foreign policy.”³⁰

By the late 1980s the conservative representation of ennobled Vietnam veterans was perhaps more familiar to Americans than the objects of censure and ridicule from fifteen or twenty years earlier. In place of the “baby killers” were valiant heroes who had remained faithful to flag and country while the rest of the nation had shamefully abandoned the cause of defending freedom from tyranny. To have any association with the military, in the early 70s (except as a weeping, repentant G.I.-turned-demonstrator throwing his medals on the steps of the Capitol Building) was to admit complicity in the criminal conspiracy of an immoral and illegal war, but by the early 1980s Vietnam veterans who were proud of their service were speaking up and being in the military was the “in” thing again. The change in the popular conception of the military was readily apparent in the tone of public discourse on defense spending and foreign policy, but it was perhaps most clearly visible in American popular culture of the 1980s. Film, television, print culture and popular music were rethinking the image of the military, and consequently the idea of the Vietnam veteran as part of a usable past, along parallel lines.³¹

On the screen, as well as on the page, this notion of the forgotten (and betrayed) hero would become central to fictive representations of Americans in Vietnam, as in the prisoner-of-war films and the combat novels which appeared during the 1980s. The aforementioned *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* films (as well as the cheaper and less successful imitations they spawned) would become the primary vehicles for the development of the forgotten/betrayed Vietnam hero theme, which ex-prisoners of war had first developed in their post-captivity narratives of the early 1970s. In fiction, veteran-novelist James Webb would depict the shameful treatment meted out to the Vietnam veteran by an apathetic civilian world and a vindictive, vicious antiwar element in his *Fields of Fire*, reaffirming the values of military service and conventional notions of patriotism while discrediting the antiwar movement, student radicalism, and leftist academia. John Del Vecchio, also a Vietnam veteran, in his novel *The Thirteenth Valley*, would portray combat soldiers in Vietnam in a manner at stark variance with the druggy, crazed, undisciplined, officer-fragging image. The soldiers in this novel are not the stock-in-trade rabble of reluctant

drafttees conducting “search and avoid” operations; they are gung-ho, proud 101st Airborne paratroopers, who volunteered to be in an elite unit and saw some of the heaviest fighting of the post-Tet phase of the war. Texts in this new mode emphasized the bravery and sacrifice of American combatants in Vietnam and juxtaposed those qualities with the sadism and brutality of the Vietnamese Communists. This was the conservatives’ method of countering the Left’s insistent harping on U.S. military atrocities. If Americans had committed atrocious acts against enemy prisoners and civilians, novels like *Fields of Fire* and films like *Missing in Action* implied, then those actions had be understood within a context that the antiwar element failed to recognize and the media failed to provide as it covered the war. That context included an exceptionally vicious and brutal opponent whose tactics often precipitated an equally brutal response, as well as the enemy’s seemingly unfair battle advantage—the ability to hide within the ranks of the civilian populace and attack him from civilian enclaves. Both of these factors, while not excusing incidents like My Lai, functioned in the “noble cause” narrative, as mitigating circumstances for any “crimes” the American fighting man might have committed while in Vietnam. Most importantly, the “ennobling” device in narratives of this type counteracted the rhetoric and imagery of vilification inscribed within the leftist narratives of the previous decade. Novelists like Webb and Del Vecchio were out to set the record straight regarding what they saw as a series of baseless falsehoods or, at best, half-truths.

Just as the antiwar movement needed the veteran witness to atrocities as a sort of trump card in debates over the morality or immorality of the war, the hawkish strategy was similar: find veterans who took pride in their Vietnam service and supported conventional patriotic values and make sure that the antiwar movement did not appear to have the last word on the conflict. Certainly there were some cases in which conservative interests attempted to manipulate veterans into voicing their party line, but the rejection of guilt and the refusal to believe in the immorality of the war in a number of veterans’ memoirs of the 1980s and after lends a great deal of credibility to the notion of a rightist veterans’ movement which rejected the idea that John Kerry and organizations like Vietnam Veterans Against the War could represent them. For the sake of convenience, I’ll call this rightist group the “patriotic” veterans—I put the term in marks because I know that many veterans who came to oppose the war would resent the implication that they are unpatriotic. These veterans unequivocally reject the notion that they have anything to feel guilty about regarding their participation in or conduct during the war. An illustrative instance is former soldier David Christian’s anger when approached by a leftist documentary film project for an interview. “The filmmakers kept asking me did I feel guilt over what I did in Vietnam,” he recalls. “I said, ‘What guilt? I’m proud of what my men and I did in Vietnam.’”³² Several

soldier's narratives written in the spirit of Christian's remarks often smolder with resentment toward groups like Vietnam Veterans of America (formerly Vietnam Veterans Against the War) as well as certain groups of civilians who they feel demonized them as criminals or stabbed them in the back by supporting the enemy from the home front. James McDonough's 1985 memoir *Platoon Leader* is a fairly typical example of this type of narrative. McDonough says at the outset that although his fellow veterans were "vilified and spurned by their countrymen, they honored their nation and themselves."³³ He goes on to portray himself as having been originally drawn to military service and combat in Vietnam as the expression of conventional patriotic impulses. The unit he leads is a disciplined, highly motivated platoon, a portrayal which flies in the face of some of the more familiar clichés about soldiers in Vietnam.

"Patriotic" vets also often complain that the antiwar movement knew little of what it was talking about other than what it had been spoon-fed by Communist-backed propagandists, media outlets hostile to the war, and mealy-mouthed agitators. Former soldier David Donovan's 1985 memoir articulates in a fairly typical way the frustration and even rage of the conservative, conventionally patriotic veteran toward the shrill denunciations of the antiwar set. Describing the "bitter experience" of his return to college (for graduate school) after serving in Vietnam, Donovan found that many students were "outraged about the war, whether one really knew anything about it or not." Emotions, fueled by ignorance, ran so high that "intelligent discussion about American involvement in Vietnam had become virtually impossible." Ultimately Donovan becomes "convinced that most of my fellow students were victims of their narrow minds. I told myself that I shouldn't be bothered with trying to rectify the misguided attitudes of my peers; not only did the task appear impossible, but the constant justification of my own involvement to such a petulant audience seemed to be fawning and humiliating."³⁴ Since they hadn't been there, Donovan implies, these students had no real idea of what went on and thus lacked the authority to denounce the U.S. war effort and the soldiers who participated in it as immoral or criminal. Leigh Wade's memoir, a more recent example of this type of veteran's narrative, echoes the sentiments of McDonough and Donovan on the antiwar movement, with a marked increase in bitterness. He ridicules the "anti-American, antiwar protesters" who harped on the "cruelty" of napalm, implying that their denunciations of this and similar weapons were part of a humanitarian pretense that only veiled their dismay at America's tactical advantage over the enemy (the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese never had access to napalm or white phosphorous). Wade also echoes the complaints of conservative media critics Charlton Heston and Peter Braestrup that the American press and television news sympathized with the antiwar element, or at best pretended to be objective while slanting coverage negatively against the U.S. military and its

South Vietnamese ally. “One of the first lessons I learned in the Vietnam War,” Wade writes toward the end of the narrative, reflecting on the meaning of his experiences, “was that most of the U.S. news reporters were more friendly to the enemy side than our own.” And invoking a theme common in many soldier narratives of the two world wars, Wade asserts that he and many of his comrades did not feel real hatred for the enemy; they felt a mixture of empathy and respect for him: “Only a soldier can empathize with the plight of another soldier—no matter what side that other soldier is on.” The only real hatred he recalls feeling was not toward the enemy but toward some of his fellow Americans. “You know the ones,” he writes, “those who sat in the safety of the U.S. soaking up the good life while smugly, stupidly, and viciously giving support, aid and comfort to the enemy.” Wade makes no effort to hide his disgust with those he feels back-stabbed him: “I will despise these people to the day I die.”³⁵

The “patriotic” veteran-memoirists of the 1980s like Donovan and McDonough were not the first veterans’ narratives to affirm anticommunist beliefs and refuse to allow antiwar veterans shamed by their service to speak for them. Ten years earlier, a besieged conservative administration was looking for veterans who *were* there and who could give some credibility to the hawkish anticommunist view. There was John O’Neill to do battle with John Kerry on *The Dick Cavett Show*, of course, but the Nixon administration probably found its most powerful and persuasive legitimating symbols in a set of conventionally patriotic, proud veterans who could simultaneously bear witness to the evil of Communism and justify the Republican/rightist strategy for defeating it. We now turn to the returned prisoners of war and the personal narratives of their experience of captivity at the hands of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.

POW Narratives and the Vindication of the Nixon Administration

Although the ideological underpinnings of the “noble cause” narrative are indeed traceable to right-wing 1960s hawks like Goldwater and Nixon, the rightist postmortem of Vietnam first began to take coherent shape during the early 1970s, in the final days of the war, when American POWs were coming home from their North Vietnamese prisons and beginning to write and publish their stories of captivity. Prisoner-of-war narratives, the bulk of which appeared between 1973 and 1976, were especially useful for this purpose. The POW narratives brought a different type of veteran to the forefront of public consciousness, one not embittered about his service in the war but rather one who was proud of it. Naturally, this veteran found a sympathetic audience in the conservative ranks because he was a witness for their side with the kind of credibility that only experience in combat confers. As had been the case for the antiwar movement, a witness’s status as a veteran often implicitly conferred upon him an authority to make definitive pronouncements on the war’s significance—only in this case, many veterans were drawing on

their experiences to *condemn* the Vietnamese Communists and Communism in general rather than their own government or the American way of life.

In *Prisoners of Culture*, the definitive critical study of Vietnam prisoner-of-war narratives, Eliot Gruner argues that these writings stand out in a distinct category of their own but also in many ways continue the American captivity narrative in the tradition that begins with the Puritan-Indian wars and continues through the nineteenth-century conflicts between white settlers and the Native American tribes of the western United States.³⁶ Just about every contemporary study of Indian captivity narratives discusses at some point or other their role as propaganda tools or political weapons in American conflicts with both Indian and British enemies from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Annette Kolodny, for example, points to the ways in which Puritan-era New England divines seized upon the latent or (perhaps more often) overt religious symbolism in captivity narratives in order to bolster up a theological argument, or perhaps merely, as in Cotton Mather's usage of the horrific story of Hannah Dustin's captivity, in order to emphasize the demonic nature of the Indian enemy.³⁷ In wars against the Indians, as Gruner points out, the captivity narratives were often "cast as episodes of divine tempting against the alien culture of the American Indian" and the devilish otherness of the untamed frontier. During the more secularized revolutionary period, Americans "found the captivity metaphor a politically powerful tool for defining their oppression under British rule."³⁸

Vietnam POW narratives performed much the same function but usually in a retrospective, after-the-fact manner, since the majority of them were published *after* the United States left Vietnam completely in April 1975. They were propaganda weapons not so much in the war against Vietnamese Communism, but in the larger struggle of the Cold War, as they provided hellish glimpses into the alien otherness of a godless and totalitarian ideology.³⁹ They were politically useful to the Right in that they often served to reaffirm, during a period in which such concepts had seemed devoid of any more credibility, the malignancy of Communism and the moral righteousness of the war against its spread in Indochina. The POW narratives also constituted an implicit or (more often) explicit endorsement of the Nixon administration's position on a variety of issues, from foreign policy to the degenerate state of domestic popular culture. To be sure, when many of the narratives reached the press, Nixon was either on his way out or already out of office. But POWs mounted their defense of Nixon not so much in the hope that they could protect him from the damage of the Watergate scandal but more for the purpose of validating Nixon's political and social imperatives and possibly to prevent the president's legacy from being obscured by the circumstances surrounding his resignation. For most of the major POW narratives set themselves starkly against the antiwar movement, the media establishment

(toward which Nixon exhibited a particularly intense animus), and the counterculture. Writer-POWs like Robinson Risner, Everett Alvarez, Jr., Jeremiah Denton, Ted Guy, and a host of others cast Nixon's antiwar critics as either traitorous villains in league with the North Vietnamese jailers or half-wits duped by them. Newspaper and television reporters are often accorded similar treatment for their perceived undermining of the war effort, and the counterculture emerges in the POW narrative as a manifestation of the decadence of a youthful populace born into easy affluence and with a sense of entitlement—a younger generation which has lost sight of traditional American values.

Most Americans born before 1960 would be likely to remember the period in early 1973 during which the Nixon administration and the North Vietnamese were hammering out the agreements in Paris which would officially end the war between the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam that year. What is perhaps not so easily remembered about the same period is that when the American servicemen (mostly Navy and Air Force pilots) who had been shot down over North Vietnam and imprisoned in Hanoi were allowed, as part of the agreement, to return to the United States later that month, they received a hero's welcome.⁴⁰ Everett Alvarez Jr., the first pilot shot down over North Vietnam and taken prisoner in 1965, recalls in his narrative that the return of the POWs seemed temporarily to unite Americans across the "raw" divisions of the preceding years in a joyful celebration of national pride again. "The joy was real," he writes, "and the exultation deep. Desperate for tranquility after a decade of turmoil, people across the land rejoiced in the return of their living symbols of hope, faith and courage." The American people, Alvarez remembers, "opened up fleetingly and spontaneously to honor the liberated POWs. It was a surge of collective tenderness that momentarily purged their anger and frustration."⁴¹ While most ground troops had been rotating back stateside after a year-long tour of duty, many of these pilots had languished in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" (the Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi) for nearly a decade, enduring terrible conditions, malnutrition, as well as constant psychological and physical abuse at the hands of their jailers. Whereas the long-haired, discontented and undisciplined ground troops of the Vietnamization period seemed like sorry emblems of the decay of American prestige, the returning POWs, who came off the plane delivering crisp salutes to the senior officers who greeted them, seemed like shining examples of American pride, determination, and steadfast devotion to duty amidst extraordinary hardships.

This contrast becomes abundantly clear in any comparison of the pilot-POW literature with the memoirs of other Vietnam-era servicemen and women. The POW remembrance of homecoming, in the literature, differs quite starkly from the conception of homecoming in the memoirs of infantry soldiers like Frederick Downs, whose narratives recount a return to an

atmosphere of hostility, suspicion, or indifference.⁴² Homecoming is described in the majority of Vietnam veteran memoirs as, at best, anticlimactic; at worst, it presents the returned soldier with challenges in some ways even more frightful than those of combat (as in Ron Kovic's memoir). The POW memoirs, on the other hand, describe homecoming (for the most part) in glowing, beatific language. The return to the United States, for the POW, is truly "the light at the end of the tunnel," to use one of the phrases that Westmoreland repeatedly invoked to describe the conflict's elusive closure. "From the moment of release," one of the POWs would write, "the prisoner received an excess of warm, loving care from their countrymen. Operation Homecoming was planned and executed to the last detail to provide for our needs, and the doctors, nurses, government people, pilots, and hundreds of citizens who greeted us at the airport all have our everlasting thanks."⁴³ Another recalls being told, just before landing at the first stop in the Philippines, not to expect any fanfare at the airport. The returnees are to be escorted quickly and quietly to the base hospital. He is surprised and overcome to find "that the ramp was surrounded with American flags, banners, signs, and thousands of people were there. They were so emotionally caught up with our homecoming that they refused to stay away. When the door to the aircraft opened, there were people waving and shouting. When we got close enough to see them—our own emotions were already near the surface—it was just more than we could take."⁴⁴

This sort of celebratory, patriotic imagery is not usually associated with the Vietnam War. At the end of a war which becomes a defeat (if not a military, then a political one) for the United States, the POW remembrance describes a return that is somehow victorious. The narration of the return implies that the POW, and by extension the nation he was sworn to serve and protect, is coming home in triumph rather than defeat. Equally baffling seems the swelling pride of the narrative voice in these descriptions. The war was controversial and morally ambiguous—denounced as sick and immoral by a considerable number of Americans—yet the pride in having served in it implies that the conflict was as clear-cut and morally sound as World War II (there is indeed a faint hint of the V-J Day ticker-tape parades in the latter POW recollection). The linkage of World War II imagery with the return from Vietnam implies that Vietnam was a "good" or morally just war; that the same clear-cut moral imperatives that fueled the American will to defeat Germany and Japan fueled the will to defeat the international Communist conspiracy. How to explain this seemingly simple-minded attitude? Readers of Vietnam literature who come to these texts with the *a priori* assumption that the war *was* either a crime or a mistake and that participation in it on the American side should be an occasion for shame or remorse are often baffled and indignant when they are confronted with the POW view of the war. Do we chalk their attitude up to sheer naivete or willful ignorance of the raging

debate over the war's legitimacy? Neither innocence nor ignorance, I believe, stand as solid explanations for the POWs' generally supportive (by that I mean strongly anticommunist and pro-intervention) stance. For one thing, most of these prisoners were men of an intelligence and caliber far above that of the average conscript. If they were prisoners in Hanoi, then they were most likely to be mature men (from their late twenties to early forties); typically they were pilots with advanced degrees in fields like astrophysics. If they were, like James Rowe, held prisoner by the NLF in the jungles of southern Vietnam, then they were typically elite Special Forces soldiers fully cognizant of the complex political nature of the war and equipped with an ability to speak more than one indigenous language with fluency.⁴⁵ In order to understand the POW perspective on the war, I think, it is necessary to take a few factors into consideration. First of all, there is the astounding length of their imprisonment—most spent about five years in captivity; some, like Alvarez, spent more than seven as a POW. The bonds that developed between these men with linked stories (since most of the pilots were held at the same location, they keep resurfacing as characters in each others' memoirs) were incredibly strong and reinforced with an abiding faith in the conventional patriotic values which most of these writers claim gave them the strength to endure the experience. Secondly, it is important to remember that these men lived for a very long time in a world hermetically sealed and impervious to change. Most of them were shot down from 1965 to 1967, and when they emerged from their prisons in 1973 it was almost as if they were Rip Van Winkles emerging from a deep slumber of years to find a post-revolutionary America changed beyond recognition. In many cases, the change, in their eyes, was for the worse. Jeremiah Denton's observations about the period immediately following his repatriation are perhaps representative: "In the first weeks, unhappily, I began to note some dark corners in America. I saw evidences of the new permissiveness, group sex, massage parlors, X-rated movies, the drug culture; that represented to me an alien element." What strikes him as even more alarming is the "mood of national political disunity" which seems to hang over the country like a cloud.⁴⁶

Naturally, religious conservatives of the day (like Nixon sympathizer Billy Graham, for example) would have been drawn to these specimens, preserved as it were in amber, of an earlier time. As the clergy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could use the harsh moral lessons of the captivity narratives in their sermons to rekindle a sense of mission in backslidden and complacent congregations, so could conservative clergy of early 1970s America point to the POW example as a useful model for a backslidden and decaying nation. But what linked the POWs' experience to the outlook of the anticommunist Right, more than anything else in the early 1970s, was their often explicit endorsement of and moral support for the beleaguered Nixon

administration, which by then was beginning to hunker down and fend off criticism of its Cambodia bombing and steel itself for the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the Watergate burglary. The motto “Return with Honor,” which had sustained men like Robinson Risner, Jeremiah Denton, Jim Stockdale, John Dramesi, Ted Guy, and other POWs in Hanoi, became the corollary to Nixon’s slogan “Peace with Honor” (extracting the United States from Vietnam without betraying or appearing to betray its South Vietnamese ally). It was obvious by 1972 that the United States was not going to win a conventional victory in Indochina, but the Nixon administration did not want a peace induced by an American concession of victory to a mulishly obstinate North Vietnam. America and its POWs had to get out of Vietnam, but not at any price. Just as the ideal POW would refuse to leave his prison if an early release meant betraying his country or another comrade to the enemy, so Nixon would not assent to any peace agreement that made the U.S. appear to be caving into the North Vietnamese or that would leave the Thieu government in the lurch. The terms had to be favorable to the preservation of American credibility, or at least a simulacrum of credibility. When the POWs discussed the code they had sworn upon when they were in prison—summed up in the “Return with Honor” phrase, which meant that a prisoner would not accept an offer of release if it involved some dishonorable act—they often implied that President Nixon, in driving a hard bargain at the negotiating table and subjecting North Vietnam to the severest pounding imaginable short of a nuclear attack before the American pullout, was abiding by the same code, albeit on a much grander scale.

