Back in the World: the Vietnam Veteran Through Popular Culture

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In his *Dispatches*, Michael Herr quotes the gonzo photojournalist Tim Page: “Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do that?[...] Ohhhh, war is good for you, you can’t take the glamour out of that. It’s like trying to take the glamour out of sex, trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling Stones.” This dissertation is in essence an exploration of Page’s question, examining how popular media during the American conflict in Indochina first removed and then restored the glamour of war. For most of its history, the United States has been defined by a certain level of militarism, a glamorizing of the process of regeneration through violence reflected in this quotation, but the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a challenging of this warrior ethos; this challenge was reversed by the 1980s, when American militarism was taken to a new, paramilitary, level. In this project, I propose that this oscillation in the association of masculinity and violence was directly linked to popular media’s depiction of the Vietnam war and of the soldiers who fought it. American society is haunted by Vietnam, not just because it was the first war the US lost (as the cliché would have it), but because of the ways in which popular culture presented the war to Americans: in particular, because of the ways the American public received this war through the emerging technologies of their television screens. The rapid response of television news to the conflict created an image of mundane warfare not through any intention on the part of broadcasters but because of the nature of the medium itself; over the next twenty years this image was both mystified and moderated by the more delayed media of film and literature and eventually molded into the now-familiar Vietvet killing machine.

In five chapters, I chronicle the evolution of the iconic Vietvet through the twenty years following the war. Following the methods of Raymond Williams and the
Birmingham School, I trace the history and development of images from Vietnam as well as the interaction of those images with popular narratives of war, violence, masculinity and heroism in America. I start with Susan Jeffords’ work in *The Remasculization of America*, taking her emphasis on the cultural narratives that fostered the restoration of patriarchal ideologies; I then move through Marita Sturken’s discussion of the creation of cultural memory from historical artifacts in *Tangled Memories*. To these foundational texts, I bring an emphasis on form and technology to shift the focus from the narratives to the mechanisms of transmission themselves. In my first chapter, I show how the relatively new medium of television, and the depiction on the nightly news of Vietnam as both mundane and corrupt, called into question the image of the heroic soldier, finally replacing that image with the demon of the uncontrollable violent vet, driven insane by an unjust war. My next two chapters look at how this image was rehabilitated through its recharacterization in the less immediate channels of novels and film, a recharacterization driven by national debates over the diagnosis of PTSD and the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. And in my final two chapters, I show how the image of the overly-muscled Supervet killing machine from pulps and blockbusters replaced the broken, victimized effigy.

I focus on the evolving history of veterans of the Vietnam War in particular because the strong interdependence of the history of that war and popular culture functions as a spotlight on the nature of the relation between media, history and cultural memory. Television coverage of the Vietnam War to a large extent worked not only to expose the inherent immorality of that particular conflict, but also of war more generally and of the image of the soldier hero. But in the two decades between the end of the Vietnam War and the first Gulf War, the standard history of the war had resolidified into one glorifying combat and violence. By looking at this changing social
understanding of Vietnam, I hope to reveal the greater mechanisms by which the newly emerging media technologies of the 1960s through the 1980s drastically changed the nature of representation of warfare, violence, and masculinity: first routinizing, then rejecting, and finally enthroning the image of the explosively violent soldier yoked to the state.
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1. Introduction

But forgetfulness will never walk
with innocence; we save our faces
at the risk of our lives, needing
the wisdom of losses, the gift of despair,
or we could kill again.
—from Phillip Appleman, “Waiting for the Fire”

The final episode of M*A*S*H, “Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen,” first aired on February 28, 1983, nearly ten years after the last combat troops left the Republic of Viet Nam. The half-hour comedy series, a thinly-veiled Vietnam allegory set in a mobile army surgical hospital during the Korean War, was coming to an end after eleven successful seasons on CBS. The episode chronicles the cease-fire that ended that conflict and finally sends home the characters who had been deployed in Korea more than three times longer than actual United States forces, but before the 4077th MASH unit is dismantled, Hawkeye Pierce, the show’s main protagonist, suffers the nervous breakdown that had been threatening since he first set foot in Asia. Hawkeye has finally cracked after unintentionally earning the very label so integral to the American cultural memory of the Vietnam War: baby-killer. Returning to base after a brief leave, Hawkeye had found himself on a bus filled with Korean civilians surrounded by enemy patrols. When one mother could not quiet her screaming child, Hawkeye was unable to control his frustration, eventually screaming at the woman to shut her baby up; she did
so by smothering it. The horror and guilt Hawkeye feels from witnessing this incident and from indirectly causing the murder of an innocent child has left him in a mental hospital, and the episode chronicles his recovery of the repressed memory of the incident and his slow return to sanity.

The death of this Korean child and Hawkeye’s implication in that death are an adaptation of incidents that occurred during the Vietnam War, and the revisions this story makes to actual atrocities in Indochina committed by American soldiers are paradigmatic of the greater transformation of the history of the US war in Viet Nam into the mythology of “Vietnam.” Hawkeye is an innocent victim, returning from R&R at the beach, who has simply wandered into this conflict; he is not looking for a battle. He does not himself engage in violence against this baby and had no intention of causing the child’s death: this violence is committed by Koreans on Koreans. And the incident is told not from the point of view of the Korean woman who sacrificed her child’s life for the greater good of the people on the bus, but from Hawkeye’s standpoint, privileging his suffering simply from witnessing this act over that of the mother who has been forced to kill her baby to save other lives. Hawkeye is no brutal American soldier who turns the violence of war on innocents, even babies; he is the victim of war, not the aggressor. In effect, this incident encapsulates the transition of the cultural memory of the Vietnam War from a brutal imperialist project that decimated the nation of Viet Nam to a tragedy suffered by all of America, and the transformation of iconic Vietnam veteran from a brutal baby-killer to a reluctant superhero. This project outlines the many faces of the Vietvet as American culture worked to reinstill a glorious heroism into the figure of the returning soldier and into the project of war more generally.

\[\text{1 Hawkeye originally remembers the episode as a woman killing a chicken, not a baby; his true memory is eventually uncovered through analysis.}\]
I did not see all of this episode of *M*A*S*H* when it was first televised; the second half of the two-and-a-half hour episode aired after my bedtime, and my mother sent me to my room before Hawkeye demonstrates his return to psychological stability by successfully operating on another Korean child. In my seven-year-old mind, the series that I had grown up watching and that was my only understanding of the Vietnam War came to an end not with Hawkeye’s triumphant departure from Korea but with his complete emotional and psychological breakdown. The reduction of my favorite character, a charming, sarcastic hero whose surgical prowess had already made me decide to be a doctor when I grew up, to a traumatized mess left me stunned and confused: was this what Vietnam was really like? Was this what Vietnam had done to America? Like Sam Hughes in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country*, I became determined to understand what had really happened in this war that ended before I was born, to experience the same mysterious trauma that had given Hawkeye such a dangerous wisdom. I would discover the secret history of Vietnam.

Years later, when I would describe this project to non-academics, I would without fail receive the same advice: I should talk to some *real* Vietvets. Go down to the VA center, I was told; come have dinner with Uncle Harry who served in the Mekong Delta; talk to Grandpa, he flew jets over there. When I responded by explaining that I was not interested in finding out what Vietnam was *really* like, and that my project instead dealt with how veterans from the Second Indochina War were depicted in US popular culture, I was generally met with complete incomprehension. How could I not want to know what *really* happened in Vietnam? I came to believe that most of American society was suffering from the same obsession that possessed me when I was seven: to find some way to access the special, *real* knowledge of the Vietvet. The valorization of military service during this psychedelic war and the glamorization of the violence of the Vietnam veteran had reinforced the preexisting trend in American culture
to depict knowledge gained in combat as the ultimate form of wisdom, and the search for an “authentic Vietnam experience” grew out of this depiction. Renny Christopher describes how this privileging of a constructed “real” history has come to define how the Vietnam War is canonized: “Viet Nam War narratives tend to be judged first on the basis of their ‘authenticity,’ rather than their literary merit, popularity, moral value, or political vision; in a circular argument, ‘authenticity’ is construed as authenticity of experience” (10). The merit of a Vietnam narrative is defined by its ability to describe the “reality” of Vietnam, but the authenticity of this reality is judged by its closeness to a constructed history: the version of the Vietnam War that was created through popular accounts. In essence, the value of any Vietnam story resides in its ability to recreate the war and thereby provide its audience with the same knowledge from experience possessed by the Vietvet; however, this “authentic” knowledge is always already mediated by ideological concerns, and any version of this knowledge that questions the now-standard narrative of Vietnam is discounted. The revised history of Vietnam is one that glamorizes both the experience of that war and the extreme violence that characterized it.

I do not discuss here the ethnocentrism of either the American nation-building project in Indochina or of popular accounts of that project; Christopher has already definitively outlined the inherent racism in American culture’s depiction of Vietnam as something that happened to Americans rather than something the US inflicted on the nation and people of Viet Nam, and although I do take her distinction between “Vietnam” the experience and Viet Nam the nation, there is no need to repeat her argument. Nor do I retread the ground covered by Susan Jeffords’ seminal The Remasculization of America, which traces the anti-feminist subtext in the popular history of Vietnam and how that subtext reinforces the patriarchal structures of American society that were challenged by the counterculture’s growing feminist movement.
Instead, I focus specifically on the creation of the iconic Vietvet in popular culture to tease out how the glamorization of violence in American culture identified by Richard Slotkin in *Regeneration through Violence* was first challenged by the war in Indochina only to return in an even more extreme fashion. This argument resonates with Jeffords’ through its acknowledgement of the fixation on masculinity in Vietnam narratives, but rather than focus on the erasure of women and the disdain for the feminine that is Jeffords’ concern, I look at the construction of masculinity itself, and how American culture tends to define masculinity through the capacity for violence. The recognition of the problems inherent in the association of heroism and violence was one of the primary challenges “Vietnam” presented to the US cultural consciousness, and the twenty years following the war saw a reinstitution of this violent heroism that had been undermined by media coverage of the war itself.

Furthermore, this study focuses specifically on the methods by which popular culture was able to effect this restoration of the glamour of violence. The war forced a questioning of this glamorization through its representation in television news media; the war as created by television news was not at all an adventure, or a quest, or a coming-of-age saga, but was both mundane and terrifying, and the violence of war lost its association with heroism and glory because the immediate medium of television news was unable to depict that violence as anything other than boring and brutal. The less rapid response of popular culture to the war, however, restored this association over time. As the history of the war itself was reframed through ideological shifts at home, popular depictions of that war took on characteristics that both claimed Christopher’s “authenticity” and presented violence in a significantly more positive light. The icon of the psychotic Vietvet that had been established through television news accounts and early popular reactions to those accounts challenged the notion that men should be praised for their capacity for violence, but the characterization of that icon was
immediately in flux, transitioning through various stereotypes as America told itself
different stories about Vietnam. These stories came not from factual accounts but from
the solidifying cultural narrative of the war, adapted to meet the needs of American
culture both to reaffirm its patriarchal structure, as Jeffords argues, and to define that
structure as an essentially violent one.

I focus on the depiction of the veteran specifically, rather than the soldier or the
war itself, because the transformations in that depiction shed the most light on how
American society at large reacted and responded to this critique of violence. The history
of “Vietnam” is not a story about Viet Nam, it is a story about America; the American
focus on the effects of the war in America rather than in Viet Nam make this clear.
Christopher points out at length that this focus is in itself unethical, erasing the damage
done by the US to the Vietnamese and substituting a narrative of American
victimization. In The Viet Nam War/the American War she intervenes in this erasure,
recovering the Vietnamese perspective. However, my project is not to challenge the
accepted history of Vietnam, but to uncover how this history became standardized,
detailing the means by which American culture comes to define itself. This project is
best done through an examination of the nearly compulsive fascination the US had and
has for the returning Vietvets. The quintessential American hero, according to Slotkin, is
one who has voyaged into the wilderness and learned the secret understanding of
violence there, but who then returns to society and is able to put this knowledge to use
for the betterment of the community. The history of the Vietvet first challenged this
figure by exposing this gnostic knowledge to the public at large on their television
screens, by presenting violence as the savagery it is rather than the splendor we wish it
could be, and by being incapable of controlling this violence upon his return. It is in
particular the threat that the Vietvet’s violence presented at home, rather than abroad,
and its subsequent taming that I explore. In the end, the critique of a culture of violence
and militarism presented by Vietnam was transformed to support the creation of the ultra-violent, paramilitary culture William Gibson describes in *Warrior Dreams*. By the first Gulf War, the association of violence and heroism in American culture was restored, but that violence itself reached a new extreme level as a direct result of the legacy of Vietnam. The iconic Vietvet—always male and usually white—became the star of a culture of ultraviolence defined by action films, comic books and television series in which the Vietvet’s special skills gained in jungle combat are put to work battling threats to mainstream American society.

I begin by examining archival news footage of both the war and the peace movement. Unlike other wars that have been mythologized with little difficulty, the tension between the ideal of heroic war and the tragedy of the grunt, between the soldier hero and the veteran activist, as portrayed on the nightly news is unique to Vietnam. By looking at coverage of the war and of the peace movement from 1968-1973 in context—that is, by taking into account not only the footage from Vietnam but the segments that preceded and followed it—my project identifies the original framing narrative (in Todd Gitlin’s sense of framing as an unspoken contextualization) of the war and the foundations of the dual experience of Americans whose only window to the war was the television screen. The peculiarities of the television newscast, with segments defined by commercial breaks, apparently omniscient anchors, and overwhelming visuals that often escaped their context, bore little resemblance to the heroic narratives that emerged from World War II. These were not newsreels, complete with a musical score and narration emphasizing the drama of war, nor were they films constructed along a valiant plotline in which brave soldiers fought demonized enemies for the greater good of humanity. These newscasts instead changed the pursuit of warfare from a noble endeavor into an everyday job: the battle of US soldiers against the People’s Army of Viet Nam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) seemed, according to these accounts, fairly
boring. At the same time, this static narrative of waiting for action at various firebases was occasionally punctuated with moments of extreme violence, but this violence was repulsive in its brutality, and was not toned down for popular consumption in the ways that the violence of WWII had been. Furthermore, these moments of violence were often left unexplained rather than located in the larger military strategy. As a result, the moral justification that excused this extreme violence was lost, and soldiers came to seem less like liberators and more like savages, in thrall to a violence disconnected from any greater cause.

Systematic study of news coverage of the Vietnam war is an excessively difficult project to undertake with any kind of completeness. Nightly news programming first expanded from a fifteen-minute to a half-hour format in 1963, as John F. Kennedy increased the number of American advisors in Vietnam.\(^2\) Unfortunately, none of the three networks kept records of these broadcasts in any organized fashion.\(^3\) The Pentagon made kinescope recordings of most news stories that reflected on Administration policy throughout the 1960s, but these records are incomplete: they do not consist of entire programs, but only those segments Pentagon analysts considered important. They are also housed in the National Archives and are not accessible by the public. In 1968, Vanderbilt University began the project of filming and archiving news programs from all three networks. These recordings are now housed in the Television News Archive, and are invaluable for any study of newscasts of the time, but unfortunately do not cover the first five years of the war, and in particular do not cover the period of the 1968 Tet Offensive. As a result, most analysis of news coverage of Vietnam is almost entirely limited to the period after August 5, 1968. Some studies

\(^2\) And the same year as his assassination, as well as that of Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of South Vietnam.
\(^3\) CBS does have some film archives, but they are not open to the public, are not organized for research purposes, and are apparently predominantly intended for use as stock film.
analyze what remains of news footage of the time, the most comprehensive of which is Daniel C. Hallin’s *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, but all of these are hampered by a lack of material. Still, the kinescope recordings and statistical analysis suggest news coverage was generally consistent before Tet, and arguments based on what records are available can generally be expanded to include those that are not. I draw my conclusions in this chapter from research conducted at the Television News Archive as well as material described in Hallin and in Edward Jay Epstein’s various studies of news broadcasts.

The depiction of Vietnam on television news drastically impacted how veterans were portrayed in popular culture. The first Vietvet hero in film, Billy Jack of his eponymous 1971 film, reflects the ambivalent nature of the antiwar Vietvet through his contrasting violence and commitment to social change. Billy is a warrior of the counterculture, adhering to an ideology of pacifism, but he defends this ideology through a violence that spirals out of control. Despite his attempts to protect the idealistic utopia created by his girlfriend Jean through non-violent means, sometimes he just goes berserk, and after killing two people Billy finally surrenders to police. Still, the film presents Billy Jack’s violence as heroic because although it is uncontrolled it stems from Billy’s commitment to the greater good: Billy only ever attacks people who deserve it, and his undeniable rage is explained within the context of the film as an understandable reaction to a history of injustice. Billy still conforms to the ideal of the heroic warrior who learned violence through war but who then channels that violence to protect society even as his savagery is in direct conflict with the established mores of that society, and the film ends with Billy’s restraining his violence in order to continue his fight though more legal, peaceful means.

In contrast, Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974) displays the Vietvet removed from any higher purpose. Ray Hicks is as violent, and as skilled, as Billy Jack; he too has
gained a certain wisdom from his experiences as a soldier. However, rather than channel that wisdom to protect his society, he turns his uncontrollable violence directly on that society. Hicks does not only bring his new skills home from Vietnam, he brings the war itself, turning New Mexico into a battlefield and killing his mentor in the process. He is the epitome of the psychotic Vietvet stereotype that became the norm in the early 1970s: the soldier whose experience of warfare has turned him not into a hero but a crazed, uncontrollable killer. The impression of innocent boys turned into heartless, unprincipled murderers is standardized through the narrative illustrated by *Dog Soldiers*, and the ideal of the heroic soldier is undermined through the suddenly inexplicable and extreme nature of his violence.

My second chapter focuses on how the creation of the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) registered and fostered a change in the depiction of the Vietvet in the post-war period. I follow the evolution, beginning in the early 1970s, of Robert Lifton and Chaim Shatan’s original concept of Post-Vietnam Syndrome into the more universal and less political PTSD as codified in 1980 by the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and the corresponding change in the characterization of veterans from threatening to victimized: Ray Hicks, the psychotic agent of destruction, becomes the still psychotic but also sympathetic John Rambo of *First Blood*, and the blasted and despairing landscape of *Dog Soldiers* becomes the psychedelic, seductive topography of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*. Rambo is just as violent as Hicks was, and still is not channeling that violence to serve the community, but his extreme menace is explained through his traumatic experiences: Rambo is suffering, and his violence is a form of acting out. While Rambo is still a threat, as his destruction of the ironically named town of Hope more than demonstrates, his redefinition as a victim removes his responsibility for his actions. If Rambo did kill
babies in Vietnam, it was not his fault, and like Hawkeye he was probably more damaged by the experience than those babies’ mothers.

However, removing the Vietvet’s responsibility for his violence also takes away his agency in directing that violence, and the redefinition of the veteran as a victim leaves no space for a Billy Jack, whose violence is a reaction to injustice. Once the Vietvet became a victim, any protests he might make were defined as acting out, and veterans who spoke out against either the Vietnam War or US government policies more generally were recast as literally insane. At the same time, what was originally defined as the sickness of individuals infected the US at large, as American culture itself came to be diagnosed with (no longer post) Vietnam Syndrome. Just as the figure of the veteran metamorphosized from a symbol of uncontrolled violence into one of weakness and suffering, a victim of war rather than an active participant, the nation too seemed castrated—a metaphorical wound that did not heal until the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

In fact, seeing the broken characters of *The Deer Hunter* was what first compelled Jan Scruggs, the organizer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, to begin his campaign for a national memorial to this unpopular war. Chapter three moves into a discussion of the controversy surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial itself. Here I discuss the editorial war waged from 1979 to 1982 over the need for a memorial, its placement, and its design, a war that disappeared both from the newspapers and from the public memory upon the dedication of the Wall. Through an analysis of newspaper accounts and *To Heal a Nation*, Scruggs’ account of his mission to see this memorial built, I outline how its construction engendered a new narrative of Vietnam, fostering a rhetoric of healing and forgiveness that allowed American society both to believe that it had learned from its mistakes and to redefine exactly what mistakes were made in the first place. The framing of the war as a two-fronted battle of the grunts on the ground versus
the Washington establishment on the one hand and the anti-war movement on the other is created through the debate over the Wall, as any other depiction of Vietnam became increasingly unimaginable. In essence, the successful completion of the VVM works as a rewriting of history, allowing for a home-front victory that obscures the actual ending of the war and provides American culture with a narrative of success in “Vietnam.”

The journey of Sam Hughes, the protagonist of In Country, from civilian to veteran follows this transposition of the war from Vietnam to America, and her search for an authentic Vietnam experience eventually provides her the secret knowledge gained in combat. However, this knowledge is scarring, and Sam eventually comes down with her own case of PTSD. Like her uncle Emmett, the Vietvet who has been victimized by both the government and the antiwar movement, Sam must make a pilgrimage to the Wall in order to find some kind of healing, but while Sam finds peace by seeing herself in the Wall and in the place of the veteran, the Vietvet Emmett himself remains in a victimized position and so is still unable to regain his heroic status. This narrative of healing and of victory became standardized through the discourse of the memorial, but while civilian Americans had at last won the war at home, the Wall came to reify the Vietvet’s need for acceptance and forgiveness and so left him in a posture of weakness.

However, once the Memorial created a space for a new victory at home, the narrative of the prisoner-of-war allowed for victory abroad and reinstilled the Vietvet with heroism through a reevaluation of the nature of victimization. The fourth chapter, “Do We Get to Win This Time?” begins with a discussion of the forgotten history of Korean War POWs. These POWs were disavowed at the time because their capitulation to torture came to symbolize a larger weakness within American society; these men had not behaved as heroic soldiers were supposed to behave, choosing death before dishonor, and their inability to embody this ideal was seen as a sign of the degeneration of young American masculinity. However, once the Wall had defined veterans as
victims to begin with, the cruel history of these Korean War POWs was overlaid on that of POWs in Vietnam, and the Vietvet’s ability to survive itself was made into a virtue. Vietvets were heroes because they had suffered, and their history of trauma became a badge of honor. Furthermore, as H. Bruce Franklin outlines in his study of the creation of the Vietnam War POW/MIA myth, POW rescue narratives attempted to regain the lost glamour of the soldier by reinscribing an unquestionably ethical narrative of rescue in the place of a tale of imperialism: Vietvets were heroic both because they had suffered and because they rescued the suffering.

Following this reframing of the Vietvet as again fighting for a higher cause, POW-themed pulp novels such as Jack Buchanan’s M.I.A. Hunter series and films such as Rambo: First Blood, Part II, inescapable in the mid-1980s, place the war firmly in the past and absolve those who fought it of responsibility for the destruction heaped upon a small Asian nation and for the failure of that destruction to lead to victory; instead, the threatening qualities and reprehensible actions previously associated with Vietvets are transferred to inscrutable Vietnamese Communists and Nazi-esque Soviets. John Rambo is transformed from a victim of PTSD whose violence threatens American society into a survivor of PTSD whose violence is turned towards enemies of the United States, and his brutality is again justified by the unquestionably immoral foe he combats; the villainy of the North Vietnamese reaches absurd heights in Mark Stone’s adventures even as the violence of the Vietvet attains a new level of brutality, and Stone’s heroism is as unquestioned as his inevitable victory. As Susan Jeffords argues, these narratives allow for a redemption of masculinity; I show how they also redefine violence as valor as long as that violence is directed towards less morally ambiguous enemies. However, neither Rambo nor Stone is able to exist happily within American society: their violence is still too extreme to be contained within US borders, and so must be exiled to the battlefields of Indochina.
I conclude my study by tracing the return of this ultraviolence to America, as the threat presented by the Vietnam veteran to American society evolved into the strengths of the action hero. In “The War at Home,” I examine how the war was finally and permanently reinscribed as a coming of age tale, both for the individual soldiers who fought in Southeast Asia and for the nation as a whole. The post-traumatic protagonists of *Lethal Weapon* and the *Punisher* comic title, for example, embody this new portrait of the veteran as a man who has been through hell and who as a result has acquired something approaching super-powers; the ubiquity of this protagonist, who gains his strength from the nightmares he survived and the violence he learned in Vietnam, is evidence of the impact of this new framing of the war. His perennial antagonist, the mercenary who also fought in Vietnam but who has no loyalty to the state, further displaces cultural fears of the soldier, distinguishing between the heroic Vietvet who was first traumatized by and then learned from his wartime berserking and his sadistic counterpart who glories in his violence. By channeling the violence of the veteran into the fight against domestic enemies, the war on crime and the war on drugs become a new version of Vietnam, which can only be fought through that war’s extreme measures. Through the renovation of the history of the Vietnam War, the World War II veteran, whose war experiences made him a man, has become the Supervet, whose war experiences make him more than human, and who, with the belated acceptance of a grateful nation, can become an unambiguous hero, determined to protect hegemonic society from the threat of disorder. Earlier narratives that call into question the association of violence and masculinity disappear along with the experiences of women, minorities, and the Vietnamese themselves, and the nation finally finds its healing in the successful outcome of the first Gulf War in 1991 with President Bush’s exclamation: “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”
2. The War on Television

And what would you do, ma,
if eight of your sons step
out of the TV and begin
killing chickens and burning
hooches in the living room,
stepping on booby traps
and dying in the kitchen,
beating your husband and
taking him and shooting
skag and forgetting in
the bathroom?

would you lock up your daughter?
would you stash the apple pie?
would you change channels?
—Steve Hassett, “And what would you do, ma”

The Vietnam War is today generally considered the first television war,
happening just as television news was expanding to a half-hour format and surpassing
newspapers as the primary source of information for Americans. This temporal
coincidence resulted in a synergistic relationship between the war and the news in which
each promoted and popularized the other. This relationship, however, is not as
straightforward or as simple as it is often depicted in today’s popular media.
According to accepted cultural memory, Vietnam was the last time “war” (generally signifying the horrors of combat) would be brought to the viewer so intimately or so immediately. Furthermore, in this view, continual combat footage from Vietnam impacted public opinion of the war so negatively that continuing the fight became impossible for the American government. As a result of its adherence to this depiction of the impact of news coverage on the war, the American military implemented a drastic system of censorship resulting in the virtual blackout of ground-level combat footage in the first Gulf War. But this view of the relationship between television and Vietnam is based on assumptions contradicted by any study of news footage of the time: the news was not suffused with combat imagery, soldiers were not portrayed as rabid killers, and not all footage showed American servicemen engaged in horrific atrocities perpetrated on helpless Vietnamese women and children.

What news coverage of Vietnam did do was undermine the iconography of the heroic soldier. In the aftermath of World War II, the mythology surrounding the hero-warrior that has pervaded Western culture since at least the time of Homer solidified into a particularly American coming of age tale: every American boy had a duty to fight for his country, and in the process would become a man (if not John Wayne himself). Despite some competing frameworks for masculine maturity, postwar culture particularly emphasized battle as a formative experience, and films featuring lantern-jawed heroes storming the beaches in France or bombing cities in Japan made warfare seem both an adventure and an essential masculine ritual.¹ To be a soldier was to enter into a select club of brave men who understood secrets about the nature of life and death from which those who had never fought were barred. Television news coverage of

¹ See Gail Bederman’s Manliness and Civilization for a comprehensive discussion of the shift from a definition of manliness through discourses of restraint and control to a more modern definition of masculinity through physical strength and violence.
Vietnam refuted that mythology with every frame, as soldiering was depicted as both mundane and cruel. The nightly news forced a reconsideration of that image of the hero-warrior, not through any political bias but simply through the interaction of the media itself with its subject; because of the size of the television screen and its common location in the living room, because of the single-camera format of the time, because of the delay between shooting and broadcast that forced the decontextualization of stories, news coverage of the “living-room war” shattered the icon of the soldier, leaving in its place the violent, unstable Vietvet.

**Figure 1:** The dead at Antietam, photo by Alexander Gardner. The sprawled corpses emphasize the horror, rather than the glamour, of war.

Film images of wars before Vietnam were not always heroic or focused on the valor of fighting men. In fact, the first American conflict after the invention of the camera produced a vision of war that was far from idealized. In “From Realism to Virtual Reality: Images of America’s Wars,” H. Bruce Franklin describes how
photographs that came out of the Civil War differed from the heroic paintings of previous wars: “[...]he collodion wet-plate process, which demanded long exposures, forced them [photographers] to focus on scenes of stillness rather than action. Among all human subjects, those who stayed most perfectly still for the camera were the dead. Hence Civil War photography, dominated by images of death, inaugurated a grim, profoundly antiromantic realism” (26). Panoramic visions of the aftermath of battle depicting unnaturally sprawled bodies scattered across grey fields were the norm for the Civil War and helped to suggest that the conflict was neither a heroic adventure nor an epic quest, but rather a tragedy. World War I continued this depiction, with an emphasis on life in the trenches featuring dysentery and fear.