Nixon reciprocated the great affection the POWs showed him, casting himself as their greatest friend and ally. About a month after they returned home, in March of 1973, he hosted a black-tie dinner at the White House in their honor. The distinguished guests were treated to an evening of toasts, music and entertainment by conservative-friendly celebrities like John Wayne and Bob Hope.⁴⁷ But the president’s short speech at the beginning of the festivities revealed that the dinner was probably more of a self-congratulatory gesture than a straight celebration of the former prisoners’ return home. In the speech, he depicted their safe return as one of the several fruits of his “Peace with Honor” plan, which had proven achievable after all. America had indeed come out of the war with its credibility intact. South Vietnam was ready to stand on its own feet and fight for itself (although this was, in fact, far from the truth). North Vietnam had returned the Americans it had taken prisoner during the fighting. And all of these feats had been accomplished through the unrestrained application of intense firepower. To be sure, the truce was a negotiated one, but it was the no-holds-barred B-52 pounding of the North Vietnamese that had brought them to the negotiating table in the first place. The “Christmas bombing” campaign of December 1972 (or “Operation Linebacker II” as the Nixon administration called it) had

accomplished its objective, and the POWs in their dinner jackets and black ties, already home less than four months afterwards, were living proof of that. In short, the returned POWs were politically useful to the Nixon administration in that they helped lend credence to the notion that the Republicans were able to bring a reasonably respectable end to the war that the Democrats had foolishly started and then bungled so badly.

Not surprisingly, in many POW narratives, President Nixon often plays the role of the heroic liberator; the lonely executive presiding over a political world populated by simpering appeasers and peace-at-any-price Northeastern liberals. In their narratives, POWs frequently find themselves passionately defending Nixon and his actions against the vituperation of their North Vietnamese jailers as well. One of the more memorable scenes involving this type of situation occurs in John Dramesi's *Code of Honor*, where the narrator stirs things up with a seemingly insignificant protest action. The Hanoi jailers put up a small poster on the "bulletin board" (actually a sort of propaganda board): a picture of Nixon with the bold black word below it: MURDERER. Angered at this insult to his commander-in-chief, Dramesi rips this poster down in an unprecedented act of defiance which, at first, creates anxiety among and earns rebuke from the senior leadership of his fellow prisoners (only because they don't want the inmates to stir up any unnecessary anger in the prison cadre, anger that will earn them collective punishment). But by December 1972 Dramesi shows virtually the entire prison population wildly cheering Nixon on as they see their once-confident jailers scurrying around in terror and feel the thundering roar of bombs falling on Hanoi: "What we suspected would have to happen was finally here. It was the most exciting, exhilarating, most encouraging thing that had happened to us in the last six years. Sometimes there would be hysterical laughter. Someone shouted, 'Go get 'em, Tricky Dick!'"⁴⁸ Philip Smith, a pilot-prisoner held in a Chinese prison after being shot down and captured during a reconnaissance flight, recalls the bombing of North Vietnam in similarly ecstatic terms in his narrative *Journey into Darkness*:

And then suddenly, when we least expected it, all hell broke loose, and the hopelessness and despair of our cell block was shattered. I first heard the news on Radio Peking. I knew it was slanted because it always was; nonetheless, what I heard gave me chills. Wave after wave of giant B-52s had swept in and bombed Hanoi, raining death and destruction on the very heart of North Vietnam. Why the hell hadn't we done that seven years earlier, I thought bitterly, but I knew that mourning the past was pointless. What mattered was that we had finally unleashed our mighty

power, and for that I was deeply thankful. It was the best news I'd heard in a long time.⁴⁹

Nixon's aggressive bombing campaign and his illegal incursions into neutral Cambodia provoked the most violent domestic reaction to any event during all the years of the war.⁵⁰ His strategy of pounding North Vietnam with enough ordnance to buy a decent interval between the U.S. pullout and the inevitable invasion of the North by the South led his political opponents to charge him with having gone beyond any acceptable limits in his massive intensification of the bombing that had begun five years earlier under Johnson. Nixon upped the ante considerably by using B-52s against civilians in the big northern cities, which Johnson had generally refrained from doing (as the retired officers like Sharp and Westmoreland complained). The idea, of course, was to buy an "honorable" exit—to inflict as much damage on the Communists as possible before the inevitable and unavoidable exit. As one historian observes, Nixon "wanted to end the war, but only after having humiliated the North Vietnamese."⁵¹ For the antiwar movement, the "madman" tactics of Nixon seemed to be beyond all rational limits. It raised such a loud hue and cry and provoked such a spasm of domestic unrest that it is not hard to conceive of a large part of the public being swayed by the sheer force of their demonstrations.

Nixon's tactics gained him few allies in the political world, but he found a strong and persuasive friend in the returning POW, whose presence seemed to vindicate the very tactics that had gotten him into so much trouble with Congress. Praise for Nixon's decision to take the gloves off and bomb the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and, later, bomb North Vietnam with no restraint whatsoever is both explicit and effusive in just about every single major POW narrative. Jeremiah Denton envisions Nixon as the great unbending stalwart unafraid to do the right thing in spite of all the noisy demonstrations trying to sway his resolve: "The waves of B-52 bombers had done their job and could fly almost without fear of loss. President Nixon had sat silently in the White House while a hurricane of criticism raged in the country and throughout the world."⁵² In *The Passing of the Night*, Robinson Risner details a father-and-son discussion about politics shortly after his return home. Shocked to find that his college-age boy is a fervent supporter of George McGovern, Risner attempts to convince him that Nixon's hard-boiled approach to foreign policy is far superior to McGovern's naïve idealism. He draws upon his experience as a POW in order to present a forceful argument: "I tried . . . as best I could to explain my position regarding the war, as well as President Nixon and Senator McGovern. I said that in the prison we came to the conclusion that the Vietnamese understood and respected force. Many times when we were reasonable, they would assume it was weakness and took advantage of us. They respected strength. They respected a person who was unyielding, who upheld those

things that he believed in, who did not yield, who did not weaken, who did not compromise.” What the president had done during the war might have been illegal, Risner went on to explain, but such extreme measures were necessary in order to ensure a clean victory against the Communists, who only understood the language of force. McGovern’s “reasonable” approach was inadequate because North Vietnam was not a reasonable nation. Only Nixon’s “madman” approach would win the war. “When he went into Cambodia he proved to them that not only did he have guts,” Risner argues, but that he possessed the sort of worldly savvy that the liberal, antiwar candidate lacked. “When [the North Vietnamese] began pussyfooting around at the negotiating table, in effect playing with the lives of thousands of American fighting men, he bombed the stuffings out of their highways, bridges, factories, and railroads.”⁵³ McGovern, it is clear, is exactly the kind of weak, short-sighted figure who would be willing to sacrifice American honor in order to appease the Communists. “I consider Kissinger a great Secretary of State,” writes Denton, offering similar praise for the hard-nosed, steely-resolved commander-in-chief, “but I think Nixon perceived the dangers of negotiation with North Vietnam better than Kissinger did, and in a pre-election speech in November he was far less optimistic than Kissinger on imminent settlement.”⁵⁴

POW narratives, with their accusations of betrayal by the some of the press and members of the antiwar movement back home, also seemed to vindicate Nixon’s well-known stance toward these groups, whom he considered his enemy as much as North Vietnam. Ted Guy confesses that he believes the press was biased against the president and actively trying to undermine the effort to effect a peace on terms the administration was honorable: “I feel much like Mr. Nixon does about the press—they’re not telling the whole damn story.”⁵⁵ Jeremiah Denton remarks that protesters and radical groups like Students for a Democratic Society, although largely marginal in the 1965-66 period, would eventually “become almost as grave a problem as the military forces of North Vietnam.”⁵⁶ Although this seems a rather outlandish exaggeration on its face, especially in light of what retired officers like Admiral Sharp would say about the near-negligible impact of the antiwar movement, one must remember that the Hanoi jailers (given names like “Rabbit” and “Rat” and “Dip-Shit” in the narratives) exploited the antics of the antiwar element in the U.S. to their propaganda advantage, often thrusting footage of protests and civil discord, or a damning news story about American atrocities, in the faces of their prisoners in order to weaken their morale and get them to believe either that their country’s war was immoral or that their fellow Americans had abandoned them. Ted Guy writes, of his own and his comrades’ reactions to these North Vietnamese efforts: “Their propagandizing got to us at times. They played up the demonstrations back in the States. They showed us polls concerning McGovern and the antiwar

sentiment.”⁵⁷ But by and large the POWs meet these propagandizing attempts with stubborn resistance, refusing to break faith with the nation they see themselves as sworn to serve. Their skepticism is not disbelief that such protests were occurring or that such articles were being written, but a refusal to believe that the antiwar movement and the literary intelligentsia were representing the mainstream of opinion in United States. While Sharp and Summers would later downplay the impact of the antiwar movement, many of the POW narratives show antiwar activity at home encouraging the North Vietnamese and steeling their resolve. Denton, for example, fears that the demonstrators back home might be able to prevent his commander-in-chief from bringing Hanoi to its knees and stalling the POWs’ release: “The bombing stopped on Christmas Eve,” he recalls, “and I prayed that the antiwar people would not deter Nixon from resuming the bombing after Christmas. I believed it was the decisive moment of the war.”⁵⁸

There is often the suggestion that the antiwar movement was partly responsible for the lengthening of the war. Some POW narratives explicitly accuse elements of the antiwar movement, like the American Peace Delegation (which visited Hanoi), of responsibility for increased levels of brutality in the Communists’ treatment of their prisoners. Robinson Risner, for example, accuses the writer Mary McCarthy of indirect complicity in his own torture. At one point, the North Vietnamese wave some of McCarthy’s antiwar writings in Risner’s face as evidence that his country has abandoned him. When McCarthy makes her famous visit to Hanoi, requesting interviews with some American prisoners of war, Risner’s jailers dress him in a cleaner uniform and move him to “a nice-looking prison” for obvious propaganda reasons. The gullible McCarthy, apparently believing all the North Vietnamese propaganda about their excellent treatment of the POWs, asks Risner a series of trivial questions, which he is forced to answer in such a way as to make his captors appear humane and lenient. Then she begins a long monologue, which the narrator listens to with disgust (concealed out of the fear of angering his jailers), about her hopes for “Senator Eugene McCarthy and his chances for the presidential nomination, about which she was optimistic.” Risner’s response to the incident is quite typical of the POW-author’s response to such visits by foreign dignitaries—the high-minded dignitaries and delegations, he believes, are either unwittingly playing into the hands of the North Vietnamese, who never fail to turn such visits into grist for the anti-American propaganda mill, or they are deliberately assisting the American enemy in their attempt to wage psychological war against the prisoners: “I sometimes wondered if Mrs. McCarthy was playing a dual role. I know I suffered because of her request to see me, and to my knowledge she did absolutely nothing to help our cause.”⁵⁹ Risner’s ambiguous “dual role” leaves the reader wondering whether McCarthy is merely a passive dupe, a deluded idealist like the dovish senator she supports, or a vile traitor.

The POW narrative was also valuable to the hawks and conservatives in that its author vigorously reaffirmed conventional patriotic values and military virtues, such as adherence to the Code of Conduct, at a time when any open displays of patriotism or pride in military service were out of favor. Denton's portrait of himself at the outset of his narrative is typical: "My heritage, training, and background made me the very antithesis of everything my Communist captors stood for, and long before the battle was truly joined between us, each side understood the elements of the struggle and its classical nature."⁶⁰ The returned captive's unabashed rhetorical flag-waving and unambiguous declarations of love of country contrasted sharply with the temper of the early 1970s. But for the conservatives, the POW's patriotism didn't make him a ridiculous anachronism, hopelessly out of touch. He stood as the measure of moral integrity, a repository of the pioneer virtues that America had gradually fallen away from during the affluence of the 1950s and the social upheavals of the 1960s. The intellectual elite, bemoaning their little teapot tempests, had sat out the war in their ivory towers, criticizing America from within its protected walls, yet the POW, who had been all but abandoned by his government, clung tenaciously to faith in God and Country. Thus the narrative reassures its sympathetic readers that the American project in Vietnam had been an honorable one. Its author had been severely tested by the trial of captivity, but the trial had passed and the narrator, through strength of will and faith, had survived and kept his honor intact. The effect is a sort of shaming of the reader; a reckoning of the irony inherent in a situation where those who have it the easiest give up and despair while those in a seemingly hopeless situation bear true faith until the end. The nation, these narratives explained, had also been tried—although not as sorely—but had been found wanting. Its lack of willpower to see the war through to the end, its betrayal of the men fighting the war, and its descent into shallow hedonism indicated a general moral decline that contrasted shamefully with the faithfulness of the POWs, who bore their trial with loyalty and dignity. "In our failure to pass the test of Vietnam," writes Denton, speaking not of himself and his fellow POWs, but of Americans generally, "we ignored the nature of the worldwide Communist threat and also lost our credibility."⁶¹ The cultural work that the POW author attempted to perform, essentially, was helping to repair the nation's credibility as a guarantor of freedoms and its status as a "City on a Hill" or model society to a world locked in a struggle between the forces of light and darkness by reminding his fellow countrymen of the vital qualities which had once made America great.

One of the other key strategies through which POWs attempted to vindicate the hawkish perspective in their narratives was through the vivid characterization of the enemy as a brutal and sadistic killer. This was a sort of counter-propaganda technique by which the right could draw attention away from the negative images of American servicemen as brutal sadists—images, as

we have seen, which had their genesis in the leftist atrocity narratives. It also reaffirmed the demonic, inhuman nature of Communism, which of course has been a staple theme of rightist literature from Whittaker Chambers' *Witness* to Alexander Solzhenitzyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. POW narratives continue this tradition, in most instances probably consciously, since many POWs show themselves familiar with such classics of anticommunist literature (James and Sybil Stockdale, for example, cite Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* as a literary influence). In POW narratives like Denton's and Risner's, the Hanoi jailers generally appear as leering tormentors who embody the cruelty and inhumanity at the heart of Communist ideology. Torture and other harsh punishments, like being placed in shackles that severely restrict mobility and bring muscles to the edge of atrophy, are regularly used on prisoners who won't participate in the North Vietnamese propaganda program (part of which consisted of writing self-denunciatory confessions in which the prisoner was forced to admit the immorality of the U.S./South Vietnamese war against the North).⁶² There is also the maddening Orwellian doublespeak that the POWs see as one of Communism's signature features. "Humane and lenient treatment" is the phrase for torture, "imperialism" is the word to describe America's attempt to defend South Vietnam from Communist aggression, "re-education" is brainwashing and indoctrination, "peace" is surrender to the totalitarian one-party state. But perhaps one of the most important elements of the POW attack on Communism is the religious element. A look at the titles of some of the major narratives—*When Hell Was in Session*, *The Passing of the Night*, *Journey into Darkness*, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*—clearly reveals the prevalence of the religious theme of suffering and the figural descent into Hell as the prelude to redemption. Certainly, as Elliot Gruner has pointed out, there are plenty of examples of POWs whose attitude remains fairly secular or aloof from religion.⁶³ For men like McCain or Dramesi, the military's "Code of Conduct" is enough to get them through the experience. For the majority, however, the contrast between God-less Communism and Christian Americanism is a central preoccupation. "God is denied by the Communists, and this denial is reflected by the way in which they treat their own subjects," writes Denton, whose Christian faith, like many of the other POWs, plays a central role in his ability to survive the ordeal. "Their system derives its strength from discipline imposed by the State. Ours derives its strength from the collective self-discipline of our individual citizens."⁶⁴

The POW, in the minds of his readers, was perhaps uniquely qualified to represent the evil of Communism, as he had personally suffered at the hands of its followers. In this sense, he was a valuable weapon for the hawks in that he stood as living proof that reports of North Vietnamese and Vietcong atrocities could not be lightly discounted as nothing but crude right-wing propaganda. Indeed, the POWs' intense emphasis on Communist atrocities might be seen

as the beginning of a massive counterattack against what conservatives saw as the propaganda campaign that the antiwar element had begun to launch in the late 1960s. The POW narrative, with its grueling accounts of torture and debasement at the hands of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong, became an effective vehicle for persuading the public of the inhumanity of the enemy and functioning as an *ex post facto* vindication of the hawkish position. In that sense, it reassured Americans who had supported the war that they had been in the right. The POW narrative not only depicted Communists as malicious brutes, it also tended to confirm the suspicions of those who adamantly adhered to the domino theory, insofar as the authors often alluded to the presence of Soviet advisors in the prison camps and emphasized the USSR's role in aiding and abetting North Vietnam's war. At the same time, it offered highly favorable images of the American serviceman as a noble, humane and courageous warrior: the shining knight crusading for a holy cause, not a hootch-burning baby-killer.

The popularity of the POW narratives in certain circles (such as the audience for the strongly anticommunist *Reader's Digest*) was due, no doubt, just as much to the gripping intensity of their captivity plots as to their power to reaffirm patriotism and national purpose at a time when the value of those attitudes was being called into question. Within their immediate context, they provided an apologetics for Nixon's conduct of the war, but the imagery and symbolism pervading them would achieve their greatest power and influence during the following decade, when Vietnam-era POWs and MIAs—both real and imagined—began to function as increasingly important symbols in the anticommunist rhetoric of the Reagan administration. As the President told Americans that the issue of servicemen still unaccounted for in Southeast Asia would be elevated to “the highest national priority,” characters and plot devices that had saturated the POW narratives of the Nixon era began to proliferate in popular films. At the same time, these films imagined fantastic rescue scenarios in which ex-soldiers, returning to Vietnam to take care of unfinished business, extracted American prisoners still languishing in bamboo cages long after the fall of South Vietnam and proved to the skeptics and nay-sayers back home that they were wrong. The effect was to imply both that the North Vietnamese were criminals and liars and that the war was indeed not yet over.

Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), the first major cinematic representation of the Vietnam captivity theme, positioned the captivity of Nick (Christopher Walken) and Michael Vronsky (Robert DeNiro) in the bamboo cages of the Vietcong as the central, terrible experience that psychologically scarred them. Although there is little in the film to suggest that the war was a noble enterprise, it nevertheless shows the enemy captors as exceptionally cruel and inhuman. While the emphasis on Communist brutality sets *The Deer Hunter*'s political perspective apart

from leftist, antiwar films like *Hearts and Minds* (which either blame Communist brutality on the U.S. military or ignore it completely), its politics remain ambiguous and are probably best described as centrist. The three most commercially successful captivity films of the first half of the 1980s, however, unabashedly expressed the “noble cause” view and similarly echoed Reagan’s prioritizing of the POW/MIA issue. In 1983 *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* transformed Reagan’s vision of a triumphant post-Vietnam America into action on the screen. All three of the films are rescue fantasies in which the hero (respectively, Gene Hackman, Chuck Norris, and Sylvester Stallone), invariably a veteran of the war, returns to Vietnam despite attempts by an effete political establishment to keep him from doing so. He undertakes the rescue either on his own or with a small group of elite professionals in a renegade operation which has no approval from official authorities. In any case, it is clear that the hero and his comrades are outcasts from a degenerate society which has abandoned both the noble cause of anticommunism and the brave men who sacrificed so much for it. The rescue implicitly rewrites history in order to let America win a moral victory against both the Vietnamese Communists and their traitorous allies within the United States; it simultaneously enacts a revenge fantasy for the erstwhile hawk. The viewer becomes witness to the graphic spectacle, at the end of each film, of the harsh punishment the hero metes out to his former tormentors. The camera lingers gloatingly over the savage beating Colonel Braddock (Chuck Norris) dishes out to his nemesis—the Vietnamese prison commandant—before blowing the entire camp to shreds. Similarly, hawkish viewers could find emotional satisfaction watching Rambo dispatching Communist Vietnamese prison guards and their Soviet advisors with explosive-tipped arrows, saw-toothed hunting knives, and other instruments of messy and painful deaths.