World War II received very different treatment in the visual media. The first war to be captured on moving film, its visual technologies alone allowed action to return to the representation of warfare and thus replaced the fear of death with the possibility of adventure and the promise of heroism. Instead of concentrating on still tableaux, the technology of motion picture cameras gravitated toward the drama of combat. The most popular contemporaneous depictions of the war were found in newsreels and government-produced documentaries, nothing like the still images of the first half of the twentieth century. Movie audiences watched as US planes won the battle of Midway, as Patton and Montgomery’s tanks caught the Axis army in North Africa in a pincer, as soldiers stormed the beach at Normandy. The very movement in these films led them to appear more exciting, more adventurous, than the still photographs that had predominantly illustrated the Civil War and World War I. Furthermore, these images were usually paired with voiceovers narrating the action and in the process emphasizing the bravery of our fighting boys on the front lines. This narration was uniformly positive, even when called upon to mourn the heroic dead. Along with the voiceovers, these films were set to a rousing orchestral score, which itself would suggest that warfare
was a noble, epic, heroic pursuit even without the narrative accompaniment. Seeing these newsreels and documentaries on the big screen further produced the impression of an exploit that was larger than life.

These new media determined the later visual and narrative depiction of the war, carrying over both their imagery and their propagandistic frame. Films made in its aftermath typically mimicked the visuals of these documentaries and newsreels to the point of even occasionally using their footage. As Jeanine Basinger notes, newsreel and documentary films conditioned audiences to expect these visuals of war, and further conditioned filmmakers to create these visuals (125). With these visuals came an ideology: WWII films coalesced into a standard storyline where a unit of soldiers may win or may lose but always behaves valiantly. Unlike the narratives of the Civil War and of WWI, the WWII ubertext reinforced the chivalric notion that war was the ultimate in heroic endeavors. As more and more films about this particular war were made, they increasingly became the standard not just for WWII films but for all war movies, and war in general became ennobled by the comparison to our most morally justifiable conflict. By the time the United States sent combat troops to Vietnam, the mythos of warfare as the ultimate testing ground for heroic masculinity had permeated American culture.

The Vietnam War presented an immediate competitor to these war movies, as it allowed for “real” war movies to be broadcast to every home, but these images immediately began to conflict with those of WWII.\(^2\) Even while the war was still being fought, Spiro Agnew and the Nixon administration argued that images from Vietnam were biased and unpatriotic, and charged the three networks with turning the American public against the war effort through their coverage of combat. In a sense they were

\(^2\) See John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* (1968) for a particularly jarring attempt to combine the imagery of the two wars.
right: television news coverage of the war did undermine the mythology that allows the public to accept war. But the turn in representation was inherent in the medium rather than the result of a systematic campaign to discredit either the government or the soldiers.

Edward Jay Epstein, in his excellent study of nightly news broadcasts conducted during the early war years, News from Nowhere: Television and the News, chronicles the extent to which television news had permeated American culture by the early 1970s: “The CBS Evening News […] is seen by an estimated 26 million viewers; the NBC Evening News […] reaches some 21 million viewers, and the ABC Evening News […] some 10.5 million viewers” (4). This works out to about a quarter of the population at the time (slightly over 200,000,000 in 1970). And far from being biased against the war, the networks generally rehearsed the same ideology that informed the WWII combat film. According to Daniel C. Hallin’s essential analysis of the media and Vietnam:

Television reporting of Vietnam […] was structured by a set of assumptions about the value of war—not so much as a political instrument, but as an arena of human action, of individual and national self-expression—and by images and a language for talking about it. This understanding of war was formed primarily in World War II, and later, no doubt, etched into the national consciousness by the popular culture about war that developed simultaneously with the political ideology of the East-West conflict: the films of John Wayne and Audie Murphy, for example […]. (142)

Certainly before the Tet Offensive of 1968, and to a certain degree afterwards, network news coverage viewed Vietnam both through Cold-War-colored glasses and through the paradigm of the boys’ own adventure. War was not about conflict between nations: it was about the hero’s journey from boyhood to manhood in which Communism was the dragon that must be slain. The news had no liberal bias in the sixties, whatever the
Nixon administration may have claimed, and the American people were not intentionally misled.

In another contradiction to the revision of Vietnam history, most war stories of the time did not consist of combat coverage. Statistics vary depending on how “combat” is defined, but there is no doubt that, despite the stereotype, the violence of battle was not a nightly experience for news audiences at any point during the war.

Certainly correspondents sought out combat footage, and such footage was the most prized by the networks themselves for its drama, but the very nature of television journalism made such footage difficult to come by: a reporter had to be on the spot when fighting broke out, and given the unpredictable nature of fighting in guerrilla warfare, much more commonly a reporter arrived after the fighting had ended.

Furthermore, the networks themselves tried to avoid airing particularly explicit combat images for fear that dinnertime viewers would switch off overly graphic programs (Epstein News from Nowhere 178). The networks did keep track of the “body count,” or the total dead, missing, and wounded, but these accounts were weekly, not nightly, and were broadcast without accompanying images. Instead, anchormen usually read the body-count numbers while those numbers were displayed on a screen behind them.

Most Vietnam coverage consisted of talking heads: anchormen reading stories or administration spokesmen making statements, rather than soldiers fighting and dying in rice paddies.

Nonetheless, the impact of those rare images at least partly explains why news footage of combat looms so large in the cultural memory of Vietnam. Oscar Patterson III,

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3 According to James Landers: “An examination of all news reports on the war broadcast by ABC, CBS, and NBC from summer 1965 through summer 1970 determined that only 3 percent of all film segments from Vietnam showed ‘heavy battle,’ defined as scenes with gunfire, incoming artillery or mortar rounds, and dead or wounded combatants visible [...]. A random sample of news programs from August 1968 through August 1973 also found few graphic scenes, ranging from 2.9 percent to 4.2 percent of all Vietnam segments shown” (89-90). Hallin reaches a different conclusion, finding that 22% of coverage showed combat, but defines combat more broadly (129). Still, according to either statistic, scenes of gruesome violence were hardly nightly fare on any network.
in a series of studies of various news media during the war, comes to the conclusion that “a form of selective perception (and more importantly selective retention) on the part of the general public of certain highly dramatic events has led to the projection of those events as characteristic of television coverage of the Vietnam war to a far greater extent than was actually true” (403). However, even if combat footage had more of an impact on the television news audience than its airtime would suggest, the nature of that impact is still up for debate. As Robert Hamilton argues: “[…] I do not think that images are self-evidently anti- or pro-war. It does not follow that by showing the ‘horror’ of war, the image is necessarily anti-war. It is dependent on the context in which it is used” (140). Images of combat themselves may have been shocking, but how their audiences interpreted them stems less from their content than their context. Todd Gitlin points out that all media, in particular news media, are organized by what he terms “frames,” systems of representation that act as a kind of shorthand: “Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (7, emphasis removed). For instance, footage of a child playing in a stream has a very different resonance when framed by a segment about summer camps than a segment on pollution. Over time, certain images increasingly became associated with the same frames, which come to stand for an entire unspoken narrative. Before Tet, and to some extent after, the frame for Vietnam War coverage was predominantly a Cold War one, which emphasized the power of US technology and the nefariousness of the Communist enemy, and which slotted combat footage of Vietnam into the heroic narrative told by the WWII combat film. Combat footage itself did not automatically imply that the war in Vietnam was wrong, and in general the networks made no efforts to frame it that way.
Still, although the frame for this combat footage was the same as that of the newsreels of WWII, which aggrandized war, the medium itself did the opposite, exploding the mystique necessary to any depiction of battle as the most valiant of all coming of age rituals. Michael Arlen, a writer for the New Yorker, coined the term “living-room war” to describe Vietnam because of the impression of families gathered nightly around the television, watching coverage of the war in the comfort of their homes.

Common wisdom then and now is that this invasion of warfare into the domestic space unsettled that space, undermining the perception of the home and family as safe, but Arlen himself suggests differently:

[…] I can’t say I completely agree with people who think that when battle scenes are brought into the living room the hazards of war are necessarily made “real” to the civilian audience. It seems to me that by the same process they are also made less “real”—diminished, in part, by the physical size of the television screen, which, for all the industry’s advances, still shows one a picture of men three inches tall shooting at other men three inches tall, and trivialized, or at least tamed, by the enveloping cozy alarums of the household. (8)

While newsreels made the practice of warfare seem larger than life simply because of the size of the big screen, television domesticated warfare, making battle seem small in both size and scope. On-the-spot reports, made possible by new, lighter-weight sound cameras, transformed soldiers from mythic beings whose every action was enhanced both by a grandiose score and a god-like narrator into simple men-on-the-street. These soldiers didn’t look like heroes: they looked like 19-year-old kids describing the logistics of their first job; their lives were not something out of a movie, they were the same as our lives—just lived in Vietnam. The grandeur imported by the newsreel was utterly lost in the ordinariness of the television interview.
Figure 2: Interviewing ordinary GIs at Con Thien: these soldiers appear young, innocent, and comfortable, and not at all wise or battle-hardened (CBS News with Walter Cronkite).

The presence of the correspondent as the audience’s surrogate further deflated the mystique of warfare. Whereas newsreels employed an omniscient voiceover to tell their stories, news correspondents were both individuals and stand-ins for a non-combatant audience. Even the impression of infallibility and objectivity cultivated by television reporters tended to fade as the reality of conditions in Vietnam underlined their humanity. Arlen provides a description of how combat footage allowed the audience to associate itself with correspondents:
Figure 3: Morley Safer as our surrogate, conducting an informal interview far from the safety of the studio (CBS News with Walter Cronkite).

[…]nd I switch back to CBS, and there... and there is Morley Safer, CBS’s man in Vietnam, standing in front of a thicket of trees, soldiers moving all around him, the camera taking his picture jiggling slightly, Safer not standing tall and staring purposefully into the camera, the way he’s supposed to, but instead with his hand on his hip, out of breath, telling us about an action that some American troops have just been engaged in, a smallish encounter, two or three men killed, nothing extraordinary, but Morley Safer is out of breath, he is not reading from a little notebook, he has not written anything down, he is speaking with pauses, changes of direction in mid-sentence, occasional gaps between words, he is
rubbing his face and moving his microphone about as if he’d just as soon not have to hold it, and pausing again, and going on, doing just fine. (22-3)

Not only are soldiers just like us, Morley Safer is just like us too; our association with him fosters the sensation that we, too, have experienced life in Vietnam without having to leave the comfort of our living room. By extension, this ersatz experience encourages the notion that soldiering is as easy as gathering to watch the nightly news. The taint of common domesticity is attached to the job of soldiering, making the idea that war was the ultimate in masculine pursuits, entirely outside everyday experience, impossible to maintain. Bringing the war home may have made home seem more dangerous, but it also made war seem more less exciting.

In addition, Vietnam stories themselves tended to remove the exoticism of war through an emphasis on the routine. Vietnam was certainly the first war where anything approaching daily coverage was possible, but there were still great technological limitations on what could be broadcast when. Satellite technology allowed footage shot in Vietnam to be transmitted to the networks in New York with minimal delay, but the costs of satellite transmission were very high, and the networks avoided using satellites for anything but the most important breaking news. Instead, film was shot in Vietnam and then shipped by plane to New York, resulting in automatic delays of some days. Epstein provides an idea of how rarely news coverage in general was timely by today’s standards:

A four-month analysis of the logs of the NBC Evening News showed that only 47 percent of the news film depicted events on the day they occurred, while 36 percent of the news film was more than two days old, and 12 percent was more than a week old. None of the news stories during that period were live, and on

4 $5,000 for a five-minute transmission, as opposed to $20 or $30 to ship film by plane, according to Epstein.
some days as much as 70 percent of the filmed news was more than a day old. A similar proportion of news film in the CBS and ABC Evening News was also delayed; only 50 percent on CBS and 46 percent on ABC depicted events on the day they occurred. (News from Nowhere 15)

The number of stories aired on the same day they were shot only decreases in reference to Vietnam. As a result, journalists were encouraged to avoid stories that would be “dated,” that is, that were tied to a specific moment in time, both to avoid seeming to air old news and to provide stories that could be used to illustrate future events. Most stories avoided dating by focusing on the routine: on the technologies of war, such as stories about helicopters, missiles, or planes; on the living conditions of the troops; or on military actions that could be separated from their greater strategic importance. Clips following bomber pilots, for instance, focused on the repetitiveness of their missions: wake up, fly over North Vietnam, drop bombs, back at the base/carrier for dinner; clips following helicopter pilots followed the same narrative path, replacing dropping bombs with rescuing wounded.

Focusing on the everyday rather than the exceptional certainly solved the networks’ timeliness problem, but had another unexpected effect: doing so made war itself seem routine. The emphasis on daily repetition turned warfare from an exploit to simple employment. As Hallin notes: “While some television reports would put it ‘above’ moral or political judgment by reference to the Cold War, what was far more common was language that essentially put the war below such judgment by treating it as a sporting event or a day’s work” (145). Soldiers were essentially (and sometimes literally) described as commuters, going to work in the jungle and then returning home to base at night. The photojournalist Tim Page is quoted in Michael Herr’s Dispatches as asking in disbelief how one could take the glamour out of war: news coverage answered his question by moving war into the realm of the mundane. The everyday focus of
television depicted war as a routine job and soldiering as no more glamorous or heroic than commuting from the suburbs in a grey flannel suit. The notion that being a solder allowed one access to hidden knowledge, to a select club of those who had been tested and survived, was destroyed when the entire civilian population was allowed to witness what actually took place during wartime. Not only was that knowledge no longer secret, but television news implied it was banal.

This banality further undermined the claim that the US was winning the Vietnam War. While newsreels functioned as propaganda during WWII by continually emphasizing both the bravery of soldiers and their military gains, the utter dislocation of most Vietnam reports from any sense of their greater military goals had the opposite effect. Warfare was worse than routine, it was pointless: helicopters, jets, long range reconnaissance patrols came and went, but nothing in Vietnam changed. As much as the military and the administration before Tet tried to give the impression of continual gains in the project of building a secure nation in South Vietnam, and as complicit as the networks may have been in this endeavor, the very nature of the news reports viewed by the American public undermined all claims of progress. If America was winning the war in Vietnam, why did the war look so unchanged? The U.S. Army no longer seemed to be a band of heroes marching inexorably to a goal of complete victory, but now had made a daily grind out of a war that seemed both repetitive and never-ending.

As the war continued, and as news coverage progressively stripped the heroism from it, the Vietnam conflict increasingly lost its moral justification. Without the possibility of heroism, of the attainment of some kind of masculine enlightenment, war loses its sanctity as a realm of individual growth. Without the possibility of victory or the impression of progress, war cannot be seen as proof of the nation’s righteousness. In his study of Vietnam films, Julian Smith writes: “Central to the war film is respect for action, for the machines and techniques of war. But Vietnam has made any action mere
busy-work and turned the mechanics of war into monstrosities. Likewise, the moral justifications of a “good” war are missing. In countless World War II films, the enemy was shown destroying civilians and setting up puppet governments—now we were doing it […]” (23). Heroism was stripped from the character of the soldier, but his violence remained.

Figure 4: A soldier sets a roof on fire with his zippo (CBS News with Walter Cronkite).

The first, and one of the most famous, moments of GI violence captured by news cameras occurred in the village of Cam Ne, where a CBS crew filmed US soldiers burning down huts with flamethrowers and, more memorably, zippo lighters. This was not a battle in which soldiers fought valiantly against a determined enemy; this was a bunch of young men, all-American boys really, going about the business of destroying homes
with the same emotional content displayed by a plumber unclogging a sink. The violence of the act of burning down a hamlet was untempered by either the excitement of a threatening enemy or the heroism of risking life and limb for a cause; the lack of interest or emotion shown by the men themselves further pushed their violence outside the pale of acceptable human behavior. These were not men caught in the heat of battle, these were men treating destruction as commonplace employment; at the same time, the boys themselves seem so innocent in their pursuit of destruction that they cannot simply be dismissed as hoodlums. As the soldiers are interviewed in between hut-burnings, they seem cheerful, innocent, and responsible, not crazed or savage: these boys are just doing their job, but that job itself is horrifying.

Even so, the violence at Cam Ne was done to property, not people, and most violence shown in the early years of Vietnam was either directed at an unseen enemy or perpetrated by those enemies. American soldiers in the early years of the war were not generally associated with brutality. The massacre at My Lai, in which US troops of the Americal division slaughtered between 300 and 500 unresisting Vietnamese villagers (the exact number is disputed), was the first moment when accounts of extreme American violence against Vietnamese civilians began to seep into the nation’s consciousness. This savagery of American soldiers, directed at humans, not huts, provided viewers at home a less sanitized, more merciless version of war than that promoted in the WWII film. When Seymour Hersh broke the story of My Lai in 1969 in a St. Louis newspaper, more than a year after it occurred, it was rapidly picked up by national news outlets, leading to a CBS interview of Paul Meadlo, a veteran who had participated in the massacre and

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5 One glaring exception to this rule is the famous incident during the Tet Offensive in which General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the National Police, executed an NLF prisoner by shooting him in the head. The moment was captured both by television cameras and by photographer Eddie Adams, and has since become one of the most famous images of the Vietnam War. However, as Loan was Vietnamese, the image came to stand more for the brutality of the war in general and less for the degeneration into violence of the American soldier specifically.
who freely described the atrocity in great detail. Fred Turner describes the effect of the timing of this interview:

Figure 5: The eerily calm face of Paul Meadlo (CBS News with Walter Cronkite).

On the evening of November 24, many [...] people were sitting in their living rooms, surrounded by friends and family, waiting to watch the Apollo 12 astronauts splash down into the Pacific Ocean. This was supposed to be a moment of American triumph—no other nation could have sent these men to the moon—and millions of Americans had gathered around their televisions to share in the feeling of national power. Yet when they tuned their sets to CBS, they saw not the smiling faces of astronauts, but the awkward, strained visage of Paul Meadlo. (38)
An audience expecting a moment of American glory instead were confronted with an instance of what Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has called the banality of evil. In the interview, Mike Wallace leads Meadlo to describe his actions at My Lai, repeating the phrase “even babies?” to force home the horror of what Meadlo has done, but Meadlo himself seems entirely emotionless, expressing his belief that God has punished him for his actions (Meadlo lost his foot to a mine shortly after the events of My Lai) without demonstrating either the slightest indication of remorse or any particular response to his own suffering. In a quiet voice, Meadlo answers Wallace’s questions, remaining eerily calm even as Wallace seems to compensate for Meadlo’s lack of response by become more and more agitated. Meadlo never raises his voice nor changes his pitch, instead answering Wallace’s questions evenly and matter-of-factly; his expression never changes; he never pauses, or seems to be overcome by any emotion of any kind: he could be discussing mess hall options. Wallace, on the other hand, becomes more and more horrified throughout the interview even as he becomes more frustrated in his attempts to draw out some kind of response from his subject. Meadlo’s lack of affect, particularly in comparison to Wallace’s revulsion (again, “even babies?”), makes him seem almost inhuman: a killing machine, not a valiant soldier.  

After My Lai, soldiers were increasingly depicted in ways that would be anathema to the World War II combat narrative. Stories of soldiers abusing drugs, refusing orders, and generally behaving in an undisciplined manner became increasingly common throughout the early 1970s. In some part this change in depiction resulted from the shifting focus of news coverage of Vietnam following the election of Nixon and his promise of peace in Vietnam; networks increasingly sought out stories that emphasized

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6 Meadlo’s lack of affect today would likely be taken as a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but that diagnosis did not exist at the time and did not become codified for another ten years. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the codification of PTSD.
American withdrawal from Vietnam rather than the fighting still taking place (Epstein Between Fact and Fiction 227). These features naturally dealt with aspects of soldiers’ lives that were removed from combat but which would also make for exciting television. And, as James Landers notes in reference to news magazines, there was increasingly little fighting involving Americans occurring, leaving a vacuum in coverage that was filled by other sensational topics:

Figure 6: Soldiers demonstrate how to smoke marijuana through a shotgun, uniting a disturbing familiarity with violence with the rise in illegal drugs. The alarming nature of the soldier’s willingness to put a shotgun barrel in his mouth is demonstrated more viscerally by the image than by the story itself (CBS News with Walter Cronkite).

Stanley Cloud, the Saigon bureau chief for Time in 1971-1972, attributes newsmagazine articles concerning drug usage, racial discord, and discipline
problems to journalists searching for newsworthy events. “There was no fighting in Vietnam early in 1972, for that matter most of 1971,” Cloud says. “That was why you had all those stories in *Time* especially, and *Newsweek* too, for that matter, about soldiers and drugs, because there were no other stories, at least from the American perspective.” (111)

Even more than newsmagazines, the medium of television thrives on moments of drama. After Tet and after My Lai, as America increasingly pulled out of Vietnam and fighting involving Americans decreased, television news replaced stories of combat with stories that focused on other kinds of conflict. Hallin makes the point that not all of these stories painted US troops in an unflattering light: “The portrayal of American soldiers remained highly sympathetic through the end of the war, but the image of the soldier eager for a fight gave way to that of the reluctant warrior whose battle was mainly to survive” (180). These stories refused the notion that war was heroic: “Never after Tet does one hear a phrase like, ‘They were bloody, but that was what they wanted’” (Hallin 175). News stories from Vietnam were no longer following the script of the WWII combat genre, and soldiering was no longer being portrayed as the most valiant way for a boy to become a man. Warfare was now a job, and a dirty one at that, one that could not only get you killed but, even worse, could make you a monster. As Myrtle Meadlo said about her son: “‘I sent them a good boy and they made him a murderer’” (Hersh). Even in the most sympathetic news stories, soldiers looked less and less like the heroic men of WWII: often bare-chested and mustachioed, wearing the paraphernalia of the anti-war movement, these were obviously not modern versions of Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier in WWII, and the violence that before had been contained.
within a narrative of heroism and patriotic sacrifice began to radiate in more threatening directions.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 7: Violence during the 1968 Democratic National Convention: uniformed police battle innocent American civilians (CBS News with Walter Cronkite).

As the counterculture pervaded the military, combat footage from Vietnam gave way to combat footage from the heartland of America. The news media turned their attention to a different drama: antiwar demonstrations that pitted the activist against the establishment. Again, the very nature of television news forced a displacement of Vietnam combat with the “war at home.” The networks already tended to categorize the growing counterculture under the umbrella topic of Vietnam; as a result of the

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7 Audie Murphy also played himself in his film biography, thus increasing his iconic status as a WWII veteran.
tendency of producers to try to provide some kind of unifying theme between commercial breaks, stories about the counterculture usually fell in the same segment as stories about the war.\(^8\) The resulting habitual back-to-back line-up of Vietnam summary and demonstration coverage reinforced this link between the two topics. Since the vast majority of Vietnam coverage was nothing more than an anchorman reading a description of fighting, following these descriptions with footage of violence at demonstrations further gave the impression that the demonstration footage was actually an illustration of the Vietnam stories.

For example, when Walter Cronkite’s narration of a battle in the Mekong Valley was immediately followed by visuals of police battling protesters, the narration and the visuals became increasingly unified. The technology of the nightly news strengthened this impression: most studio broadcasts used only one camera, instead of switching between camera angles to indicate shifts in topic as modern news broadcasts do. Because the studio visual is a static shot of Cronkite talking, uninterrupted by a cut to another camera or a shift to another anchor (either of which would indicate a narrative break), everything Cronkite says between commercials seems to be part of the same story. Cronkite speaks in his almost hypnotic cadence, rapidly rattling off details with no visual illustration. He gives no obvious indication at the end of the story that he has finished his discussion of Vietnam, instead continuing directly into his discussion of the protests, but this story is graced with better visuals in the form of actual footage of violence between protesters and police. With no forceful break between the stories, these striking visuals end up serving as illustration for both, and suddenly the protest story seems to have become the pictures accompanying the Vietnam story. Paired with the tendency of anchormen to read news briefs in something of a monotone, the lack of

\(^8\) See Gitlin 73.
cuts between cameras made stories blur together; there was no visual or aural indication of the end of a theme. War stories flowed into anti-war stories with no attempt at differentiation, and the war in Vietnam was visually brought home.

Soldiers who had lost their heroism and who increasingly represented uncontrolled, threatening violence, were replaced in one version of this war at home by the police who battered helpless peaceniks. While soldiers in uniform rounded up civilians in Vietnam using excessive force, beating women and old men (even babies), Chicago Mayor Daley’s police force did the same with the peaceful demonstrators outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Audiences watched in horror as television cameras captured days of violence; this violence was made especially threatening when police turned on reporters themselves. The visual depiction of a correspondent, our surrogate, attacked by police creates the impression that we are the ones being attacked; the image of a police baton coming at the camera as if it were swinging towards our own heads cements this impression.\(^9\) When National Guardsmen actually killed unarmed college students during protests at Kent State in May 1970, the suspicion that Americans were at war with the very soldiers who were supposed to be protecting them was only reinforced. The violent soldiers of Vietnam had come home in the form of a faceless, fascist military and police force.

Soldiers, however, did not occupy just one position in the war at home. Not only were they seen as the fascist forces of oppression, they were also seen as the violent counterculture. Soldiers in Vietnam increasingly sported symbols of the counterculture: peace signs and bandannas were mixed with olive drab. Conversely, anti-war protestors increasingly looked more like soldiers as more televised activists were dressed in fatigues. In large part, this fashion crossover stemmed from the growing media

\(^9\) It also did not help the police’s cause that newsmen in general took great umbrage to being attacked, and that their coverage of the event was influenced accordingly.
presence of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Although VVAW never received the widespread media coverage its members sought, and although many of their planned activities were all but ignored by the mainstream news, images of veterans protesting multiplied in news coverage as more antiwar protests were organized by VVAW; however, these veterans did not conform to viewers’ expectations. The armies of protesting veterans who entered the living rooms of America through the nightly news looked more like the hippies whose protests they joined. Gerald Nicosia recalls a group of these veterans gathering for a protest march:

The hundred and fifty men who showed up […] looked like soldiers all right, but not the proud troops they’d been in Vietnam. There were representatives of every branch of the service—Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force—and they all wore their military uniforms, mostly combat fatigues, many sporting an assortment of medals and ribbons in juxtaposition to their VVAW buttons and peace symbols […]. But their hair often flowed in tangles over their shoulders, there were many beards and moustaches, and their clothing had a decidedly ragtag quality—shirts were unbuttoned and hung out at the waist, pants were rumpled and tattered, and there wasn’t a spit-shined boot in the crowd.

(63)

Returning Vietvets (at least, those who increasingly became the focus of television cameras) did not look like the returning Veterans of WWII, wearing crisp uniforms while parading down Broadway; these veterans looked like the very drug-addled hippies who were protesting the war. In fact, these veterans themselves were protesting the war. The line between the clean-cut soldier and the dirty hippie became increasingly blurred, and both soldiers still in Vietnam and veterans at home were increasingly identified with the counterculture with which they were once considered at odds.
As former soldiers blended into the counterculture movement, those veterans of war became a threat to the home front. As Gitlin emphasizes in his history of the anti-war movement, the movement was increasingly depicted as not just deviant but also dangerous by the news media. In part this transformation was accidental. Since TV wisdom held that audiences demand excitement, producers tended to choose stories that had some kind of drama or tension in them; those choices favored coverage of demonstrations focusing on violence, making the entire movement seem prone to such violence. Still, Gitlin argues that the movement was also depicted as dangerous as an unconscious attempt on the part of producers to maintain the bourgeois status quo. As an anti-war stance became more politically acceptable and was held by more members of the elite, Gitlin writes, newscasts distinguished between good anti-war protestors—middle-class college students who had no other attachment to the counterculture—and bad anti-war protestors—dirty hippie communists, who viewed the war as only one part of a larger imperialist project. By depicting increasing numbers of clean-cut members of the antiwar movement, the news media effectively mainstreamed such protestors while marginalizing those protestors who did not look particularly good on television. VVAW members tended to fall into the latter category. As this marginalized counterculture came to seem even more dangerous in contrast with the more acceptable, reasonable branches of the antiwar movement, as the trial of Abbie Hoffman and the Chicago Seven was repeated with minor changes in the trial of Charles Manson and his family, the Vietvets associated with this counterculture came to be identified with random acts of violence.
Figure 8: A VVAW member throws his medal on the White House lawn. His dress, while military, is far from regulation, and his pain and anger are evident on his face as he violently rejects all his medal represents (Winter Soldier).

Not only did VVAW members’ mode of dress tend to link them with more radical elements of the counterculture, their message itself put them beyond the pale of acceptable American society. Wilbur J. Scott points out how VVAW’s tactics themselves undermined the group’s legitimacy in the minds of the American public: “The VVAW strategy of emphasizing atrocity to disparage American military policy in Vietnam—an increasingly favored way to protest the war—aroused more than feelings
about the war itself. It also stirred the sentiment that many Vietnam veterans themselves were worthy of contempt. Even those in sympathy with what VVAW was trying to accomplish sometimes found it difficult to accept and make sense of the stories without despising those who reported them” (The Politics of Readjustment 19).

VVAW’s guerrilla theater actions, where they mimicked the taking of a Vietnamese village in the heartland of America, not only showed Americans the violence happening in Vietnam but also suggested that these Vietvets themselves were uncontrollable and likely to stage armed attacks on their neighbors. The Winter Soldier hearings, in which several Vietvets testified to atrocities they themselves had committed, not only brought home the horrors the US military was committing but proved that these veterans themselves were capable of such horrors. VVAW members, by far the most often broadcast type of Vietnam veteran (with the possible exception of POWs in later years), proved by their very antiwar actions that they were violent, uncontrollable men who could commit the worst kind of atrocities, and the VVAW’s conscious attempts to “bring the war home” to the American people had the unintended effect of making the American people afraid that veterans would literally bring the war home by committing violent acts on the populace. When during the week of protests known as Dewey Canyon III several veterans threw their medals onto the White House lawn in the ultimate rejection of the war and of what that war stood for, it became clear that these Vietvets were a threat not only to individuals, but to American society at large. Now they weren’t just mock-arresting civilians, they were surrounding the White House. Like the rest of the counterculture, these soldiers were revolutionaries, but their military-gained skills and the violence they embodied made them much more dangerous than the hippies whose best offense was a Japanese tiger dance meant to protect them from police batons. Angry, protesting VVAW members were contrasted with less hostile,
more mainstream college students, with the veterans almost always being cast in the role of the violent, dangerous revolutionary rather than the citizen in a free democracy.

By the time the American involvement in Vietnam drew to a close, the media had created two types of Vietvet: the fascist war machine and the desperate revolutionary. These two stereotypes corresponded with the extremes of American political culture: those on the left could fear the fascist while those on the right could fear the revolutionary. What these two diametrically opposed portraits had in common was the notion of uncontrolled violence: regardless of one’s stance on the war, regardless of one’s beliefs about American society in general, the Vietvet was always seen as dangerous.

Once the glamour was removed from the occupation of the soldier, and warfare was no longer seen as righteous, all that remained was the violence inherent to battle. When soldiers returned from Vietnam this violence stuck with them, and as televised veterans increasingly behaved in unexpected ways—protesting the war they had just fought, demanding change from the government in domestic policy—their actions began to seem erratic and unpredictable. Television news only furthered this impression with its tendency to report actions without causes: veterans were obviously angry, but American society was not quite sure why. Smith writes (in something of an oversimplification): “Before Vietnam, America did not feel threatened by her veterans. It was assumed that when boys were sent away to war they would kill and when they came home they would stop” (171). When coverage of the Vietnam War took away the moral justification for the violence of soldiers’ actions it also took away the control over that violence: instead of employing violence in the service of the nation, now soldiers seemed to be violent for no particular reason at all and thus for any reason at all. When the war was brought home to America in the form of civil unrest, that violence came with it.
That uncontrolled, uncontrollable violence is a defining characteristic of the first iconic Vietvet in popular culture: Billy Jack. The first veteran to make it to the big screen, Billy Jack originally appeared in 1967’s *The Born Losers*. The character was created by Tom Laughlin and Delores Taylor, who wanted to make a film starring a Native American hero but who could not convince any studio to back such a radical idea; that is, until Taylor was inspired by news reports of a motorcycle gang terrorizing the California town of Monterey in 1964 to make a movie where Billy Jack battles an evil biker gang. *The Born Losers* has Billy Jack protect a rape victim from the gang’s attempts both to scare her out of testifying against them and to repeat their crime; in the end, Billy shoots the gang’s leader between the eyes in a climactic rescue. The film was an unexpected box office hit, grossing 36 million and engendering the explosion in biker gang films that would last for nearly a decade. The success of *The Born Losers* finally gave Laughlin and Taylor the influence they needed to make the film they’d originally intended: the eponymous *Billy Jack* (1971).
Figure 10: The hippie students of Jean's school (Jean in the black vest in the foreground) are obviously members of the counterculture (Laughlin Billy Jack).

In The Born Losers Billy is depicted as existing on the outskirts of society: he lives in a trailer in the hills, he can’t find work since his skills as an expert horse wrangler are no longer in demand, and he seems to be on the verge of losing everything to rapacious bankers. Still, although Billy is not part of mainstream America, he is not particularly identified with the counterculture either. The voiceover explains: “He had just returned from the war, one of those Green Beret rangers,” but this introduction says nothing about his feelings on that war or his politics more generally (Laughlin The Born Losers). Instead, the biker gang seems to fill that countercultural role, as indicated by their San Francisco style, complete with fringe jackets and Jackie O sunglasses; the gang looks so hip one almost expects them to snap their approval of their leader’s witticisms. These bikers might be violent, but their clothing and speech suggests their association with the political left; Billy, on the other hand, has no particular political affiliation in The Born Losers besides a sort of unspoken populism. Billy Jack changed Billy’s position, pushing him further left and identifying him firmly with the counterculture in the form of the
alternative school directed by his girlfriend Jean. Jean introduces the character at the beginning of the film in a voiceover: “All the townspeople knew about Billy Jack was that he was a half-breed, a war hero who hated the war, turning his back on society by returning to the reservation, where he watched over the Indian, the wild horses, and the kids at my school. No one even knew where he lived. Somewhere way back in the ancient ruins, with an old holy man who was teaching him secret Indian ways and preparing him for the sacred initiation ceremony” (Laughlin Billy Jack).\(^\text{10}\) Billy represents the attempts of the counterculture to return to what was viewed as a more honest, more loving way of life in the form of “secret Indian ways”—he is the Native American who will teach the white man to live in harmony with the planet. When the film moves to Jean’s school, the audience is left with no doubt that we are in the belly of the counterculture here: everyone has long hair, children sing anti-war songs during lunch in the cafeteria, and classes perform psychodramas starring black messiahs whose message is a raised fist. Both through his love for Jean and through his role as the school’s protector and champion, the film firmly establishes Billy’s affinity for the counterculture beyond his exploration of Native American heritage.

However, Jean’s counterculture is not the only counterculture the film gives us. The narrative drive of the film stems from the flight of a pregnant teenage girl, Barbara, from her abusive father who just happens to be a town deputy. The film begins with the sheriff informing his deputy that Barbara has been found in Haight-Ashbury; when Barbara and Deputy Mike are reunited Barbara describes another counterculture as she explains the difficulty of knowing the father of her child: “It means, concerned father, that I was passed around by so many of those phony mahariji types who kept telling me

\(^{10}\text{Laughlin and Taylor’s attempt to create a Native American hero for the silver screen is unfortunately undermined both by the casting of the blond and white Laughlin as Billy and by the continual references in the film to “secret Indian ways”, as opposed to any tribal affiliations; still, the film was groundbreaking for its time.}\)
that love is beautiful and all that bullshit.... In other words, concerned father, I got balled by so many guys I don’t know if the father’s going to be white, Indian, Mexican, or black.” Barbara’s experience in Haight-Ashbury has been of a false counterculture: a society that uses the rhetoric of the counterculture without its meaning, where free love has been turned into abusive sex. Barbara’s obvious anger stems not just from her relationship with her father but also from her disillusionment with this counterculture that promised her a utopia but only exploited her. The threat of this counterculture, which has left Barbara not only pregnant but with hepatitis, not to mention obviously emotionally scarred, is contrasted with the peaceful nature of Jean’s school. Billy Jack finds Barbara unconscious, having been brutally beaten by her father, and takes her to the school to hide her from Deputy Mike. There she does her best to reject the approaches of the students and of Jean, but even this jaded girl is no match for the overwhelming love of this commune. Barbara is finally won over when she announces her pregnancy in a theater class. Far from rejecting her, the students express their joy at her immanent motherhood, even improvising a skit proclaiming Barbara’s child to be the savior of the world. Unlike her San Francisco acquaintances, the members of the school want nothing more from Barbara than her happiness, and she rapidly blooms in that environment. Jean’s school is the utopia Haight-Ashbury only promised, and the contrast between the school and the corrupted counterculture of the city works to reinforce the virtue of Jean’s peaceful way of life.

Unfortunately, this peace is not to last. The townspeople are deeply threatened by the school and its radical ideology of peace, and when several students venture into town on a field trip, passers-by glare at them with an unrelenting hostility that soon erupts into direct conflict. This conflict begins at the town ice cream store. The store owner refuses to serve the students because they are Indian; in a stomach-twisting moment mimicking iconic images from the civil rights movement and sit-ins at
Woolworth lunch counters, the bully Bernard Posner, son of the town’s richest man, pours flower on these Indians to turn them white. For the most part, the students sit silent and stoic through this humiliation—the one girl who attempts to protest physically is easily restrained by Bernard’s hulking henchman aptly-named Dinosaur—and embrace the tactic of non-violence at the heart of Martin Luther King’s, and Jean’s, philosophy. Even this indignity does not inspire them to reject their pacifism, and the visual links between this moment and photographs from the 1963 Jackson sit-in emphasize the school’s virtue through its association with the civil rights movement. By 1971 the civil rights movement, by and large, had been accepted as a virtuous, if not saintly, endeavor; the fact that Jean’s students are so committed to this ideology of non-violence proves that the school itself is an unquestionably laudable cause.

Figure 11: Bernard makes Indian students white (Laughlin Billy Jack).

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11 According to the DVD release bonus material, this incident is directly based on true stories Laughlin and Taylor heard in Taylor’s South Dakota hometown.
Figure 12: Sugar is poured on the heads of protests at a Woolworth's counter in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963.

Still, this is on some level an action movie, and that pacifism is fleeting. Billy Jack intervenes, and in the process shows that although he may be aligned with Jean’s counterculture, he is not truly a part of it; he tells Bernard:

Bernard, I want you to know that I try. When Jean and the kids at the school tell me that I’m supposed to control my violent temper and be passive and non-violent like they are, I try. I really try. But when I see this girl of such a beautiful spirit so degraded, and when I see this boy that I love sprawled out by this big ape here, and this little girl, who is so special to us that we call her God’s little
gift of sunshine, and I think of the number of years she’s going to have to carry in her memory the savagery of this idiotic moment of yours, I just go berserk.

Figure 13: Billy Jack goes berserk (Laughlin *Billy Jack*).

With the word “berserk” Billy Jack shows us the violence of which he is capable, knocking Bernard out and throwing Dinosaur through the store window. After his quiet speech, his violence seems to come out of nowhere, catching not just Bernard and Dinosaur but the viewer entirely off guard. And the violence does not end there: knowing that the townsfolk are gathering to take revenge on him, Billy calmly removes his shoes before going out to meet them, in order to better display his Green Beret foot-fighting skills. Although eventually overcome by sheer numbers, Billy does quite a bit of damage first, making it obvious that he has the skills of warfare to accompany his violence. Billy might be the avenger of the counterculture, but he himself cannot accept the doctrine of peace and love that Jean teaches; his violence is uncontrollable, and no matter how hard he tries, sometimes he just goes berserk. This conflict between Jean’s utopic pacifism and Billy’s uncontrollable violence drives the rest of the film, as Jean continually exhorts Billy to restrain his rage even as his rage is the only effective agent of
change the film presents. Furthermore, Billy’s violence is the only satisfaction the viewer experiences in the face of continual frustrating injustices. Bernard, Deputy Mike, and the rest of the film’s villains only ever receive their just desserts at the end of Billy’s kicks, and each of Billy’s berserking moments works to redress the previous several minutes of the triumph of evils.

Figure 14: Billy Jack’s deadly feet provide an outlet for the viewer’s frustration (Laughlin Billy Jack).

Because this is a movie with a message, the audience is given a rational explanation for Billy’s anger, both in the form of the unconscionable treatment of Native Americans and in the form of the failure of the non-violent counterculture to change American society. As the film continues, tensions between the town and the school escalate to the point where Deputy Mike practically organizes a lynch mob to burn down the school, and is only held off by the sympathetic sheriff; these tensions are most evident in Bernard’s repeated attacks on students that inevitably end in embarrassments at the hands of Billy Jack. Finally Bernard, having nursed his resentment of Billy to a poisonous level, attains his revenge by brutally raping Jean. Jean, however, decides not
to tell Billy of Bernard’s crime because she knows what Billy will do, and she is just that committed to non-violence. Eventually, Billy finds out about the rape, and storms off to kill Bernard. As he walks away, Jean tries to convince him to restrain his violence and that the only way for the school ever to be accepted by the townspeople is through patience and education:

JEAN. Billy, please! We haven’t crossed over that thin line yet but if you kill Bernard you’ll be doing just what they want. Can’t you see that? You just can’t keep making your own laws. There’s gotta be one set of laws fair for everyone, including you.

BILLY JACK. That’s fine, when that set of laws is fairly applied to everyone then I’ll turn the other cheek too.

JEAN. There’s gotta be a better way to change those people.

BILLY JACK. Change those people? You worked with King, didn’t ya?

JEAN. Yes.

BILLY JACK. Where is he?

JEAN. Dead.

BILLY JACK. And where’s Bob and Jack Kennedy?

JEAN. Dead.

BILLY JACK. Not dead—their brains blown out, because your people wouldn’t even put the same controls on their guns as they do on their dogs, their bicycles, their cats and their automobiles.

JEAN. I don’t care about all that! I just don’t want you to go out and commit murder! [Billy stares at her, then walks off.] Please, Billy, please. We’ll go someplace else, someplace where it doesn’t have to be like this.

BILLY JACK. Oh, really? Well, tell me, where is that place? Where is it? In what remote corner of this country, no, of the entire goddamn planet, is there
such a place where men really care about another and really love each other?
Now, you tell me where such a place is and I promise you that I’ll never hurt another human being as long as I live. Just one place! [Jean looks down.] That’s what I thought.
Billy might be violent, and his violence might be condemned by the purported message of the film, but at the same time the audience understands why he is violent: both on the emotional level, where Bernard deserves to be punished, and on the rational level, where non-violence hasn’t changed anything, we are led both to sympathize with and to valorize Billy’s violence. Billy may be berserk, he may be out of control, but he is still a hero.

Figure 15: Billy gives himself up but still exudes strength: he looks ahead, not down, and leads the arresting policemen rather than being dragged along (Laughlin Billy Jack).

And in the end Billy’s heroism is confirmed when he trades his freedom for Jean’s values. Billy kills Bernard and Deputy Mike, but is himself wounded; the film ends in a standoff, Billy hiding in a barn while surrounded by police and the National Guard. After several hours, Jean and the sheriff finally convince Billy to give himself up, but
Billy does not trade his life for nothing. Instead, he has a list of demands: that the school be funded and free from interference, that Jean be its director for the next ten years, and that the state hold a press conference annually to publicize its progress. With those guarantees in place, Billy willingly walks out to his arrest. Through the intervention of Jean and the sheriff, Billy’s violence has been redirected and finally contained. In the end, Billy gains his goals not through violence but by negotiation, and his entry into the criminal justice system suggests that he will continue his fight, not with his fists (or feet, as the case may be) but with a lawyer. When Billy walks out of the barn he is not at all defeated: he has been captured not because he failed but because he chose to be captured. Naturally, as Billy is walked to a police car and then driven away, the schoolchildren who line the road recognize Billy’s moment of power by raising their fists in salute—the same salute taught to them by the black messiah in Barbara’s welcome skit—a symbol of strength, not peace.

Figure 16: Billy's honor guard (Laughlin Billy Jack).

Billy Jack is a veteran whose violence works for good and in the end is channeled into needed societal change, but he is the exception to the rule. Laughlin and Taylor
created their character as part of a greater project to change the world; as a result they provided their veteran with an ideological outlet for his violence. In contrast, the vast majority of films from the early 1970s did not provide their violent Vietvets with reasons for their anger. Instead, their violence was incomprehensible and dangerous. Billy Jack was given a platform from which to profess his beliefs, but the VVAW was not; their demands were not reported in the media, and as a result their actions came to seem more and more incomprehensible. Why were these soldiers throwing their medals on the White House lawn, anyway? The obvious anger displayed by these veterans seemed unreasonable, just an example of the violence warfare had taught them without also showing them how to control that violence. In his essay “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” Rick Berg writes:

The Vietnam veteran has become a transient loser, a marginal, who has toured Hell and returned, not wiser or maturer but as a threat to the American dream. Always a killer, the vet is seen as one who is infected spiritually and mentally—never politically—by the senseless genocide in Vietnam, the continuing murder of women and children. In a war of containment, he has failed and is contaminated. He is now part of the problem, a carrier who must be sterilized […]. (116)

As Vietvets increasingly came to stand for a kind of rabid violence they increasingly became a kind of catch-all villain in popular culture. The image of the fascist soldier reappears in films where crazed vets try to enforce their own order on society, as in 1973’s Dirty Harry sequel Magnum Force. Alternately, the image of the counterculture soldier haunted the biker gang films inaugurated by The Born Losers as vets returned from war in Vietnam only to lead their biker troops in a war on America, as in 1968’s Angels from Hell.
While before the Vietnam War soldiering was seen as a heroic activity, a chance for a boy to prove his bravery in his quest to become a man, by the time the last combat troops left Vietnam in 1973 the image of the hero soldier had been almost entirely smashed. Only Billy Jack, who fought for the counterculture, still could be portrayed as a hero—and after all, he is a hero of the counterculture, and as such is automatically a threat to normative society. The townsfolk of *Billy Jack* see him as a danger, not a savior, because of his specific association with the counterculture. Thus Billy has a cause for which he directs his violence, but that cause itself is somewhat threatening. Moreover, most Vietvets in popular depictions were not so determinedly associated with an ideological project; more commonly, the only attribute left to the post-Vietnam soldier was the threat of violence. Popular culture reinforced this assumption, often placing the Vietvet squarely in the villain’s role. As Smith writes:

[…]. Vietnam has produced a large body of young men who practiced or witnessed at first hand the sanctioned use of violence—not surprisingly, film and television writers and producers have assumed the mass audience will accept the portrayal of veterans as constantly violent, given to handgrenade fraggings in hotel elevators and […] sniping from rooftops. Though the films are rarely
specific about the exact relationship between Vietnam and violent veterans, three
general categories can be dimly perceived: the Vietnamese experience has turned
healthy young men into sick killers; it has pushed latently violent men over the
line or has transformed blatant maniacs into honored representatives of our
culture; most commonly, it has embittered men (be they normal or neurotic) while
teaching them skills that can be put to dangerous use. (155-6)

Billy Jack is only safe if you’re on his side; as far as other Vietvets go, no one is safe. As
this stereotype of the violent Vietvet became common in popular depictions it became
more and more accepted as truth by American society; news stories increasingly detailed
moments of incomprehensible violence from veterans. Being a soldier was no longer an
admirable practice; instead, warfare was a sure way to produce a monster, and these
monsters were direct threats to American society.

Billy Jack may be a warrior for the counterculture, but he is a violent one, prone
to rages—when he throttles Bernard his brutality is disturbing even though Bernard so
richly deserves killing. Even those heroic protagonists who followed in his footsteps
could not escape the taint of this violence; even when Vietvets were not cast as villains,
they were still dangerous. Albert Auster and Leonard Quart describe the trend
inaugurated by Billy Jack in reference to The Born Losers: “In its undeveloped fashion, the
film’s depiction of Jack’s rage and disillusion was the first real hint offered by
Hollywood that all hadn’t gone well in Vietnam and that instead of coming home a hero,
more than likely the veteran was returning alienated, angry, unsettled, and unable to
adjust to post-war society” (44). Billy Jack’s rage against an unjust society is portrayed
as righteous within the logic of his films because these films depict an American culture
that requires drastic, even revolutionary, change in order to survive. Other texts, less
sympathetic to the cause of revolution, dwelled solely on the threatening aspects of that
rage. What for Billy Jack was revolutionary, for other Vietvet heroes was nihilistic.
Perhaps no other fictional text presents this nihilism as clearly as Robert Stone’s novel *Dog Soldiers*. Published in 1974 but set in 1971, the book is a bleak depiction of an America composed of nothing but violence, corruption and drugs. As Robert Solotaroff notes: “In 1971 a majority of Americans professed belief in a personal God, and—to refer to conspicuous absences in the world of *Dog Soldiers*—surely some government employees were free from corruption, insanity, sadism, and drug addiction; surely a fair number of Americans lived loving and productive lives. But given the way Stone selected and structured his characters and locales, we have no hint of their existence” (64). There are no heroic characters, actions, or moments in *Dog Soldiers*; no one is innocent (even Janey, the four-year-old daughter of two of the protagonists, seems to be suffering from PTSD), American society is doomed, and even the very landscape by the end of the novel, set in the salt flats of New Mexico, seems blasted and infernal. Stone presents an America for which there is no hope, and he lays this destruction directly at the feet of the war in Vietnam and the veterans who have brought the violence and chaos of that war back to the US with them.

The novel begins by introducing John Converse, a sometime journalist in Vietnam. Converse, having come to Vietnam for inspiration and having found nothing but absurdity and death, has agreed to smuggle a great deal of heroin to the US; he essentially subcontracts the job to his friend from a stint in the Marines, Ray Hicks. Hicks returns to the US and delivers the heroin to Converse’s wife Marge, only to discover that they have been double-crossed by Converse’s supplier and that they are all now being sought by a group of corrupt government agents led by a man named Antheil. Hicks and Marge flee together, while Converse finds himself captured by Antheil upon his own return to the States. Antheil and his associates, Danskin and Smith, use Converse in their attempts to recapture Hicks, Marge, and the heroin, and Hicks and Marge eventually hide out at the mountain retreat of Hicks’ old roshi, or Zen master,
Dieter. After a climactic battle scene that leaves Danskin, Smith and Dieter dead, Converse and Marge escape with the heroin in a jeep, while Hicks tries to walk out to meet them and dies on the way. The novel ends with the heroin in Antheil’s hands and with Converse and Marge continuing their flight.

For the most part, the point of view of the novel shifts among Converse, Hicks and Marge, giving three very different evaluations of events, but the only one of these three who ever seems to initiate any action is Hicks. Except for agreeing to the drug deal in the first place, Converse does little but react to events as they happen, and except for insisting on trading the heroin for Converse’s life at the end of the novel, Marge is mostly along for the ride. Hicks, on the other hand, is constantly acting, from surprising Danskin and Smith when they first come for Marge, to ejecting a group of squatters from his home, to giving a writer an overdose of heroin as revenge for a slight, to replacing the heroin with sand when Marge goes to exchange it, to initiating the final battle with Antheil’s men with an M-70 grenade launcher. Without him there would be no novel, and both Marge and Converse would likely be dead. Furthermore, the territory of the novel increasingly becomes Hicks’: the text moves from Converse’s world of Saigon journalists and Marge’s job at a pornographic movie theater in San Francisco to Hicks’ domain of violence and chaos to the extent that in the climax of the book Hicks literally turns a mountain in New Mexico into a Vietnamese battle ground. The force of Hicks’ character is such that he brings the entire novel, and by extension American society, into his fever dream of Vietnam.

Of the novel’s characters, Hicks is the only soldier—Converse was once a marine, but no longer, and gained what little fame he has from writing a play about an antiwar Marine, Smith claims to have been in Vietnam, but is lying, and Danskin pursues antiwar protestors for the FBI—and much of his ability to act stems from his veteran status. He is at home with violence in a way that none of the other characters is except for those
who are manifestly criminals, and only Hicks is capable of answering the situation in which he, Marge and Converse find themselves. At the same time, Hicks is the most frightening character in the novel: Antheil, Danskin and Smith are all violent, bad men, but Hicks defeats them all at their own game. In addition, he shares with these three black hats a certain unpredictability in his willingness to resort to violence, a tendency towards overreaction, that makes all four particularly dangerous and upsetting, but Hicks is supposed to be the hero. The reader expects Antheil and his men to be frightening, but when Hicks explodes into unnecessary violence it is much more jarring. He is more than a loose cannon, he is a time bomb. His experiences in Vietnam have turned him into the same kind of agent of violence and destruction as his criminal foes, and in the end he, not Antheil, is responsible for the disintegration of society into chaos, forcing even Antheil to flee the country.

Hicks leaves Vietnam, and is thus able to smuggle Converse’s heroin back to the US, because his tour of duty is up and he has decided not to reenlist. He had planned to be a career soldier, and is in fact finishing his third tour while Converse, who began in the Marines at the same time, has been a private citizen for ten years, but Vietnam has changed his mind. However, his decision to leave the Marines did not come about because he was horrified by the violence of war—in fact, he “had come, during his years as a professional marine, to think of himself as a kind of samurai,” and during combat in Vietnam “his disciplines had served him well” (75)—but because of the clash between the morality of the war and his own personal ideology. Stone writes: “But it was not a war for a man who maintained a spiritual life, and who had taken an Asian wife. Many marines there were stronger against it than he; he declined to speak against war, any war. Yet people in the line who had come to hate the nature of the thing did not hesitate to talk to him about it” (75). Hicks leaves the Marines because he maintains a spiritual life, and although he is not exactly against this specific war, there is something about
Vietnam that conflicts with his principles. The narrative goes on to describe the specific incident that inspired Hicks to refuse to reenlist: after Hicks allowed his troops to attend a Bob Hope performance, his unit was then assigned in retaliation for this small dereliction of duty a dangerous patrol that led to the deaths of most of his men and in which Hicks was himself shot. This “Battle of Bob Hope,” as Hicks calls it, encapsulates both the absurdity and the arbitrary response of military authorities during the Vietnam War. The violence of the war is not what gets to Hicks; the immorality of the war also does not seem to bother him particularly, although his reference to his Japanese wife does indicate a certain awareness of the racism and imperialism at the heart of the conflict. What bothers Hicks is the injustice of military authorities.

The landscape of the Vietnam War itself, on the other hand, does not seem particularly disturbing to Hicks. The violence and chaos of battle is both familiar and acceptable to this American samurai. However, the American landscape has become threatening. He warns Converse as much when Converse drops off the heroin:

“You’d better be careful,” Hicks told him. “It’s gone funny in the states.”

“It can’t be funnier than here.”

“Here everything’s simple,” Hicks said. “It’s funnier there. I don’t know who you’re running with but I bet they got no sense of irony.” (57)

Hicks appreciates the simple world of violence that Vietnam has become to the point of appreciating the irony that attending a USO show can result in death even though that very irony has led him to give up his military career, but America has somehow gone funny: Hicks can no longer understand or exist within a society that is not composed of that ironic violence. When he returns to San Francisco, he recognizes its beauty but fails to appreciate it: “When he came downstairs he saw that the lights above Oakland had come on, and the sky behind them was like deep blue marble. Even skid row smelled of eucalyptus. He was unmoved” (78). Hicks has lost the ability to admire his home, and
even a beautiful evening leaves him cold. He has been elementally changed by his experiences in war and can no longer hold dear the very things for which he was supposedly fighting. To Hicks, on some level, America has become a wasteland.

This is not to argue that Stone presents pockets of America, untainted by Hicks, that are still utopic; there is no space in this novel that is not on some level corrupt. After all, Marge, the closest thing the novel has to a moral center with the possible exception of Dieter, begins the novel selling tickets for porn movies and addicted to the opioid Dilaudid. As Frank Shelton points out: “Stone has created, then, a world in which brutality and illegality are the norm and not the exception and has implicitly linked that condition to the Vietnam War. However, Vietnam has not caused this situation; it simply reveals that violence and corruption are endemic to American life” (79). Still, I would argue with Shelton’s claim that Dog Soldiers does not imply a causal link between the Vietnam War and the depravity of the US. Although this link is not explicitly stated, it is unavoidable when one includes the main bridging factor between Vietnam and the degeneracy of American society: illegal drugs. Nearly every moment in the novel reinforces the notion that drugs have directly caused the US to descend into chaos, and on the most superficial level of the plot the reader is constantly reminded that those drugs come from Vietnam through the MacGuffin of the bags of heroin.