The films not only brought revenge fantasies against the former American enemy to vivid life on the screen, they also provided the thrill of retribution against what had been the antiwar element within the political establishment—an element which, the films make clear, continued to do disservice to the American fighting man by denying that any POWs/MIAs existed in Vietnam. When the hero returns to an incredulous America with the rescued prisoners, the skeptics scramble for cover and make pitiful attempts to save face. On his way back from the mission, which he has accomplished against all odds, Rambo tells the duplicitous Murdock (a liberal politician who pooh-poohs the notion of live POWs/MIAs in Vietnam) that he is coming to exact vengeance upon him for selling him down the river. The sentiments Rambo expresses echo the resentment of the hawkish veteran toward the liberal establishment man who sent him to the war only to abandon him, as well as those who vilified him when he returned home. And, perhaps

more importantly, he proves that America still had the wit, ingenuity and strength to defeat its enemies. In these films, the victory is not so much a military as a moral one. The war was not lost because it was inherently flawed but because traitors like Murdock stabbed the military in the back. Both Braddock and Rambo are Nixon-Reagan figures who valiantly fight the enemy even though a short-sighted civilian bureaucracy frustrates them every step of the way and charges them with illegal conduct. They remain faithful to the POWs/MIAs even though self-centered post-Vietnam America has forgotten them. The prisoners themselves, in these films, appear comparatively briefly and are not fully characterized. Yet their importance lies in symbolism rather than characterization, for they are embody the cause of anticommunism that America has abandoned.

These films functioned as affirmations of the Reagan view because they did everything that the original POW narratives had done—emphasize the cruelty of the North Vietnamese, demonize the antiwar movement, portray the liberal establishment as treacherous and only concerned with appearances—and at the same time they offered a fictive contradiction to those who dismissed the POW/MIA issue as a myth (they also hinted darkly at the existence of a leftist conspiracy to keep the POWs from being rescued). For Reagan, the POW/MIA symbol was useful in several ways. The image of “America held hostage” (a reference to the Iran crisis) echoed Nixon’s famous “pitiful giant” metaphor, which implied a powerless Gulliver tied down by Communist and antiwar Liliputians. America under Jimmy Carter, the 1980 campaign rhetoric implied, was the prisoner of a diseased economy and a timorous foreign policy characterized by unwillingness to act decisively or use force. America had been sending the wrong message to terrorists like Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, who was literally holding Americans captive. Reagan also found the POW/MIA myth useful as a means of breaking away from Carter’s attempts to establish diplomatic relations with its former enemy and continuing an anti-Vietnam policy long after the war had ended. In order to establish the Vietnam War as a “noble cause” in the public memory, it was necessary to reaffirm the United States’ enmity with that country by playing up the idea that the war was not yet over, in the sense that Communist Vietnam was still holding on to American prisoners. In this sense, POWs/MIAs were instrumental in Reagan’s large-scale attempt to construct a new paradigm through which to view that particular chapter in American history. As H. Bruce Franklin writes in his *MIA, or Myth-making in America* (1995), “homage to the Americans still allegedly captive in Southeast Asia is not merely a ritual. It is also a basis—or at least an ostensible basis—for foreign policy.” The Reagan and Bush administrations, according to Franklin, cynically used the MIA issue as an

excuse to refuse any move toward normalization of relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.⁶⁵

Conservative Historiography and the Revision of Vietnam

The POW narratives served as powerful testimonials to the justness of the crusade against Communism, but personal narratives and action films are of course not sufficient, convincing proof of a proposition. After the Republic of Vietnam had fallen to the Communists, it became readily apparent to conservatives that a more updated, “revised edition” of the war’s history was necessary, one which interpreted the Vietnam episode in light of those pivotal events of 1975 and after—events which, in the eyes of many conservatives, vindicated the positions they had taken during the 1960s and early 70s. Conspicuously absent was a coherent historical narrative of the war that clearly articulated their view of the war and drew readers’ attention to that which the conservatives saw as self-evident. The conservative approach to Vietnam as history attempted to correct the errors of the “immoral and criminal war” and the “tragedy without villains” narratives by systematically debunking what those on the Right saw as the most harmful myths propagated by leftists and/or liberals.⁶⁶ Some of those myths, specifically those revolving around the Vietnam veteran, we have already seen treated in the “patriotic” veterans’ memoirs and the POW narratives. Often these narratives dealt with larger historical questions about the war’s legitimacy and the morality or immorality of certain tactics, but usually in an oblique and anecdotal way. Due to the formal limitations of the soldier’s memoir, it was not possible to provide really convincing empirical evidence that, for example, American minorities did *not* suffer casualties disproportionate to their participating numbers during the war (a notion useful to the Left in emphasizing race and class inequities in a corrupt society), or that, to posit another example, the South Vietnamese regime was an artificial prop of the United States with little or no support among the populace. Certainly, a soldier’s memoir could portray race relations in a unit in a way that undermines the notion of pervasive racial disharmony in the military, or it could portray South Vietnamese troops as highly motivated and interested in defeating the enemy (in order to undermine the notion of ARVN soldiers as puppets fighting half-heartedly on behalf of an illegitimate government). But these issues were more the province of the historian than the memoirist.

At least one historical work (not so much a history of the Vietnam War overall but rather a critical history of the National Liberation Front) which favored the conservative, anticommunist view, as it focused exclusively on the malignancy of Vietnamese Communism, appeared during the war. Indochina specialist Douglas Pike’s 1970 book *The Vietcong Strategy of Terror* completely rejects the romanticized view of the Vietcong as freedom fighters and paints them as

ruthless, unscrupulous, power-hungry murderers. But in the years following the war, conservative perspective on its history was conspicuously absent until 1978, when University of Massachusetts political scientist Guenter Lewy published *America in Vietnam*, the first major history of the war to appear after the fall of Saigon. Begun in the same year that Halberstam and Fitzgerald published *The Best and the Brightest* and *Fire in the Lake*, Lewy completed the work in 1977, “amid reports of a new human tragedy in the making—uncounted hapless refugees drowning on the high seas and thousands of others seeking a new home in a world all too indifferent to their suffering.”⁶⁷ That particular tragedy—the flight of the boat people—was one of several key developments in the aftermath of the Communist victory that conservatives claimed proved they had been right all along. Norman Podhoretz, a champion of Lewy’s work, cites the reversals of former antiwar writers Peter Berger and Tom Wicker after their discovery of the state of affairs under the Hanoi regime in support of his claim that Communism proved disastrous for Vietnam and Cambodia. Berger now realizes that “the peoples of Indochina have, since 1975, been subjected to suffering far worse than anything that was inflicted upon them by the United States and its allies” and Wicker now laments the “vast tide of human misery” resulting from the triumph of Communism in Southeast Asia.⁶⁸ If Vietnam under Communism was the utopian paradise that the radical Left had prophesied would be the result of an American defeat, conservatives like Podhoretz ask, then why were thousands of Vietnamese risking everything they had to flee the country on rickety, overcrowded boats, with only a slim chance of surviving the voyage? Those who had clamored about the oppressive and authoritarian character of the U.S.-supported regimes in South Vietnam, conservative commentators wryly observed, have either been completely silent on this turn of events or engaged in an acrobatics of sophistry that wound up blaming American imperialism and capitalism for all that has gone wrong in Southeast Asia since 1975.⁶⁹ The major assumption underlying *America in Vietnam* is that the United States *could* and *should* have defeated North Vietnam’s expansionist ambitions. This seemed to enjoy some credibility in the context of certain developments of the late 1970s: the rise of repressive, murderous regimes in Cambodia and Vietnam, the increased Third World tendency to jump on the Soviet bandwagon—and set the tone for the conservative re-vision of the Vietnam War and its legacy that continue to find expression in later books like Norman Podhoretz’s 1982 apologia *Why We Were in Vietnam* (a play on the title of Norman Mailer’s 1967 antiwar novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?*) and ex-president Nixon’s 1985 polemic *No More Vietnams* (an ironic invocation of the battle-cry of the American Left on the issue of U.S. involvement in Central America during the 1980s).⁷⁰ Both of these books cite Lewy as the foremost authority among historians on Vietnam.

Naturally, left-leaning historians view Lewy's influence as a poisonous one (Pike is also a *persona non grata* in the Gabriel Kolko/Marilyn Young/H. Bruce Franklin circle). Marilyn Young, in her epilogue to the anthology *Vietnam and America: A Documentary History*, saw Lewy's purpose primarily as one of "affirming the benevolence of American intentions" and taking refuge in the dubious premise "that the United States had a legal and moral right to be fighting in Vietnam in the first place. Without this premise," Young argued, "the tactics employed, legal or illegal, officially condoned or condemned, are irrelevant to Lewy's enterprise. For it is impossible to fight a criminal war with justice."⁷¹ Lewy, for historians like Young, is nothing but a "revisionist" historian.⁷² Lewy's heretical conclusions in *America in Vietnam* turn the assumptions governing leftist critiques like *At War With Asia* and *Fire in the Lake*, as well as centrist narratives like *The Best and the Brightest*, upside-down. The Left, which up to that point had exerted a great degree of interpretive control over the history of the war (perhaps only among the cognoscenti), was now confronted with a substantial challenge to its scholarly authority, one that their ideological enemies could rally around and draw sustenance from. A slim volume light on data, short on substantive argument, and published by a small independent press could be easily dismissed as the work of a crank, an amateur with an ideological axe to grind. But *America in Vietnam* arrived as a dense, massive, meticulously documented narrative, and it bore the imprint of one of the most prestigious houses in the academic publishing: Oxford University Press. Lewy's status as a professional scholar, as opposed to an activist or statesman, also lent the weight of authority and the appearance of dispassionate objectivity to the text. Clearly, its appearance was adequate cause for alarm among those who wanted Vietnam to remain fixed in the public memory as a shameful, criminal episode in the American past. For Lewy is not merely writing this history as a disinterested enterprise. He has undertaken the writing of *America in Vietnam*, as he makes clear in the preface, in order to correct the perception among "a large number of Americans" that "the Vietnam War represents not only a political mistake and a national defeat but also a major moral failure."⁷³ As Lewy states in his preface, he is deeply concerned about the legacy of Leftist antiwar radicalism, which has left the impression in popular and youth culture of America's intervention in Vietnam as "the epitome of evil in the modern world."⁷⁴ The task he sets for himself is to correct this misperception. The inscription of Vietnam as a shameful chapter in American history is due in large part, he argues, to a body of distorted historical literature that unfairly accuses the U.S. government and military of implementing a genocidal war in Southeast Asia; his intention is to expose its inaccuracies and inconsistencies. For Lewy, many of the antiwar intellectuals who had written about the war—Noam Chomsky and Frances FitzGerald among those he names—were not merely mistaken or

misguided; their work was fundamentally meretricious, calculatingly contrived out of conformity to audience expectations, not to make genuine contributions to the historical record in a spirit of disinterested scholarship. Drawing an ironic contrast between the leftists' cries of official deception and what he perceived as their own proclivity toward a selective rendition of the facts, Lewy observes: "It is symptomatic of the ideological fervor which has characterized much writing on the Vietnam War that many authors have accepted as fact those portions of the *Pentagon Papers* . . . which served the particular axe they were grinding but have rejected as tainted and unreliable documents from the same source which they deemed inconvenient and out of line with their political views."⁷⁵ *The Pentagon Papers*, Lewy argues, is an essentially undecidable and ambiguous collection of texts, parts of which the antiwar Left found politically useful while other sections blatantly undermined their claims. Attempting to monopolize the interpretation of the documents, the Left had erroneously insisted that this "official history" exposed the war's criminality. The *Papers*, however, neither vindicate nor indict any person or policy. One can pull portions out of context to create the illusion that the document supports a given set of claims, but according to Lewy, they held no revealed overall "truth" about the war. These willful distortions are responsible, in Lewy's view, for some of "the most implausible and unsubstantiated allegations" leveled against the military, baseless charges that the public uncritically accepted "if in line with the conventional wisdom" on the war and the "widely held views and prejudices" toward the military and the government fashionable during the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁷⁶

Both the postwar situation in Southeast Asia and the recently uncovered documents, Lewy believes, cast the American intervention there in a new light and demand honest and unbiased consideration. Phenomena like the flight of the boat people and the killing fields of Cambodia precluded, for Lewy and his conservative audience, the pre-1975 view of Communism in Southeast Asia among anyone with the slightest bit of intellectual honesty.⁷⁷ It was simply not possible, *America in Vietnam* argued, to view the Hanoi regime through the same romantic lenses that the American Left viewed it prior to the Communist takeover. Lewy saw it as his duty to correct this erroneous perception of the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese allies as benevolent liberators and to show those who had scoffed at the notion of Ho Chi Minh as a murderous tyrant that they had been dead wrong. Lewy's view of the American enemy stood in stark contrast to the view in texts like *At War with Asia*, which had helped to foster a myth of the Vietcong and North Vietnamese as popular folk heroes fighting a "people's war" against evil imperial Western invaders. Lewy begins his challenges to the antiwar Left's paradigm with detailed accounts of

how these allegedly benevolent revolutionaries treated the Vietnamese people both during and after the war.

Seymour Hersh's book on the My Lai massacre, the Winter Soldier Hearings, and the various war crimes tribunals during the early 1970s had fostered, as we have seen, an image of the American military as a criminal institution regularly employing inhumane tactics and flippantly ignoring international standards of conduct in warfare. *America in Vietnam*, like the POW narratives, responds to the "war crimes" rhetoric by depicting in great detail the cruelty of the Vietnamese Communists—and contrasting it favorably with what he sees as the American military's restraint and professionalism in order, as he writes, "to make the moral calculus a more rational enterprise."⁷⁸ American war crimes were an ever-reliable staple of media coverage; little or no attention was paid for the far more frequent and reprehensible crimes of the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. First of all, Lewy argues, we must acknowledge that, contrary to popular belief and Left mythology, brutal terrorist tactics were integral to the Vietcong strategy, and the Communists' use of such tactics was methodical and coldly calculating. Lewy cites a newly declassified 1974 U.S. government document to show that the vast majority of victims of Vietcong terrorism were "ordinary civilians" and a much smaller minority of victims were actual "government officials, policemen, members of the self-defense forces or pacification cadres." While the Vietcong enjoyed the romantic status of "Robin Hood" which the antiwar Left in the United States and Europe conferred upon them, the facts show that they were not merely killing corrupt government officials, but murdering large numbers of the innocent South Vietnamese they claimed to be liberating. The Communists, as in the POW narratives, employ Orwellian doublespeak in order to justify their atrocities and promote the illusion of their benevolence. Lewy refers to fellow anticommunist Douglas Pike's scholarship in order to illustrate this phenomenon. In the literature of Vietnamese Communism, Pike points out, "the word *terror* does not appear." Victims are never executed as examples to terrify the populace into submission, they are "punished" for crimes. NLF propaganda never describes victims as civilians but fascists, reactionaries, and puppets.⁷⁹ "Most of the hapless victims were peasants, teachers, social workers who had sided with the GVN," Lewy observes, "but by dehumanizing them in this way the use of terror could be rationalized." As an illustration of the atrocious nature of Vietcong strategy, Lewy refers to an exceptionally vivid eyewitness account of it in journalist Kuno Knoebl's 1967 book *Victor Charlie*, which describes an instance of "punishment" for what the Vietcong deem to be crime (which is, more often than not, refusing to cooperate with them): "Capital punishment occasionally was carried out by disembowelment with the villagers forced to be in attendance."⁸⁰ Other cruel and barbaric "punishments" such as public amputations were

typical of Vietcong tactics. Lewy regards with disgust the prominent antiwar intellectual Professor Richard Falk of Princeton University, who, during the war, functioned as a blithe apologist for Vietcong terrorism and justified their disregard of the Geneva Conventions. The poorly equipped guerrilla fighter, according to Falk, faced with an overwhelmingly powerful military technology, could not afford to play by the same rules that the superpower could. He has no choice but to use the weapons at his disposal, such as terrorism. Yet whereas “insurgent terror tends to be discriminating in its application and to involve relatively small numbers of victims” the “tactics of [US and ARVN forces] tend, as the conflict increases, to become increasingly indiscriminate.”⁸¹ For Lewy, this is specious reasoning, borne out of the tendency to romanticize the Vietcong and portray them as the underdog, the righteous David against the imperialist Goliath. It begs the question, first and foremost, of the *rightness* of the cause for which the guerrillas fight. Are we to grant the common criminal sanction merely because, in his efforts to perpetrate a crime, he does not have access to the latest police equipment?

Whereas the Left had held up the My Lai massacre as damning proof of the immorality of U.S. policy, anticommunist historians like Lewy and Pike countered with a Communist atrocity that they claim dwarfed any that the Americans may have committed—what they termed the “Hue Massacre” of Tet 1968, when, according to Pike, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars who seized control of the city for about a month and killed over five thousand (as opposed to the five hundred of My Lai) Vietnamese civilians during that time. Many, of course, were killed by either infantry or indirect fire during the initial assault upon the city, but the majority (roughly three thousand) of the dead were actually executed and buried in mass graves. The victims, according to Pike (who cites both excavation proceedings and the testimony of Communist defectors who were present), were lined up in front of ditches and cut down with machine guns. These innocent people, mostly teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other members of the middle class were killed, according to Lewy and Pike, because the Communists viewed them as collaborators with the corrupt Southern regime and obstacles to their goal of establishing Northern rule over the South—if not eliminated, they would continue to linger as dangerous reactionaries who would influence the youth with counter-revolutionary ideas. The cruelty of these executions becomes evident in Pike’s account of the way in which many of them were unsuspectingly lured to their deaths. When a “Communist political commissar” arrives at a Catholic church in which several hundred civilians are taking refuge from the fighting, he produces a long list of names, calls out hundreds of the occupants, tells them that they are to report to a “ ‘liberated area’ ” for a brief period of re-education, after which they can report home. Upon arrival at the “liberated area” the refugees are gunned down and piled into the ditch

prepared for their bodies.⁸² After his analysis of Pike's account of the Hue Massacre, Lewy then chides "Hanoi's sympathizers" (once again, Richard Falk, along with "VC sympathizer" Edward S. Herman), who have either ignored the incident or "made a futile attempt" to explain it away. "In view of all this," Lewy concludes, "it is hard to accept Falk's assertion that the NLF . . . conducted its belligerent operations in conformity with the principles of military necessity, discrimination, proportionality and humanity, or the widespread belief among admirers of the VC" that their terrorist tactics killed "only a small number of victims."⁸³ What angers Lewy throughout this discussion of the Hue Massacre is what he perceives as a double-standard that the Left seems to employ when dealing with the question of war crimes and atrocities.⁸⁴

After his discussion of Communist atrocities, his argument that such crimes were not merely isolated displays of excessive zeal (as the Hanoi government euphemistically described the mass murders of its Stalinist land reform campaign), and his denunciation of the Left for its rationalization of these horrors, Lewy attempts to expose the fraudulence of the various war crimes tribunals' accusations of grossly illegal and immoral conduct against the U.S. military. War crimes were *not* condoned by the U.S. military and were not as regular an occurrence as everyone has been led to believe, he concludes. In what would become standard conservative technique for addressing the troubling questions posed by My Lai and similar incidents, Lewy isolated the actions of men like Lieutenant Calley as grotesque aberrations far outside the pale of conduct characteristic of the numerous military operations that took place between 1965 and 1972. He also sought, like writers in the "tragedy without villains" mode, to elaborate upon the difficult and frustrating circumstances that the field soldier faced. But he went beyond the centrist view of atrocities in his aggressive insistence on the doves' complicity in creating those circumstances. *America in Vietnam* dismisses the proliferation of atrocity stories as nothing but a propaganda weapon in the antiwar movement's arsenal. Without denying that Americans committed war crimes, he accuses the Left of exploiting those isolated incidents involving U.S. servicemembers in order to weaken public support for the war effort and undermine the credibility of the government and the military. Noting the irony that the intelligentsia have no problem grasping their own government's past uses of enemy atrocities for propaganda purposes (as in propaganda about the cruelty of "Huns" in World War I or the Japanese in World War II), but are ready to swallow the anti-American atrocity propaganda with no skepticism whatsoever, Lewy goes on to suggest that the vast majority of American war crimes are perhaps fiction rather than fact, more than likely wild embellishments of military men's tall tales which the antiwar movement picks up and amplifies for its own purposes:

Every war . . . creates its atrocity stories which build upon and embellish the mindless disregard of human suffering and the willful cruelties which always accompany the fighting. Soldiers while away hours and days of boredom by writing home accounts of adventures and outrages which never occurred in quite the exaggerated form portrayed. People at home, reading or hearing these stories of prisoners murdered, women ravished and children mutilated, develop strong indignation against the perpetrators of these foul deeds and thereby gratify certain powerful hidden impulses. When the war is supported by strong currents of patriotism these stories of atrocities focus primarily upon the enemy. Government propagandists and journalists further encourage denunciation of the hated foe. In an unsuccessful and unpopular war like Vietnam, on the other hand, atrocities are blamed on one's own nation's army that persists in pursuing an elusive victory. In either case, a single instance of cruelty, told and retold, soon becomes a prevailing habit which happens all the time. Rhetorical indignation helps hide the lack of proof. A vigorous display of humanitarianism silences any show of incredulity on the part of the listener or reader.⁸⁵

The anti-U.S. atrocity story, Lewy proposes, has embedded itself so deeply within the public consciousness precisely because it had been mythologized through a process of repetition and magnification attributable mainly to the left-liberal media. These sensationalized atrocities, according to *America in Vietnam*, have thus taken precedence over the minimal reality of American war crimes and proliferated so uncontrollably as to foster the delusion that American policy was in and of itself criminal and that the atrocities were somehow part of that policy.

But atrocity and genocide did *not* characterize American policy or the most of the military's conduct in the field, according to *America in Vietnam*. Lewy bases this conclusion upon new documentary evidence that the earlier writers had not had access to, prior to a 1972 executive order from President Nixon which made certain "classified defense information" available to "qualified researchers." (It isn't difficult to imagine the reaction of a Left-leaning historian to the notion of Nixon deciding who is a qualified historian). Since, as Lewy claims, his is "the first work dealing with the Vietnam War" to make use of "the classified records of the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps—after-action reports, field reports and staff studies of the pacification effort and the Phoenix program, intelligence reports, investigations of war crimes, and the like," he is able to provide a "startling" and "novel" picture of the war which differs from his predecessors "in both fact and significance."⁸⁶ In other words, the FitzGeralds and the Chomskys had their facts wrong about American war crimes and therefore misrepresented the

enterprise as a whole. Whereas previous researchers only got titillating, sensational parts of the big picture—atrocities, cover-ups, and a secret history of the war—Lewy implies that he painstakingly mined the paper mountains left behind by hundreds of day-to-day operations of the type which atrocity-hunters like Seymour Hersh had ignored in order to focus on the grotesque aberration. Based on its exposure to this information, *America in Vietnam* would offer a radical challenge to previous claims about atrocity and genocide being intrinsic to U.S. policy. The primary importance of these military documents, Lewy claimed, was that their content contradicted the frequent charge that the war was “illegal and immoral” in both concept and execution, for the operations orders and after-action reports showed no evidence of either genocide or indiscriminate use of firepower against civilians. In fact, a “detailed examination of battlefield practices” showed “that the loss of civilian life in Vietnam was less great than in World War II and Korea and that concern with minimizing the ravages of war was strong.”⁸⁷

For Lewy’s conservative audience, his research revealed—in contrast to the writings of the sensationalists and shrill moralists who bandied terms like “genocidal” and “criminal” to describe American policy in Vietnam—that charges the charges of criminal conduct and genocidal policies baseless and hysterical. Citing United Nations statistics, he dismisses as ludicrous and laughable Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell as pompous hacks and their statements at the 1967 War Crimes Tribunal about America’s allegedly genocidal policy: “If genocide consists of the destruction of a people in whole or in part, the first thing to do should be to look at population statistics.” The populations of both North and South Vietnam actually, he writes, increased considerably both “during and despite the war, at annual rates of change roughly double that of the U.S.”⁸⁸

Neither, according to Lewy, does the all-too-frequent charge of American racism against Asians hold up. Servicemen often referred to the Vietnamese as “gooks,” but in this they differed little from the soldiers of previous conflicts, who used a variety of “unflattering epithets” to refer to their enemies. Neither, finally, was America’s prosecution of the Vietnam War historically unique in the level of its brutality and violence. What did make the war an historic exception, however, “was the close scrutiny which the conduct of American troops received as a result of the war’s unpopularity and the strong worldwide criticism it drew.” These combined factors, Lewy explains, somehow helped create the delusion that Americans in Vietnam were somehow more brutal than the Nazis or the Japanese during World War II.

The damaging paralysis of American foreign policy and the seeming loss of national purpose—both symptomatic of the malaise that conservatives believe plagued the country during the Carter years—Lewy traced back to the slanderous attacks on America that the antiwar rhetoric

had inserted into the national consciousness. The long-term ramifications of these negative images were alarming. “For many younger people,” he writes in his preface, the “view of the American role in Vietnam” as immoral and imperialistic “has contributed significantly to the impairment of national pride and self-confidence that has beset this country since the fall of Vietnam.” The spirit of national masochism—to use Spiro Agnew’s phrase again—that the war’s loudest critics had helped to create was not only responsible for America’s inability to exert a positive influence on world events in the post-Vietnam era; it was also at the root of the moral and spiritual morass into which the youth of the country were apparently sinking. The loss of individual purpose and direction and the onset of moral decay reflected the larger loss of national purpose and moral decay in the political establishment. Lewy’s undertaking, like that of Robinson Risner and Jeremiah Denton, was full restoration of that national self-esteem that had been so sorely wounded in Vietnam. But whereas the POWs had attempted to repair the image of America in quasi-religious terms, through personal testimonies that dramatized heroic and essentially American frontier virtues at work in the face of extreme adversity, Lewy attempted as a professional historian to redraw the reader’s entire picture of the war in order to close the gaping hole in a national narrative whose fabric had been ripped by libelous traitors. The Vietnam episode, in Lewy’s final analysis, did not unmask America’s true imperial face, as the “illegal and immoral” rhetoric would have it. And neither was the war, as in the “tragedy without villains” scheme, an aberrant fit of temporary insanity. It was, rather, the expression of a noble, honorable, and particularly American compulsion: the altruistic desire to defend freedom from tyranny. Lewy writes *America in Vietnam* in the hope that it would “help demonstrate that moral convictions are not just the possession of persons in conscience opposed to war, and that those who in certain circumstances accept the necessity and ethical justification of armed conflict also do care about human suffering.” The *real* heroic minority of conscientious human beings was not comprised of deserters, whistleblowers, and demonstrators, in Lewy’s interpretation; it was made up of the small percentage of Americans who had answered the call of duty only to be mocked and vilified for their selfless devotion to the cause of freedom. While many of their antiwar compatriots behaved as despicable slackers, shirking a sacred responsibility and prolonging the war with their encouragement of the enemy, the Americans who went to Vietnam, according to Lewy, acquitted themselves nobly and generally exhibited a high moral character in their conduct of the war. *America in Vietnam* was undertaken in the hope that its readers would reconsider the conventional wisdom on these veterans and recognize their noble, if thwarted, achievement: having attempted to defend South Vietnam’s right to determine its own future free of Communist coercion.

The *Freikorps* Novels: *Fields of Fire* and *The Thirteenth Valley*

Personal narratives, histories, and conservative polemics on the Vietnam War all sought to contradict the image of the veteran that the antiwar or liberal narratives offered; some Vietnam War fiction attempted the same end and promoted the conservative view of the war in general, touching on key themes in rightist discourse on the war. Novelists James Webb and John Del Vecchio depict the performance of American service personnel in Vietnam, for the most part, in highly positive terms. Generally, the tactically competent and courageous warriors in these novels are honorable and morally sound. This is not to say that Webb and Del Vecchio present sanitized fictions of war replete with stock “brave and noble Americans in action” caricatures to an audience uninterested in realistic portraits of Americans and Vietnamese in mortal combat. These texts are no less violent, bloody, profane, or emotionally powerful than their predecessors, the leftist atrocity narratives of the late 1960s and the “tragic” novels and personal narratives of the 70s. But what really sets these conservative novels apart from an atrocity narrative like *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* or a “tragic” novel like *Going After Cacciato*, apart from obvious stylistic or technical differences, is their attitude toward the war, and even war in general. While it is misleading or simplistic, perhaps, to say that Webb or Del Vecchio glorify war, there is no question that they present the experience of combat as redemptive and exalted. They present armed conflict as one of the unavoidable but necessary evils plaguing human existence, showing that immense suffering and ugliness it entails are briefly redeemed through some transcendent act of selfless sacrifice, which stands in these novels as a beatific moment of epiphany and self-realization. Webb and Del Vecchio differ from their veteran-writer predecessors (or contemporaries) primarily in that they offer celebratory visions of military service in Vietnam at complete odds with the vision in radical Left literature of American soldiers as Nazis. These two novelists also clearly reject the political ambiguity of Caputo, Herr, and O’Brien. *Fields of Fire* and *The Thirteenth Valley* resurrect chivalric military virtues like honor, loyalty, fidelity to duty, and physical bravery, celebrating them without irony and attempting to re-establish them as subjects fit for literary treatment.⁸⁹ In the antiwar literature of the late 1960s, as we have seen, and to some extent in the “tragic” literature of the 1970s, the soldier often figures as the deluded automaton, preconditioned by a corrupt society to expect that he will achieve triumphant glory on the battlefield and ultimately disillusioned when his preconceived notions are destroyed by a confrontation with the absurdities of military existence or by the recognition that his country’s pretensions to morality are severely undercut by the atrocious practices of the soldiers fighting in its name. In the right-wing novels of combat in Vietnam, however, this pattern is reversed. Whereas in an antiwar novel like Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929)

the experience of war eventually disillusioned the naïve soldier who had signed up or submitted to the draft out of a desire to fulfill his patriotic duty, the right-wing novel shows us soldiers who come to reject the antiwar movement and its claims by way of their experiences in combat.

Both *Fields of Fire* and *The Thirteenth Valley* are set late in the war, roughly during 1969-71 (which is significant, since this is the period during which the war gradually began losing the support of the American public, the antiwar Left became more vocal, and discipline began to break down in the armed forces), and both feature characters (in Webb's case, a major character, in Del Vecchio's, the protagonist himself) who start out as dovish reluctant warriors and end up transformed, by combat in Vietnam, into proto-hawks who view liberal politicians and leftist student demonstrators with contempt. I call these texts *Freikorps* novels, because in many ways, they are reminiscent of the *Freikorps* literature of post-World War I, Weimar-era Germany. *Freikorps* texts by German veterans of World War I, with their proto-fascist celebration of the warrior ethos and their glorification of heroic sacrifice for the Fatherland, stand almost diametrically opposed to antiwar narratives like Remarque's. Perhaps the best of these *Freikorps* texts is Ernst Junger's *Storm of Steel* (1920), a memoir by a veteran of the Kaiser's army notable for its unambiguous nationalism and celebration of the warrior ethos. Whereas the antiwar narrative tends to portray the soldier as a victim, not naturally violent but for the pernicious influence of nationalistic propaganda, and the hapless pawn of careerist generals who conduct the battle safely from the rear, a *Freikorps* narrative like Junger's, on the other hand, celebrates the "strenuous life" and the battlefield achievements of the soldier along with the moral worth of the cause he is fighting for.⁹⁰

James Webb's largely modeled his novel on the great naturalistic World War II epics such as Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* and Norman Mailer's *Naked and the Dead*. Like Mailer's novel, *Fields of Fire* revolves around a small unit engaged in a series of seemingly inconclusive combat operations against a vicious and determined foe. The setting for much of the novel is the Central Highlands region of Vietnam; the narrative alternates between brief periods of time spent in rear-area base camps and long stretches spent patrolling in "the bush." The final segment of the novel takes place in the summer of 1970, against the backdrop of the reaction to the Cambodia bombing back on the turbulent home front, where one of the Marines whose development we have followed in Vietnam has an ugly confrontation with the antiwar Left. *Fields of Fire*, like its World War II antecedents, has no truly central character, but rather, as critic Thomas Myers observes, a "triumvirate of protagonists" whose varied responses to their situation in Vietnam illuminate some aspect of the war's larger significance.⁹¹ The triumvirate consists of Lieutenant Hodges, the platoon leader; Ronnie "Snake" (whose surname isn't

provided), the most aggressive and tactically competent squad leader in the platoon; and Private (later Corporal) Goodrich, who, as a Harvard dropout with intellectual leanings (he thinks of himself as an existentialist and throws around quotes from Schopenhauer and Sartre) and initially dovish sympathies, is the oddball of the platoon. Webb's use of the flashback at certain intervals throughout the action reveals defining moments in the lives his characters led before the war and suggests connections between the environments which produced them and their present conduct in Vietnam. All three are misfits in some sense, who either found the comfort and safety of civilian life unsatisfactory or were compelled by economic or social circumstances to join the Marine Corps for a lack of other viable options. Snake, formerly a janitor from the Bronx, who joined the Marines in order to escape from a degenerate world of drugs and prostitution, ends up finding purpose and fulfillment as a sergeant in the infantry. Robert E. Lee Hodges, Jr., a Kentuckian whose family history bears a distinguished record of military service stretching back to the Civil War, earns a commission at the U.S. Naval Academy and becomes a Marine infantry platoon leader in the hopes of filling the shoes of a father killed in action during World War II and living out the military traditions of his ancestors. Goodrich, an upper-middle-class New Englander and Harvard student who shocks his friends and family with his decision to drop out and enlist in the Marines, is easily the most important character in terms of the novel's expression of its political stance. His gradual illumination and final epiphany at the end, at which he realizes some important "truths" about the war and his experience of it, are integral to the novel's valorization of the rightist view of Vietnam. Although Goodrich's reasons for joining the military are not completely clear to himself, there is a clear suggestion that he is dissatisfied with the antiwar movement's explanation of Vietnam from the outset. Webb portrays him in his biographical flashback as genuinely troubled by the thought of boys his own age—fellow countrymen, no less—fighting and dying in a war while he hears his Harvard classmates coldly dismiss them as beneath contempt; to these sons and daughters of the ruling class, soldiers in Vietnam are either pitiful fools too stupid to find one of the myriad ways to avoid the draft or brute criminals whose death or wounding is only just dessert for their participation in an immoral war. Most of the Harvard crowd in *Fields of Fire* don't seem to be genuinely concerned with the morality or immorality of the war. But the "immoral and criminal war" argument, proliferated and repeated, and bolstered with stories of American atrocities, makes justifying draft evasion easier for them. Webb devotes the opening segment of Goodrich's biographical flashback to a recital of the methods—most of them suggested by draft counselors—his fellow students used in order to avoid the draft: "John Wilkins Grimsley the Fourth" fakes insanity; "Michael Murphy" takes a pill to raise his blood pressure; "Sol Levinowitz" fakes a fit and is deemed unable to

adapt to the disciplines of military life; “Tim Forbes” starves himself and exhibits a convincing display of “well-researched suicidal tendencies.” By avoiding the draft, Grimsley is able to go to medical school, training for a career in psychiatry; Murphy attends law school, so that he can “uphold the standards of integrity, honesty, and obedience to the law;” Levinowitz, who couldn’t adjust to the discipline of the military, has no problem adjusting to the rigors of graduate work; Forbes ends up getting a Rhodes scholarship.⁹² Webb clearly frames these people as disgusting hypocrites, pretending to be heroes of conscience when each is merely looking out for himself. The suggestion is that those who “took the biggest shits on the system” would later be the ones profiting from it most and enjoying its fruits while those who shed their blood or died to defend the honor of America and South Vietnam are at best forgotten, at worst slandered.

Goodrich’s only antiwar classmate that he seems to respect is his close friend Mark Solomon. Webb gives a sympathetic portrayal of Mark and suggests that he is sincere. Whereas the other draft evaders don’t really care, Mark is described as caring “too much”:

For Mark, Vietnam was the most important political happening since the Russian Revolution, a symbolic event that could spell the final end to imperialism. Mark believed in Nuremburg, in the duty of conscience. He had joined several antiwar groups, and had written and distributed leaflets. Vietnam consumed him.⁹³

Mark also avoids the draft, going to Canada instead of faking a medical condition in order to fail his physical. At the end of the novel, when Goodrich argues with his father about the respectability or moral soundness of Mark’s decision, he invokes Thoreau and points out that civil disobedience is an old and honorable American tradition. “That answers itself, son,” his father returns. “Thoreau went to jail, not to Canada. That’s civil disobedience. The other is self-interest, cloaked with morality.”⁹⁴

Although Goodrich, through his friendship with Mark and his exposure to the atmosphere of Harvard, where antiwar activity and teach-ins are a regular occurrence, has a good deal of sympathy for a left-liberal view and understands the critique of imperialism, he secretly finds this view repellent for reasons he can’t articulate and suspects it is perhaps facile and self-serving, possibly a “cloak of morality” for cowardly motives, and desires to see the war for himself in order to make up his own mind about it. He hopes in some sense to have it both ways by joining under the auspices of a promise to be put in the Marine Corps Band as a musician (allowing him, he thinks, to keep the war at arm’s length), but when the needs of the Corps take precedence and Goodrich lands in the infantry, he moves through a series of events which test his dovish, liberal convictions and propel him in an altogether new political direction.

Webb's attack on the antiwar movement does not solely employ Goodrich's "conversion experience" as an isolated case. *Fields of Fire* reinforces the rightist paradigm of the Vietnam War by situating that conversion amid a host of other circumstances and events which serve to undergird the validity of Goodrich's overall conclusions about the war by the end of the novel. In its portrait of Dan, the Vietnamese Kit Carson scout who accompanies the platoon as an interpreter and guide, the novel dispenses with the Leftist stereotype of South Vietnamese "puppet" soldiers whose mercenary attitude, cowardly conduct and poor battlefield performance betray the illegitimacy of the cause they fight for (in contrast to supposedly dedicated, heroic Vietcong living in the jungles for years on end). Dan, a former Vietcong guerilla (compelled to join under the threat of harm to his family) who surrendered to the Americans under the *Cheu Hoi* program after the Communists murdered his wife and child, now fights out of the lust for personal vengeance and the desire to prevent the ideology that betrayed him from taking over his country. While Dan is not a major character in the novel, Webb depicts his disillusionment, awakening, and conversion to anticommunism in terms that clearly support a rightist vindication of the war. Similarly, the biographical segment portraying Dan reaffirms the cruelty and inhumanity of the Communists, who "win" over villages in the South through brutal force and the systematic use of terror—publicly beheading recalcitrant village chiefs who refuse to cooperate with or supply the Vietcong, for example. Next to the Communists, Dan comes to realize, the Americans don't appear brutal at all. Their brutality, when it surfaces, is impulsive and unsystematic, occurring in spite of their policies, not as a result of them. He is surprised, after immersion in Vietcong propaganda, to find the Marines "very friendly, accepting him as one of their own now that he had surrendered."⁹⁵ There is the suggestion, in one of Dan's internal monologues, that if Communists were able to "win" the populace over in the South, it was only because they were completely unscrupulous and disregarded all civilized norms. The Americans, with their hesitancy to use similar tactics, were placed at a disadvantage. The Vietcong, in Webb's novel, are winning the war *not* because they have the sort of popular support in the countryside that would afford them such a strategy, as the protesters back home ignorantly believe. They are winning precisely because they are able to control the rural South through terror and coercion, implementing, as part of their policy, the sort of atrocious criminality that Americans commit only incidentally.