When Hicks and Marge first flee Danskin and Smith with the heroin, they decide to sell the stash. Hicks tracks down his old friend, ironically named Eddie Peace, who is the one person he knows who might be able to buy such a large amount of heroin. When Eddie complains about the level of danger involved in dealing such a quantity of drugs, Hicks responds:

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12 At times it seems that the name of every character in the novel is nothing more than an ironic sobriquet: Eddie Peace, the movie producer who lives a counterculture lifestyle while embracing none of its message; Hicks, the uneducated white trash; Converse, the bohemian who is contrary through sheer perversity; Antheil, the director of hordes of government agents; and on and on.
“There’s a different attitude about scag today,” Hicks said. “With the situation over there, anyone who travels can run it.”

“That’s the fuckin’ war for you,” Eddie said. “It’s stupid.” (143)

Before the war, dealing in heroin was dangerous: the drug was not accepted by American culture, much less by American law enforcement, transporting it to the US was difficult, and distributing it as much so. However, now heroin inspires a “different attitude”: it is almost taken for granted, and dealing in opiates is as commonplace as in marijuana. This new attitude, according to both Hicks and Eddie, comes as a direct result of the war in Vietnam. Vietnam has made heroin both accessible and tolerable.

This accessibility of drugs in America is creating its corruption, in the specific form of destroying the idealistic aspects of its counterculture. The closest thing to a utopic space the novel provides is only as a memory: Dieter’s mountaintop commune, once called Those Who Are. Although now only Dieter and his son Kjell live in the former monastery El Incarnacion del Verbo, at one time it was a thriving community of peaceful hippies who seem to have spent their time fishing and contemplating Dieter’s wisdom. However, when Hicks and Marge reach the commune, its halcyon days are long past. This degeneration is first evident in a vegetable garden Hicks, Marge and Kjell walk past on the way to the monastery:

They walked along the dirt road toward the foot of the mountain, past the car skeletons and the tepee to a patch of soil where rows of blackened vegetable leaf withered in the company of thorny weeds and broom. The patch was enclosed with chicken wire.

“Christ,” Hicks said, “Sally’s garden.”

“Yes, sir,” Kjell said.

“They strung that wire underneath the whole bed,” Hicks told Marge. “To keep the gophers out.”
Marge nodded wearily.

“Most people poison gophers. But it was the time of peace and love and all that lives is holy.” He turned to the boy. “You remember that time?”

“I don’t know,” Kjell said.

“In the end somebody got drunk—I don’t remember who—and came down here with a shotgun and blasted all the gophers they could find.”

“That was a reaction,” Kjell said. “Because it was so much work putting in the chicken wire.” (219-20)

This community was once so pacifistic that rather than poison creatures most people consider vermin its members encased their garden with chicken wire; this description greatly resembles Jean’s school, with its acceptance of and love for all living creatures and commitment to the doctrine of non-violence. But while Jean bans all forms of drugs from her school, Dieter did not, and alcohol intoxication rapidly undermined whatever idealistic pacifism Those Who Are professed. The work involved in creating a utopia paradoxically inspired the very violence the utopia rejected. Now the garden, like the commune itself, is withered and devoid of life. Everyone who once came to Dieter to learn his wisdom and to live without violence has left to return to that violence; as Kjell tells Marge: “‘Some people around here used to say fishing was cruel. Dieter says the people who objected to it most are all murderers now’” (228).

When Marge asks Dieter why his commune failed, he very specifically blames drug use for the end of his experiment. He gives her a parable to explain the end of his utopia:

“Listen,” Dieter announced, “a hippie sermon—When the soul leaves the body it approaches the void and there it is assailed by temptations. In its first temptation it encounters two people fucking—naturally what remains of its prurient interest is aroused. It draws closer and closer until it’s drawn in. It has
been visualizing its own conception. It goes back the way it came and that’s the end of liberation. Well, that’s what happened to us,” Dieter said. “I suppose it was the dope that stopped us. We were drawn in because it was so much fun.”

While when Those Who Are first moved to the mountaintop they “didn’t drink—[they] didn’t do up. [They] washed [their] dishes in the stream and listened to the birds,” that idyllic, sober existence did not last, and once drugs were introduced the entire project fell apart, collapsing into violence and eventually aridity (271). The only hope for American society the novel presents is contained in these paradisal memories of what Those Who Are once were: the counterculture that rejected the imperialist and violent aspects of the US to create a peaceful, accepting society. But the drugs that Vietnam has made so easily available, and which Hicks has literally as well as figuratively brought back home, destroyed this only remnant of promise. Instead, Dieter’s mountain is desolate, and Those Who Are have become the squatters infesting Hicks’ cabin: a dangerous group of drug addicts who have abducted two blond teenagers. As Gregory Stephenson writes:

The millennial expectations of the counterculture—its quest for mystical enlightenment and for a new community founded upon human love—have disintegrated in a very short order, and have left in the wake of their failure a lingering sense of mental and moral malaise [...]. The triumph of human depravity over psychedelic transcendentalism is further underscored by the fate of the two teenage girls at Hicks’s Black Canyon cabin. Seeking the romantic mystery and the expanded consciousness promised by the hip myths, they end up corpses, abused and then murdered. (59-60)
These hippies have moved from shooting gophers to raping and murdering teenagers, and their brutality has only been magnified by their drug use. Vietnam has brought an uncontrollable violence to the US not just through war but through the drugs it provides.

Hicks’ descent into violence has been just as precipitous. He is as closely associated to Those Who Are as Billy Jack was to Jean’s school—in fact, he has their symbol tattooed on his arm—but he was never the commune’s designated samurai; rather, the last time he was there, Kjell reminds him, he was peacefully fishing. But when Hicks returns to El Incarnation del Verbo he brings nothing but drugs and death. Dieter remembers what Hicks once was: “He was beautiful. He was your natural man of Zen. You could have done anything with that guy” (271). Before Vietnam Hicks was peaceful and at one with the universe, but after Vietnam, as Solotaroff makes clear, his willingness to resort to limitless violence is anything but Zen-like. He thrives on brutality, unleashing an unwarranted amount of cruelty on Smith, overdosing Eddie’s writer friend because of Eddie’s insults, and finally marshalling the tools of total war to take on Antheil and his men. Furthermore, this extreme violence is explicitly associated with the war in Vietnam. The novel presents the final confrontation with Antheil through Converse’s eyes: “As they [Converse and Smith] wrestled, Converse heard to his astonishment a sound which he was certain might be heard in Vietnam and nowhere else—a *pwock*, like a steel cork popping from an empty metal drum, the sound of an M-70 grenade launcher firing its cartridge. In a moment a monstrous ball of fire swelled up under the trees down the hill from them” (298). The resulting battle comes straight from the front lines as Hicks attacks the agents with his grenade launcher and a machine gun; the parallels to Vietnam are only more clearly drawn by Dieter’s recreation of war using speakers and a light show appropriated from Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. Converse continues: “The din of battle swelled over them—bazookas, mortars, rockets,
tank guns—it was Dienbienphu, Stalingrad” (299). Hicks has literally brought the Vietnam war home.

Hicks himself has difficulty distinguishing the war in Vietnam from this private drug war in New Mexico. Having cornered Antheil long enough to let Converse and Marge escape, he returns to the monastery to collect the heroin, but during the climb he begins to confuse the war he left with the war he created: “The most difficult part of the climb was the rain. It was light rain, that grew warmer and warmer, jungle rain that closed off the breeze—it took an act of concentration for him to realize that it was the clearest of moonlit nights, that the ground on which he walked was dry as dry bones, as chalk, as dry as his mouth was dry” (309). Hicks is hallucinating, imagining himself in Vietnam when he is really in the US to the point where he even feels a non-existent rain, because to him there is no distinction: he does not recognize that his violence is inappropriate for the home front. Vietnam and America are the same place to Hicks, and he is just as willing to destroy here as he was there. Furthermore, Hicks has made America become Vietnam by unleashing that destructive violence. He has turned what was once a pacifist commune into a war zone. While Billy Jack arguably did the same thing, holding his standoff on the grounds of Jean’s school and thus bringing the National Guard to bear on that utopia, Hicks has no larger cause than a drug deal to justify his violence. He is Billy Jack without the principles.

While Billy Jack is able in the end to restrain his violence to further his cause, Hicks, who has no cause, also has no limit to his destruction. When he reaches the monastery, Dieter tries to convince him to destroy the heroin, pointing to it as the root for all the evil that has beset both his home and the country at large and calling for a

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13 To be fair, Hicks is also under the influence of psychedelic mushrooms at this moment, as well as suffering from extreme blood loss; but the very fact that drugs have aided in the transformation of America to Vietnam for Hicks furthers the point.
new beginning for his utopia, one free from the drugs that undermined Those Who Are, but Hicks is no longer able to hear Dieter’s preaching. He has been too long in Vietnam and can no longer understand the rhetoric of peace and love Dieter employs. Instead, he believes Dieter is trying to steal the heroin from him (the heroin that he never particularly wanted, by the way). As Dieter runs towards the cliff edge where he intends to dispose of the drugs, Hicks thinks: “A little man running against the trees […], I’ve hit that one before,” again bringing Vietnam to America and misidentifying Dieter as a Viet Cong (314). Hicks is now incapable of identifying appropriate targets for his violence, and he shoots and kills Dieter, the only adult character in the novel who is not irredeemably corrupt. Not only has Hicks brought the war home, he is now waging his own war on innocent American citizens. His violence is utterly uncontrollable, and liable to lash out at any one, at any time.

Hicks rapidly realizes that Dieter did not intend to steal the heroin from him, and was in fact trying to save both Hicks and his ideals, but even then he does not express remorse over his actions. Hicks does not come to recognize even that his violence in that instance was uncalled for, much less that it should be rejected in general. Instead, he blames Dieter and irony for his death:

Damn it, if you’re going to make a gesture you have to have some grace, some style, some force. You have to have some Zen. If you act like a drunken thief, and people haven’t seen you in a while, they’re likely to think that’s what you are.

He had certainly fucked his gesture.

“Semper fi,” Hicks said. The pain came up again, he sat on a standing part of the fence in the rain.

Lousy stupid thing. Like the Battle of Bob Hope. Like everything else. (315)
Dieter died not because Hicks’ violence is out of control but because Dieter was somehow not Zen enough: he was not clear enough about his intentions (although he said over and over again that the drugs needed to be destroyed); he was drunk (although Hicks himself has just taken a shot of heroin); and he did not approach Hicks’ level of spirituality (although Hicks is the one who shot Dieter over a possession, and Dieter the one in search of a higher level of existence without drugs). Hicks refuses to admit any responsibility for his error, instead taking refuge in the motto of the Marine Corps: this is no natural man of Zen, this is—as Converse identifies him—a psychopath, whose experience of the absurd irony of Vietnam has left him without any identifiable moral compass. Hicks is ruled by his violence, lashing out at the very man he turned to for help and rejecting the tranquility of the Zen philosophy he claims; he is unable to differentiate between Vietnam and America—his murder of Dieter is the same as the battle of Bob Hope to him. There is no particular logic here, nor does Hicks claim responsibility for Dieter’s death: it’s just a “lousy, stupid thing.” Hicks has become the distillation of Billy Jack’s prototype, Billy without his ethics: the violent Vietvet, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, the incarnation of violence.

Billy Jack, who appears early in the history of representations of Vietvets, is still able to manifest some kind of greater morality through his commitment to Jean’s philosophy; although he himself is not able to embrace her beliefs in non-violence, he is committed to social change, and so his actions can be depicted as heroic. His conflict with the town does not seem thoughtless or overly violent, but justified: his violence, although itself regrettable, is serving a greater purpose. By 1974, however, Billy Jack ceases to be representative of the Vietvet except in terms of his violence and rage. The recoding of the soldier through the medium of television news had stripped him of his cause and emphasized only his violence, ruthlessness, and anger. Ray Hicks, who almost seems willing to destroy the world just because he can, is much more
representative of the portrait of the Vietvet by the mid-1970s: an uncontrollably brutal killer. News coverage had removed the heroism from battle, instead creating the belief that fighting a war created not men but monsters. The next twenty years after the Vietnam war would see a determined effort on the part of both media and government to rehabilitate these monsters and to rechannel, direct and control their violence so that the figure of the hero soldier could again be employed.
3. After the Fall

How tired I am of hearing about that war
which one should struggle
to keep the nightmare of, suffer from rather than forget.
I don’t want to heal, and I’m sick of those who do.
Such things end in license.
—from George Evans, “Revelation in the Mother Lode”

On May 26, 1971, Jon Nordheimer published a front page article titled “From Dakto to Detroit: Death of a Troubled Hero” in the New York Times. The article was on a topic that would have been very familiar to Americans surrounded by media depictions of violent biker-vets bent on mindless destruction: Dwight ‘Skip’ Johnson, a Vietvet, had tried to hold up a grocery store in Detroit and had been killed by the store manager. But Johnson was no ordinary violent Vietvet—he was a war hero, a winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Accordingly, Nordheimer’s article, instead of simply resting on the stereotype of the violent vet to explain Johnson’s action, explores Johnson’s life story, beginning with his childhood in the ghetto, moving through his military history, and dwelling at some length on his experiences after discharge. In the process, Nordheimer’s article indicates the beginning of a sea-change in the perception of Vietnam veterans, as they were transformed from violent threats to American society to victims of that society whose suffering stood in for the pain of Americans at large.

Nordheimer’s article detailing Johnson’s life and death already contains the emphasis on the psychology of the Vietvet that would dominate the rest of the decade. Despite suggesting numerous sociological reasons that the former Medal of Honor winner
would choose to commit suicide by grocery store clerk—race, class, economics—
Nordheimer finally seems to come down firmly in the camp of an individual,
pathological explanation. Set in italics to increase the contrast with the rest of the
article, Nordheimer includes excerpts from Johnson’s army psychologist’s notes
(inadvertently raising questions of doctor-patient privilege in the process); these
quotations lead up to one final, ironic climax:

The subject remembered coming face to face with a Vietnamese with a gun. He
can remember the soldier squeezing the trigger. The gun jammed. The subject has
since engaged in some magical thinking about this episode. He also suffers guilt
over surviving it, and later winning a high honor for the one time in his life when
he lost complete control of himself [Johnson won the Medal of Honor for an
apparent berserking episode]. He asked: “What would happen if I had lost
control of myself in Detroit and behaved like I did in Vietnam?” The prospect of
such an event apparently was deeply disturbing to him. (16)
The conclusion Nordheimer obviously intends his readers to draw is that Johnson’s
decision to hold up a grocery store, to threaten to shoot the manager, in the end to do
nothing more than threaten, and finally to be himself shot to death by said manager, is
this feared incident where Johnson again has lost control of himself. This moment can
somehow be equated to Johnson’s earlier episode of single-handedly attacking and
defeating a superior force of NVA soldiers, and furthermore can be seen as some kind of
repetition of this episode rather than as an unconnected attempted robbery.

In the course of the article, Nordheimer does nod to other possible explanations
of Johnson’s behavior—he points out, for example, that Johnson was desperate for
money, and quotes a lawyer friend of Johnson’s who believes that Johnson was burdened
by a “ghetto mentality” that left him unable to operate in an upper-class world. But by
privileging the accounts of Johnson’s psychologist, Nordheimer closes off any possibility

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for other interpretations of Johnson’s actions, leaving only the explanation that Johnson’s failed hold-up, so unimaginable for an American hero, both stemmed directly from and recreated his Vietnam traumas. Johnson’s death, in this analysis, is not symptomatic of larger economic issues in America, which could leave a Medal of Honor winner in such financial straits he finds himself forced into armed robbery. Nor is this an act of racial militancy, where Johnson is rejecting the label of “‘electronic nigger,’ a robot the army was using to recruit blacks for a war in Asia” (Nordheimer 16). Johnson’s actions are not political statements but are pathological disturbances. Through this shift in cause, the nature of the threat Johnson presents also changes: he is no longer attacking society, he is attacking one individual store clerk, a much less challenging act. Furthermore, a closer examination of Johnson’s psyche provides the understanding that Johnson was really attacking himself; as his mother suggests: “‘Sometimes I wonder if Skip tired of this life and needed someone else to pull the trigger’” (Nordheimer 16).

Here Nordheimer echoes the phobia that had come to dominate the American landscape—that the violence the soldier had wreaked in Vietnam would follow him home—but changes its focus from the fear of the citizen to the psychological suffering of the soldier. He prefigures the trope taken by discussion of the war until the first debates over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; as David James and Rick Berg write: “Common wisdom reports that, as Vietnam disappeared from nightly news after the early 1970s, the war was forgotten. But the books and articles that were published suggest rather that the war had been displaced from the language of politics and geography to that of psychology” (80). By shifting discussion of Vietnam from the political to the personal, the threat presented by angry Vietvets of both the baby-killer and the antiwar activist

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1 After winning his medal, Johnson was transferred to the Army’s recruiting department; he apparently had many problems with the parallels between racism in the US and the imperialistic aspects of nation-building in Vietnam.
varieties was lessened, and political action itself was made into nothing more than a symptom of a psychological disturbance. The psychotic Vietvet became the suffering Vietvet.

For much of the Vietnam War and the period following it, the standard psychological diagnostic tool did not list any disorders that could be caused by combat stress. The first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I)* had appeared in 1952 and had contained a diagnosis for “gross stress reaction” that could have been applied to returning veterans, but when the American Psychiatric Association published the revised *DSM-II* in 1968 this diagnosis was dropped. Military psychologists believed that they had largely solved the problem of shell-shock by treating soldiers rapidly, close to the front, and returning them to their units as soon as possible (Scott "PTSD in DSM-III" 297). Before Vietnam, American society had thus removed what little space ever existed for acknowledging the damage wars might inflict on the minds of those who fight them. The returning Vietvets themselves, however, as well as many therapists who worked with them, rapidly came to the conclusion that this dismissal of combat stress was both premature and ill-advised. Increasing numbers of returning veterans were experiencing significant readjustment problems, and many were struggling with what were considered inappropriate feelings of violence and alienation. Without any recognized diagnostic criteria for these symptoms, these veterans were being labeled with other illnesses, most commonly paranoid schizophrenia, then turned away from the VA; Johnson himself was diagnosed with depression (Nordheimer 16). As Chaim Shatan wrote in an open memo to the psychiatric community: “‘Moral Corruption’ is *not* in the Standard Classified Nomenclature of diseases.... They [veterans] can expect little help from the VA without proof that their affliction is ‘service connected’ and can be diagnosed according to the revised APA classification (*DSM II*)” (qtd. in Nicosia 178).
In an attempt to change the standards of the VA and to convince the government to provide psychological treatment for Vietvets, several members of the psychiatric community joined with activist vets to force the APA and the VA to recognize the legitimacy of these returning soldiers’ complaints. Labeling the veterans’ symptoms “Post-Vietnam Syndrome” (PVS), they began a campaign to publicize the plight of the sick veteran in order both to force the government to provide treatment and to remove the prejudice in the mind of both the government and the American public against the stereotypical violent Vietvet. The first major assault came from Shatan, a psychiatrist who worked with Vietnam veterans in New York. In an op-ed solicited by the New York Times in 1971 as a response to Nordheimer’s article but not published until May of 1972, he outlines six “themes” common to PVS sufferers, all of which stem directly from their combat experiences, and which in the end reads something like an diagnostic manual itself, outlining symptomology as well as the causes of those symptoms. In essence, Shatan’s editorial seems to serve the purpose of explaining the Vietvet to the general public: behavior which previously seemed irrational, unpredictable and threatening loses some of its threat by being interpreted. Vietnam veterans are not dangerously violent, for instance; they are suffering from combat brutalization and impacted guilt (Shatan). Shatan’s editorial is generally considered the moment when Post-Vietnam Syndrome, as an actual psychological disorder, entered the public lexicon; furthermore, the article inspired several therapists working with veterans in different parts of the country to begin to share their experiences, energizing the drive for recognition of veterans’ psychological readjustment difficulties.

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2 For a more in-depth discussion of the inclusion of PTSD in DSM-III, please see Allan Young, The Harmony of Illusions; Wilbur J. Scott, “PTSD in DSM-III: A Case in the Politics of Diagnosis and Disease,” Social Problems 37; Gerald Nicosia, Home To War.

3 The Times seems to have been concerned that Shatan’s editorial would be too controversial, and so delayed its publication.
The next year, Robert J. Lifton, a former Air Force psychiatrist who had been working with veterans’ self-organized rap groups, published *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims Nor Executioners*, which would become the defining text of PVS. In it, he links the development of PVS with the specific nature of Vietnam: this war, he argues, because of its inherent immorality and atmosphere of “absurd evil,” creates an “atrocity-producing situation” in which soldiers commit acts typical of war but without the sense of moral legitimacy usually granted by a war’s cause. He writes: “The men were adrift in an environment not only strange and hostile but offering no honorable encounter, no warrior grandeur” (38). The nature of modern warfare (and guerrilla warfare in particular) obliterates the possibility of chivalric battle, already undermining the notion of heroic action necessary to justify acts of violence. The moral fog surrounding Vietnam, where soldiers were often witness to the dishonesty and hypocrisy of their superiors in the field in addition to appreciating first-hand the questionable nature of the entire nation-building project in a country where the majority of the population opposed the new nation, finished the job of destroying any possibility for ethical justification of a soldier’s duty. In other wars, Lifton argues, soldiers are able to justify actions—murder, in particular—beyond the pale of standard morality by focusing on the greater cause for which they are fighting. In Vietnam, the cause of protecting our Asian ally from Communist aggression was both too distant to have much emotional impact and itself widely contested. In country, the bureaucratic organization of the Vietnam-era military converted a righteous quest into something approaching an assembly-line job with the body count as production quota. Unable to tell himself that his actions had some greater heroic justification, a soldier in Vietnam found himself fighting only for his own survival:

The actuality of death is the test by which prior claims of the war’s nobility or necessity are judged. In Vietnam that test could not be passed. One could make
no inwardly convincing association between death and a higher principle. Individual survival, always the predominant preoccupation in war, became in this war the only purpose or cause one could call forth to justify one’s actions. Nor could the attempt at logical explanation of why one person died and not another, so characteristic of death immersion in general, ward off the sense of total absurdity. Subsequent deaths one witnesses are no more acceptable, though more effectively managed by numbing—but one never really recovers from that first survival. (Lifton 225)

PVS as originally defined by Lifton, Shatan, and others was thus inextricably linked to the Vietnam War, and more, to the unethical nature of the Vietnam War. Vietvets experienced higher rates of adjustment problems because Vietnam was morally wrong, and soldiers who are forced to fight for a cause in which they cannot believe become psychologically damaged. As Jonathan Shay would later argue in Achilles in Vietnam: “I speculate that a soldier’s trust in his own perceptions and cognitions usually recovers spontaneously upon return to civilian life, unless the soldier has also experienced major betrayals by his own leaders” (170, emphasis in original). This definition of PVS is inherently political, as it contains the assumption that the war in Vietnam is morally unjustifiable and that the soldier in Vietnam has been betrayed.

Because this definition of PVS was so specifically associated with Vietnam as opposed to other wars, for it to gain any traction in the cultural consciousness that war had first to be proven to be unique. Lifton, Shatan and Haley’s campaign for recognition of the syndrome went a long way towards producing this impression, but still focused specifically on negative aspects of the war: the atrocities, bureaucracy, and absurdity associated with service in Vietnam formed the basis of their arguments. For those who occupied the other end of the political spectrum, and to whom Vietnam was not on its face an unjust war waged with excessive brutality, these arguments for the Vietnam
War’s extraordinary status were unacceptable. After all, the US had fought guerrilla wars before, notably in the Philippines, World Wars I and II were both brutal, and the publication of *Catch-22* in 1961 had made the absurdity of military bureaucracy common knowledge. Even the political dissent over the war was nothing new to those possessed of long historical memories: the Civil War was barely a century past. But if none of these factors was unique, what argument was there for the particular problems of the returning Vietvet? Why were they adjusting so much more poorly to life at home than veterans of previous wars?⁴

The answer to these questions came with the canonization of a depiction of the Vietnam War that had previously only been suggested: Vietnam as the Psychedelic War, as told by Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977). Michael Herr had been a correspondent for *Esquire* in Vietnam from 1967 to 1969; *Dispatches* collected some previously published pieces with new work to create a kind of memoir of his time in country. This non-fiction memoir rapidly became the standard history of the war despite its stylistic innovations and admittedly limited subject.⁵ In it, Herr presents an experience of war that is far removed from that depicted by television news during the war: this war is neither mundane nor unheroic (although it is certainly brutal), it is an extravaganza of sound and lights, absurd and incomprehensible but beautiful all the same. The glamour that news media had removed from warfare, Herr forcibly restored through his gonzo journalistic depiction of a rock-and-roll war. This war was unique because it embodied the style of the sixties counterculture without its particular political message.

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⁴ To be clear: I am not arguing here that veterans of previous wars seamlessly assimilated into peacetime society; however, at the time just as today there was a dramatic aporia in cultural memory over the difficulties experienced by returning soldiers from the Revolution to Korea. Furthermore, the difficulties experienced by Vietvets were given rather more publicity than their predecessors, due in large part to the changes in national news media and the ubiquity of television.

⁵ In part, some of *Dispatches*’ historical canonization comes from Herr’s employment in Hollywood: he wrote the voice-over narration for *Apocalypse Now* and collaborated on the screenplay for *Full Metal Jacket*, two Vietnam ubertexts that manifest the same style and ideology as *Dispatches*. ©
Even the landscape in Herr’s Vietnam is surreal. The text moves from Saigon, to Hué, to Khe Sanh, and back to Saigon, in the process including isolated moments from both Herr’s experience and that of the soldiers he meets, and in all these locations Vietnam itself seems almost an alien planet, inhospitable to human, and particularly American, life. Herr writes: “Forget the Cong, the trees would kill you, the elephant grass grew up homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence, your whole environment was a bath” (66). Parts of World War II may have been fought in the exotic climes of Asia and Africa, but even these places were nothing like Vietnam, where the plant life itself was dangerous. This environment is utterly incomprehensible, aware and full of hate but without any possibility for understanding. Previous wars were fought against people, but this war is being fought against a place. Even when Herr does recognize the existence of individual humans as enemies they are tied to the landscape in a way that itself seems incomprehensible: “It was late ’67 now, even the most detailed maps didn’t reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind” (3, italics removed). The Vietnamese are themselves part of the landscape, and that landscape is something entirely unknowable by American eyes. This war is unique because it is being fought in Vietnam, and Vietnam is a space so far removed from American civilization it might as well be another planet, where not only the inhabitants but the very vegetation is hostile.

Furthermore, this landscape is haunted in a way unknown to previous wars. Vietnam is otherworldly both in the unnatural sense and in the supernatural sense, and its very unknowable nature puts it into the realm of the threateningly paranormal: “Spooky. Everything up there was spooky, and it would have been that way even if there had been no war. You were there in a place where you didn’t belong, where things were glimpsed for which you would have to pay and where things went un glimpsed for
which you would also have to pay, a place where they didn’t play with the mystery but killed you straight off for trespassing” (95). Vietnam is a mysterious landscape, and the threat it presents to American soldiers is well beyond anything experienced in other wars: it is spooky, eerie, impenetrable. American troops simply do not belong there in a way that was never true of Europe or even of Japan. In addition, this supernatural quality has nothing to do with the war itself: this is not a land that is only temporarily unfriendly, and that one day can be pacified. This is not an Indian country that can eventually be domesticated and stripped of its mystical threat. Vietnam’s hostility is inherent in its nature.

In contrast, the technology of the American war machine is familiarized as Herr rhapsodizes about that most ubiquitous example of Vietnam technology: the helicopter. At times Herr seems to have spent the entire war in helicopters traveling from one LZ to another, and he describes them like a lover:

In the months after I got back the hundreds of helicopters I’d flown in began to draw together until they’d formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder. (9)

Although the majority of American troops in Vietnam did not spend all their time in helicopters and instead were usually stationed on bases, Herr, like most journalists, experienced a mobility denied to soldiers whose movements were dictated by the military; as a result he grants an importance to the helicopter that is somewhat out of
proportion to the average soldier’s experience.\textsuperscript{6} This importance becomes a glorification as he describes his meta-chopper as “the sexiest thing going;” he is almost worshipping at the altar of American technology as he describes this machine of both life and death. His rhetoric in describing both his fear and exhilaration during his many helicopter journeys glamorizes both the machine itself and those lucky enough to use them as transport. A helicopter is suddenly not just a machine, it is the Ferrari of the air with the power of a god. No other war had used these sexiest of machines to anywhere near the extent as Vietnam, and Herr’s repeated celebratory discussions of his trips provides Vietnam with a unique sensation of motion, speed and adventure.

When Herr goes on to describe at several points throughout the memoir the arcing lights of tracer rounds fired both at and from these personified beasts of the air, the war begins to seem less like a war and more like a light show. There are always fire and explosions in Herr’s Vietnam, and as dangerous as they are, they are also beautiful. Herr even describes watching an air bombardment from the roof of his hotel in Saigon with several of his colleagues: “In the early evenings we’d do exactly what correspondents did in those terrible stories that would circulate in 1964 and 1965, we’d stand on the roof of the Caravelle Hotel having drinks and watch the airstrikes across the river, so close that a good telephoto lens would pick up the markings on the planes” (233). As terrified as Herr admits he becomes under fire, particularly in the section detailing the siege of Khe Sanh, he still describes these moments of death from above as fireworks removed from their context, and the reader watches the explosions with the same detachment Herr and his fellow journalists displayed on the roof of the Caravelle. Herr goes so far as to title one section of the book “Illumination Rounds,” and in that

\textsuperscript{6} William Gibson points out in\textit{The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam} that helicopters were essential to the American military’s conception of the war and to the way the war was fought; still, the vast majority of troops in Vietnam were support, rather than combat, troops, and spent most of the war on the ground.
section describes isolated moments as if they themselves had been lit up by flares, briefly illuminated only to return to darkness. The lights from these bombs, these tracer rounds, these flares, are spectacular; between them and the already spooky landscape, the world of Vietnam comes to seem more and more dreamlike and unreal, exposed only in unconnected flashes, removed not just from the norm but from anything that came before.

Herr completes this transition from an everyday war to an out-of-body experience when he includes a soundtrack to Vietnam. His stylized prose itself takes on a kind of rhythm reminiscent of beat poetry, and the language of the grunts he ventriloquizes is both musical and obscure. However, Herr’s music does not stop with language, and he continually references pop songs of the time to create a kind of background noise to his narrative. He describes his first experience of both a rice paddy and Jimi Hendrix as enemy fire surrounds him: "And I was thinking, Oh man, so this is a rice paddy, yes, wow! when I suddenly heard an electric guitar shooting right up in my ear and a mean rapturous black voice singing, coaxing, ‘Now c’mon baby, stop acting so crazy,’ and when I got it all together I turned to see a grinning black corporal hunched over a cassette recorder. ‘Might’s well,’ he said. ‘We ain’ goin’ nowhere till them gunships come’” (181). For Herr, Vietnam is defined by its music, and there is music everywhere he goes, from the parties in Saigon with other journalists to enemy-encircled rice paddies, everything from the Oscar Meyer Wiener jingle to the Rolling Stones. As David James makes clear in his article on the music of the Vietnam War, not until Dispatches was there this strong association of the war and the pop songs of the time, but after Dispatches the two were inseparable (80).

Once Dispatches provided Vietnam with a musical soundtrack the war became less of a campaign and more of an experience. This was no longer a political and martial engagement in Vietnam, it was a psychedelic trip, exciting, engaging, hip, and
utterly impossible to dislocate from its historical moment. The Vietnam War was World War II on LSD. Once the war itself became stylish, it also became attractive in ways that previous representations of the war had denied. Gibson discusses a review of the novel: "Our “first rock-and-roll war,” the reviewer said. It sounded as if he was expecting a series and *Dispatches* was the best way for the spectators to get ready for the show" (The Perfect War 4). Vietnam was a rock-and-roll war, with laser shows and sexy helicopters, as seductive as the counterculture of San Francisco had been. WWII, on the other hand, was an old man’s war, boring and staid and without the sultry music. After *Dispatches*, popular representations of Vietnam were almost required to feature motown, folk and rock until the war itself seemed only an excuse for a concert. Music came to define this war, but not just any music: the music of this specific period of innovation and experimentation, linked with all the attractive elements of the counterculture’s association with sex, drugs and rock and roll, was now inseparable from the war and glamorized the war by association. Vietnam was not like any other war: it was so much sexier than that.

Herr does not just glorify the Vietnam War through his novel; he also lauds the soldiers he meets, focusing in particular on the grunt combat soldier. Unlike many of his colleagues, Herr seeks out grunts to talk to, rather than considering them boring or not worth his time (Herr 217). His love and admiration for the combat soldier runs throughout the novel as he describes them, recounts their stories, and even claims a certain communion with them through the shared experiences of wartime:

All right, yes, it had been a groove being a war correspondent, hanging out with the grunts and getting close to the war, touching it, losing yourself in it and trying yourself against it. I had always wanted that, never mind why, it had just been a thing of mine, the way this movie is a thing of mine, and I’d done it; I was in
many ways brother to these poor, tired grunts, I knew what they knew now, I’d done it and it was really something. (206)

Herr recognizes that there is an inherent difference between being a correspondent and being a soldier, and he is aware that he is a volunteer who can leave at any time while these soldiers are at the mercy of their commanding officers; furthermore, he does not ignore the difference between fighting battles and reporting on them. Even so, he is a brother to these troops because they have all shared the same unique experience of the Vietnam War. Herr’s emphasis therefore is not on what is different between himself and these soldiers but on what is the same: not on violence, killing, or taking orders, but simply on being there, on experiencing the psychedelia of Indochina. Just like these soldiers, Herr has gained the secret knowledge that can only be gained from war: he knows what they know, and although that knowledge would go on to leave him with flashbacks, still gaining it was “a groove.” Moreover, the knowledge Herr and these grunts possess came not just from any war, but from Vietnam, the unique and indescribable rock-and-roll war.

However, whatever psychological scars Herr might possess, he still recognizes that the minds of the soldiers around him have been considerably more twisted. In one particularly graphic scene, a soldier hands him a bag of what appears to be dried fruit but that Herr luckily recognizes is in fact human ears before reaching in for a snack: “When I handed it back he was still grinning, but he looked sadder than a monkey” (34). Herr has had the experience of war but he has not gained the violence, the brutality, of these soldiers. Because he has not been required to shoot people, because he could always retreat to his hotel in Saigon, he has never been caught up in the “atrocity-producing situation” described by Lifton. Even as he considers himself a brother to

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7 Even the term “flashback” for the intruding memories suffered by victims of trauma is linked to the counterculture through its association with the abuse of LSD.
these soldiers who knows what they know, and who can translate their metaphorical, oblique language, he has still not become what they are: animals and instruments of death. He sees their violence and is both attracted and repelled by it. Herr writes: “[T]he young ones were so innocent and violent, so sweet and so brutal, beautiful killers,” encapsulating his ambivalent feelings for these soldiers (Herr 235). And as much love as he may have for these young men, as sympathetic as he may find them, he still appreciates their menace: they are beautiful, but they are still killers.

In fact, it seems, according to Dispatches, that the unique nature of Vietnam is directly responsible for this double-sided nature of the Vietvet. But while PVS activists claimed that the features of the war that cause the syndrome were political, the novel gives the impression that the problem was more one of style. Soldiers coming out of Indochina had psychological scars that were a direct result of having lived through a psychedelic war, of having traveled through this most spooky of landscapes. Experiencing such a surreal happening could only inspire a certain kind of insanity. In the end, Dispatches makes the same argument as Lifton and his colleagues that the war in Vietnam was unlike any other, but not because of its brutality: because of its mise-en-scene. Dispatches is certainly not a pro-Vietnam War text, and Herr’s own disdain for the military bureaucracy of Vietnam is more than apparent, but this memoir is not a direct critique of the war in Indochina or of the US imperialist project more generally. Instead, it is to a large extent a celebration of Herr’s exposure to this particular, unique war. As a result, it tones down the political aspects of the diagnosis of PVS, replacing a direct indictment of US methods in Vietnam with a carnavalesque atmosphere that is as seductive as it is off-putting. Herr does not dismiss these soldiers’ violence, nor does he attempt to justify it, but he restores to it the glamour that television news had destroyed. Thus the diagnosis of PVS became more acceptable as it became less
associated with a political stance and more associated with the personal and psychological aspects of waging a psychedelic war.\footnote{\textcopyright{} Herr also makes it clear that he does not believe that this war is unrepresentable outside of the language of the psychedelic: “Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history” (218). He thus discounts previous media representations of the war in favor of his own stylized one, as only such stylization could expose the true nature of this war.}

Unfortunately for proponents of PVS, the syndrome was not only a problem for American society generally but for members of the APA specifically, and the psychiatric community itself initially rejected this new diagnosis. When in 1974 the APA first began working on a revision of DSM-II, they had no plans to include a discussion of stress-related symptoms to replace the missing acute stress disorder. In large part this reluctance to engage with PVS stemmed from the physiological bias that had come to pervade the APA, as the psychiatric community shifted from a reliance on Freud and therapeutic models to Emil Kraepelin and an emphasis on empirical research (Young 94-102). Psychological disorders were considered to stem from physiological deformities, neural or biochemical, not from life experiences; so PVS couldn’t be a result of warfare, but rather stemmed from having a mind too damaged already to cope with warfare; combat stress stemmed from a preexisting condition. As Gerald Nicosia writes in his somewhat overly celebratory history of the Vietnam veterans’ movement:

The [APA] task force shrinks were also pushing the idea of normal stages of development—such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—and the theory that each time one passed to a new stage there were normal “adjustment reactions.” Thus, in their view, combat was a normal fact of adulthood, and it was to be expected that some veterans might have more difficulty than others in making the transition to war from civilian life, just as some people had more trouble adjusting to parenthood and other adult responsibilities. If your
transition was difficult enough, you then developed an “adjustment disorder.”

(205)

PVS did not line up with this concept of human mental development, as it laid the blame for veterans’ problems squarely on their war experiences and refused the possibility that PVS might instead be a signal of some underlying psychopathology. In fact, this tendency to diagnose Vietvets with developmental and personality disorders was exactly the trend the PVS activists were fighting against. APA leaders, in particular Robert Spitzer, the head of the task force set to revise DSM-II, did not accept the legitimacy of the PVS diagnosis because it contradicted their paradigm for viewing mental disorders.

Furthermore, it is likely the APA felt pressure from the VA and the government at large to ignore the campaign for recognition of PVS. The diagnosis itself is so inherently political, and could (and eventually did) lead to such staggering economic responsibilities for the VA, it would actually be more surprising if there had not been a concerted effort to discount PVS. The activists who were campaigning for PVS to be included in DSM-III also often alienated the entrenched forces they meant to convince through their association with the antiwar movement; as Richard Fuller points out: “[I]n the minds of the traditionalists,... proponents [of the PTSD diagnosis] were part of the most visible and activist symbol of the antiwar movement in the United States: the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, who were ‘probably all crazy before they got into the service in the first place’” (qtd. in Young 113). It was easy to dismiss this disorder which challenged the prevailing model for psychological development when those advocating it themselves could be dismissed as being politically motivated at best and drug-crazed lunatics at worst. In addition, the people whom PVS activists were trying to help were often viewed less than sympathetically by society at large; Vietvets had been successfully stereotyped as dangerous, violent threats to society, making it easy to
be unsympathetic to their plight, and the fact that they had lost their war encouraged the assumption that they were cowards who had not really tried to fight it.

Furthermore, to admit any combat-stress related diagnosis into *DSM-III* would itself be a political move, even discounting the particular politics of PVS and the particular distaste for the Vietnam veteran; as Jack Smith, a VVAW member and director of the National Veterans Resource Project, notes:

> Post-traumatic stress disorder at its basic level is an undermining of the morale, the willingness to fight. If you give it legitimacy, you're basically telling people that it's okay to have questions about war. The military has a vested interest in not recognizing these kinds of psychological difficulties, because it presents all kinds of problems for them in the conduct of wars. It's far easier [for the military] if you say, “Real men don’t get it.” PTSD and the recognition of it is profoundly political. (qtd. in Nicosia 350)

To recognize the damage done by war to the minds of soldiers is to recognize that war is itself inherently damaging, that there is something about war that is not good for us. While this statement is in one sense obvious (as war is usually associated with mass death, never good for the health) it also undermines one of the basic ideological tenets of masculinity in America: that a boy becomes a man by fighting a war. This diagnosis in fact proclaims the opposite—that fighting a war undermines a boy’s ability to become a man and leaves him psychologically stunted rather than whole and enlightened—and in essence renames what previous generations would have called cowardice as a predictable and legitimate reaction. Thus the inclusion of PVS in *DSM-III* was not simply jarring to the contemporary psychological model of most members of the APA, it also disagreed with standard American assumptions about the nature of heroism and of masculinity. These assumptions had been undermined by news coverage of Vietnam but not entirely erased, and when Vietnam was defined as an aberration in contrast to
World War II, the heroic soldier stereotype began to resurface. And although the diagnosis of PVS was described as specific to fighting in Vietnam, and would not apply to a soldier in a less ethically questionable, less surreal war, it still implied that there was something inherently unhealthy about killing people.

Of course, despite all these obstacles, in the end the PVS activists were mostly successful in their campaign, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was included in DSM-III; mostly but not entirely successful, as this compromise diagnosis differs greatly from the original conception of PVS. Following Foucault, Peter Conrad and Joseph W. Schneider point out the constructed nature of psychopathology in their study of the nature of psychiatric diagnoses: “What is considered deviant in a society is a product of a political process of decision making. The behaviors or activities that are deviant in a given society are not self-evident; they are defined by groups with the ability to legitimate and enforce their definitions” (22). PTSD is a case in point of this process of definition, as various elements in PVS were underlined or deemphasized to create a less threatening political statement which eventually would undercut almost all the challenges both to the Vietnam War and to the legitimacy of war in general presented by the original diagnosis. PTSD instead became a tool in the rehistorization of Vietnam that allowed America both to slough off guilt for that conflict and to pursue the same policies that led to it.

Perhaps the most obvious change in emphasis from PVS to PTSD was the shift in focus from atrocity to victimization. As originally conceived, PVS was inextricably linked not just to the witnessing but also to the committing of atrocities in wartime; for example, Sarah Haley’s seminal article, “When the Patient Reports Atrocities,” barely touches on patients at all. Its focus is rather on how therapists must control their natural reactions of revulsion to the confessions of atrocities Vietvets narrate. Haley felt the need to write this article because she had come to believe that the sources of the
psychological disturbances in the Vietvets she was treating were specifically the atrocities they had committed and, more importantly, their reluctance to discuss those atrocities for fear of being judged. Lifton, too, emphasized the link between PVS and the active participation in atrocities, although already in *Home from the War* he depicts soldiers as victims of Vietnam’s atrocity-producing situation, thereby removing some of their agency and thus their responsibility. But the final shift from executioner to victim came as a result of the composition of the working group on stress-related disorders set up by the APA in the process of revising the *DSM*. The head of this working group, Nancy Andraesen, was originally unmoved by the efforts of Haley and Shatan to convince her to include combat as a stressor but eventually changed her mind. As Nicosia tells the story:

> The unbelievable had happened. Andraesen had begun to observe delayed-stress syndrome in the burn victims she was treating, and the symptoms of her burn victims greatly resembled the problems she had been hearing of in Vietnam veterans. Though still not completely won over, a turning point had been reached in her thought, and enough of Andraesen’s “ice” had begun to melt so that she and Sarah actually became friends; in effect, she soon became the Working Group’s secret advocate on the Reactive Disorders Subcommittee. (207)

The diagnosis of PVS gained legitimacy through its similarity to problems suffered by burn victims, by Hiroshima victims, by Holocaust survivors. In effect, for PVS to be accepted required the transformation of Vietvets into victims: for anyone, including the psychiatric community, to welcome these violent outcasts back into civilized society required the belief that their adjustment problems were not their fault and did not stem

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9 Lifton had also worked extensively with Hiroshima survivors, and his work on Vietvets already suggests parallels between the two groups.
from anything they did in Vietnam, but came from what they experienced there—soldiers in Vietnam were victims just as surely as rape survivors.

Unfortunately, there is a problem with the equation of Vietnam veterans and other victims: there is immediately something absurd about the assumption that a rapist would suffer the same psychic pain as his victim, and to put the atrocity-committing soldier in the same space as victims of atrocities forces an erasure of his actions. As Kalí Tal writes in Worlds of Hurt, her analysis of three versions of trauma: “‘Soldier as victim’ representations depend upon the invisibility of the soldiers’ own victims, namely Vietnamese soldiers and civilians” (138). To depict soldiers as victims implies that soldiers were not also aggressors, and while the original diagnosis of PVS left room for the recognition that veterans had both suffered and inflicted suffering on others, in the final definition of PTSD contained in DSM-III that ambivalence has disappeared. The focus has shifted from the guilt suffered by the soldier for actions taken in war to the “traumatic event” itself. The specifics of the event are less important than the fact of the event’s existence, and experiencing, witnessing, and committing an atrocity are all conflated. For a diagnosis of PTSD, it suffices simply to have lived through a psychedelic war.

This shift was necessary to force the recognition of PTSD and to allow veterans to receive VA benefits. In fact, once veterans were successfully redefined as victims, the inclusion of some version of a combat stress disorder in PTSD was virtually guaranteed; as Allan Young writes in his indispensable history of the PTSD diagnosis: “The failure to make a place for PTSD would be equivalent to blaming the victim for his misfortunes—misfortunes inflicted on him by both his government and its enemies. It would mean denying medical care and compensation to men who, in contrast to their more privileged coevals, had been obliged or induced to sacrifice their youths in a dirty and meaningless war” (114). PVS activists gained the moral high ground by emphasizing the suffering of
Vietvets. But by making veterans into victims, PTSD also removed any responsibility they might have had for actions taken in Vietnam. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser sum up the problem in their eponymous article: “To be a victim means never having to say you’re sorry” (104). The crimes committed by American soldiers in Vietnam disappeared, leaving only the suffering of the soldiers behind. Soon after, Vietnam itself disappeared—as “Post-Vietnam Syndrome” lost the proper noun in its name to become PTSD, this new PTSD itself became more and more generalized; or, as Fred Turner puts it in *Echoes of Combat: the Vietnam War in American Memory*: “Where Murray Polner and Robert Lifton had described the symptoms of post-traumatic stress as the inevitable results of having to play both victim and executioner in Vietnam, the psychologists who defined the disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* claimed that it was the result of ‘a psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of usual human experience’” (61-2). The specific absurd evil which led to an atrocity-producing situation has been replaced by a definition that is both significantly more vague and also arguably not applicable to Vietnam veterans—is war so far outside the range of usual human experience, after all? The political critique inherent in PVS evaporates with the loss of specificity, as Vietnam and war more generally are left with no more moral opprobrium than an auto accident or a natural disaster.

Once Vietvets were successfully redefined as sick, and once the responsibility for their actions in Vietnam was removed, veterans began to be portrayed significantly more sympathetically in the media: the biker gang/Vietvet genre disappeared, giving way to the first wave of generally recognized “Vietnam” films: *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Coming Home* (1978), for example. At the same time several novels and memoirs of veterans began to receive significant critical and public attention. The heroes of these new Vietnam tales share the same trait of uncontrollable violence that characterized both Billy Jack and Ray Hicks, but these texts put the reader into a
position to sympathize with the violent vet rather than fear him. When The Deer
Hunter’s Nick puts the gun to his head in his final game of Russian roulette as Saigon
falls around him, the audience understands the violence of the veteran both as a reaction
to the horrible events of the war and as something predominantly directed toward the
veteran himself. Nick is suffering, not threatening.

The most paradigmatic suffering Vietvet is also likely the most well-known: John
Rambo. In his first appearance in 1982’s First Blood, Rambo is not yet the warrior-hero
he would become in later iterations; instead, he is a victim, forced into the role of killing
machine during the war and tormented by his obsolescence in peacetime. The film even
opens by displaying this obsolescence, as Rambo discovers that he is the last of his
squad left alive. When we first see Rambo tramping down an isolated road he seems
tired, not violent. As he approaches the camera, the muted horns of the soundtrack
combine with his faint smile to suggest that this scene will be a triumphant return home
of a brave soldier. That impression is immediately shattered as he is greeted not with
open arms but with hostility by the mother of his war buddy. His friend has died of
cancer from Agent Orange exposure, and Rambo is utterly alone. The conventions of the
soldier’s return are upended, and instead Rambo continues his solitary march but
without an Ithaca at the end. The nondiegetic music shifts to a more somber tone, and
Rambo becomes an object of pity, not fear.

Rambo’s appearance here immediately types him as a particular type of Vietvet.
Jeffrey Walsh calls attention to his dress:

The prelude shots […] linger on Rambo’s patriotic insignia. In appearance he is
far less of a hippie than the description of him suggests in the novel [on which
the film is based]. Although he has longish hair, what matters most is that his
khaki army surplus jacket has the American flag sewn on it. The audience senses
that this portrayal will be more sympathetic than the earlier one—the drifter has become a patriotic vet. (53)

Figure 18: John Rambo enters Hope. His dress and aspect suggest both the soldier and the vagrant, and his isolation is evident from his framing in a long shot on a lonely road (Kotcheff).

Walsh is correct here in noting that while Rambo’s appearance does to some extent suggest the threat of the counter-culture veteran he is obviously not a hippie, but Walsh then dismisses those countercultural markers and so misses what Rambo’s dress most strongly signifies: not patriotism, but vagrancy. By the late 1970s Vietvets were threatening to American society not just because of either their violence or their tendency to join the counter-culture and speak out against mainstream ideology, but also because of their readjustment problems themselves: with their higher levels of unemployment, suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, and (particularly once PTSD was officially recognized) mental illness, these veterans had become a drain on the American economy. In fact, throughout the 1970s activists had made a point of emphasizing the readjustment problems of the Vietvet as an attempt to drum up sympathy for his plight, with the result that, as Eric Dean writes in “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran”, the problems of Vietvets had come to be viewed as a crisis (65). Sheriff Teasle immediately identifies Rambo as a threat to his little town of Hope not
because Rambo looks like a hippie but because Rambo looks like what he is: a Vietvet drifter. Rambo is obviously a veteran, and possibly a patriotic one, as Smith notes, but that doesn’t make him less dangerous; instead, he seems to be typed as a veteran simply to indicate how dangerous he might be. Rambo’s veteran status, as opposed to his vagrancy, does not seem to do much more than suggest his possible violence until that violence has begun to make an appearance.

Of course, this violence does not take long to manifest, as Rambo is no sooner carted off to jail for vagrancy than he has incapacitated half the lawmen of the town. Still, Rambo’s violence seems immediately of a different quality from that of his violent vet forbears. George Dionisopoulos notes:

[T]he filmic image of Vietnam veterans in these [earlier] movies suggests that the returning veteran is a “human frag bomb,” an “all-purpose all-American villain [...].” Interestingly, most of these films never provide any detail concerning the main character’s experiences in Vietnam that served to produce such antisocial

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10 And in a somewhat ironic twist which suggests that the media’s prejudice against Vietvets has not yet been entirely banished, Teasle turns out to be completely right in his snap judgment about Rambo, who is such a threat to the town that by the end he has almost destroyed it.
behavior. Instead, service in Vietnam becomes “a narrative function, a plot device which enables other textual troubles to be explained or elided” […], or, more simply, just a “convenient excuse” that serves “to explain someone’s bizarre behavior.” (87)

Figure 20: ...in an attitude that mimics his binding as a POW (Kotcheff).

By the early 1970s, Vietnam service had become a signifier of violence without actually requiring any detailed explanation of the mechanism whereby that violence was created. Rambo, however, is provided a much more fleshed-out back-story. When he first begins to lose control as he is tortured in the police station basement, the film rapidly cuts in a series of flashbacks to his torture in a POW camp. Each of these flashbacks, both in action and in framing, mirrors the scene in the basement, emphasizing the parallels between Rambo’s past and his present. Rambo becomes sympathetic because we are given an explanation for his violent reaction: what the deputies experience as incomprehensible the viewer understands to be almost conditioned—outside of Rambo’s control and therefore not his fault. By extension, the incomprehensible violence of Vietvets in general is attributed to the aftermath of their wartime experiences.
However, while Billy Jack also had some kind of justification for his violence, Rambo’s reasons are personal, not political. The torture inflicted on Rambo here could have stood on its own as a justification for Rambo’s rage, but by linking that torture to what Rambo survived in Vietnam the audience is forced to understand Rambo’s rebellion as a PTSD symptom rather than a response to police brutality. This is not a protest against injustice, it is a manifestation of a private pathology. Rambo fights back, the narrative shows us, against his own memories—memories of which the
audience, unlike the deputies, is allowed a privileged glimpse. In addition, as the flashbacks become more and more intense, the camera’s point of view shifts from viewing Rambo to inhabiting Rambo, putting the viewer in the position of the tortured soldier. Rambo is not simply violent, nor does his back-story happen off-screen; we are given in the first fifteen minutes of the film a visceral depiction of what made Rambo the way he is; we are then invited vicariously to experience it ourselves. Rambo might be violent, but given his history of torture by the Chinese, his violence seems both explicable and entirely justified. When Rambo defeats his tormentors and escapes the station, the film depicts him as a hero, not a threat to law and order.

Still, although the viewer may sympathize with Rambo, he does not quite empathize with him; Rambo’s violent behavior might be explained by the film, but he is still depicted as something both more and less than an average man. It becomes rapidly apparent in the course of the film that Rambo, besides simply being a violent Vietvet, is in fact a sort of supersoldier—to use Rick Berg’s phrase, Rambo is a V(i)et Cong, a killing machine that has taken the tactics of the enemy beyond what they themselves were able to accomplish. When Rambo’s Green Beret status is first revealed both to the audience and to the sheriff’s posse who have chased him into the forests of the Pacific Northwest, the reaction of the police to the news is somewhat unexpected: not regret for torturing a Medal of Honor winner to the point where he snaps, not even dismay over the bad publicity such actions could bring, but fear of bodily harm. This exchange follows the notification:

DEPUTY MITCH. Green beret. War hero. That’s great. That’s just great.

DEPUTY 1. Why don’t you shut your mouth?

SHERIFF TEASLE. Oh, what the hell’s the matter with you guys? He’s one man! Wounded!

DEPUTY 2. Those green berets, they’re real bad asses.
DEPUTY MITCH. Why don’t you let the state police handle this? (Kotcheff)

At this point the Sheriff has half his department chasing Rambo through the woods; Rambo himself has fallen off a cliff into a tree and been shot in the head. And yet these deputies are afraid to continue their pursuit of one wounded man. They recognize what the film in short order confirms: Rambo, like any Green Beret Medal of Honor winner, is more than just a man, and can incapacitate an entire small town police department twice before breakfast, using only punji sticks and his gigantic knife. He is a guerrilla warfare expert, the fantasy of John Kennedy’s special forces program and the modern version of Daniel Boone or Ethan Edwards.

![Figure 23: Rambo as V(i)et Cong, barely visible as he uses his extraordinary combat knife to carve punji sticks (Kotcheff).](image)

But the film’s praise of Rambo’s skills is not unmitigated. As Michael Paris outlines: “The film condemns the army for creating a killing machine like Rambo but continually places him in situations where the audience are expected to admire his fighting skills” (25). To reverse this formulation: Rambo’s strength makes him worthy of our admiration, but the film constantly undercuts that admiration by indicating both his instability and his menace, and his strength lacks the restraint displayed by other individualistic American heroes. Rambo’s violence may be explained but it still
threatens; in particular, it threatens hegemonic power structures. After calling in the state police and the national guard, Sheriff Teasle is informed by a deputy of the police brutality Rambo experienced; his response sums up the danger Rambo poses:

Doesn’t make one goddamn bit of difference, Dave, and you know it. If one of my deputies... gets out of line with a prisoner then the prisoner comes to me with it, and if I find out it’s like he says, I kick the deputy’s ass! Me! The law! That’s the way it’s gotta be! People start fucking around with the law and all hell breaks loose! Whatever possessed God in heaven to make a man like Rambo?

Rambo embodies the threat of vigilantism, sending the message that if you try to work outside the system your town will be destroyed. The sheriff might be corrupt, might be the kind of sheriff who leaves a decorated war hero to the whims of a sadistic deputy in a basement, but he is still the last line of defense between civilization and barbarism. Undermine the sheriff’s authority, corrupt as it may be, the movie suggests, and you turn America into the anarchy of “Vietnam.” Rambo is no revolutionary like Billy Jack, nor is he a criminal psychopath like Ray Hicks, but his violence still forces him outside the bounds of social order.