Similarly, the novel undermines the notion that American atrocities were regularly condoned by the chain of command by placing a heavy emphasis on the barbarity of the Communist enemy. This, of course, we have already seen in the POW narratives. But whereas POWs rarely discuss their own (perhaps erstwhile) role as killers and set up no real moral

comparison between American tactics and North Vietnamese tactics, Webb fully acknowledges his Marines' role as killers. But he sets up a contrast between the extreme brutality of the Vietcong, who consider the rape of young girls a legitimate psychological warfare tactic, and the comparatively tame "atrocities" that Americans commit. Whereas the Vietcong see no problem with using children as human shields and beheading elderly villagers in order to keep the rural peasant in the grip of terror, the Marines of *Fields of Fire*, at their worst, might burn an evacuated village or shoot a captive they believe responsible for the death of a comrade. Such a shooting, in fact, is the central event in the novel and serves as the lynchpin on which Goodrich's moral development hinges. Webb's presentation of the shooting includes the context that, according to the rightist view, the demonstrators and radicals conveniently ignored. Both of the novel's two crucial sequences—the execution of the two Vietcong suspects and the firefight during which Snake is killed—are framed in such a way as to suggest that the Vietnamese who were the objects of American brutality were typically not "civilians" at all but Vietcong guerrillas taking cover by mingling within the South Vietnamese populace.

The conflict between the rightist warrior ethos and antiwar left-liberalism is situated perhaps most clearly within the opposition between Snake and Goodrich. While Goodrich is repeatedly concerned with the legality or morality of the platoon's conduct (in that he will not tolerate the use of seemingly brutal methods of getting information from a Vietcong sympathizer and looks aghast upon Dan's encouragement of such methods), Snake views with contempt the (read: dovish) politicians back home always holding hearings and trying to micromanage the military: he eschews the crippling restraints that he perceives they impose upon him and stupidly give the tactical advantage to the enemy. Snake assigns Goodrich the derogatory appellation "Senator" both because of his association with the hated liberal Northeastern establishment (as a Harvard student) and his critical attitude toward the war. When Snake first meets the new addition to his squad and finds out that he's from Harvard, he sneers: "That's one of the places that gives us all these Senators and Congressmen and Secretaries that don't know their asses from first base about what goes on in the street. Or over here."⁹⁶ Goodrich grows to hate Snake, thinking him a dumb, ignorant brute, and begins to resent the mean and wiry little man's power over him. The relationship between the two begins to resemble that of the "sensitive poet" troop and the "hard-assed sergeant whom nobody likes but has his troops' best interests at heart" (which is a stock opposition in war films like *The Sands of Iwo Jima*). When Snake announces his plan for a summary execution of two Vietnamese civilians, Goodrich refuses to participate, presenting the standard objections, but Snake proceeds with the execution anyway. Webb's description of the incident makes it clear to everyone but Goodrich that the two are not villagers

but Vietcong cadre—Dan convincingly argues as such and persuades Snake that they are not in fact noncombatants but accomplices to the murder of one of their fellow Marines killed the day before. When the platoon goes back to a rear base area and the opportunity presents itself, Goodrich reports the incident to a legal affairs officer in the hope that justice will be served. As the investigation gets underway, Goodrich, out on patrol, triggers a deadly ambush by attempting to keep one of his comrades from shooting what he thinks is a small child but turns out to be a teenage guerilla posing as a child to lure them into a trap. Maimed by a grenade and pinned down by enemy fire, Goodrich is ultimately rescued by the man whom he has accused of murder. Snake dies as a result of injuries sustained while saving his comrade and thereby escapes the disgrace of a court-martial for the murders.⁹⁷ Hodges and the rest of the platoon recommend their deceased comrade for a posthumous Silver Star, but when the investigation catches up with him, the battalion commander refuses to consider the award recommendation. With Hodges and the other witnesses to the incident dead or transferred out of the unit, there is no one left to defend Snake's reputation.

The novel's final and perhaps most memorable sequence, in which the crippled Goodrich comes home and returns to Harvard, is in many ways the chief vehicle of its rightist politics. Here Webb portrays student demonstrators as insincere, bullying, intellectually dishonest hypocrites who seek to exploit the Vietnam veteran in order to further their own hollow, self-interested agenda (convincing themselves that the war is immoral in order to assuage the guilt of not sharing in the hardships of military service). Goodrich's first confrontation with the antiwar element back home occurs before he goes back to school. Mark Solomon hears that his friend is back living at his parents' home temporarily and sneaks back down from Canada to pay a clandestine visit, knocking on Goodrich's bedroom window late at night. Goodrich is excited and glad at first to see him but soon becomes irritated when Mark complains how difficult his life as a waiter is in Canada—especially after having graduated from Harvard. How dare his friend compare the hell of the bush to suffering the indignity of waiting tables? When Mark starts lecturing him on the immorality of the war and tells him that he lost his leg for nothing, Goodrich becomes angry. Goodrich's father overhears the hubbub, discovers Mark, and calls the police, who come and arrest him as a draft evader. Goodrich resents his father's action and argues that he just forced him to betray a friend, but his father comes back with an argument on behalf of patriotic duty and respect for the law that leaves Goodrich unable to respond with anything but vague sentimentalities and appeals to the sanctity of long friendships.

Consumed with guilt about his role in the denial of Snake's posthumous award, and disturbed by the unrest on the domestic scene, Goodrich takes no real pleasure in being home.

After a brief period of trying to forget the war under a veil of blaring acid rock and barbiturate-induced stupor, he begins to re-examine many of his old pre-Vietnam dovish convictions in the light of his combat experience and begins to question and doubt them. Finally, he enrolls in school again with the intention of finishing his degree. Immediately he notices the vast gulf between himself and the students who stare at him. His sobering immersion in the depths of experience has destroyed his respect for many of the radicalized academics he previously admired and who now remind him “of Tocqueville’s description of the stratified, vaporous intellectuals who brought about the French Revolution in the name of unattainable ideals.” Goodrich’s “intimate rubbings in the dirt and bake of Vietnam, his exposure to minds unfogged by academic posturing, his months of near-total dependence on the strengths and skills of persons who would have been no more than laughable pariahs, or a moment of chic elbow-rub, to the students who now surrounded him, joined to make him question all his earlier premises.”⁹⁸

At first his fellow students either ignore him or see him as nothing but a freakish curiosity. But when the news of Nixon’s bombing of Cambodia gets out and unleashes a storm of protest, two organizers from the Student Coalition to End the War (their names, “Braverman” and “Kerrigan” perhaps a conflation of or play upon the names Berrigan and Kerry), attempt to enlist Goodrich as a speaker for an antiwar rally the following day. One of them, Goodrich notices with disgust, is wearing a raised, clenched fist superimposed over an NLF flag on the back of his jacket. When they tell him that he could “really give the rally some credibility” with his presence, he realizes that they are more interested in the visual impact of his dismemberment rather than any opinion he might care to express. The uneasy exchange between the returned warrior and the activists who would exploit his misery for their own ends contrasts Goodrich’s experiential wisdom with their media-fed ignorance:

“And what we really need is somebody who is able to talk about how shitty it was in the Nam. How senseless the killings were. How it felt to see your buddies get wasted. The whole immorality bit. You know, the desecrations, the tortures, the atrocities. I’ll bet in the Marines you saw a lot of that.”

“That’s all a bunch of shit.”

“What?” Both stared incredulously at Goodrich.

“It’s all a bunch of shit. I have more standing to say that than any person in this school. And I say it’s a bunch of shit.”

Braverman peered at Goodrich with unmuted hostility. “With My Lai in the paper every day you tell me it’s a bunch of shit?”

“I didn’t say things didn’t happen. And I don’t know anything about My Lai. But it’s a bunch of shit to say it’s regular or even condoned. Look, man. I fought with myself for months. I even turned a guy in for murder. I thought it was my duty. But I just don’t know anymore. What you guys are missing is the confrontation. It loses its simplicity when you have to deal with it.”⁹⁹

After putting up some resistance to them, Goodrich finally submits to the request, agreeing that he won’t say anything to contradict the general aims of the rally. Goodrich assures them that the main thrust of what he says will be that he wants the war ended. The agreement is a subterfuge, however, for Goodrich has no intention of sticking to the leftist script Braverman and Kerrigan expect him to follow. He genuinely *does* want the war ended, but not in the terms that Braverman and Kerrigan envision. His idea of an end to the war has more in common with Nixon and Kissinger than with the campus radicals. Goodrich also views the rally as his chance to defend the memory of his dead comrades and as a way of atoning for his having denied Snake his posthumous award: “Snake, Baby Cakes, and Hodges, all the others peered down from uneasy, wasted rest and called upon the Senator to Set the Bastards Straight.” His fellow Marines have been “wronged by a culture gap that overrode any hint of a generational divide.”¹⁰⁰ The gap, in other words, is not a generation gap so much as a gap between those who have shared in the hardships of the war and those who have skated past such an inconvenience to their career plans.

Goodrich arrives at the rally, noticing the NLF flags and the chanting of pro-guerilla slogans: “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is Gonna Win!” Disgust and rage well up within him as he looks around at the demonstrators, many of whom seem to view the event merely as an excuse to party and get out of class. Braverman and Kerrigan help him up onto the stage and urge him to speak from the heart. Goodrich begins what seems to be a rousing antiwar speech, all the more powerful as it comes from a wounded veteran, with a call to end the killing. The crowd cheers deafeningly. He goes on to restate his wish and then follows with a series of enraged accusations against everyone attending the rally, questioning their sincerity and their motives: “Look at yourselves. And the flag. Jesus Christ, Ho Chi Minh *is* going to win.” It’s easy for them, he shouts, to fly the enemy’s flag and cheer him on to victory when they have no personal stake in the matter. “How many of you are going to get hurt in Vietnam? I didn’t see any of you in Vietnam.”¹⁰¹ Ironically noting to himself that the shabbiness of their dress stands as an odd contrast to the brilliance of the lives ahead of them (“masked with unkemptness, almost as if they were secretly ashamed of the largeness of their own futures”), he goes on to blame these specimens of upper-crust best-and-brightest for failing their blue-collar fellow countrymen: “I saw dudes, man, dudes. And truck drivers and coal miners and farmers. I didn’t see any of you.

Where were you, flunking your draft physicals? What do you care if it ends? You won't get hurt."¹⁰² He rushes on, in a half-lucid state, to describe the demonstrators as willfully ignorant, smugly self-confident in their presumed expertise, before Kerrigan jerks the microphone out of his hand and kicks him off the stage. Goodrich ignominiously hobbles down the steps and through the booing and hissing crowd, "engulfed by confused and hostile stares." He makes his way back to the car, which he finds surrounded by students who have already spray-painted swastikas along with "FASCIST PIG" on the hood and doors.¹⁰³ For a moment Goodrich is so enraged he contemplates starting his car up and running several of the students down with it, but he regains control of himself, realizing that such an action would probably only satisfy them by reinforcing a stereotype, and drives away.¹⁰⁴

Goodrich's sense of impotent rage is echoed throughout Bob Greene's oral history of GIs who tell of their experiences upon returning home from Vietnam. Some of them parallel the experience described above. Former military policeman James Busk's description of a prisoner escort mission from Vietnam to Fort Leavenworth military prison is a typical example:

There was a large group of protesters in the airport—they chanted slogans, waved signs, and screamed at us for being pigs. Several spat at us, jumping out of the crowd to spit and then jumping back into the crowd. I don't believe I have ever felt such impotent rage in my entire life. I certainly understood opposition to the war, though I felt it was rather ill-informed at the time. But I had been drafted, had tried to do my job and keep my nose clean, and I could not understand the personal antipathy of those protesters. They sided with our prisoners and against us, simply because we represented authority. Their ignorance of the facts of the situation and their misdirected passion were perhaps excusable, but at the time, I think I would have gladly blown them away.¹⁰⁵

Interestingly, the sense of impotent rage in both the fictional Goodrich and the real-life Busk seems to stem not so much their inability to give these protesters a sense of the complexities that arise once one has experienced the "confrontation" with the real face of the war (note Goodrich's insistence to Kerrigan and Braverman that they view the war in such simplistic terms because they have no experience of it—"What you guys are missing is the confrontation") but an inability to articulate them in the face of so much shouting and self-righteous sloganeering. Philip Beidler, who has some trouble with what he sees as Webb's essentially "conservative" and "revisionist" picture of the war and domestic dissent, nevertheless praises the novelist's attempt to deal with the "larger American tendency to simplistic, callow ideologies" and offer "a more general call to moral self-contemplation" that allows for "the complexities of issues as imaged especially in the

experience of those who actually fought there.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, Webb, in Beidler’s view, is not so much attacking the antiwar movement but attacking the bad behavior of a small and obnoxious minority of student radicals who unfairly blamed veterans for the war.

At first glance, Beidler’s thesis seems reasonable. After all, the scene in which Goodrich’s father castigates Mark for fleeing to Canada and coming back suggests that the privileged position in the novel is one of respect for genuine antiwar sentiment free of self-serving motives—the Thoreau model. But respect for a position, Beidler seems to forget, is not the same thing as agreeing with it. The development of Goodrich’s political stance throughout seems to show that the antiwar movement is just dead *wrong*. Upon arriving in Vietnam, he is prone to sympathize with (without completely identifying with) the Bravermans and Kerringans; he also looks with disgust upon his fellow Marines as sadistic brutes. Yet his debt to the comrades he once denigrated has turned his world upside down and begun the reversal of his previous convictions. He begins to see the characterization of Vietnam veterans as brutes as nothing more than one-sided propaganda—“a bunch of shit”—in spite of tremendous clamor in the media—“My Lai in the paper every day”—about American atrocities. The campus radicals, who will never be forced by first-hand experience to probe beneath the false picture of the war they choose to entertain, and who are destined to live comfortable and protected lives regardless of how the war turns out, entertain all sorts of naïve and foolish ideas about Vietnam, from the benevolence of the Vietcong to the popularity of Communism in the South. Goodrich, who casually entertained such beliefs before seeing the war with his own eyes, suffers immensely for them, ultimately only to discover their moral and intellectual bankruptcy. He is left, finally, with the sober realization that the only convictions worth having are those that have been paid for with one’s own blood. The novel frames Goodrich’s head-on confrontation with the demonstrators in such a way as to vindicate Nixon’s aggressive bombing campaign, discredit the media-generated atrocity stories, and expose the campus radicals as self-serving frauds. Nixon’s incursion is a bold, history-making move, not a crime against humanity. It is just about as clear a rejection of Johnson’s “limited war” as one could devise and is at the furthest remove from the philosophy of weakness espoused by the peace candidates. Cambodia, in the eyes of the campus radicals, is the arch-atrocity, the supremely irrational act and the apparent widening of the war that Johnson ostensibly sought to keep from expanding. Goodrich, who has known what it is to fight against an enemy privileged with an unfair advantage—who had to fight with one hand figuratively tied behind his back—advances the shocking heresy that the bombing of the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia seems to be the most sensible thing about the entire war. Webb here echoes what the retired officers like Westmoreland and Sharp argued in their memoirs—that too often, the

doves cried “atrocities” whenever the American military tried to implement an aggressive strategy as a means of shortening the war. In the larger interpretive vision inscribed in *Fields of Fire*, both the antiwar movement and the adherents of the limited war strategy are ultimately responsible for the very atrocities they denounced with so much righteous indignation. The unreasonable restraints *they* placed upon the American fighting man were ultimately responsible for the kind of rage and frustration at the root of incidents like My Lai.

Whereas Webb is largely silent about his own authorial intentions, John Del Vecchio, a Vietnam veteran of the 101st Airborne Division, makes his rather clear in the preface to *The Thirteenth Valley*, a novel similar to *Fields of Fire* both in its conservative narrative technique as well as its rightist politics. *The Thirteenth Valley* is, like *Fields of Fire*, structured around the “triumvirate of protagonists” model. There are three major characters: Lieutenant Brooks, the cerebral company commander, Sergeant Egan, the hard-bitten and experienced squad leader, and James “Cherry” Chelini, an inexperienced buck private. The novel is much less linear in its narrative structure than Webb’s and does not revolve around the development of a particular character’s consciousness. It is structured around rather a series of seemingly inconclusive engagements with elements of a large North Vietnamese Regular Army unit hidden somewhere deep within the Au Shau Valley and primarily concerns itself with presenting “slice-of-life in the bush” scenes. It is far more dialogue-heavy than Webb’s novel, for Del Vecchio spends much of the reader’s time listening to soldiers’ conversations during the lulls in fighting. Much of the dialogue consists of soldiers talking politics, and here it seems that Del Vecchio is trying to achieve two objectives. First, he is attempting to counter the stereotype of the fighting man as a brainless meathead, a pawn with no idea of the reasons why he is in Vietnam. Del Vecchio’s soldiers know the arguments and the issues and come across as witty and articulate. Secondly, in most of the conversations on politics, anticommunism and a kind of rough conservatism generally trump liberalism and antiwar sentiment, which is presented as poorly argued, weak and unfocused. Sergeant Egan’s conversation with Minh, the Vietnamese Kit Carson scout and interpreter for Alpha Company, is a good example. When Minh, who has a low opinion of the Thieu government, wonders whether or not Communism might be good for the Vietnamese as a way of eliminating the corruption that seems to plague the South, and an American soldier is willing to concede the possibility to Minh, Egan and a few other soldiers set both of them straight:

“But why Communism?” Egan asked. “There hasn’t been a society in history in which Marxist collectivization has been popular. Communist states are always police states. Commie economic policies always destroy their own economy.

No one, once it's been accomplished, likes it. Minh, it'll be either you join the collective farm or factory or they'll try to kill you. It's that simple."

"They've got to try it," El Paso said. "Coming out of colonialism is like coming out of childhood, like going through adolescence. They've got to experience it all in order to decide in which direction to go. It won't last long. Communism has a moral ring if you read the doctrines. It really sounds wonderful. It demands justice for the exploited."

"Yeah, but in reality it doubles the exploitation," Egan said.

"It always denies freedoms," Brown added.

"Yeah, it coerces people to keep from falling on its face," Cahalan said.¹⁰⁷

This scene and many others like it in the novel belie the old saw that soldiers in battle don't think about causes, they only fight for their buddies. Of course, Del Vecchio's picture of unit camaraderie shows that they do indeed fight for each other and take care of each other, but they also know, generally, *why* they are fighting—to stop Communism from taking over Vietnam.

I agree with the critical consensus on this novel, which, generally speaking, is that it is a less successful work, on the technical level, than *Fields of Fire*—it is much longer than it needs to be and lacks focus. But Del Vecchio is worth discussing briefly for my purposes here because he tackles many of the same themes as Webb and from much the same angle. He emphasizes what he sees as the nobility of the warrior and the value of combat experience, the professionalism of the military and the rarity of atrocities, and the vicious character of the antiwar movement and its effect on the war. He wrote the novel, as he says in his preface, with certain counter-propagandistic aims in mind. He says that in the "aftermath of the American defeat in Vietnam—with refugees coming in through Hamilton AFB a mere three miles from my home" he felt compelled to write something that would counter the "rampant media stories about American veterans, cliché stories, partial truths with minimal context: drugs, atrocities, lack of discipline, inter-American racism"—many of the same "myths" that Richard Nixon would later complain clouded public perceptions of the war. "I was intent on telling a realistic story which would destroy the falsehoods of 'conventional wisdom,'" Del Vecchio writes. Such conventional wisdom was the public's uncritical acceptance of the "damaged veteran" images dominant in American popular culture during the early and mid-1970s. Del Vecchio hopes that his attempt to "change America's image of Vietnam veterans" will educate the eggheads in "the media, in the arts, and in education" who perpetuate these negative stereotypes of Vietnam veterans. "To the vast majority of Americans who served honorably, heroically, in the most moral war this nation has ever engaged in, I wish you peace, prosperity, happiness, and vindication."¹⁰⁸

Del Vecchio certainly attempts to counter some of the stereotypes through his presentations of soldiers in action. Alpha Company is a well-disciplined, cohesive unit. Even though it is 1970, nobody is smoking dope in the field. When Private Denhardt, new to the unit—a “fucking new guy”—tries to impress his comrades by engaging in the behavior that they think they expect; behavior that accords with stereotypes coming from a bunch of know-nothing college kids back home, Sergeant Egan makes it clear to him very quickly that such unprofessional and downright sick antics are not to be tolerated:

“All right,” Egan boomed from over beside the dead [NVA] soldier, “who’s got the motherfucker’s ear? You fucking pig.” Egan charged toward Denhardt. “You motherfucker. You low-life cunt fuck. Put that ear back on that man’s head!” Denhardt tried to protest. Egan raged more furiously. “Bullshit!” he yelled. “Either you put that fucking ear back on the fucking dink’s head or I’m going to cut yours off and nail them on him. You fucking savage.” Egan spit. He grabbed Denhardt by the shoulders of his shirt, yanked him forward and threw him toward the body. “Bury that fucker before the stench makes me vomit in your mouth.”¹⁰⁹

Of course, Sergeant Egan has a very foul mouth and uses the racist term to refer to the Vietnamese, but when all is said and done he has, like the other warriors of the unit, a deep respect for the enemy soldier and his bravery—the type of respect that Junger refers to when he writes of the “Tommies.” Thus he will not allow the desecration of enemy dead; they must be buried properly in accordance with that respect. Alpha Company are not the undisciplined savages who, according to “conventional wisdom” (as Del Vecchio has it), mutilate corpses. Of course, this new troop has indeed performed such a mutilation, but it is only because he has been led to believe by misinformation back home that this is the type of behavior that is expected of him in the bush.