Of course, this rhetorical question of Teasle’s is Colonel Trautman’s moment to declare from off-camera: “God didn’t make Rambo. I made him.” Not only is Rambo a threat to authority, he is unnatural to boot. While his experiences in Vietnam may have induced the psychological damage that leaves Rambo’s violence uncontrollable, the American military in the form of Trautman is responsible for making him into the guerrilla Frankenstein’s monster in the first place. Trautman describes his creation to Teasle:

You don’t seem to want to accept the fact that you’re dealing with an expert in guerrilla warfare; with a man who’s the best—with guns, with knives, with his bare hands; a man who’s been trained to ignore pain, ignore weather, to live off
the land, to eat things that would make a billy goat puke. In Vietnam his job was to dispose of enemy personnel. To kill, period. Win by attrition. Well, Rambo was the best.

This description does not line up with the heroic model of the World War II veteran or the American frontier hero; the Vietvet, to take Rambo as a particularly capable example, is not even really a soldier—as Herr revealed, he is a killer. While the beginning of Trautman’s speech emphasizes Rambo’s superheroic abilities and his status as the ultimate warrior, by the end of the speech he has lost that status just as he has lost his moral justification. According to Trautman, according to Teasle, Rambo is nothing but a killing machine who “blew a gasket.” Rambo on one level embodies heroic, militarized masculinity in his exceptional strength and fighting abilities (and Stallone’s physique reinforces this vision of iconic maleness), but he cannot be a role model because he does not act from his own will, but from his training. He may possess the skills that define masculinity but he does not have the ability to control those skills and so is continually forced to relive the Vietnam War. He has gained a secret knowledge from warfare but cannot harness it, and so that knowledge itself is frightening.

Still, the film is less sympathetic to those hunting Rambo than it is to Rambo himself. The threat Rambo apparently presents to America can be summed up in his statement: “There are no friendly civilians.” Rambo has brought the body-count mentality back home with him, and it would seem that no one is safe from his violence. But in fact Rambo does identify friendly civilians, scaring off rather than wounding or killing the teenage hunter he stumbles across in the woods and refusing to kill any of Teasle’s men. Instead, the National Guardsmen who trap Rambo in an abandoned mine show the utter lack of respect for human life Trautman and Teasle attribute to Rambo.
Figure 24: A warped version of Iwo Jima (Kotcheff).

The exchange among the guardsmen when deciding how to approach Rambo’s hideout indicates that these men have none of the discipline of their quarry. They refuse to follow their lieutenant’s orders, even addressing him by his first name rather than by rank; the lieutenant refuses to follow the orders of Teasle to take Rambo alive; and the guardsmen are presented as cowards, who “didn’t come here to get killed,” and who are only able to defeat Rambo (temporarily) with overwhelming firepower. Yet these poorly trained soldiers have even less respect for human life than the man called a “killing machine.” Having destroyed the entrance to the mine and, they believe, Rambo himself, the guardsmen celebrate by taking souvenir pictures, recreating the famous photograph of Iwo Jima and imputing heroism to their actions. They obviously feel no remorse over the death of a medal of honor winner, and their callous celebration of having required an entire squad plus rocket-launcher to defeat one man echoes the depictions of baby-killing Vietvets. These guardsmen stand in for the earlier, fascist veteran, completing the transformation of America into Vietnam while suggesting that the immorality of the soldier in that war stemmed less from events in Vietnam itself than from something in American society that allows men who never served in Vietnam (and possibly avoided the draft by joining the National Guard) to manifest all the psychological brutality of the
stereotypical Vietvet with none of the bravery or skill this film restores to them. These men have not experienced war itself, and so do not have the special, secret knowledge that makes a veteran a hero even as it gives him PTSD.

Figure 25: Rambo as tunnel rat (Kotcheff).

As the guardsmen metamorphose into soldiers in an American Vietnam, Rambo continues his transition into V(i)et Cong, turning the mine into the tunnels used by NLF fighters during the war. Like a good guerrilla, Rambo escapes, leaving no body to be counted and only the presumption of his demise, and immediately continues the war by capturing an enemy vehicle from a National Guardsman. However, Rambo is not simply changed into a Viet Cong, sans parentheses: he goes on to set fire to the town, in a scene that “clearly alludes to the burning and torching of hamlets in Vietnam” (Walsh 53), and which again marks him as following the path of the American soldiers. It seems that Rambo contains the best of both sides, as far as military prowess is concerned: the overwhelming firepower and destructive ability of the Americans combines with the deadly guerrilla tactics of the Vietnamese to produce the perfect soldier. Unfortunately, far from being able to harness the power of this ultimate warrior, Americans can only watch as he destroys Hope virtually unmolested. Rambo is burning down hometown USA, having brought the war home with him in his perfect soldier body. At this point
Rambo again seems to echo earlier portraits of Vietvets, wreaking destruction on America, and had the film ended with Rambo being killed in a blaze of glory, *First Blood* would have simply been a minor variation on the biker-vet films that preceded it. But instead the film allows Rambo the opportunity to explain what has made him so dangerous. In an almost incoherent speech, Rambo breaks down and outlines both for Trautman and for viewers why Vietvets are violent: PTSD.

Critics often focus on Rambo’s protestation to Trautman in this final scene that “somebody wouldn’t let us win,” emphasizing the film’s placing of blame for the loss of the war on the home front and the shift to the stab-in-the-back history of Vietnam, and certainly the film does depict Americans who stayed home as guilty of casting out Vietvets, leaving them to their suffering and hence encouraging their violence. But the film itself, in Rambo’s speech, gives several reasons for his misery: not only his abandonment by the military and by the country at large, both in Vietnam and on his return home, but the loss of his friends, the downgrading of his societal status from elite soldier in Vietnam to drifter veteran in America, and finally and most viscerally, the traumatic event that has caused his PTSD. In an increasingly emotional diatribe, Rambo lays out the ultimate cause of his violence:

> We’re in this bar in Saigon, and this kid comes up, this kid carrying a shoe shine box, and he says, uh, “Shine, please? Shine?” I said no, and he kept asking, yeah, and Joey, he said “Yeah,” and I went to get a couple beers, and the box is wired, and they open up the box, fucking blew his body all over the place, and he’s laying there, and he’s fucking screaming, there’s pieces of him all over me, just pieces, like this [rips off bandolier], and I’m trying to pull him off, you know? And it’s my friend that’s all over me! I’ve got blood and everything and

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11 Still, this notion that veterans experienced PTSD in large part because of the poor reception they received upon their return to America is itself part of the popular conception of the disorder.
I’m trying to hold him together, and put him together, his fucking insides keep coming out, and nobody would help! No one would help, he’s saying, “please, I wanna go home, I wanna go home,” he keeps calling my name, “I wanna go home, Johnny, I wanna drive my Chevy,” I tell him, “What, I can’t find your fucking legs! I can’t find your legs!” I can’t get it out of my head. I do this seven years. Every day I have this. Sometimes I wake up and I don’t know where I am. I don’t talk to anybody, sometimes a day, sometimes a week. I can’t put it out of my mind.

It is this memory, not Rambo’s frustration at not being allowed to win or his anger at being abandoned by his country, that finally leaves Rambo sobbing uncontrollably on Trautman’s shoulder. And this memory encapsulates the experience of Vietnam that PTSD emphasizes: Rambo is remembering an atrocity he experienced, not perpetrated; rather than a moment of heroic battle which could conceivably viewed ambivalently, and in which his survivor’s guilt could be mitigated by the notion that his friend died heroically, we have a child with a bomb, reminding us that not only were there no civilians in Vietnam, but that most of the time there were no soldiers to fight, only booby traps. Furthermore, Rambo does not match up with Lifton’s depiction of the PVS sufferer, who might be haunted by what he was forced to do but who is also, through rap groups and political action, able to find some kind of healing. Rambo does not have PVS, he has PTSD, and has lost his agency accordingly. As Albert Auster says of The Manchurian Candidate, the film here links private pathology with public action, and Rambo’s actions, which until this point could conceivably be seen as a legitimate political response to an unjust and corrupt sheriff, can now be entirely dismissed as manifestations of his illness. In the end, Rambo redeems the violent veteran stereotype by showing that he is not responsible for his actions; through the diagnosis of PTSD, the Vietvet has been transformed from a menace to a victim.
Figure 26: Rambo breaks down (Kotcheff).

But viewing soldiers as victims, as the diagnosis of PTSD requires, implies a loss of masculinity for this profession traditionally defined as the ultimate apogee of manhood. We may be able to forgive Rambo for his outbreak of violence once we define him as sick, but that illness cannot yet be separated from his warrior status, and by implication his warrior status is what makes him sick. The spectacle of the overly masculine Stallone bawling while Richard Crenna awkwardly pats him on the back both infantilizes and feminizes. While Billy Jack, in almost the same situation, surrounded by police after having let his Vietnam violence out, identifies the source of that violence in historical, political betrayals of Native Americans and allows himself to be captured instead of killed from a position of power, Rambo simply collapses into Trautman’s arms like a little boy seeking comfort and begging forgiveness. Whatever strength, whatever masculinity Rambo has displayed throughout the rest of the film is entirely undermined by this moment of weakness. Rambo here epitomizes the problem of PTSD for American society: if we can forgive our soldiers and ourselves for our actions in Vietnam only by redrawing ourselves as victims rather than perpetrators, only by showing that we suffered just as much as, if not more than, than the Vietnamese, that
still leaves Americans in the position of victims, and while victims may have no responsibility, they also have no power.

Figure 27: Rambo is led away by police in a moment that mimics the ending of Billy Jack but with an entirely different force: Rambo seems weak and confused, draped in Trautman's jacket, and Trautman, not Rambo, leads the way (Kotcheff).

If the loss of power in the soldiers’ position was a threat to American masculinity, that threat was nothing compared to that of the loss of power of the country as a whole, as Post-Vietnam syndrome, a psychological disorder suffered by individuals, became the Vietnam Syndrome, a psychological disorder suffered by the country at large. Originally coined by Richard Nixon, by the end of the 1970s the Vietnam Syndrome was a term increasingly used by conservative and neo-conservative politicians to refer to the cautious American foreign policy of the Carter administration. As Michael Klare writes: “Stated simply, the “Vietnam Syndrome” is the American public’s disinclination to engage in further military interventions in internal Third World conflicts” (1). But the term came to imply a more pervasive illness than one simply infecting the executive branch; rather, all of America seemed to be afflicted. Suddenly it was not just Vietvets who were ill, and violence wasn’t the only thing they had brought

12 According to George Herring.
back with them from the jungles of Vietnam. As veterans began to be welcomed back into American society, having been reclassified as victims rather than criminals, they spread the contagion of PVS to the American body politic.

This is all a metaphor, of course. Psychological disorders are not contagious, and “American Society” is not an individual subject to sickness even if they were. How, then, did this metaphor become such common sense that it dominated political discourse for the next fifteen years? Young explains the process: “The history of the traumatic memory is a chain of analogies: between posthypnotic suggestion and pathogenic secrets, between surgical shock and nervous shock, between victims of unusual violence and perpetrators of unusual violence, and so on. But analogy does a better job at proliferating meanings than containing them [...]” (128). And just as PTSD was invented through a chain of analogies, comparisons between the war in Vietnam and the political unrest in the US, between the traumatized soldier and the traumatized citizen, between (as Susan Jeffords discusses in The Remasculization of America) the castrated veteran and the castrated nation, led to the reclassification of foreign policy as illness and political dissention as trauma.

This process begins with defining Vietvets as victims. If veterans were victims, what had victimized them? To focus on the suffering of American soldiers necessitated the erasure of other (i.e. Vietnamese) suffering, but to erase the Vietnamese from this description also erases any cause of the soldiers’ distress. As Jerry Lembcke writes in his examination of the myth of the spat-upon veteran: “The psychologically damaged veteran raised a question that demanded an answer: what happened to our boys that was so traumatic that they were never the same again? As it came to be told, the story of what happened to them had less to do with the war itself than with the war against the war” (100). Once the psychological diagnosis PVS became PTSD and lost its geographical specificity, the actual Vietnam War could no longer explain why American
soldiers were suffering from such pervasive readjustment problems. Instead, the “war at home” came to stand in for the traumatic moment that lead to the Vietvet’s PTSD. Continuing the quotation above, Tal goes on to write: “These representations [of soldiers as victims] must also provide a convincing victimizer for the soldiers, e.g., inept or evil commanding officers, back-stabbing politicians, a traitorous Fourth Estate, or a callous and hostile American public” (138). Rambo’s actual traumatic memories might come at the hands of the Vietnamese, but the film gives the viewer to understand that had Trautman ever answered Rambo’s calls to Fort Bragg, or had Rambo been able to find steady employment, or had Teasle respected this Vietvet rather than dismissing him as a threat, Hope would not have been destroyed. The real trauma is not the Vietnam War—after all, could an undeveloped nation of Asians really traumatize brave American soldiers?—but the divisions in American society over the war. This redefinition of the traumatic moment essentially removed the threat PTSD had raised to American martial masculinity and to the US military’s ability to continue to wage wars: war was no longer traumatic, and Vietnam had not been responsible for damaging young men’s minds. Instead, opposition to war was identified as the ultimate culprit, and anti-war protestors came to be seen as having done significantly more damage to the psyche of soldiers than anything that had happened in wartime. “Vietnam” came less to describe the actual police action in Viet Nam, a country in Southeast Asia, and increasingly stood in for a decade of turbulent political unrest and social change.13 Or, from another angle, what could have been viewed as a decade of democracy in action became a trauma for unsupported troops, and through the analogy between mental and physical trauma became a wound on the imaginary American psyche.

13 Consider, for example, the title of the Time-Life series “The Vietnam Experience”.

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Once the traumatic incident was redefined as the war at home rather than the war in Vietnam or war in general, suddenly significantly more Americans became eligible for the diagnosis of (P)VS. Vietvets no longer had the monopoly on traumatic experience: anyone who had lived through the sixties could make the same claim to psychological distress. By analogy, every American was suffering from the effects of “Vietnam.” Extending the metaphor, “American society” itself was ill. Even as PVS was becoming PTSD, losing its wartime specificity, it was also becoming the Vietnam Syndrome, and American foreign policy was being redefined as pathological. By extension, political dissent becomes treason, an attack on America. As Keith Beattie argues: “By drawing on its common(sense) association with the body, the wound metaphor posits a unified culture as fixed and natural and implies that before the infliction of the unhealthy wound the United States had been such a culture” (18). Once the protests of the sixties were identified as the cause of Vietvets’ readjustment problems and thus in themselves traumatic, the substance of the protests was removed, leaving only the shell of dissent. If “American Society” was one unified psyche which had been traumatized by this dissent, stripped of its moral, ethical and political content, than dissent itself was bad, both pathogenic and symptomatic of the Vietnam Syndrome. Veterans who spoke out—against the war itself, against the VA’s policies, against other US policies, both foreign and domestic—were silenced once they were diagnosed with PTSD, as the countercultural behavior which had made them so threatening to begin with became redefined not as revolutionary action or simply violence but as acting out. As Tal goes on to write: “Though we may be confounded by angry activist Vietnam vets marching in the streets and hurling their medals back at the government that awarded them, we are quite clear on what to do with ‘patients’—we place them under the care of experts and we ‘treat’ them, with therapy or drugs. We continue the therapy until they are ‘healed’” (145). And like Vietvets, citizens, once
PTSD had become universal, also lost their power of dissent, as any critique of
imperialist actions in the Middle East or Latin America was redefined as a
manifestation of the (no longer Post, as Vietnam became a state of mind) Vietnam
Syndrome.

If America was sick with the Vietnam Syndrome, it must need healing. Richard
Nixon makes this clear in No More Vietnams, his manifesto explaining his
administration’s foreign policy and criticizing Carter’s:

Until we shake this Vietnam syndrome, the United States will court failure in any
international initiative it undertakes—in the Third World, in East-West relations,
even in relations with our friends. Behind the champagne glasses and polite
smiles, every leader and diplomat we encounter in Washington and abroad
wonders whether we can be counted upon in a crisis or if we will cut and run
when the going gets tough. (14)

The Vietnam Syndrome, apparently, is a deadly disease, undercutting US power at
every turn. That power, it seems, is not undercut by having lost a war to a third-world
country, or even by a general policy of ineffectually meddling in the foreign affairs of
other countries. Rather, the main symptom of the Vietnam Syndrome is an unwillingness
to continue this policy. Charles Horner writes in Commentary:

However one regards the Vietnam war itself, a world view was indeed derived
from it which bears no logical or inherent connection with a critique of the war
itself. The most conspicuous and, potentially, the most dangerous element of
this view has to do with the question of American power. The anti-war ethos
spawned a broad-scale attack on the whole of American power. (56)

Horner here refuses to acknowledge the antiwar movement’s claim that Vietnam was
only one example of a general imperialist policy and does not see the American public’s
anti-interventionist stance as a rejection of that policy. He sees Vietnam as a unique,
isolated incident that has inspired a kind of universal delusional state from which only those who agree with his foreign policy suggestions are immune. The pathology of the Vietnam Syndrome consists in questioning American power and America’s right to use that power. Until this illness is healed, America is in dire threat of becoming entirely powerless. Vietvets, Americans, “American Society” is all in need of healing; it would take the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the fierce debate over its design, to create a metaphor of healing sufficient to cure the metaphor of the Vietnam Syndrome.
4. The Wall

I didn’t want a monument,
not even one as sober as that
vast black wall of broken lives.
I didn’t want a postage stamp.
I didn’t want a road beside the Delaware
River with a sign proclaiming:
“Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway.”

What I wanted was a simple recognition
of the limits of our power as a nation
to inflict our will on others.
What I wanted was an understanding
that the world is neither black-and-white
nor ours.

What I wanted
was an end to monuments.
—W.D. Ehrhart, “The Invasion of Grenada”

The release of the Iran hostages in 1980 was a huge boon to the campaign of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF). The nation as a whole rejoiced in their return; parades as well as yellow ribbons abounded, and the hostages were treated to everything from lifetime baseball-game passes to vacations in Florida. In contrast to the euphoria of the rest of the country, Vietnam veterans watched this welcome somewhat
less than enthusiastically. Lance Morrow describes the scene and its effect on Vietvets: “Viet Nam veterans watched the spectacle of welcome (the routes of motorcades lined with cheering, weeping Americans, the nation glued to its TV sets, the new President doing the hostages proud in the Rose Garden) and their years of bitterness boiled up to a choked cry: WHERE THE HELL IS MY PARADE?” (Morrow) The contrast between the reception of these 52 hostages and that of the millions of veterans who returned from Vietnam seemed to encapsulate the national amnesia that Jan C. Scruggs, Vietvet and founder of the VVMF, was trying to combat with his idea for a Vietnam memorial. The VVMF’s fundraising campaign, which had gotten off to a slow start, was revitalized by the outrage of veterans and by the increasing sense of public guilt over the treatment of these veterans by the American populace at large (Scruggs and Swerdlow 56-9).

Scruggs had begun his campaign for a memorial in 1979 and had been making slow but steady progress toward completion. Congress had dedicated a portion of the Washington Mall as a site for the memorial in 1980, clearing the first hurdle. But Scruggs and the other members of the VVMF were determined that contributions for this memorial should come from the public, not the state (Scruggs and Swerdlow 8). This was to be a demonstration of the people’s willingness to accept the Vietvet, not an emotionless government gesture. Unfortunately, before the return of the hostages the VVMF had made little economic headway, neither garnering any great media attention that might bring their project to the attention of the American public nor successfully gathering momentum with their grass-roots mail campaign. It seemed the people were not yet willing to signal that acceptance. The codification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the growing awareness of that diagnosis in the cultural consciousness meant that Vietvets were no longer simply considered dangerous threats, liable to become violent at any moment, but it does not follow that these victims of Vietnam therefore deserved a monument. There was growing support for a slew of
government programs that tried to counter veterans’ adjustment problems, be they psychological, physical or economic, but this public sympathy had not yet been converted into praise. That sentiment began to change with the public reaction to the return of the Iranian hostages. These hostages had not done anything besides be victimized in a foreign country, but they were celebrated simply for surviving; Vietvets demanded to know why they were denied the same consideration. Editorials began to appear from Vietvets, specifically demanding some kind of recognition.

Of course, any comparison of the situation of the hostages and the Vietnam veterans immediately uncovers extreme differences between the two: 52 hostages as opposed to about 2.5 million Vietnam veterans; diplomats rather than soldiers; bystanders during a time of peace versus combatants during a time of war.\(^1\) Equating veterans with hostages forces an elision of these differences and puts veterans in the hostages’ position of victimization. Erasing questions of the morality of soldiers’ actions in Vietnam, the comparison of veterans with hostages builds on the characterization of Vietnam veterans as victims of circumstance, who fought bravely only to be rewarded with PTSD. Those who served in Vietnam, according to this narrative, had no more agency than the diplomats whose only action had been their presence in the American embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. This image of the victimized Vietvet, begun with the campaign for recognition of Post-Vietnam Syndrome and standardized by the Vietnam films of the late 1970s, was reified through the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) in Constitution Gardens on the National Mall, and specifically though the debate over Maya Lin’s controversial design. Characterizing

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\(^1\) Furthermore, Vietnam veterans did have a parade: the ‘Home with Honor’ parade in New York City on April 1, 1973; a better parallel to the hostages, instead of combat troops, is the Vietnam POWs released in 1973, who received a similar welcome to the Iran crisis hostages.
veterans as victims allowed the memorial to be built, as it removed questions of the legitimacy of the war from the discussion of how to memorialize those who fought it.

Moreover, the construction of the Memorial completed the transformation of veterans from psychotics into casualties and, eventually, heroes by re-fighting the Vietnam war without the Vietnamese and with a happy ending. The controversy over the design of the VVM worked to adapt the cultural memory of Vietnam, moving the war from Indochina to America and the focus from imperialist policy in Asia to internal debate and division in the United States. Maya Lin’s design, by refusing the standard genre markers of a war memorial and instead choosing, through its black, horizontal design, to focus on the tragedy of war, provided an opportunity to resist debates over the war itself and its moral justification. In the ensuing debate, the VVMF became characterized as a populist band of grunts who only wanted to build their memorial without even asking for help from the government; the fight over the design became a battle against antiwar activists on the one hand and callous bureaucrats on the other. This redefinition of the enemies of the combat soldier was soon applied to the war itself: soldiers in Vietnam had not been fighting against Vietnamese guerrillas but rather against civilian Americans on the right and the left who had undermined their efforts in Indochina both by opposing the war and by allowing politics to direct it. When the VVMF succeeded in constructing their memorial despite the forces aligned against them, they proved that Vietvets were not losers who had failed in Vietnam because they were somehow lacking; they could have succeeded in wartime just as they had in peacetime if they had only been given the opportunity. In the end, the battle for the Memorial displaced the actual war in Vietnam and provided combat soldiers with a war they could win—and ultimately did—win.
The characterization of the veteran as victim was implied in the VVMF’s project from the outset. In an editorial titled “We Were Young. We Have Died. Remember Us” published in the Washington Post on Veterans’ Day, 1979, Scruggs, the president of the VVMF, forces a remembrance of the trauma of war through his depiction of an attack on a machine gun nest but channels this remembrance through a vocabulary of suffering, describing the death of one of his compatriots in terms both heroic and horrifying. While Scruggs mentions his valor, he emphasizes the pain of his comrade’s wounds and his eventual “horrible, excruciating death” (Scruggs). Scruggs goes on to indict the American community not for any actions involving the war itself but for its treatment of veterans upon their return: “The media’s portrayal of Viet vets has amounted to a collective character assassination as we became typecast as violence-prone, psychological basket
cases. The treatment and indifference we received is far from compensated for by a little media splash during Vietnam Veterans Week.” According to Scruggs’ editorial, Vietnam veterans are victims of North Vietnamese machine-gunners and also of Americans at large; the veteran deserves recognition not only because of his military service, but also in recompense for the “character assassination” through which he has had to suffer. The war that so deeply scarred Vietvets was not just the war in Indochina, it was what has been increasingly characterized as “the war at home”: the conflict over the war in American society. Returning soldiers were innocent casualties in this war, caught between the antiwar movement that viewed them as baby killers and the government that disowned them as losers.\(^2\) The larger project of the VVMF—to allow a space for a memorial to a war the US lost by separating the warriors from the war—continues this trope, by emphasizing poor treatment of veterans over soldiers’ actions in battle.

This depiction of the true source of the Vietvet’s suffering was not immediately accepted. Instead, it gradually became standardized over the next three years, as the VVMF fought to see their project of a memorial realized. Originally, there seemed to be little call for a monument to the Vietnam War. After all, the conflict in Indochina was not even officially a war, and however you name it, America lost it. By separating the controversial war from the soldiers who fought in it, and who suffered not just at the hands of the Vietnamese, but also at those of their own countrymen, the VVMF successfully convinced the American establishment that this memorial was a worthy cause. However, this separation itself led to controversy, as the memorial as it was

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\(^2\) This narrative is itself misleading, and not particularly historically accurate. As Jerry Lembcke argues in *The Spitting Image,* by-and-large antiwar protestors embraced returning veterans rather than blaming them for their actions in war, and the US government has never been known to be particularly solicitous of its returning veterans from any conflict. However, this alternative history was already somewhat current when the VVAF first began its campaign, and the debate over the memorial cemented this history of poor treatment in American culture.
eventually designed focused on the victimized, rather than the heroic, Vietvet. Only a little over a year passed between the presentation of the design for the memorial and its dedication, but that short period saw a storm of editorials, debating the design and its place in the larger cultural narrative of Vietnam. By 1982 that debate itself had been recharacterized as a battle, a synecdoche for Vietnam itself; while the controversy over the Memorial’s design was almost immediately not only dropped but essentially erased from the public mind upon the Wall’s dedication, its structure—a war of grunts fighting antiwar protesters and bureaucrats in an essentially noble cause—came to define Vietnam.

The criteria issued by the VVMF for the memorial design competition made a specific attempt to avoid controversy by focusing on veterans rather than the war itself. The memorial was never intended to be celebratory in any sense, but because most war memorials are by default celebratory, that very decision to separate the war from its warriors begged a certain amount of debate. Grady Clay, the chair of the competition’s judging panel and one-time editor of Landscape Architecture, writes: “The program requirements, written under direction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, specifically required designs that would ‘make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct,’ but should ‘become a symbol of national unity, a focal point for remembering the war’s dead, the veterans and the lessons learned through tragic experience’” (55). As Karal Ann Marling and Robert Silberman point out in their discussion of the VVM controversy, The Statue Near the Wall, not everyone viewed Vietnam as a tragic experience (10). These instructions already deny any possibility for seeing the Vietnam War as a heroic battle simply through their incorporation of the word “tragic,” and those who still believed in the causes behind the conflict were unlikely to be pleased by this characterization. In addition, rarely are war memorials built that focus solely on remembering a war’s dead, at least in the US; America had no history of
memorials of the sort that began to appear in Europe after World War I, dedicated to the victims of war’s violence. Even memorials to Civil War soldiers in the southern states carry an unspoken assumption that at the very least the soldiers’ willingness to serve was praise-worthy. The genre of “war memorial” is not usually defined by loss, and the VVMF’s design requirements implied a specific challenge to that genre. As Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson and Enrico Pucci point out in reference to the final design: “Simply put, generic violations typically are not gratuitous. The generic violations in the case of the wall certainly are not; they mark a dissatisfaction with the capacity of the ‘normal,’ monumental discourse to adequately commemorate [sic] Vietnam veterans” (276). From its inception, the VVM refused its genre, and used the characterization of Vietvets as victims that had been born in the debate over PTSD in its foundational design concepts. Vietnam was not a war to be celebrated, it was a war to be mourned, and Vietvets needed to be remembered not because they were heroes but because they had suffered.