Del Vecchio’s portrayal of race relations in the military is at complete odds with the prevalent notion of Vietnam-era military race relations in leftist and black separatist discourse of the “No Vietcong Ever Called Me Nigger” persuasion (the idea of blacks dying and being wounded in much higher numbers than whites, of a structure of white officers and senior NCOs with black enlisted, and of blacks as unmotivated to fight on behalf of a society that refuses to grant them full citizenship). Particularly revealing is his portrayal of black separatist sentiment flourishing in rear areas while black soldiers in the field get along just fine with their white comrades. Since Del Vecchio is white, his inclusion of a black officer with fairly conventional patriotic, pro-military attitudes as a major character has irritated more than one critic. The

characterization is often criticized as unrealistic and implausible, or, at the very least, problematic for other reasons. “When representing black officers,” Milton Bates writes, “white writers seem reluctant to show any but the most patriotic side of the officers’ personalities.” Bates does not deny the possibility that there were in fact black officers who exhibited conventionally patriotic attitudes and took great pride in their military service. One has only to look at Wallace Terry’s *Bloods*, which includes the narrative of Colonel Fred Cherry, a black POW who shared the experience of imprisonment in Hanoi with Denton, Risner, McCain, and Dramesi, to know that there were such black military men who espoused conventional patriotic, anticommunist attitudes. “But the omission of black officers who are critical of their country or the war speaks volumes,” in Bates’s view. “It implies that poorer, less educated black people might have a legitimate quarrel with American policy, but not those who have gained access to college and other perquisites of the middle class.”¹¹⁰ In other words, portraying a black officer as conventionally patriotic and gung-ho suppresses the notion of black dissent and serves the conservative agenda. To be fair, in whatever other ways Del Vecchio’s novel serves a rightist agenda, it can hardly be accused of suppressing black dissent. Bates forgets that Del Vecchio allows the rear-area demagogue “Marcus X,” a Nation of Islam black separatist, a great deal of space in which to air his views.

Exile Narratives and the Vindication of the “Noble Cause”

There is a scene in Roland Joffe’s film *The Killing Fields* (1984), based on the true story of Dith Pran’s (Haing S. Ngor) imprisonment in the “angka” labor camps during Pol Pot’s reign over Cambodia and his subsequent near-perilous escape into neighboring Thailand, which vividly illustrates the dilemma that many Americans (as well as British and French) who were active in the antiwar movement—especially those who had painted Indochinese Communism in rosy colors and rooted for the triumph of the progressive “liberation” movements as against the stodgy old pro-Western dictators like the Vietnamese President Thieu and the Cambodian premiere, Lon Nol. In this scene, *New York Times* reporter Sydney Schanberg (Sam Waterston), who had failed to get Pran out of Cambodia before the fall of Phnom Pen to the Communist Khmer Rouge rebels, is confronted by other reporters in a large convention center just after he has just finished delivering a prize acceptance speech, in which he makes an impassioned plea to the world on behalf of Pran and the other victims of the Cambodian “killing fields.” The reporters’ questions imply a great deal of skepticism toward the stories coming out of Cambodia, noting that many of them are being printed in the conservative, anticommunist *Reader’s Digest*. Perhaps, the reporters’ questions imply, these stories are merely exaggerations undertaken for anticommunist

propaganda purposes. An angry Schanberg retorts, “Well, maybe in this one instance the *Reader’s Digest* happens to be right!”¹¹¹

The film is perhaps referring here to what some came to see during the late 1970s as the stubborn refusal of many on the Left to acknowledge the existence of atrocities in Cambodia or North Vietnam after the Communists came to power in 1975—a refusal borne of embarrassment. One of the best-known examples of this type of refusal is Noam Chomsky’s famous 1977 review essay “Distortions at Fourth Hand,” in which he addresses the issue of genocide and brutality by these regimes. Chomsky here paints the Western press—to include the *New York Times*—as hopelessly biased against these progressive (according to him) nations and their “commitment and dedication” and “impressive social and economic progress in the face of the enormous destruction” wrought by the American presence, and claiming that the unjustly derided “new economic zones” in Vietnam are actually the sites of positive reconstruction efforts.¹¹² He then goes on to review three books on Cambodia, two of which paint a grotesque picture of life under Pol Pot and one which paints a picture of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot as the country’s best hope for success. He dismisses the other two books as little better than anticommunist propaganda. “Their scholarship collapses under the barest scrutiny,” he writes of one these anti-Khmer Rouge books. On the other hand, he praises George Hildebrand and Gareth Porter’s *Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution* (1976) as “a carefully documented study of the destructive American impact on Cambodia” which details “the success of the Cambodian revolutionaries in overcoming it, giving a very favorable picture of their programs and policies, based on a wide range of sources.”¹¹³

This failure to recognize the extent of the human rights abuses by the Cambodian and Vietnamese Communists has become, as we have seen in our discussion of Lewy’s *America in Vietnam*, ammunition for a wide range of conservative voices to attack the reputation of the antiwar movement. By 1980 more and more exiles from Cambodia and Vietnam were coming to the West after escaping their native countries and publishing harrowing accounts of their experiences in labor camps, “re-education” camps, as well as the much-touted “new economic zones.” Books like Doan Van Toi’s *The Vietnamese Gulag* (1979), Nguyen Ngoc Ngan’s *The Will of Heaven* (1982), and Troung Nhu Tang’s *A Vietcong Memoir* (1985) all offered plenty of grist for the political Right’s mill. Conservative anticommunists, still holding to the hawkish position and looking for vindication after 1975, could hold such books up to the leftist apparatchiks and say “I told you so.”

I mention these books in closing this chapter because they are an important and often overlooked addition to the body of anticommunist testimonial literature (which includes the POW

narratives) that has been important to the cultural and political Right ever since Solzhenitzyn's famous book about the life in the Soviet Gulag, and like Solzhenitzyn they are all the more important because they carry the credibility of native voices (sometimes, as in the case of Truoung Nhu Tang, those of former Communists) decrying the enemy ideology and documenting its ruinous effects on human society and the human spirit. The Vietnamese "re-education" camps, the displacement of the former Vietcong in the South by Hanoi bureaucrats, and the horrors of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia were all proof positive, for the Right, that Communists really *were* cynical, ruthless totalitarians who trampled on signed agreements and reveled in cold-blooded and systematic butchery. We had therefore been morally justified in fighting them, the argument ran, and those who opposed the war had been, whether they knew it or not, on the side of totalitarianism and tyranny.

All of the books mentioned above have heavy anticommunist overtones, but it is probably Nguyen Ngoc Ngan's memoir which mounts the most coherent and sustained attack on Communism. *The Will of Heaven*, an absorbing account of his war experiences as an officer in the South Vietnamese army, his subsequent sufferings in the "re-education" camps and "new economic zones," and finally his escape to Canada, paints an exceedingly bleak picture of life under Communism and lends itself to the hawkish self-vindication in many ways. Not only are the Communists cruel and authoritarian, they seek to control *every* aspect of life in Vietnam. "Every day we saw our lives become more restricted; every day we saw some personal freedom we had always taken for granted disappear," he writes, giving the lie to the Chomskian picture of happy Vietnamese under progressive and humane leadership. "We became aware of the oppressive officiousness of our neighborhood committee, which now required signed permission even to visit nearby suburban areas. Neighborhoods had become rife with tattlers and informers. Everyone began to wear masks and say little."¹⁴ And all the time Ngan sees Ho Chi Minh's famous declaration posted everywhere: "Nothing is more precious than freedom and independence."¹⁵ Ngan finds the phrase a bitter mockery of the true state of affairs. The Communists implement a true reign of terror, conducting public executions for ordinarily menial crimes like the theft of small amounts of rice from the government-controlled ministry building. "The executions we had witnessed," he writes of the public shootings of three hungry teenagers caught stealing food, "were part of the campaign of the new government to terrorize the populace into a quick and uncomplaining acceptance of the new regime, and thus avoid any embarrassing rebellion."¹⁶ The terrorizing is necessary, Ngan makes clear, because the regime which claimed it would provide for everyone and raise everyone's formerly low standard of living under the Western imperialists was now proving that its promises were hollow and empty cheats. "People

who had never known want or hunger in their lives now found themselves going to bed on empty stomachs,” Ngan recalls of the government’s food distribution scheme. “Rice that should have been distributed to the hungry was shipped instead to the North.”¹¹⁷

Ngan’s experiences in the “re-education” camp or the jungle prison of Bu Gia Map are particularly revealing. He belies what he sees as the Western fiction that the Vietnamese are a demographically homogeneous people by focusing on tensions between Northerners and Southerners. When the prisoners are forced to march into the jungle every day and clear land for the “new economic zones” (which, he shows, are being built with what is essentially slave labor), they pass a village. The villagers wave at the prisoners, treating them sympathetically as fellow southerners, offering them cigarettes and cold soda, asking if the “Communist dogs” have been mistreating them, and then giving hostile looks and muttered curses to the Northern guards. When it comes to relations between northerner/Communist and southerner/Buddhist/Catholic, Ngan paints a stark, “us against them” picture. But where he really condemns Communism is in the scenes inside the camp itself. The prisoners are constantly mistreated and ordered around at gunpoint, forced to do hard labor and confined at night to cages, even as they are repeatedly told that they are “volunteers.” The brain-washing and double-speak are even more in evidence during the unbearably tedious indoctrination sessions, where the prisoners are forced to imbibe and regurgitate Communist catechism. One of their history “lessons” consists of a lecture on the illegality of the “puppet” Diem government, which, according to the commissar, was established by the imperialists in contravention of the legal government which Ho Chi Minh established after the French defeat at Dien Bein Phu in 1954. During this lesson, a usually quiet young man suddenly stands up in a shocking act of defiance and challenges the commissar:

“That is not entirely correct, sir,” Tao retorted. “By the terms of the treaty concluded by Ho Chi Minh and the French in 1946, Ho Chi Minh had absolutely no claim to the South. And it was the South that finally got rid of the French. President Diem kicked the French army out of Vietnam completely in 1956. Therefore Diem had a more complete victory over the French than did Ho Chi Minh!”

We all held our breaths. The commandant seemed about to explode. The veins in his forehead stood out; his face looked swollen and apoplectic. How could Tao have been so foolish!¹¹⁸

Predictably, the infuriated commissar orders the guards to haul the young man away. Although Ngan indeed regards Tao’s outburst as foolish, he nevertheless admires him for his courage, as do the rest of the prisoners, and for his deft exposure of the commissar’s intellectual bankruptcy.

The Communists, Ngan also observes, turn out to be untrustworthy backstabbers who often turn on their most loyal subjects—or, in other words, the most zealous revolutionaries. The narrative thread of the author’s friendship with “Khai” illustrates this point quite clearly. Before Ngan enters the ARVN as an officer during the early 1970s, he leads a student’s life in Saigon at the university, talking politics and philosophy in the cafés. Ngan’s sympathies are still largely unformed at this time, although he makes it clear that his background is middle-class and Catholic. One of his friends, the intellectual Khai, is a passionate admirer of Ho Chi Minh and the Communists and hopes for their victory. Later, Ngan gains a very favorable impression of the Americans while in the ARVN and working with them; simultaneously, his war experiences give him an increasingly negative view of Communism. After the fall of Saigon, Khai—who never went into the ARVN—suddenly emerges as an important cadre and reveals to Nguyen that he had been helping the NLF even as a college student. Khai rises to prominence and wins the chief administrative position in the education system because of his revolutionary zeal and wartime service to the Communists. Formerly a humble teacher, he now becomes a petty tyrant lording it all over his former peers and supervisors. But when he slips up in error, having promoted an “incorrect policy,” he is arrested and sent to prison for an indeterminate length of time.¹¹⁹ Khai’s fate, which Ngan seems to suggest is in some ways poetic justice, is by no means unusual in the bleak prison of the Vietnam he describes for his readers.

Truong Nhu Tang’s memoir, perhaps the best known Vietnamese exile narrative aside from Le Ly Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, has at its core this very notion of betrayal by the Hanoi leadership. Tang, a committed and idealistic NLF cadre for many years, works faithfully for the advancement of the Communist cause and the defeat of the imperialists and their puppets, only to see his loyalty and devotion betrayed. He sees many of his NLF veterans and fellow southerners also betrayed after 1975, when the promises of the Hanoi regime turn out to be lies. While Tang’s romantic, nostalgic, and idealized picture of the 1960s-era heroism of the Front and its long struggle in the jungles of southern Vietnam might give pause to some conservatives and lend credence to the notion that the guerillas really *were* genuinely interested in freedom and independence from foreign domination, and not using democratic rhetoric as a mask for totalitarian objectives, his picture of Communist rule in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon is just as bleak as Ngan’s, and it is for this reason that Tang found such a receptive audience in the anticommunist Right of the 1980s.¹²⁰ His picture of drab, totalitarian rule darkening his beloved, once-bright homeland is uncompromising. He emphasizes throughout the early part of his narrative the tolerant and inclusive aspect of the National Liberation Front—which is called a “front” precisely because it is willing to include Catholics, Buddhists, and others

and does not seek to displace honored Vietnamese customs and traditions. The Hanoi regime, however, has no intention of continuing such frivolity. The NLF, Tang realizes not long after 1975, was in many ways an unwitting dupe and a tool of Hanoi's objective of total domination of Vietnam, something to be tossed aside once Hanoi was well on its way toward that achievement. Hanoi considered the NLF, "whose programs had embodied the desire of so many South Vietnamese to achieve a political solution to their troubles and reconciliation among a people devastated by three decades of civil war," he writes, "as simply the last linkup it needed to achieve its own imperialistic revolution." Once Saigon had fallen and Thieu and the Americans were out of the way, the southern guerilla movement "not only had no further role to play; they became a positive obstacle to the rapid consolidation of power." Until that stage, Tang explains, the Communists in Hanoi could not lay their cards on the table:

Now, with total power in their hands, they began to show their cards in the most brutal fashion. They made it understood that the Vietnam of the future would be a single monolithic bloc, collectivist and totalitarian, in which all the traditions and culture of the South would be ground and molded by the political machine of the conquerors. These meanwhile, proceeded to install themselves with no further regard for the niceties of appearance.¹²¹

At the close of his narrative, after describing his escape from the country he once believed would be a paradise after the expulsion of the imperialists and the victory of the revolution, he emphasizes once again his intense disillusionment with the outcome of the war and denounces the Communists in Hanoi unequivocally:

Ho Chi Minh's successors have given us a country devouring its own and beholden once again to foreigners, though now it is the Soviets rather than the Americans. In the process, the lives that so many gave to create a new nation are now no more than ashes cast aside. That betrayal of faith will burden the souls of Vietnam's revolutionaries—even as their rigid ideology and bellicose foreign policies have mortgaged the country's future.¹²²

The strident denunciation of the revolution and the reaffirmation of the domino theory's validity did indeed resonate with anticommunist conservatives in the 1980s, who might have felt vindicated regarding their hawkish Vietnam-era positions. The acknowledgement (coming from a former Vietcong, no less) that the victory of Communism in Vietnam would signify that country's entrance into the Sino-Soviet orbit implicitly discredits the some of the antiwar movement's fundamental assumptions during the Vietnam era and, later, the Left's assumptions afterwards. Nixon, in *No More Vietnams*, lists them: that "Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist first

and a Communist second” that “the National Liberation Front was a revolutionary movement independent of North Vietnam” and, most importantly, that “life is better in Indochina” now that the Communists are in power.¹²³

Interestingly enough, Renny Christopher, in her *The Vietnam War/The American War*, the definitive critical study of Vietnamese exile narratives, regards Tang’s narrative in a highly circumspect manner and treats Ngan’s with barely concealed contempt. Her analysis of *A Vietcong Memoir* avoids any discussion of Truong’s disillusionment with the Hanoi regime and focuses instead on his treatment of his years as an NLF cadre. She takes conservative reviewers of the book, like Douglas Pike, to task for what she sees as an ill-informed and misplaced enthusiasm for what he calls the autobiography of a “Vietcong turncoat” and argues that his review pretends as if Tang’s is the only Vietnamese book to be published in the West.¹²⁴ Lambasting Pike for ignoring such classics as Vo Nguyen Giap’s *How We Won the War* (1976) and Van Tien Dung’s *Our Great Spring Victory* (1977) while elevating a provisionally anticommunist narrative (but all the while attempting to tease out Tang’s essential belief in the validity of the resistance in spite of the aftermath), she focuses on the ignorance and bias of Western reviewers who want to appropriate the book for their own ideological ends. As for Ngan, she dismisses his book as “firmly rooted in bourgeois attitudes.”¹²⁵ She objects to what she sees as his “condescending attitudes” toward the peasants, whom he portrays as “lazy and willfully ignorant.” She accuses him of “classism” as well as “racism” (specifically in his portrayal of the Montagnard folk who live in the jungles outside the camp). For evidence of his racism, Christopher offers Ngan’s use of the term *moi* to describe them (even though the rest of the inmates as well as the Communist guards also call them *moi*) and his description of their laughter as “childish.”¹²⁶ What she finds most objectionable, however, is Ngan’s apparent internalization of “American” values—the values of the “culture that has dominated him in Viet Nam and in his new home in North America,” (she gets around the fact the Ngan lives in Canada, not the United States, by referring to his residence as “North America”) and she derides his narrative as nothing more than a servile “attempt to meet the expectations of the American audience and curry American favor through his doctrinaire anticommunism and cloying pro-Americanism”—nothing but the South Vietnamese lackey’s pathetic attempt to please his Occidental masters.¹²⁷

Christopher’s comments certainly make one thing clear: if the political implications of Vietnamese exile narratives such as these are in any way lost upon the Right, they are certainly not ignored by the other side.

Notes

¹ Newt Gingrich, C-SPAN "Winning the Future," 25 February 2005. I say this because typically the party in power has never liked to admit it is the party in power.

² William C. Berman, *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton*. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998): 60-64.

³ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. (New York: Random House, 1991): 657. This is something difficult to verify as an empirical fact, of course, but one can point to a number of other historians and critics who could easily be described as left-liberal have made this claim and given evidence to support it. See Marilyn Young's essay "The Vietnam War in American Memory" in *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War*. ed. Marilyn Young, H. Bruce Franklin, et al.

⁴ Left-leaning thinkers and historians, like Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and John Dower, refuse to subscribe to the notion that the United States and its Allies held the moral high ground during WWII. They admit the evil of fascism and Nazism but emphasize, for example, American racism in the war against the Japanese. Right-wing extremists such as Holocaust denial theorists and neo-Nazis reject the triumphal paradigm for more obvious reasons.

⁵ Quoted in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays*. ed. Robert J. McMahon (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1990): 605. The setting for the 1988 speech was the Veterans' Day ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C.

⁶ Jim Neilson, *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998): 25-27.