Maya Ying Lin’s design for the memorial was the unanimous choice of the VVMF judges; upon reflection, it becomes difficult to imagine how any other design might have been possible.³ The four main criteria for the design—to be reflective and contemplative in character, to harmonize with the surroundings of the Gardens and of the Mall at large, to contain the names of all who died and were missing, and to make no political statement—essentially required such a monument. As Marling and Silberman point out: “[T]he design requirements of the competition and, hence, her winning entry were shaped by a concept that virtually ensured a geometric design with a minimum of sculptural embellishment, with primary emphasis on the names of the dead, a tonality

³ The discussion that follows is in no way meant to be an aesthetic critique of the beauty of Lin’s design, but simply to situate that design in a larger national conversation of power and victimization. A comparison of the Wall with the recent Korean War Memorial, also on the National Mall, provides an undeniable example of how the simple design elements employed by Lin can be appropriated and used for significantly less effect.
conductive to their readability, and a lack of narrative content” (10). White marble would have been blinding with the southern exposure of the site; a vertical monument would both have competed (probably to its detriment) with the Washington Monument and would have made it impossible to read all the names; and the design could not take any political stance, which, in a culture dominated by monuments celebrating heroes of wars, is itself a political statement. The design Lin submitted consisted of a long, polished, black marble wall with two wings, one pointing toward the Lincoln Memorial and the other toward the Washington Monument. The Wall was to be inset into the ground, and a gentle slope would lead to the Wall’s face. Engraved on the Wall, in chronological order and with no other commentary, would be the names of every soldier killed in Vietnam. In essence, Lin’s design answered the demands of the VVMF in the
simplest possible manner; but as a result also reified the VVMF’s subtext of the
victimized veteran in its departure from the standard war monument. This
characterization became the heart of the debate over the Wall.

This debate has been discussed at length by several critics. In essence, the
argument split between two opposing camps: a group of entrenched government figures
and celebrities, including Ross Perot and Secretary of the Interior James Watt, who
rejected Lin’s design because they found it insulting to veterans, and Lin’s supporters,
who considered any changes to her design to be unnecessary and unacceptable. Not
surprisingly, this argument came to be defined along party lines, as those opposing the
Wall were by and large conservative while those supporting the design were generally
liberal. At its most basic, the disagreement echoed debates over the war itself: those
who had been hawks during the war, and who had supported US actions in Vietnam,
rejected Lin’s design because they considered it not to be celebratory enough. Because
the Wall did not glorify the Vietnam War, these opponents believed it actively
dishonored that war. On the other hand, those who defended the design were perfectly
willing to accept its representation of the war as tragic. At first, the design’s detractors
rejected the Wall outright, often calling for something more figurative and less abstract,
but eventually the opposition unified under the leadership of Perot, Tom Carhart and
James Webb. Accepting the basics of Lin’s design, this group demanded a number of
what they considered “minor” changes that were intended essentially to transform the
Wall into something significantly more traditional: they wanted white marble instead of
black, something vertical instead of horizontal, and a flag. Of course, Lin and the
VVMF did not consider these changes to be so minor, and refused to accept them. The
debate, which became increasingly ugly as time went on, ranged from the editorial pages

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4 See for example Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories; Marling and Silberman, The Statue Near the Wall;
Beattie, The Scar that Binds.
of newspapers across the country to meetings with Secretary Watt, whose approval of the design was required by the congressional bill that gave the VVMF the Memorial’s site in Constitution Gardens.

There has been much critical discussion of the particular demands of the Wall’s detractors and what those demands imply; Marita Sturken encapsulates this conversation, writing: “Many saw its black walls as evoking shame, sorrow, and dishonor and perceived its refusal to rise above the earth as indicative of defeat. Thus, a racially coded reading of the color black as shameful was combined with a reading of a feminized earth as connoting a lack of power” (52). In fact, in one particularly emotional moment in a meeting between the Wall’s opponents and the VVMF, General George Price, a high-ranking African American officer, pointed out the inherent racism in the association of the color black with shame and defeat: “Black is not a color of shame. I am tired of hearing it called such by you. Color meant nothing on the battlefields of Korea and Vietnam. We are all equal in combat. Color should mean nothing now’” (Scruggs and Swerdlow 100). But most of these analyses of the controversy take for granted the underlying problem with Lin’s design for those who wanted a white, above-ground monument: its permanent establishment of the Vietnam veteran as victim instead of hero. Although certainly this debate is shot through with racism and sexism, those discourses only seemed apt to those who employed them because of the stereotyped position in American society of blacks and women as powerless victims. As unacceptable as the glorification of white masculinity in American culture may be, that rhetoric was motivated here by the need to depict soldiers as heroic and not victimized. The diagnosis of PTSD had gone a long way towards standardizing the characterization of Vietvets as victims, but opponents of the design did not particularly want that characterization memorialized. Because of its color, because of its shape, Lin’s monument contrasts sharply with other neo-classical
white marble war memorials that directly laud the military, and its contemplative nature invokes the antithesis of heroic valor: mourning. In effect, the Wall most strongly suggests a mass grave.

Furthermore, the beginnings of the outcry over Lin’s design did not focus specifically on either the monument’s color or its anti-phallic overtones. Instead, much of the concern centered on two issues: the lack of any mention of Vietnam on Lin’s wall (the original design contained only the names of the dead and missing, with no inscription) and its focus on the dead rather than the living. Two letters to the editor published in the Washington Post ten days after Lin’s design was unveiled make these concerns clear. Addressing the lack of inscription, Robert C. Lorbeer writes in the first letter: “Now we are going to have a Vietnam Veterans Memorial that does not even identify where or in what war the men and women served and died. That’s recognition?” (Lorbeer). Those who argued for an inscription recognized that the absence of the word “Vietnam” on the wall implied that the very word was too shameful to appear in the hallowed political center of our nation. Furthermore, the lack of context for the listed deaths removed soldiers from a position as noble warriors in a cause and instead suggested the purposelessness of their individual deaths. As Charles Krauthammer writes: “To treat the Vietnam dead like the victims of some monstrous traffic accident is more than a disservice to history; it is a disservice to the memory of the 57,000. It is an act of arrogance for us to assign them the status of victims, and nothing but victims” (Krauthammer). Although an inscription was soon added to the design plan, it remained short, with none of the laudatory overtones common to such inscriptions, and tends to get lost in the sea of printed names on the Wall. As a result, it does little to counteract the impression that the names on the Wall belong to men who died for no reason.
The second letter published in the *Post* under the title “Inadequate Memorial” addresses the second problem with Lin’s design: the emphasis on the dead. Timothy J. Vogel writes: “There are thousands of men who saw action in Vietnam who should not be forgotten. The sacrifice of these men and especially those who returned disabled or from imprisonment should not be concealed from the American public. Traditionally, when we honor our veterans, we honor all our veterans, and there is no cause for differentiation now” (Vogel). Lin’s design was simply following the design criteria put forward by the VVMF, but its focus on the names of the dead and missing erases the existence of any veteran who returned from Indochina. It implies alternately that no soldiers survived the Vietnam war or that those who did do not deserve to be memorialized. The soldiers whose names appear on the Wall are not figures of inspiration, symbolizing a glorious death for freedom; they are simply dead, and their deaths inspire only grief. Even Scruggs’ authorized history of his battle for a memorial, *To Heal a Nation*, recognizes that this design does not in any way celebrate the service of Vietnam-era soldiers but instead mourns their loss. Adding to the mythology of the power of the Wall, he writes:

> And she [Maya Lin], in turn, believed that the vets did not understand what they were building. They thought the Memorial was only going to be beautiful. They did not understand what it would really be. At one point, for example, [Robert W.] Doubek [executive director of the VVMF] asked her, “What will happen when people first see it?”

> She swallowed and said something encouraging. She wanted to say, They’ll cry. (110-1)

Lin’s design encourages displays of grief because it focuses on death rather than legitimizes the cause for which these soldiers fought. There is no sense here that the Wall will inspire pride or patriotism. Instead, it mourns those who died. Moreover, its
neglect of the soldiers who survived implies that those soldiers do not deserve a similar honor.

This effacement of the Vietnam War from the memorial further changed its focus—rather than battles in Indochina, the VVM came to memorialize the war at home. The names listed on the Wall seemed to have died not in an unmentionable foreign conflict but rather as a result of divisions within the United States. The tone of the Wall implies mourning, and the listing of the names of the dead and missing makes clear that these soldiers, at least, were victims. But what were they victims of? The lack of emphasis on the conflict in Indochina in the design disassociates these soldiers with the Vietnam War and leaves the cause for these many deaths unclear. However, the memorial’s placement in Constitution Gardens suggests an alternative. In an article in the Washington Post, Ward Sinclair quotes Doubek as saying: “‘We thought it was right for Congress to designate the site and we thought everyone was in agreement that the monument should be in an area that was the site of massive demonstrations, near the Lincoln Memorial, which also symbolizes reconciliation’” (Sinclair). The Gardens, sometimes described as the White House’s backyard, had been associated with the antiwar demonstrations that had come to symbolize the divisions in the nation caused by Vietnam. Placing the VVM in this site suggests that this memorial is to the war at home, a war comparable to the Civil War, rather than the one fought in a country no one could find on a map. Lin’s design, with its suggestion of a mass grave, implies that the dead it lists fell in battle on the Mall, not in the Mekong Delta, and the soldiers it commemorates might as well be buried under it. This shift in the focus of the memorial, from Vietnam to America, allowed living veterans to be reincorporated into those mourned at the memorial; they might not have been obvious victims of the war itself (after all, they lived—maybe they even killed babies over there), but no one was willing to argue that they were not victims of America’s post-war neglect and amnesia. All
Vietvets were casualties of the war at home, and the Memorial marked the graves on its symbolic battlefield.

However, simply locating the memorial on the site of anti-war protests was not enough to recategorize the Vietnam conflict as one that occurred in the US. In fact, the very attempt to make this shift inspired some of the angriest denunciations of Lin’s design; Carhart, originally a supporter of the VVMF, later became famous for his characterization of the Wall as a “black gash of shame,” arguing that:

The jurors [of the design competition] know nothing of the real war in Vietnam— the television portrayal was far from adequate. But the political war cut so deeply through society that everyone had to take sides. The net result is that the design the jury chose as the winner was necessarily a function of their perception of the war they lived through in America. It may be that black walls sunk into a trench would be an appropriate statement of the political war in this country. But that is not the war whose veterans the Fund has been authorized to memorialize. (Carhart)

By focusing on the war at home, the memorial seemed to be forgetting about the war in Indochina; the war the soldiers actually fought was being ignored in favor of the political struggle of civilians. The memorial was less about the honor of serving in Vietnam and more about the shame of participating in antiwar protests. Relying as it did on the characterization of Vietvets as victims of America’s disdain, the VVM memorialized not service in wartime but suffering at home. It was from its very inception motivated by the guilt over the mistreatment of soldiers in America, not in Vietnam. For those who wanted a memorial to the actual war, this shift in emphasis was unacceptable; the journalist Tom Wolfe went so far as to describe the Wall as a “tribute to Jane Fonda” (Wolfe). Still, this very debate over the memorial’s design itself worked to shift the
memorial’s focus from Vietnam to America, as the debate was increasingly characterized as a new version of the Vietnam War.

The first major attacks on Lin’s design tended to come from the conservative end of the political spectrum and from those who had supported the Vietnam War at the time; these commentators attacked the Wall specifically as an antiwar statement. Pat Buchanan’s editorial decrying the Wall is a particularly good example of this kind of rhetoric; he writes: “At what point does a piece of architecture cease being a memorial to service and instead become a mockery of that service, a wailing wall for future anti-draft and anti-nuclear demonstrators?” (Webb) In this view, the Wall, though its implicit antiwar stance, echoes the position of protestors. Memorializing the brave actions of Vietnam-era soldiers, it rehashes the position of the antiwar movement, the very group that refused to support Vietnam troops, called them baby-killers, and spat on them when they demobilized. In contrast, the attacks on the design are described as coming from a position of patriotism. Unexpectedly, these attacks often rely upon the same rhetoric of victimization that this group found so distasteful in the memorial itself, describing the design as yet another insult to long-suffering Vietvets. The men (and they were almost all men) who protest the design are themselves brave veterans who have been victimized by the neglect of the American public. Wolfe, in an editorial in the Washington Post, writes: “Veterans like Carhart and Webb were dumbfounded and then outraged. Far from ‘honoring’ and ‘recognizing’ those who served in Vietnam, the Lin design simply buried the dead of Vietnam, put them in a pit, below ground, in funereal black, as part of something too horrible and shameful to be mentioned by name or even associated with the American flag” (4). Wolfe thus places Carhart and Webb, the two

__5 Scruggs apparently worried that the remnants of the antiwar movement would also protest the memorial simply because it memorialized what they considered an immoral war, but these protests from the left seem never to have materialized.__
most recognized and outspoken members of the campaign to change Lin’s design, in the position of the veteran, and uses the discourse of victimization of veterans to provide them with an unquestionable moral stance. Just as Vietvets were absolved of responsibility for their actions in Vietnam through the discourse of PTSD and thus were able to occupy a more sympathetic position, Wolfe’s depiction proves the ethics of Carhart and Webb’s objections by emphasizing their victimized status.

However, Carhart and Webb’s actual military histories in the end helped to undermine this positioning. Both served in Vietnam, but neither could really claim the position of victimized Vietvet as defined by PTSD. These were not grown-up versions of John Rambo, isolated from mainstream society and forced to drift through a country that refused to accept them. These men were not former LRRPs like the men Herr interviewed; they were not combat soldiers, and they most certainly were not grunts. Rather, both Carhart and Webb had been officers in Vietnam, and so were easily characterized as part of the establishment that had been instrumental in turning the war into an “atrocity-producing situation” and that had gone on to neglect the Vietvet upon his return. As a characterization, “bureaucrat and career officer” was a much better fit than “grunt” for Jim Webb, a graduate of the Naval Academy and author of the Vietnam novel Fields of Fire who would go on to be the Secretary of the Navy under Reagan and later a Virginia senator, and for Tom Carhart, a West Pointer who commanded teams under the infamous Operation Phoenix, a CIA-organized assassination program. Their position as victimized Vietvet rapidly lost credibility in the emerging narrative of the battle for the monument when these men became associated with Ross Perot, a

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6 In “The Wall,” his history of the debate published in Esquire magazine, Christopher Buckley makes the attempt to characterize Webb as an “officer/grunt” in order to restore Webb to something of a position of moral superiority, but he is the exception to the prevailing theme, and his very need to coin the awkward term “officer/grunt” suggests the difficulty of maintaining Webb in that position (Buckley).

7 See Chapter 6 for a more in depth discussion of the Phoenix Program.
millionaire who had not served in Vietnam, and entrenched Washingtonian and Secretary of the Interior James Watt.

Scruggs, however, was almost a made-to-order grunt, and the controversy over the design increasingly located him as such. In To Heal A Nation we find the final, standardized version of Scruggs’ moment of inspiration which led to the wall:

In March of 1979, Jan Scruggs, a 29-year-old former rifleman with the U.S. Army 199th Light Infantry Brigade, went to see a movie entitled The Deer Hunter, notorious for its explicit, bloody depiction of death and cruelty.

Scruggs became upset, not by the combat scenes, but because of the scenes showing blue-collar youth in a Pennsylvania coal town. They were the people who had believed in their country, which then abandoned them when the war went sour—the people he’d seen suffer and die in Vietnam.

That night, Scruggs couldn’t sleep. At 3:00 A.M. he was alone in the kitchen with a bottle of whiskey. Mortar rounds hit. Twelve men were unloading an ammunition truck. An explosion. Scruggs came running. By instinct, he pulled the first-aid bandage from his trousers. Organs and pieces of bodies were scattered along the ground. They belonged to his friends. He had only one bandage. He stood and screamed for help.

The flashbacks ended, but the faces continued to pile up in front of him. The names, he thought. The names. No one remembers their names.

“T’m going to build a memorial to all the guys who served in Vietnam,” Scruggs told his wife the next morning. “It’ll have the name of everyone killed.”

In this version, Scruggs becomes the prototypical Vietnam veteran: he was an enlisted Army rifleman, that is, a grunt; he drinks, perhaps to excess, and he suffers from flashbacks, suggesting PTSD. Scruggs may have had the bright idea of creating a
memorial to his brothers-in-arms, but this account implies that this moment of inspiration could have happened to any Vietnam veteran, and in fact specifically grew out of his victimization as a veteran. Scruggs is able to occupy the position of victimized Vietvet in a way that is unavailable to Carhart and Webb because he was in no sense associated with those who had power in Vietnam; he had no agency in that war, and simply did his best to survive it. Furthermore, his PTSD directly inspired his desire to see a memorial constructed. Scruggs suffered in Vietnam, and now he suffers at home, because people like Carhart and Webb abandoned him; naturally, his opinions on the design of the memorial meant specifically to celebrate men like him should carry more weight.

What this version of Scruggs’ moment of inspiration neglects is the rest of his life history. Far from the stereotype of the Vietvet psychopath endemic in the early 1970s, and just as far from the image of the Vietvet victim of the late 1970s, Scruggs had both been actively involved in veterans’ issues in his work at the Department of Labor and had completed a significant amount of higher education: “Upon his return to the U.S., Scruggs enrolled at American University and became deeply involved in the problems of the demobilized Vietnam troops. Eventually attending graduate school, he completed a study on the psychological adjustments facing Vietnam veterans, and in 1976 presented his findings to a Senate subcommittee” (Hess 121). Scruggs may have been to Vietnam, he may even suffer from PTSD, but he is not exactly an outsider to Washington bureaucracy who has been forgotten by his country. He is by no means having difficulty adjusting; he is mingling with senators. In fact, according to Maggie Lewis: “The Vet Center program [established to provide a space for veterans’ rap sessions] is the result of his campaigning” (106). Scruggs himself was not one of the nameless, faceless veterans ignored by the nation; he possessed both the intellectual and the political capital denied to veterans in this narrative of disenfranchisement. He may indeed have
drunk too much whiskey after seeing *The Deerhunter*, but he had also read Lifton’s work on post-Vietnam syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder, and his idea for the memorial grew out of his previous work with veterans (Lewis).

The success of the VVM, however, mandated the effacement of this aspect of Scruggs’ history, underlining instead his similarity to the veteran stereotype in order to locate him unequivocally on the moral high ground. Descriptions of Scruggs as the controversy progresses increasingly refer to his war wounds, call him a redneck, and generally position him outside the circles of the powerful and the privileged despite his previous experience working in and with the Washington bureaucracy. In one early newspaper article discussing a VVMF fundraiser, Phil McCombs indicates the direction that most portrayals of Scruggs would go on to take: “The last time Jan C. Scruggs wore a tux was when he got married. He’s the young ex-soldier who got the idea for the memorial and organized all this. Now there he is, an ex-E3, up there on the stage with all those dignitaries, or down there on the dance floor, some guy with four stars on his shoulder draping his arm over Scruggs’ shoulder and laughing” (McCombs "War in Memories"). Scruggs is an everyman: he is not the kind of guy to wear a tux, or who usually hobnobs with four-star generals. He is certainly not Tom Carhart or Jim Webb, much less Ross Perot. He is the grunt, whose victimization after Vietnam continues; the establishment will not even let him build his memorial to his dead buddies. By the time the memorial’s modified design was finally completed, this casting of Scruggs as a grunt and his opponents as the establishment had become the accepted history; Hugh Sidey writes in *Time* magazine: “Lovely irony. Like life. An infantry corporal with nine pieces of shrapnel in his back carried on the fight for three years, pressing, retreating, always

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8 Those who found Maya Lin’s design insulting successfully campaigned to have a realistic statue, designed by Frederick Hart, and a flagpole added to the design, but as these additions are generally ignored in popular depictions of the VVM, this argument focuses solely on Lin’s Wall.
recovering and trudging wearily ahead, overcoming protesting generals (Air Force Ace Robinson Risner) and multimillionaires (Ross Perot) and politicians (Congressman Phil Crane) and pundits (Columnist Pat Buchanan) and bureaucrats (Secretary of the Interior James Watt)” (Sidey). This is not simply a public debate over a piece of art; this is a battle, echoing the battles of Vietnam in its depiction of the players as an uncaring establishment and a soldier just trying to do the best he can.

Scruggs’ moral position was only strengthened when Maya Lin, who at the request of the VVMF had remained silent for some time, reentered the debate over the memorial. Just as Scruggs was continually defined by the same epithets—wounded, veteran, enlisted—Maya Lin’s characterization in the popular presses rapidly solidified: Lin became the embodiment of the elite, antiwar counterculture. B. Drummand Ayres Jr. hits on every aspect of Lin’s new persona in his article on the memorial for the *New York Times*:

> When the contest officials made their decision earlier this spring, they did not know that Miss Lin was not a trained architect. They discovered that she was, instead, a 21-year-old senior at Yale University, about to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in architecture, but with several years of graduate work and several years of apprenticeship still ahead before she could put “architect” after her name.

> The officials found, too, that the Vietnam war was not one of the big issues in her life. She was too young for that.

> And, finally, they learned that when she submitted her memorial concept for a classwork grade at Yale, she was awarded a “B”. (Ayres)

Lin is not only Asian and as a result easily equated with the “gooks” the grunts were ostensibly fighting on the ground in Vietnam, as well as with the antiwar protestors who flew North Vietnamese flags; she is not only a woman, and thus entirely outside the
paradigm of heroic, martial masculinity; she is a college student, at an elite academy, who has not bothered to learn anything about Vietnam. To add insult to injury, she’s not even an A-student. Lin might have stepped directly out of the counterculture of 1968, and there is no question according to this characterization that had she been a student during the war she would have been one of the mythic female students who spat upon veterans upon their return. When Lin rejected the VVMF’s proposal for a modified design, her arguments against what she saw as a lessening of the power of her original concept were easily undermined through her conflation with those who protested the war. Lin’s attempt to preserve the integrity of her design was thus converted into an attack on veterans themselves: she knew nothing about the war, and yet she was trying to undermine these veterans’ goal, that is, Scruggs’ (and not Lin’s) memorial.

While the VVMF never demonized Lin personally in any particular way, the memorial’s opponents did, by forcing her into the position of, in Tom Wolfe’s term, a “mullah of Modernism.” In attacking Lin’s design, along with the VVMF itself, Wolfe writes: “One cannot presume to read the minds of these men [the VVMF judges]. But from all outward appearances they are the typical successful sons of millennial modernism. Men of their age who rose to success in the art world seldom did so by displaying the anarchic instincts of that 19th-century figure, the genius. They made it by displaying the absolutely orthodox instincts of a mullah” (3). Wolfe’s attack was intended to put the VVMF on the defensive by equating the Fund with the intellectual elite who were seen as the core of the antiwar movement, and who care nothing for the needs of veterans or for the will of the people (he even goes so far as to suggest that the jury picked this design purposely to annoy the American public). But Scruggs’ identification with the victimized Vietvet insulated his organization from such characterization. Instead, Maya Lin, who resisted all changes to her memorial on the intellectual, erudite grounds of artistic integrity, filled this role. Lin, and the art critics
who supported her memorial on the basis of its design rather than its ideology, knew nothing about the real plight of the Vietvet; they were elitist snobs, who cared more about abstract concepts of art than they did about real, suffering veterans.

In the end, Scruggs and the VVMF came to be depicted as fighting a two fronted war. On the one hand, they battled the government establishment that was trying to embroil the memorial in the same web of politics that had turned the war itself into such a quagmire; on the other hand, they fought the radical counterculture that valued intellectual ideals over the human lives of soldiers. According to this narrative, only the grunts of the VVMF could claim any kind of ethical justification for their actions: they were only trying to remember their dead friends and yet they were still being victimized by the same civilians who had sent them to Vietnam in the first place and then rejected them because of what Vietnam had made them do. The battle for the memorial was in essence the last battle of the Vietnam War, fought (as the war itself had on some level been fought) in America rather than the US. Furthermore, this last battle came to stand in for the war at large, and the narrative that soldiers in Vietnam had been fighting an uncaring government bureaucracy as well as uncaring antiwar protestors, and had lost the war not because the Vietnamese had defeated them but because these fellow Americans had, became the standard revised history of Vietnam. However, unlike the war itself, in this last battle the grunts were victorious. The successful completion of the VVM was seen as triumph in the war at home, and given the erasure of the Republic of Viet Nam and the Vietnamese themselves in this history, the war at home was the only one that mattered.

To some extent this revision of the history of the Vietnam War had been gaining circulation since the late 1970s but had had most of its currency in politics; it did not become standardized until after the dedication of the VVM.
The monument, in the end, changed history. Once the Wall was dedicated, the controversy over the design that had filled editorial pages across the nation for over a year melted away.\(^\text{10}\) None of the commentators who went to see the VVM continued to call it nihilistic, insulting, or a black gash of shame; instead, praise for Lin’s design became nearly universal.\(^\text{11}\) Sturken writes: “[A]fter Lin’s memorial had actually been constructed, the debate about aesthetics and remembrance surrounding its design simply disappeared. The controversy was eclipsed by a national discussion on remembrance and healing” (Sturken 58). Commentators ceased discussing whether the Wall design was a brilliantly simple piece of art or an insulting anti-war statement and followed Scruggs’ imperative in the dedication ceremony: “‘Let this memorial... begin the healing process and forever stand as a symbol of national unity’” (McCombs "Reconciliation"). In fact, many editorials referring to the newly-built memorial emphasized the writers’ emotional reaction to the Wall through the emotional affect of their prose; James J. Kilpatrick’s article, “The Names,” in the Washington Post, takes on almost an air of invocation through his repetition of the word “names” (Kilpatrick). Any sense of journalistic objectivity to the design is further negated through the continual listing of veteran after veteran, gold-star mother after gold-star mother, approaching the Wall in tears. Once in place, the Wall was no longer a site of national division; rather, simply through the success of Scruggs’ campaign to have the Wall built, the VVM changed from being a symbol of division to a site where such divisions could be overcome.\(^\text{12}\) Praise for

\(^{10}\) As brutal as the controversy over the design for the VVM may have been, still the memorial was completed in an unbelievably short amount of time: “In spite of the controversy, no major memorial on the Washington Mall has been built in so short a time from the moment fund-raising began to the moment the last stone was in place—about three-and-a-half years for the VVM” (Griswold 690).

\(^{11}\) Some attention continued to be paid to the ongoing battle over the placement of Hart’s statue, as well as to the exchange of insults between Hart and Lin over their respective designs, but once the Wall was built, it ceased to be the focus of attack.

\(^{12}\) I am not arguing here that the VVM is not inherently an extremely powerful piece of art; however, the switch from critique to celebration is not only due to the strength of the Wall’s ability to invoke emotion but is also due to the power of the narrative that described its completion as the successful end of the war at home.
the memorial was universal and came not because of any particular aesthetic aspects of the Wall but because of its position as a symbol of and a locus for the healing of the wounds of Vietnam.

This national discussion of healing, to use Sturken’s phrase, operates on two levels: the healing of the individual combat veteran and the healing of the nation as a whole. The widespread acceptance of the memorial and the final celebration of the Wall from both the right and the left put an end to the war at home, repairing the divisions in American society that had begun with the fierce debate over the Vietnam War. In fact, by recreating the Vietnam War in the war over the memorial—in reference to the debate over the VVM’s modifications, Scruggs even told a reporter: “‘They’re refighting the Vietnam War [...]’. It sort of fits the Vietnam experience as a whole’” (Beck and Lord)—the debate over the memorial left the impression that all of America had just fought the war again. Regardless of the actual power of Lin’s design, once that design was dedicated, and once thousands of Vietvets and families of veterans came to celebrate it, there could be no more debate over its appropriateness. To attack the memorial after its dedication would be to reprise the poor treatment of veterans of American society after the war. In addition, such an attack would be on some level an attempt to take away the Vietvets final triumph: these soldiers at last had successfully defeated their internal enemies and presented the nation with a victory, and to try to deny them that victory would be traitorous.

But even as Vietvets as a group were finally able to win a war and thereby prove that they were not ineffective losers and drug addicts who had been defeated by the ragtag, feminized guerrillas of a backward Asian nation, on the individual level Vietvets began to seem even more powerless than they had before the memorial had been built. Because coverage of the dedication ceremony repeatedly depicted weeping veterans, the image of the wounded, emotional Vietvet became fixed in the public consciousness.
Coverage of the week-long celebration surrounding the dedication of the Wall on November 11, 1982, emphasized the healing of individual veterans, rather than the nation as a whole, and focused on Vietvets’ reactions to the memorial. Frances X. Clines, in his report on the dedication ceremonies, provides the prototype for the most common image associated with the opening of the Wall to the public: “Bearded veterans wearing old fatigue jackets and battle medals can be seen reaching toward the names of remembered dead warriors, running the fingers across the letters” (A1, B15). Television coverage of the “Marching Together Along Again” parade did not show soldiers marching in military formation, but veterans in variously modified versions of uniforms in an inversion of VVAV protest marches, their often-obvious disabilities reminding the viewer of their victim status. These soldiers were the walking wounded. In addition to being a site for the nation as a whole to recover from the divisions of the war at home and eventually emerge a stronger, unified country, the Wall also became a locus for individual Vietvets to work through their PTSD publicly, remembering and working through the scars of war. Almost as if the Wall were a religious relic, veterans made pilgrimages to it, touched it, and were healed.