⁷ Berman, *America's Right Turn*, 188-89. I do not wish to get into a long discussion of the social and historical forces involved in bringing conservatism to power in the 1980s; but it is necessary to mention some of them, I believe, in order to point to factors that Jim Neilson ignores completely.

⁸ Communism, of course, was not the only enemy of the *Pax Americana* during the 1980s. There was also the trend within certain Southwest Asian and Middle Eastern states like Iran, Syria, and Lebanon toward the spread of anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli Arab nationalism and religious extremism. Although certain extremist theocratic regimes received support (both material and moral) from the Soviet Union, they could not properly be called client states, since their ruling bodies often governed according to theocratic precepts which were violently at odds with the atheistic ideology of Communism. Regimes like that of the Ayatollah Khomeini's in Iran represented an altogether novel sort of threat to U.S. interests. Vietnam always hovered in the background whenever the United States and Islamic fundamentalism clashed. Pre-Khomeini Iran, for example, paralleled the situation in Southeast Asia several years earlier. Iran, like South Vietnam, had been a client state of the U.S., headed by a dictator (Shah Reza Pahlavi) whose position was strategically useful in that he served as a bulwark against Communist expansion in an area abundant with crucial natural resources. When he was overthrown, the analogy was readily apparent to the student radicals who captured the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took several Americans hostage. They held a large banner for photographers and journalists to see, and the banner and its message were broadcast during the news coverage of the event in the United States. American television viewers could see the angry mob waving a banner that said, in bold black letters, "America: Vietnam wounded you, Iran will bury you."

⁹ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991): 314.

¹⁰ Charlton Heston hosted a 1983 documentary called *Television's Vietnam*, funded by Reed Irvine's conservative watchdog group Accuracy in Media. This 90-minute program was an attack on the massive multi-volume PBS documentary *Vietnam: A Television History*, which had appeared earlier that same year. Heston, historian Douglas Pike, former Vietnam correspondent Peter Braestrup, and several others attempted, in *Television's Vietnam*, to expose what they perceived as an ill-concealed left-liberal bias in the PBS series.

¹¹ Quoted in Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984): 277. Agnew's remarks were in response to the October 1969 anti-war moratorium.

¹² There have been quite a few expositions of the conservative view on the culture wars. One of the most notable regarding the politicization of academia is Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998).

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- ¹³ William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989): 425.
- ¹⁴ Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press): 3-4.
- ¹⁵ Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982) 35-36.
- ¹⁶ But there is no doubt that these books seeped down into popular consciousness to great extent, especially when Charlton Heston, in *Television's Vietnam*, praised *On Strategy* as "the best work of history I've read recently."
- ¹⁷ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, v.
- ¹⁸ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 297. The author completely dismisses antiwar sentiment among Vietnam-era youth as nothing but a mask for self-serving motives (i.e. not having one's academic career interrupted by the inconvenience of military service). He attributes the rise of "anti-war militancy on college campuses" to "young men feeling twinges of conscience" as they "sat out a war while others fought" and making peace with themselves by having "convinced themselves the war was immoral."
- ¹⁹ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, iv.
- ²⁰ Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999) 174-175.
- ²¹ Robert D. Heinl, "The Collapse of the Armed Forces." In Marvin Gettleman et al. *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995): 328.
- ²² James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam 1945-1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991): 271.
- ²³ Haynes Bonner Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1992): 123.
- ²⁴ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. (London: Routledge, 1995): 77.
- ²⁵ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, vi.
- ²⁶ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, vii.
- ²⁷ See Norman Podhoretz, *Ex-Friends: Falling Out with Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt and Norman Mailer* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), as well as David Horowitz and Peter Collier's *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).
- ²⁸ For a representative sampling of some of this guilt, see James Fallows, "What Did You Do During The Class War, Daddy?" (*Washington Monthly* October 1975): 5-7. Also Arthur T. Hadley, "The Draft Debate: A Special Section" (*Washington Post* April 6 1980) E1-E5.
- ²⁹ Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman, eds. *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans Since the War*. (New York: Praeger, 1980): x-xi.
- ³⁰ Michael Klein, "Historical Memory and Film." In Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 22-23.
- ³¹ The best examples of consistently positive television portrayals of Americans in Vietnam during the 1980s are the series *Tour of Duty* and *China Beach*.
- ³² Quoted in B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (Dallas: Verity Press, 1998): 563.
- ³³ James McDonough, *Platoon Leader* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985) v.
- ³⁴ David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985) 318-19.
- ³⁵ *The Protected Will Never Know* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998): 222, 238, 240.
- ³⁶ Elliot Gruner, *Prisoners of Culture: Representing the Vietnam POW* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993): 28-29.
- ³⁷ Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984): 20-21. Hannah Dustin's Indian captors, according to her narrative, seized her infant child by the legs and smashed its skull against a tree.
- ³⁸ Gruner, *Prisoners of Culture*, 28-29.
- ³⁹ The parallel is clearer when one looks at Richard Slotkin's seminal study of Puritan captivity narratives in *Regeneration Through Violence* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000): 66-67. In his discussion of the clergy's employment of captivity narratives in the King Philip's War-era sermons, Slotkin argues that these sermon-narratives "became the Puritan establishment's first line of intellectual defense

against the unruliness and atomism of their people, the criticism leveled against them by the home English, and their own uneasiness about their situation vis-à-vis the Indians.” POW narratives, in a sense, similarly functioned as a conservative “intellectual first line of defense” against the “unruliness and atomism” of the counterculture, the European and American intelligentsia’s criticism of the war, and the American “uneasiness of their situation vis-à-vis” the spread of Communism in the world.

⁴⁰ The primary source for this claim is the POW narratives themselves, which are virtually unanimous in their recollection of a joyful and triumphant homecoming. There are two exceptions, however. The first is James Rowe’s *Five Years to Freedom*, because Rowe was a prisoner under much different circumstances than the pilots (he was a Special Forces soldier captured and held in an NLF camp in South Vietnam), and one who escaped on his own in 1968. George Smith’s *POW: Two Years with the Vietcong* is the other exception. Smith’s antimilitarist narrative offered critiques of American racism and imperialism, was favored reading material by the antiwar left and the North Vietnamese even handed out his book to POWs in Hanoi as antiwar propaganda. Although the standard historical narratives on the Vietnam War for the most part echo the POW narratives on Operation Homecoming, they are also less likely to make it seem as if all criticism of the war stopped momentarily as the POWs returned. A.J. Langguth, for instance, notes that antiwar icons like Jane Fonda refused to believe that torture was policy in Hanoi and took issue with the lavish praise heaped upon the POWs and called them “hypocrites and liars” who were obscuring the Vietnam veterans speaking out against U.S. atrocities inflicted on the Vietnamese. See A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000): 626.

⁴¹ Everett Alvarez, *Chained Eagle: The True Heroic Story of Eight-and-One-Half Years as a POW by the First American Shot Down Over North Vietnam*. (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1989): 288.

⁴² Frederick Downs, *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978): 11. In the preface to his memoir Downs recalls an experience on the University of Denver campus in the fall of 1968, where he was attending classes after returning home from service in Vietnam. Another student observed Downs’ prosthetic and inquired whether or not he lost his hand in Vietnam. When Downs replied in the affirmative, the student remarked: “Serves you right.” This marked the keynote for Downs in his homecoming experience.

⁴³ Jeremiah Denton, *When Hell Was in Session: A Personal Story of Survival as a POW in North Vietnam* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1976): 237.

⁴⁴ Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese*. (New York: Random House, 1973): 248.

⁴⁵ Rowe discusses the nature of Special Forces training and how it prepared him for the experience of captivity in the second chapter of his *Five Years to Freedom: The True Story of a Vietnam POW* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971): 55-80. Leigh Wade appears briefly in Rowe’s narrative as a colleague.

⁴⁶ Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 238.

⁴⁷ The most comprehensive history of the Vietnam POWs is Stuart Rochester and Frederick Kiley’s *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia 1961-1973* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999). Rochester and Kiley cover the White House fete on pp. 589-90.

⁴⁸ John Dramesi, *Code of Honor* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975): 270. The poster scene occurs on p. 232.

⁴⁹ Philip E. Smith and Peggy Herz, *Journey into Darkness: The Gripping Story of an American POWs Seven Years Trapped Inside Red China During the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992): 224-225.

⁵⁰ Like almost everything else regarding the Indochina conflict, Cambodia’s neutrality at that time is a matter of debate. Right-leaning historians like Michael Lind argue that Prince Sihanouk tacitly approved of the bombing, while a left-leaning historian like William Shawcross, in *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1979), maintains that the incursion was a criminally unilateral action which destabilized Cambodia and paved the way for the Khmer Rouge.

⁵¹ Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press) 299-300.

⁵² Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 230.

⁵³ Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, 259-61.

⁵⁴ Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 230.

⁵⁵ Ted Guy, “Ted Guy.” In Zalin Grant, ed. *Survivors* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975): 339.

⁵⁶ Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 22.

⁵⁷ Guy, “Ted Guy,” 319.

⁵⁸ Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 231.

⁵⁹ Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, 174-75.

⁶⁰ Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 11.

⁶¹ Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 240.

⁶² Most of the POW narratives give detailed descriptions of the tortures that the North Vietnamese used on them. The most common were beatings and bodily contortions that restricted blood flow to the extremities or violently dislocated the joints. See Howard and Phyllis Rutledge, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* (Old Tappan, N.J., Fleming H. Revell, 1973): 24-28. See also Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, 77-98, Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 54-67; Alvarez, *Chained Eagle*, 158-80; Dramesi, *Code of Honor*, 120-33.

⁶³ Gruner, *Prisoners of Culture*, 33.

⁶⁴ Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 116-17.

⁶⁵ H. Bruce Franklin, *MIA, or Myth-making in America: How and Why Belief in POWs has Possessed a Nation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993): 4-5. U.S./Vietnamese relations have been normalized since the publication of Franklin's study, as I have pointed out in the previous chapter.

⁶⁶ Probably the most succinct summation of the "myths" of Vietnam that conservatives detest is found in Richard Nixon's post-presidency polemic *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985). Nixon lists twenty three supposed falsehoods (from the claim that the Vietnam conflict "was a civil war" to the notion that people enjoy a better life "in Indochina now that the United States is gone") in the first chapter. He maintains that such lies have been purveyed throughout the print and electronic media and swallowed uncritically by a gullible public. The rest of the chapter consists of a point-by-point "debunking" of these twenty-three myths.

⁶⁷ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978): v.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1983):198-99.

⁶⁹ For an example of this type of attack, see Stephen J. Morris, "Whitewashing Dictatorship in Communist Vietnam and Cambodia." In Peter Collier and David Horowitz' *The Anti-Chomsky Reader* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004) 1-34.

⁷⁰ Rejecting the "tragedy without villains" paradigm as nothing more than a consolatory myth, Podhoretz, in *Why We Were in Vietnam*, argues that one side was wrong and one side was right. For too long, the Center had tried to placate the hard Left and far Right with the notion that "everyone on all sides of the argument turned out to be wrong about the political character and implications of the Vietnam War." He cites the familiar litany of discredited assumptions—the domino theory, the necessity of containment, etc.—and attempts to show, despite the Left's vigorous assertions to the contrary, that none of these notions have been proven false. They are only false, in fact, if one insists on a literalistic interpretation of them. The dominoes did not fall all over the Southeastern Pacific, as so many Cold Warriors had predicted, after the loss of Vietnam, but "believers in the domino theory turned out to be right in thinking that an American defeat in Vietnam would give encouragement to other Communist insurrections or 'wars of national liberation' backed by the Soviet Union. Thus, no sooner had Vietnam fallen than Soviet proxies in the form of Cuban troops appeared in Angola to help the Communist faction there overwhelm its pro-Western rivals in a civil war. With local variations, the same pattern was repeated over the next few years in Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Yemen, and Afghanistan, all of which were taken over by Communist parties subservient to or allied with the help of Soviet proxies or massive infusion of Soviet arms." 176-77.

⁷¹ Quoted in Gettelman, *Vietnam and America*, 518.

⁷² It is necessary to pause here and consider the significance of the words "revision" and "revisionist" before going on to discuss Lewy's treatment of Vietnam. I do not mean to suggest, by using such words to describe his project, that Lewy and other historians whose work seemed in sympathy with a conservative viewpoint were of necessity engaged in some propagandistic distortion of the past in order to serve a particular political agenda. Lewy saw his task as one of merely setting the record straight (although it is worth noting that much of Lewy's work betrays a strong anticommunist bent). The term "historical revisionism" has indeed come to describe the practice, anathema to conservatives in the culture wars of the last decade, of uncovering and throwing light on unsavory aspects of America's or Western civilization's past (colonialism, Indian removal, slavery, etc.) in what the right often perceives as a concentrated effort to make white Europeans look like villains and Native Americans, blacks, and colonized peoples look like innocent victims. The perception among conservative commentators, from Lynne Cheney to Robert Bork to William Bennett, is that leftist historians are actively attacking the national self-image with embarrassing narratives of white men raping and plundering a Native American pastoral; they do this, the argument runs,

in order to undermine American prestige and make patriotism seem ignorant. The historians typically counter by arguing that they are not inventing or changing a static and unalterable past; they are merely taking new evidence into consideration or looking at the same phenomena from a different perspective than that of earlier historians. Most historians, however, regardless of their political persuasion, would agree that history is *necessarily* under constant revision, as present events unfold and shed new light on the past, and as new evidence is unearthed.

⁷³ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, vi.

⁷⁴ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, vi.

⁷⁵ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, vii.

⁷⁶ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, vii.

⁷⁷ Examples of antiwar luminaries who later expressed regret and guilt over their enthusiasm for Vietnamese Communism in light of events after 1975 were Joan Baez and the French journalist Jean LaCouture. See Collier and Horowitz, *The Anti-Chomsky Reader*, 9-11.

⁷⁸ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 272.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 273.

⁸⁰ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 273.

⁸¹ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 271.

⁸² Douglas Pike, *The Vietcong Strategy of Terror* (Saigon: U.S. Mission, 1970): 23-29.

⁸³ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 277. Edward Herman and D. Gareth Porter later wrote an attempt to refute Pike's claims about a systematic massacre carried out by Communists in Hue. See their "The Myth of the Hue Massacre" (*Ramparts* May-June 1975): 36-45.

⁸⁴ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 307. He praises one antiwar activist, Staughton Lynd, whom he sees as intellectually honest. When Bertrand Russell asked Lynd to participate in the 1967 War Crimes Tribunal, Lynd "declined because of the refusal of the tribunal to inquire into the crimes of both sides." Another potential participant took issue with the Tribunal's apparent position that a Vietnamese child killed by American napalm would constitute a crime, whereas the same child killed by Vietcong terrorism would not.

⁸⁵ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 307.

⁸⁶ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, v.

⁸⁷ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, vi.

⁸⁸ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 300-01.

⁸⁹ They had their work cut out for them, because they were writing against the grain of war literature in the United States. Antimilitarism and pacifist sentiment, indeed, have been strong thematic strains in American war fiction from Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane to Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut.

⁹⁰ See Junger's *Storm of Steel* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1996, orig. published 1920). Junger, a German combat veteran of the Western Front, delivers a hypnotic Periclean oration at the end of his book, in which he describes combat as an exalted, religious experience, an "inestimable treasure" of which he and his comrades "can never be deprived." He finishes with a fiercely nationalistic "Germany lives and Germany shall never go under!" 317-19. *Freikorps* refers the group of right-wing German veterans who resented the terms imposed on Germany after defeat and promoted a "stab-in-the-back" version of the war. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in sections shares much of the same nationalistic fervor and celebration of combat experience found in *Freikorps* literature.

⁹¹ Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 70.

⁹² James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978): 116.

⁹³ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 116.

⁹⁴ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 442.

⁹⁵ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 208.

⁹⁶ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 86.

⁹⁷ This primal scene—the murder of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops—is, as we have seen, a recurs throughout Vietnam combat narratives. Indeed, texts like *A Rumor of War* and *Fields of Fire* (as well as films like *Platoon* and *Casualties of War*) often position the American soldier's confrontation with an atrocity as the pivotal turning point in spurring either his spiritual growth or moral degeneration. Typically, the atrocity in question is emblematic of the mother of all Vietnam atrocities: My Lai. Caputo and Webb both reject—explicitly and obliquely—what they perceive as abstract explanations of such incidents advanced by the antiwar crowd. For Caputo, the popular "racism" and "frontier-heritage" theories are

misguided attempts to account for the causes of the murders with hazy notions of something inherently malicious in the American character. For both Caputo and Webb, the American atrocity in Vietnam had to be understood within a context of mitigating circumstances which, without excusing it, facilitated the shifting of blame from the combatant's shoulders and onto some other locus. Yet Caputo and Webb understand those mitigating circumstances in fundamentally different ways. Each writer's perspective on the larger significance of the war, furthermore, hinges largely upon that particular understanding. Webb, like Caputo, emphasizes the role of the jungle environment in which most small-unit operations took place as a sort of over-determining factor, yet the action of his novel suggests that the murder of civilians was primarily the result of the kind of strategy that the McNamaras and Bundys adhered to, a strategy which unnecessarily placed American soldiers in a vulnerable defensive position and made them easy prey for snipers, ambushes and booby traps. Enlightenment, in Webb's universe, consists in awakening to the fact that using concentrated force equals speaking the only language the North Vietnamese know. Neither diplomacy nor tit-for-tat reprisals accomplish any lasting political objectives in such a conflict.

⁹⁸ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 443.

⁹⁹ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 447-48.

¹⁰⁰ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 450.

¹⁰¹ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 451.

¹⁰² Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 451.

¹⁰³ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 451-52.

¹⁰⁴ Webb's attack on the antiwar movement continues even more virulently in a subsequent novel, *A Country Such as This*, in a scene depicting the October 1967 march on the Pentagon. Robert Timberg, in *The Nightingale's Song* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) illuminates the autobiographical elements in *Fields of Fire*, describing Webb as enraged by the open displays on campuses of solidarity with the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. "Webb decided the hostility of many of his antiwar schoolmates was an expression of suppressed guilt. By arguing that the war was illegal and immoral, and that all American soldiers did was shoot civilians, torch hooches, and do dope, they were trying to get themselves off the hook for their own actions." 185-86.

¹⁰⁵ Bob Greene, *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989): 49.

¹⁰⁶ Philip Beidler, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991): 69.

¹⁰⁷ John Del Vecchio, *The Thirteenth Valley* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin): 370-71.

¹⁰⁸ Del Vecchio, *The Thirteenth Valley*, ix-xi.

¹⁰⁹ Del Vecchio, *The Thirteenth Valley*, 228.

¹¹⁰ Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 68.

¹¹¹ Roland Joffe, *The Killing Fields* (Warner Brothers, 1984).

¹¹² Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, "Distortions at Fourth Hand" (*The Nation* June 25, 1977): 1-9. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Gareth and Porter's "wide range of sources" include reports from the Cambodian government.

¹¹³ Chomsky and Herman, "Distortions at Fourth Hand," 3.

¹¹⁴ Nguyen Ngoc Ngan and E.E. Richey, *The Will of Heaven: The Story of One Vietnamese and the End of His World* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982): 82.

¹¹⁵ Ngan, *The Will of Heaven*, 131.

¹¹⁶ Ngan, *The Will of Heaven*, 81.

¹¹⁷ Ngan, *The Will of Heaven*, 131.

¹¹⁸ Ngan, *The Will of Heaven*, 115.

¹¹⁹ Ngan, *The Will of Heaven*, 89-90.

¹²⁰ Truong Nhu Tang appears in Charlton Heston's *Television's Vietnam* two years before the publication of his memoir. Heston presents him as a witness to the evils of Communism in Vietnam and discusses his disillusionment with the revolution.

¹²¹ Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1985): 268-69.

¹²² Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir*, 310.

¹²³ Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, 10.

¹²⁴ Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995): 53.

¹²⁵ Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/The American War*, 65.

¹²⁶ Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/The American War*, 67.

¹²⁷ Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/The American War*, 69-70.

CONCLUSION

By describing and analyzing some of the rhetorical linkages between the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terrorism, I hope that I have demonstrated that one's understanding of the Indochina conflict is inextricably bound up with his or her understanding of the American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. Of course just about every intelligent person recognizes this in a general way: one must know the past in order to understand the present. But, as I hope I have shown in the preceding chapters, there is not now and never has been any broad consensus as to what constitutes a *proper* and *correct* understanding of the Vietnam War, and although the arguments about the Global War on Terrorism are likely to take shape in unpredictable ways in the future, the disagreements are so deeply rooted in certain cultural circumstances (or, crudely put, deep-seated differences between "red state" and "blue state" outlooks) that it is doubtful that any sort of cultural consensus will prevail now or in the future. (Regarding the future, the conflict between the United States, its allies, and militant Islamist groups is far from over—eventually the war may engulf emerging nuclear powers such as Iran and North Korea, and add an entirely new dimension to the debate). But I am not sure that cultural consensus about war is necessary or desirable in a free society. I realize that some degree of consensus is necessary for practical reasons and for accomplishing certain basic objectives, but at the same time, open debate and discussion are essential to and healthy in a functioning democracy. But in order to engage in honest discussion of subjects like the Vietnam War (and the current conflict as well), one must, I believe, avoid the type of rigid absolutism and unyielding historical certainty that I have described in several instances throughout this project. This absolutism of both the Left and the Right, bordering at times on fanaticism, often produces work that is intellectually dishonest and calculated solely for the purpose of reaffirming the validity of a given ideological outlook, be it Marxism or anti-Communism.

On the Right, this tendency has often taken shape in the willingness to overlook or ignore the problems inherent in supporting unpopular and repressive regimes as allies in a war against Communism or Islamist terrorists. During the Vietnam War, anticommunist hawks threw their support behind dictators like Ngo Dinh Diem, Nguyen Van Thieu and Cambodia's Lon Nol, and ignored the proliferation of human rights abuses endemic to their regimes. How can one condemn the North Vietnamese Communists as brutal thugs with no regard for human rights while tolerating the existence of "tiger cages" in South Vietnam? Now the parallel between this inconsistency in the Right's narrative of Vietnam and the Bush Administration's Global War on Terrorism becomes apparent to critics: how ironic that President Bush supports dictators like

Egypt's Husni Mubarak and Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf as friends and allies in his war to spread democracy in the Middle East. Would they welcome the type of freedoms in their own countries that the President envisions people enjoying across that region?

On the Left, the tendency to absolutism has taken shape, as I have previously shown, in instances like Noam Chomsky's long refusal to concede that Communist atrocities in Southeast Asia were more than anticommunist propaganda from the Right. The same can be said for many of Chomsky's admiring readers and followers, for many of them seem completely unaware of his past involvement in this issue. In the recent award-winning adulatory documentary *Chomsky: Rebel Without a Pause* (2004), an admirer running through a list of what he sees as the writer's heroic qualities boasts that Chomsky has been subject to death threats from Zionist groups because of his stance on Israel, and recalls that a Cambodian exile group once showed up protesting one of his appearances with signs accusing him of denying the Cambodian genocide. At this juncture, the man laughs, shaking his head, unable to figure out why in the world anyone would condemn Chomsky for such a historically remote and seemingly irrelevant phenomenon. Among some of the leftist writers I've discussed, there is either a rush to distance the massacres of Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge from Marxist ideology (arguing that the murderous impulses arose out of uniquely Cambodian circumstances and had nothing to do with Marxism) or to blame the incident entirely on Nixon and Kissinger's bombing of the country and the social turmoil resulting from it.

The liberal center, as I have shown in my discussion of the work of writers like Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, and Michael Herr, suffers attacks from both ends of the ideological spectrum, precisely because centrists like these deal in ambiguity and uncertainty. Ideological absolutists on the Left and the Right cannot tolerate such uncertainty. The character of the Vietnam War, in their minds, must have a fixed, knowable essence, and they see as their imperative the establishment of that essence in the historical record as a matter beyond dispute. This is the impulse driving an enterprise like Jonathan Neale's *A People's History of the Vietnam War* (2003). For Neale, whose interpretive categories conform to those of Howard Zinn (editor of the New Press People's History series, to which Neale's book belongs) Vietnam is to be understood as an imperialist war, and there is no room for doubting this precept, for that would lead to questioning the character of the Global War on Terrorism as an imperialist war. Neale makes the inevitable linkage between the two conflicts. At the end of his book, written in December 2002, he cites the impending war as symptomatic of the "U.S. government's ambition for global dominance" and confidently predicts that General Tommy Franks will rule as "colonial governor" over a "prolonged occupation" which will "produce either terrorism, or mass urban

demonstrations, or both, as it has begun to do in Afghanistan.” The rhetoric of democracy and freedom is nothing but a ruse for a much more sinister scheme: “Washington has made it clear that they do not plan on elections in Iraq.”¹ Neale and other like-minded writers have since been proven dead wrong. Elections took place in Iraq in January 2005, and did not result in the installment of Iyad Allawi as predicted (the man described as a Bush toady or puppet ruler).

On the other hand, the same type of rigid absolutism fuels conservative polemics like Ann Coulter’s *Treason* (2003), which inscribes the Vietnam War as an exclusively liberal Democrat failure, poorly conceived of and bunglingly executed by presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Similarly, she reads the entire conflict with militant Islam as rooted in the failures of liberal Democrats like Jimmy Carter: “Time and again, Democrats’ gutless pusillanimity has emboldened America’s enemies and terrified its allies,” she writes, blaming the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the hostage crisis in Iran exclusively on Carter’s abandonment of Shah Reza Pahlavi.² More importantly, Coulter reinforces the rightist linkage between the American defeat in Indochina and the increased aggression from the USSR in the 1980s and the increase in militant Islamist aggression throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. She describes the “domestic ‘peace’ movement” as “unabashedly rooting for the Vietcong” and alleges that the mainstream press (namely, the *New York Times*) actively tried to undermine the war effort. Arguments that “the conflict in Vietnam was a civil war” or that “the Communists were really agrarian reformers” were tantamount to treason. Throughout the book she ascribes the term “traitor lobby” to persons subscribing to the notion that the way to end Communism or terrorism is to end the poverty that give those ideologies their appeal.³ All this, of course, elides the scrutiny of the Shah’s human rights record, which arguably had much to do with domestic turmoil in Iran during the late 1970s; Coulter dismisses any discussion of Vietnam as a civil war as misleading and deceptive, and she fails to differentiate between serious and thoughtful critics of the Vietnam War who cared about their country and youthful agitators wearing NLF flags on their jackets.

In short, writers like Neale, on the Left, and Coulter, on the Right, are illiberal absolutists who see any moral ambivalence about the Vietnam War or the Global War on Terrorism as spineless and irresponsible. I began this project out of the impulse to reject such absolutism and unyielding historical certitude because I think it is both dangerous and intellectually dishonest. After growing up on films about the Vietnam War and later beginning to read about it (first history, then memoirs and fiction), I was naturally interested in the topic because even at an early age I could see that the Vietnam War as an event in the past was contested ground. Adults in my life disagreed with one another about it, sometimes with an almost violent passion. My father and

an uncle had served in Vietnam and had very definite opinions on the matter. To them, know-nothing politicians had sent American boys to die in a pointless “political game.” But this did not mean that they rejected the enterprise of defending Communism in Southeast Asia. As I come from a fairly conventional, conservative, middle-class Catholic family, it is perhaps not surprising that my father was strongly anticommunist. Although he never positioned himself as “antiwar” (a slippery term, as I have come to realize), he and my uncle did believe that President Johnson, whom my father vilified as a “slime-ball,” was a crass and selfish opportunist of the worst sort and that Vietnam was primarily his responsibility. But there any philosophical resemblance to liberal or leftist antiwar sentiment stopped, because my father also believed that Johnson and McNamara were forcing the U.S. military to fight the war “with one hand tied its back.” What was needed, according to them, was a Barry Goldwater or a Richard Nixon (earlier than 1968) to “stop playing around” and get serious about driving the North Vietnamese out of South Vietnam. This meant pounding North Vietnam into submission in accordance with Curtis LeMay’s (rejected) guidance. As I began to read more and attempt to formulate my own position on Vietnam, I recognized this line of reasoning as the “stab-in-the-back” argument central to the “noble cause” narrative (my father was also, as you might guess, an enthusiastic Reagan supporter). And I saw how it conflicted with other narratives. I read books like Marilyn Young’s *The Vietnam Wars* and then began to regard my father’s view at a critical distance; much later I began to read Guenter Lewy’s *America in Vietnam* and could not help but be compelled and persuaded by his clear and passionate argument that much of what the far Left had said and written about the Vietnam War were lies and deliberate distortions. When I began graduate studies in English, I became professionally interested in the subject, and began to survey the secondary literature on Vietnam War fiction, I revised my opinion initially, but read other material later on and remained ambivalent. I have never been able since then to make up my mind about the Vietnam War.

Of the four “Vietnams” I have outlined and described in the preceding pages, I have not tried to elevate one above the others, because I believe that each narrative has some compelling strengths as well as obvious weaknesses.

I believe that the conservatives and anticommunists were right about some things: namely, the threat of Communism. There is an ample and still growing body of historical literature that convincingly argues that the American fear of Communism was legitimate and reasonable, not baseless, hysterical and rooted in illusion. Stalinist Russia and Maoist China were murderous totalitarian regimes with expansionist ambitions, and would have advanced over much of the globe had it not been for another superpower acting as a balance against them. I believe,

on the other hand, that the Rightist attempt to downplay the faults of anticommunist dictators allied with the U.S. and friendly to its interests is the great moral weak spot in the conservative narrative and oftentimes the attempts to gild corrupt despots like Nguyen Van Thieu do not come across as very convincing.

The Leftist literature and film on Vietnam is most convincing when it appeals to Americans to reject imperialism and alignment with dictators as an obscene contravention of the nation's roots as a rebel against colonialism. Similarly, I can appreciate the moral outrage against massive bombing campaigns in which hundreds or thousands of innocent civilians are killed, or the use of chemical warfare against the vegetation shrouding the landscape.

But both the Right and Left are often selective in their outrage: conservatives only tended, during the Vietnam War, to focus on Communist atrocities, and some of the same leftists so outraged at the United States' bombing of Cambodia in 1969-70 or the bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 were silent or even celebratory when the Soviet Union invaded and bombed Afghanistan in 1979.

I hope that I have drawn attention to some of these strengths and weaknesses in each of the four "Vietnams," and I have written this primarily for those seeking a meta-historical perspective on the literature and film of this conflict. I have also focused on some of the linkages between the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terrorism not necessarily because I find all of them compelling, although admittedly some of them are. I have tried to clarify the ways in which specific past discourses about Vietnam inhabit current discourses about Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism. Most of them are fairly obvious. The Right, for example, draws a parallel between what they see as a traitorous and reckless antiwar movement of thirty years ago and an ascendant and increasingly vocal "traitor lobby" (to use Ann Coulter's phrase) inhabiting the entertainment industry, the intelligentsia, the press, and academia which regularly undermines American progress in the war against militant Islam and sympathizes with the enemy. The Left suggests that the insurgents in fighting against Coalition Forces in Iraq now are akin to the Vietcong guerillas who fought (according to leftists like Chomsky and FitzGerald) for freedom and independence from foreign domination thirty years ago. Contemporary liberalism today (perhaps embodied in a centrist like Senator Joe Lieberman) quibbles with the Bush Administration's prosecution of the war but basically resolves to "stay the course" and professes to understand the necessity for American success in building a democracy in Iraq; this resembles perhaps the liberal anticommunist position of thirty-five or forty years ago. Clearly, when one understands American intervention in Vietnam as a crime, one is likely to understand the invasion and occupation of Iraq or perhaps even Afghanistan as a crime. One who understands America in

Vietnam as conducting a noble crusade against Communism will be likely to subscribe to the idea that America is trying to bring freedom and democracy to the Middle East. And one who understands Vietnam as a tragic overreaching, a mistaken and ill-advised (but not criminal) venture will be likely to understand Iraq in the same way.

Of course, this is an oversimplification which breaks down upon closer examination, insofar as a number of individual writers (for example) haven't conformed to this mold. William Shawcross, in his book *Sideshow*, denounced Nixon and Kissinger's war in Southeast Asia as criminal and brutal; without renouncing his former position he now supports the invasion and occupation of Iraq in his book *Allies: Why the West Needed to Remove Saddam* (2004). James Webb, who has been dismissed by some readers as a gung-ho jingoist and narrow-minded nationalist who glorifies war because of his vilification of the Vietnam-era antiwar movement in his novel *Fields of Fire*, has made his opposition to the war in Iraq very clear. And there are others, who still maintain that the Vietnamese Communists were fighting for Vietnamese independence and not for the furtherance of Sino-Soviet expansionist ambitions, yet who refuse to ascribe such heroic status to Islamic militants. I believe that, as tempting and compelling as many of the analogies between Vietnam and Iraq are now, many of them are false and misleading, and because the current war is every bit as politicized as Vietnam was, the same ideological categories are often in use. Just as the My Lai massacre came to represent all that was evil and hideous about the American enterprise in Vietnam, so the Abu Ghraib affair and related prison abuse scandals has come to symbolize all that is supposedly racist and corrupt about the American enterprise in Iraq. But as vile and despicable as the abuse of prisoners of war in U.S. military detention facilities is, does it really fall into the same moral category as the act of gunning down more than a hundred innocent Vietnamese villagers? And however one views the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, sympathetic treatments of the *mujahideen* as heroic resistance fighters with the true interests of their native peoples at heart, in the matter of the peasant Vietcong guerillas, are either based on gross misinformation or willful ignorance, no matter how astonishingly pervasive they are. Leftist websites, the leftist blogosphere and the Yahoo! message boards are places where one can find a virtually uninterrupted stream of criticism against the Bush Administration and its wars, which, in and of itself is unobjectionable and reasonable to expect. But much of the antiwar criticism is intertwined with the demonizing of U.S. military personnel and the granting of heroic Robin Hood status to monsters such as Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. "American Soldiers Deserve to Die," read one message board heading in the summer of 2004, shortly after the Abu Ghraib revelation. A person identifying herself as "Julie Masters" went on to describe American military personnel as ignorant rednecks and racist

murderers who deserved death at the hands of their Iraqi victims. “I sincerely hope that the Iraqi people rise up and behead anyone wearing an American military uniform,” she closed. This memorable post was one among several hundred similar posts in a period of about a month. Certain posts celebrated the deaths of U.S. military personnel as victories in the struggle for true Iraqi liberation from imperialism. Of course, it is difficult to know who is saying what on the Internet, and there is certainly no reason not to believe that some posts like the one by Julie Masters could have been written by those eager to agitate the Right and stir up trouble with provocative but disingenuous posts. But there is no doubt that many, if not most, of them were sincere expressions of a desire to identify with the *mujahideen* as underdogs. Recently, while listening to a review of Steven Spielberg’s science-fiction film *The War of the Worlds* (2005), it struck me how pervasive such sentiment is, and how routinely it passes unchallenged. The reviewer, who more or less panned the film, took Spielberg to task for avoiding politics and playing it safe. In the film, an adaptation of H.G. Wells’ tale of Martian invasion, huge metallic machines overrun Earth, savagely plunder its resources, and proceed to exterminate the human race. At one point the protagonist (Tom Cruise) attempts a sort of suicide mission against one of the destructive tripods with some grenades he has stolen from an abandoned National Guard humvee. The reviewer then chided Spielberg for failing to draw the moviegoer’s attention to the irresistible parallels between America’s invasion and occupation of Iraq and the Martian invasion of Earth. Tom Cruise, in other words, as a heroic resistance fighter bringing down a Martian tripod should lead us to think of guerillas in Iraq bringing down an Abrams tank with a homemade bomb.

Having some personal experience of these “heroic resistance fighters” and their violence—which is often worse than indiscriminate, in that it *deliberately* targets civilians—I cannot help but reject these facile characterizations of both guerillas and American military personnel utterly. I spent almost a year in Iraq, from April 2003 through March 2004, as a military policeman in the cities of Nasiriyah and Najaf, and most of our time was spent rebuilding police stations, providing security for banks where Iraqi pensioners could receive their allotments, supplying and equipping the Iraqi police, and conducting joint law enforcement patrols with them. There was not a single fatality in my unit either by accident or hostile fire, and in turn we never caused any Iraqi death by accident or hostile fire. For the most part, we got along with the residents of these cities quite well. The most spectacular act of violence I did happen to come into oblique contact with in Iraq (oblique in that I did not experience any personal physical injury as a result of it) was the terrorist bombing of the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf on August 29, 2003, less than two weeks after bombing of the United Nations building in Baghdad. More than one

hundred people were killed outright by a series of powerful car bombs as they came out of the mosque after Friday prayers with the leader of the Shi'ite Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr Al-Hakim (the primary target of the violence). The spectacle of the bleeding, burned and mutilated victims at the Najaf Hospital (many of them children) was horrifying and appalling. Comparing the perpetrators of such crimes (which also include the bombing a Red Cross building as well as targeting of NGO personnel and aid workers not affiliated with Coalition Forces) to Robin Hood or even to the Vietcong and North Vietnamese (who never committed terrorism against U.S. civilians) is outrageous. The conflation of Vietnamese guerillas fighting for socialism and independence from foreign occupation thirty years ago with Islamic militants hoping now to dominate the Middle East, Africa, Europe and the Pacific Rim is a mistake. It is, in fact, the chief mistake that is made today with reference to the comparison between the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terrorism. In a recent prescription for U.S. and allied victory in the Global War on Terrorism, two neoconservative authors who played a crucial role in shaping the Bush Administration's Iraq strategy attack this popular reasoning by drawing an apt parallel between the war in Iraq and another bloody war in America's past: "For a dozen years after Appomattox, former Confederate soldiers terrorized their neighbors, robbed trains, and killed Union soldiers," they write. "Was the Ku Klux Klan a 'national resistance'? Was Jesse James?"⁴ One may disagree with or reject this book's underlying assumptions and its neoconservative proscription for "victory" in the Middle East, but to equate Baathist and Islamist thugs to the Vietcong and North Vietnamese is beyond the pale of reasonable discussion.

Notes

¹ Jonathan Neale, *A People's History of the Vietnam War* (New York: The New Press, 2003): 264.

² Ann Coulter, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Crown Forum, 2003): 127.

³ Coulter, *Treason*, 129.

⁴ David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003): 12.

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Education

Bachelor of Arts, English (1992)
Saint Leo University
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Master of Arts, English (1995)
University of South Florida
Tampa, Florida

Thesis: "Natural Supernaturalism in *Moby-Dick*." Argues that Melville incorporates a critique of religious literalism or fundamentalism, one heavily influenced by Thomas Carlyle and grounded in the early nineteenth-century "higher criticism" of the German Romantics, into his philosophical fiction about a doomed whaling voyage.

Ph.D., English (2005)
Florida State University
Tallahassee, Florida

Dissertation: "Four Vietnams: Conflicting Versions of the Indochina Conflict in American Culture from the Cold War to the War on Terror." Argues that the Vietnam War has taken shape in American literature, film, and popular song according to four basic formulas (Vietnam as Domino, The Immoral and Criminal War, the Tragedy Without Villains, and the Noble Cause), that each formula is grounded in specific sets of historical and cultural circumstances, and that each of these formulations continues to dominate public discourse about Vietnam and its relationship to American wars past and present.

Professional Experience

Adjunct Instructor, Saint Leo University (1996)
-Taught Survey of American Literature I (1600-1860) for two semesters

Teaching Assistant, Florida State University (1996-2000)
-Taught First-Year Writing (ENC 1101 and 1102) for four consecutive years
-Designed and taught ENC 1145 "Writing About Popular Music" course for three semesters

Presentations

"Melville's *Typee* as a Subversive Captivity Narrative." FSU English Department Graduate Student Colloquium (Spring 1998).

Publications

"No Separate Mysteries: Stalinism, the Fragmentation of the Marxist Meta-Narrative, and Postmodernism in E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. In *Anarchy and Dissent: American Literature in the Sixties*. Ed. Maria Eugenia Diaz. Salamanca: University of Salamanca Press, 2000.