However, in order to be healed one must be wounded in the first place, and this depiction of the Wall as a site for Vietvets to move beyond their victimization both by the war and by the American public is a continual reminder that those men were, in fact, able to be victimized in the first place. Reflecting later on the portrayal of the VVM as a site for veterans to work through the traumas of war, Margaret R. LaWare writes: “[T]he Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become an important and powerful place of healing because it creates a symbolic space where the expression of suppressed grief and anger at the codes of ‘manliness’ enforced by the government and military can finally find an outlet. These codes of ‘manliness’ imply that ‘to be a man, you have to go fight in a war, you have to win the war’” (163). But this rejection of hegemonic codes of “manliness”
does not occur in a private space; it is a public disowning, and is easily read not as a rejection of such codes but as an inability to embody them. The definition of masculinity within American ideology has not changed so much since Vietnam that the sight of a soldier crying can be seen as an exhibition of strength, and the continual reference to veterans’ healing, usually through tears, at the memorial, enforces the categorization of the veteran as a feminized victim, in need of comfort from an outside source. Just as Colonel Trautman finally had to rescue Rambo from his suffering, these Vietvets need the Wall to end their misery. To be described as a victim is to be defined as not possessing the strength to overcome one’s victimizer, to be characterized as occupying a position without power. The continuing narrative of PTSD-afflicted veterans being brought to the Wall to work through the traumas of war reinforces this categorization.

Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country*, published in 1985, rehearses both the war at home and the healing power of the VVM in its exploration of one teenage girl’s attempt to come to terms with the war that killed her father before she was even born. Sam Hughes is a working-class girl growing up in rural Kentucky who lives with her Vietvet uncle Emmett; the novel follows her through the summer after her high school graduation as she becomes increasingly obsessed with Vietnam, finally ending with a trip she, Emmett, and her paternal grandmother take to visit the Wall. In the course of the novel, Vietnam becomes redefined through Sam’s eyes, not as the war Emmett and her father fought but as her understanding of that war, marked by popular depictions of that war and by Sam’s entry into the war at home. The battle of the grunts against the government establishment and against the antiwar movement becomes Vietnam’s most lasting legacy, and Sam herself comes to occupy the position of combat soldier in a domestic battle.

Much of the novel focuses on Sam’s relationship with her uncle and with his group of Vietvet friends. Emmett is immediately presented as the victimized vet, living
on his sister’s largesse, unable or unwilling to find a job or contribute productively to society. Mason’s first description of him characterizes him as particularly victimized by the residue of Vietnam: “Emmett is a large man of thirty-five with pimples on his face. He has been very quiet since they left Hopewell yesterday, probably because Mamaw is getting on his nerves. He has bad nerves” (6). Emmett has bad nerves because he has PTSD, and although he is less prone to flashbacks than he once was, he is still deeply troubled by his memories of the war: he has headaches that seem to be psychosomatic, cannot have a meaningful relationship with his ex-girlfriend Angie, and is only able to function within the confines of his predictable routines. To add to his victim status, the pimples on his face are not hormonal but are chloracne, a sign of exposure to dioxins and a side-effect of Agent Orange poisoning. The damage Vietnam did to Emmett is literally written on his face. Although Emmett is depicted as less traumatized than he once was, when he first returned from the war with a group of drug-addled hippies and acted out by flying a Vietcong flag from the town clock tower, he has still by no means successfully adjusted to peacetime society. The Vietnam War has left him mentally and physically scarred.

Sam, on the other hand, has no direct contact with Vietnam. Although her father died in the war, he died before she was born and so she is not able to experience this loss directly: in fact, she only begins to understand the reality of her father’s death through the death of Colonel Blake on the television show M*A*S*H, which she watches religiously (Mason 30). She has no memories of the war, either in Vietnam or at home; what little she does know of the war comes from M*A*S*H, a few stories of Emmett’s, Bruce Springsteen and Beatles songs, and her own research, but even she recognizes that

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13 Emmett has lived with his sister, Sam’s mother Irene, since his return from Vietnam; Irene has recently moved, but Sam has stayed in Hopewell to finish high school and to take care of Emmett, a responsibility she has claimed for herself.
14 While M*A*S*H is ostensibly set in Korea, the show is a thinly veiled allegory for the Vietnam War, and Sam understands it as such.
this knowledge is inadequate: “The books didn’t say what it was like to be at war over there. The books didn’t even have pictures” (48). Inspired by her graduation speaker’s discussion of sacrifice, Sam is on a quest to learn what Vietnam was “really” like in a way unmediated by popular culture, history books, or politics. Although Sam has more knowledge about the war than most Americans as a result of her research program, she is still defined as essentially ignorant because she never experienced the war directly; as she is told by one of Emmett’s friends: “You don’t know how it was, and you never will. There is no way you can ever understand. So just forget it. Unless you’ve been humping the boonies, you don’t know’” (136). Sam is paradigmatic in her ignorance of Vietnam: like all the American civilians who did not serve, she is not a veteran of the war and so she will never understand what that war was like.

Because of her closeness to Emmett, however, she does recognize at least one of the grunt’s true enemies: the government bureaucracy, localized in the US Department of Veteran’s Affairs. Sam is constantly trying to convince Emmett to seek treatment from the VA for his acne, which she believes to be chloracne (and the novel indicates as much), but Emmett resists; he no longer has much faith in the US government to solve his problems. When she finally does convince him to see a dermatologist, Emmett’s experience with the doctor encapsulates the uncaring response of American society to the adjustment difficulties of veterans, either physical or mental: “‘You know what the doctor said?’ Emmett asked, as Lonnie pulled out into traffic. ‘He said he’d seen a lot of vets with all kinds of complaints. He said they wanted to blame everything from a sore toe to a fever blister on Agent Orange. He just laughed at me. He said it wasn’t nothing but nerves. Wouldn’t that just fry your butt?’” (74-5). The possibility that Emmett might actually have been poisoned in Vietnam is dismissed by the doctor who seems to think that all veterans are whiners; he believes Emmett’s very real skin problem to be psychosomatic and doesn’t even bother to ascertain if Emmett suffers from other
symptoms of Agent Orange exposure. According to this dermatologist, Agent Orange is imaginary, only in the heads of veterans and not a real problem that leads to cancer and birth defects. Furthermore, this doctor does not just disregard any questions of Agent Orange exposure, he also belittles the psychological problems of veterans as “just nerves.” There is no acknowledgement here that service in Vietnam might have real, lasting, physiological or psychological effects. Emmett’s attempt to seek help for his adjustment problems leaves him with nothing but some face cream and a fried butt.

As Sam comes to recognize both the VA’s and the US public’s refusal to take responsibility for the suffering of Vietvets, she becomes increasingly furious with the American government, and is eventually pushed almost into an anti-American position. After a dinner with her boyfriend Lonnie’s parents during which they are less than sensitive to Emmett’s readjustment problems, she fights with Lonnie, who has told her that if another war broke out he would feel obligated to do his duty to the nation: “‘Nobody understands the vets,’ she said, almost crying. ‘They’re different. People expect them to behave like everybody else, but they can’t. If the Russians sprayed Agent Orange over here, it would be chemical warfare for sure, but the United States poisoned its own soldiers. I can’t imagine why you’d want to defend a country that would do that’” (87). The more Sam understands about the Vietnam War, and the more she comes to sympathize with the plight of Vietvets, the more she identifies the US government as the enemy. The ignorance that led Sam to believe that the VA and the government would actually be able to help Emmett is replaced by a knowledge that the government caused his problems in the first place. Soldiers in Vietnam were victims of the American bureaucracy that forced them to fight an unethical war and that wounded them physically and spiritually; Vietvets in America are still victims of that same bureaucracy that will not even acknowledge its veterans’ suffering. Sam is slowly coming to understand the Vietnam War as not fought by grunts but against grunts.
However, Sam is still a civilian, who has never humped the boonies, and so is unprepared for her first exposure to the realities of war. When she discovers an account of the war that is directly personal she is horrified. Sam’s quest to understand Vietnam is also a quest to understand her father, and she convinces Mamaw to give her her father’s journal from the war, one of the few documents Dwayne left behind. The journal mostly contains incomprehensible descriptions of troop movements and equipment, but towards the end Dwayne describes an ambush he survived and his desire to revenge himself on the Vietcong; he mentions killing a VC almost offhandedly before the diary ends. Sam’s reaction is far from sympathetic; she is disgusted by her father’s unthinking racism, his blood-thirstiness, his killing. Just as the American public rejected the mundane brutality of the combat soldier during the Vietnam War, Sam finds that now that she knows what veterans actually did over there she can no longer respect them. Even her relationship with Emmett is tarnished: “She didn’t know how she could face Emmett now” (206). Because Sam’s understanding of the war is not experiential but comes through the accounts of others, she is unable to put herself in her father’s or Emmett’s position; instead, she is simply disgusted by their violent actions. Sam herself becomes the second enemy of the grunt: the antiwar protestor who rejected the returning Vietvets. She is incapable of understanding the basis of their violence. When she returns home to discover that Emmett has set off a flea bomb, she equates this extermination with the slaughter of Vietnamese: “Emmett had helped kill those Vietnamese, the same way he killed the fleas, the same way people killed ants. It was easy, her father wrote. But the enemy always returned, in greater numbers. Pete [a friend of Emmett] had practically bragged about killing. Men were nostalgic about killing. It aroused something in them” (209). Because Sam still does not know what Vietnam was really like, she misidentifies the source of the Vietvet’s brutality as something inherent in masculinity rather than something imposed upon them by an atrocity-producing situation, and she
mistakes their suffering for savagery. Like the mythical, stereotypical antiwar protestor, Sam blames the veteran for the violence of war.

Sam is unable to experience the realities of Vietnam, but the novel allows her to recreate them, sending her to hump the boonies not of Indochina but of Kentucky. Sam flees the flea-bombed house for the nearby Cawood’s pond: “Cawood’s Pond was so dangerous even the Boy Scouts wouldn’t camp out there, but it was the last place in western Kentucky where a person could really face the wild. That was what she wanted to do” (208). Cawood’s pond is isolated and overgrown, not developed: a primitive space for Sam, and therefore similar to the landscape of Indochina in her mind. This is not Vietnam, but it is the closest Sam is able to get, and she is determined to understand what her father and Emmett went through; she thus spends the night in the swamp transforming it into her own personal field of war. Of course, on some level Cawood’s pond will never be Vietnam, and Sam admits the differences: no one is shooting at her, she has no one to shoot at herself, and there is not the same chance of violence. Even the landscape is different: this is not Herr’s threatening jungle, these are “hickory trees and maples and oaks and other familiar trees” (210). Still, Sam’s imagination is able to overcome the differences, and she invests the quiet swamp with the style of Vietnam taken from *Dispatches*:

The night sky in Vietnam was like a light show, Emmett had said once. Rockets, parachute flares, tracer bullets, illumination rounds, signal flares, searchlights, pencil flares. She tried to remember the descriptions she had read. It was like fireworks. And the soundtrack was different from bugs and frogs: the *whoosh-beat* of choppers, the scream of jets, the thunder-boom of artillery rounds, the mortar rounds, random bullets and bombs and explosions. The rock-and-roll sounds of war. (214)
Sam is able to transform this swamp in western Kentucky into Vietnam by focusing not on the actions of soldiers in war but on the strangeness of their environment; for Sam, Vietnam is not about anything soldiers actually did but what they lived through.

The final transformation of Cawood’s Pond into Vietnam makes this clear, as the swamp does not truly become a battlefield until Sam is personally threatened by it. Dawn is breaking, and Sam has spent the entire night alone in the wilderness and is now cleaning up her camp when she begins to hear a rustling in the woods she cannot attribute to animals. This is a human threat, and Sam’s mind goes immediately not to an imaginary Viet Cong but to a real possibility: a rapist.15 Sam hides and opens a can of oysters to use as a weapon; in this moment of danger she finally experiences what every soldier lived through: a direct threat to her life. Mason describes Sam’s reaction: “Now she felt no rush of adrenaline, no trembling of knees. She knew it was because she didn’t really believe this was real, after all. It couldn’t be happening to her” (218). The fear Sam feels parallels the fear of soldiers on a battlefield, and she is just as ready to resort to violence to defend herself. She has at last experienced the trauma that so wounded Vietvets: she has humped the boonies, she has been in country, and she has survived. The fact that the “V.C. rapist terrorist” turns out to be Emmett looking for her is unimportant. All that matters is Sam’s experience of fear, her shock that leads her to enter almost a fugue state and that leaves her with her own case of PTSD.

Of course, to define warfare as the fear of personal injury is to ignore the violence of combat, not to mention the politics of waging a modern war. But Sam’s reaction to this experience makes clear that whatever the differences between a night spent at Cawood’s Pond and a tour of duty spent in Vietnam, the experience has afforded her

15 It seems highly unlikely that a rapist would travel all the way to Cawood’s pond in search of a victim, but as a teenage girl in 1984, a rapist is a much more likely danger for Sam to encounter than a Vietnamese guerrilla fighter.
some insight into the realities of battle and their aftermath. The novel never explicitly identifies Sam as suffering from PTSD, but the characterization of her response to this experience—her withdrawal, her anger, her emotional deadness—mimics those symptoms, and although a night spent at a pond and the threat of one possible rapist is incommensurable with a tour of duty in Vietnam, the novel suggests that Sam’s victimization is of the same kind as Emmett’s, although of a lesser order. In fact, Sam leaves the swamp even more traumatized than her uncle: “Sam would have expected Emmett to be the one to flip out—or that pain to crack his head open—but to her surprise she was the one who went sort of crazy after Emmett came to find her at Cawood’s Pond” (229). Sam’s equation of her psychological distress with Emmett’s suggests that she believes that she now has insight into the cause of his trauma. These two moments are unified through their focus on fear, and all the specifics of Vietnam are ignored in favor of a concentration on survival. Sam herself has become a kind of grunt, unable to adjust to society. She too is a casualty of the war at home.

Because Sam is now a kind of Vietvet herself, she is only able to heal at the Wall. Emmett insists on their trip in order to give both himself and Sam the closure they are unable to find for themselves. When they arrive at the memorial, Sam and her family first focus on finding Dwayne’s name, but Sam herself “stands back while Emmett and Mamaw search for her father’s name” (242). Unlike Mamaw, her trauma is not Dwayne’s death, and she is not particularly moved by his memorialization. She does not have the same sense of loss as her grandmother, for whom this is less of a memorial and more of a gravestone. On the other hand, because she never served in Indochina with a company of other grunts, she does not have the same experience of the Wall as her uncle, who finds a particular battle described in the chronological grouping of his friends’ names. Sam does not fully engage with the Wall until she finds herself listed there in the form of PFC Sam A Hughes. Once she finds her own name listed on the
memorial, she becomes a part of it as all Americans are a part of it: “She touches her own name. How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall” (245). Despite having never been to Vietnam, despite having never been to war, even despite having never protested a war, Sam is still listed on the Wall; she has survived the war at home in the swamps of Kentucky, and been able to come to peace with that war and with her father and uncle through her identification with them: they are all victims of Vietnam.

Sam’s journey throughout In Country from civilian to veteran is only possible because the Vietnam War has been conflated with the war at home. Her trauma stems not from any actual experience of combat but from her engagement with the grunt’s battle against unthinking antiwar protestors and uncaring government bureaucrats; she is transformed into a veteran not by killing but by surviving. This emphasis on conflict within American borders rather than any battles in Indochina became the primary narrative of Vietnam after the completion of the VVM. It only makes sense that her journey would end at the Wall, where she is finally able to see herself in the list of names. By transferring the Vietnam War to America, all American citizens are redefined as veterans, and this memorial to healing is able to provide the nation with the reconciliation the fall of Saigon refused. The civil war that has divided the US since 1965 is finally over, and all Americans are the victors.

However, while in the end the VVM provides a locus of healing, it does so only for the nation, and only within these narratives of victimization. Veterans remain victims at the memorial, eternally symbolized by their dead fellows, reminded by the Wall itself of the nation’s disregard for the men who fought in Vietnam. In Country ends

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16 This is not to say that the VVM does not in some fashion provide individual Vietnam veterans with a means to work through their feelings about the war and their service in it, but rather to argue that the Wall was not able to reinvest the symbolic Vietvet with the strength and agency denied to him by the narrative of victimization.
ambiguously; Sam has found herself in the Wall and thus finally has the understanding of Vietnam she sought, but Emmett’s fate is unclear. In the final lines of the novel, “Silently, Sam points to the place where Emmett is studying the names low on a panel. He is sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames” (245). Possibly Emmett’s interaction with the Wall will heal his psychological wounds, but as sacred as the Wall might be, it is unlikely to clear up his chloracne; furthermore, the description of a “smile like flames” does not exactly suggest the serenity of psychological balance. In any case, by ending at this moment, rather than providing the reader with a description of what Emmett may have done upon his return to Kentucky, the novel permanently locates Emmett in the definition of victimized Vietvet: whatever the character might have gone on to do, here he is frozen in this moment of (possible) redemption, unable ever to be completed. In its focus on healing, the memorial defines the Vietvet as in need of that healing: always a victim, never a hero.

In contrast, once the nation was described as a war zone, torn between the opposing camps of the establishment and the anti-war movement, it could be re-unified and thus experience the healing that was always deferred for the individual Vietvet through the very construction of the VVM. Of course, as Beattie points out: “By drawing on its common(sense) association with the body, the wound metaphor posits a unified culture as fixed and natural and implies that before the infliction of the unhealthy wound the United States had been such a culture” (Beattie 18). This narrative takes a legitimate, albeit particularly heated, debate within a democratic culture and transforms it into a damaging, unhealthy, divisive war. The political divisions of the Vietnam era were no longer seen as legitimate calls for action from either the left or the right; instead, both these positions helped to injure the nation’s implied unity, leaving America as crippled as the paralyzed veteran. When the VVM was built,
silencing the debate over its design, it also silenced debate over the Vietnam War itself.

Kilpatrick’s editorial continues:

This memorial has a pile driver’s impact. No politics. No recriminations.

Nothing of vainglory or of glory either. For 20 years I have contended that these men died in a cause as noble as any cause for which a war was ever waged.

Others have contended, and will always contend, that these dead were uselessly sacrificed in a no-win war that should never have been waged at all. Never mind. (Kilpatrick)

Never mind the various viewpoints expressed during the Vietnam era, or the varying critiques leveled at the direction of the nation. The rhetoric of healing surrounding the memorial moves criticism of the Vietnam War and America more generally into the realm of illness, and subsumes any historical lessons learnt from the conflicts in Indochina under the aegis of the Vietnam syndrome. Vietvets, personified by the VVMF, won the war at home by building the memorial and so ending its internal conflict. Still, the individual Vietvet would need to return to Vietnam in order to transform from a victim to a hero.
5. Do We Get to Win This Time?

God forgive me, but I’ve seen
that triple-canopied green
nightmare of a jungle
where a man in a plane could go down
unseen, and never be found
by anyone.
Not ever.
There are facts,
and there are facts:
when the first missing man
walks alive out of that green tangle
of rumors and lies,
I shall lie
down silent as a jungle shadow,
and dream the sound of insects
gnawing bones.
—from W.D. Ehrhart, “POW/MIA”

Perhaps no figure from the Vietnam War has continued to haunt American popular culture as thoroughly as that of the POW. Even thirty-five years after the end of the war, Werner Herzog can release a film about the escape of a pilot shot down in Laos to critical acclaim; fire stations across the nation continue to fly the black POW/MIA flag with the Stars and Stripes; and John McCain’s heroism in the Hanoi
Hilton can be pitted against his disinterest in pressing Vietnam for information on those still missing as issues in a presidential campaign. Our faith that some POWs are still alive in Indochina is inscribed on the face of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the crosses that distinguish the missing from the dead.\(^1\) And yet, despite their ubiquity in popular culture, relatively few soldiers were actually taken prisoner in Vietnam: the interest in the Vietnam POW is out of proportion to their actual numbers. According to Elliott Gruner’s study of representations of POWs: “There were fewer than 800 American POWs in the Vietnam War. The number of Americans captured during the Korean War was 7,140; there were 130,201 during World War II; 4,120 during World War I; and over 400,000 American prisoners from both sides during the American Civil War. Although each captivity had received some attention, no previous POW experience was so persistently represented in the United States” (14). In this chapter, I am arguing that the Vietnam POWs have such resonance in American culture because the mythology surrounding them allowed all the varied revisions of the Vietnam narrative to be unified in a story of victory: soldier-victims and V(i)et Congs reach the apotheosis of their iconographies in the back-to-Vietnam tales of rescue and revenge, and Vietnam becomes a just war won through the prowess of the American soldier/fighting machine. The Vietnam POW centers a new narrative of Vietnam that grew out of the histories of POWs in Indochina and in Korea. This narrative genre answered the cultural need for a story of victory in Vietnam by employing the stereotypes of the psychotic Vietvet and the victimized Vietvet in a new combination that justified the veteran’s violence while locating it securely in Asia.

During the war itself, the POW in Vietnam moved from being a mostly forgotten soldier in quarantine to being a victim of North Vietnamese cruelty whose suffering and

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\(^1\) These crosses can be changed to diamonds to indicate soldiers who have been determined to have died, or changed to circles if any soldier were found alive.
captivity justified the continuation of the war: by focusing solely on the plight of the POW and by characterizing POWs as hostages rather than as captured combatants, the US government was able to reinstill the war effort with the moral justification it had lost, redescribing the American mission as one of rescue rather than conquest. The

Figure 30: The ubiquitous POW/MIA flag.

memory of the ill treatment of Korean War POWs at the hands of Asian communists transferred to Vietnam POWs, but when these POWs returned without collaborating or embracing the enemy’s ideology they were characterized as victors simply for surviving their experiences. Furthermore, once the war was redefined as a rescue mission rather than a nation-building project, the US was able to win it just by bringing the POWs home, and for a short time the American government was able to depict the Vietnam War as an American victory. Unfortunately for the administration, the graphic images of the fall of Saigon combined with the myth of the abandoned MIAs still in Vietnam to undermine that depiction, forcing American society to acknowledge the failure of its
project in Vietnam. However, later fictional accounts of MIA rescues, epitomized in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and popularized in pulp series following the exploits of MIA hunter heroes, restored that ersatz victory by rescuing imaginary POWs and thus finally winning the Vietnam War. The POW genre provided a space for a reimagining of the Vietnam War as just, ethical and heroic, and transformed the victimized Vietvet into a hero whose strength stems specifically from that victimization.

The story of the Vietnam POW begins before the fall of Dien Bien Phu with the more than 4,000 American prisoners who survived captivity during the Korean War. The history of these POWs has by now largely been eclipsed by their more famous brethren, but is essential background for any understanding of how POWs in Vietnam came to be depicted. Of the 7,190 American soldiers taken prisoner in Korea, 2,730 of them died in captivity, or 38 percent. These prisoners died of enforced starvation, exposure, and disease, or on death marches as camps were moved further from the front. Those who survived were subjected to daily indoctrination classes in the virtues of communism. Raymond B. Lech, in his heart-breaking study of the returning Korean war POWs, describes the importance of this narrative: “The uniqueness of the POW situation during the Korean War lies in two arenas: the percentage of deaths to the total prisoner population and indoctrination toward communist meanings, values, and way of life. Hardly any war since the turn of the twentieth century has caused the number of prisoner deaths that occurred in Korea, based on total POW population. As for indoctrination, nothing like what took place in Korea had ever happened before” (2). The image of the Korean war POW came to be one of failure, suffering and weakness, calling into question not just the masculinity of the American fighting man but also the valor and virtue of US post-war culture at large, and was read as a sign of the increasing decadence of American society and of its impending downfall.
However, during the war itself, the POWs most regularly in the media were not the Americans in camps along the Yalu river, but the North Koreans and Chinese imprisoned by the United Nations, particularly on Koje Island. North Korea claimed that its prisoners were being mistreated by the UN troops, and these claims seemed to have some basis in fact as fatal incident followed fatal incident on Koje. In large part these disturbances seem to have resulted from infighting between the prisoners themselves, stemming from their varying degrees of ideological commitment to communism. Still, the Red Cross cited violations of the Geneva Convention by UN troops (Stevens). The North Korean government complained regularly of the mistreatment of its prisoners during the peace talks, and although the UN allies occasionally reversed the attack, their questions about UN prisoners of war were lost in the utter lack of information about those prisoners provided by North Korea and China: North Korea, arguing that these soldiers were not prisoners of war but rather war criminals and thus not subject to the Geneva Conventions, did not provide lists of prisoner names or allow Red Cross observation of camps (Parrott "U.N. Lays Duplicity to Foe on Captives"). To complicate matters further, several of the North Korean and Chinese prisoners indicated that they would refuse repatriation and wanted to stay in the South or in Formosa (now Taiwan), and the UN announced that it would only return willing prisoners; North Korea, however, “contended that under [the Geneva Convention’s] terms the United Nations [was] obligated to return all prisoners, at the point of a bayonet, if necessary, and that the principle that no captive will be repatriated against his own will is ‘illegal’” (Parrott "U.N. Lays Duplicity to Foe on Captives"). The North Koreans’ insistence that all prisoners be returned, regardless of their wishes, became one of the largest obstacles in the peace talks, and was only settled in 1953 when both sides agreed to create a kind of neutral zone, where UN and North
Korean prisoners who refused repatriation would be held for ninety days and given a chance to change their minds.

Although rumors of the mistreatment of American POWs had circulated to some extent during the war, the full extent of their suffering did not become clear until the first prisoner exchange, Operation Little Switch, was conducted between April 20th and May 3rd of 1953. The returning POWs told stories of starvation, of exposure, of death marches, of summary executions, of torture. It became clear that a higher percentage of American prisoners had died in North Korea than in any other war; furthermore, that these men had died as a result of what seemed a deliberate policy of extermination on the part of their North Korean captors. The majority of American POWs were captured in the large territory exchanges of the first months of the war, when each side at one point controlled almost the entire Korean peninsula only to falter under counterattack; in the first winter of their captivity, 1950-1, these soldiers were housed in overcrowded shacks, fed a kind of birdseed, and left in their summer uniforms to freeze. They were then force-marched from their point of capture to permanent camps established on the border with China; most who fell behind were killed or left to die. When the POWs reached these permanent camps, which were generally controlled by the Chinese Army rather than the North Koreans, conditions improved, but thousands had already died.

Life in the permanent camps may have been easier on the prisoners' bodies, but it was significantly harder on their minds, as their Chinese captors instituted an unprecedented program of indoctrination. POWs were forced to attend classes on communism daily and to participate in study groups among themselves; they were

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2 A close second for American POW deaths came at the hands of the Japanese during World War II, where 33 percent of American prisoners died; neither of these percentages, however, comes close to the deaths of both Russian prisoners in German hands and German prisoners in Russian hands during that conflict.

3 POWs who made it through that first winter for the most part survived the rest of the war.
asked to sign statements indicting the US’s and the UN’s policies in Korea and internationally, protesting the war, and criticizing policies of capitalist imperialism; and they were asked to record propagandistic radio broadcasts. Those who refused were sometimes threatened with overt torture or with solitary confinement, which, according to a contemporary newspaper account, “usually meant [enduring the] freezing cold, standing rigidly at attention and getting very little food and water. It was harsh treatment that left no scars. At the end of several days, however, a man was perfectly willing to sign a meaningless piece of paper to be returned to more normal prison living” (Alden). However, after so much death, most POWs did not seem to require such drastic persuasion to sign these confessions to war crimes, as they believed that statements so obviously signed under duress could not be taken seriously; in fact, many Air Force pilots had been specifically instructed by superior officers to cooperate in the event of capture (Lech 164). As a result, vast numbers of prisoners “collaborated” with the enemy in creating various forms of propaganda.4

By and large, the American public agreed that the POWs could not be held entirely responsible for such collaboration under duress, and at first most of the post-war media emphasis was on the suffering of the POWs rather than any confessions they may have signed or broadcast. Mainstream US culture depicted the actions of the POWs in the camps, while not commendable, as understandable; another *New York Times* article reports: “The remarkable thing about the repatriated prisoners is that, after having been subjected to endless forced marches, primitive living conditions, lack of adequate medical care, coercion by direct threats of personal injury and the constant

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4 In addition, Biderman makes the point that: “A large number of the POW’s who were accused of ‘collaboration’ had pleas of ‘good motive’ to account for their acts. This was particularly true of officers and ranking NCO’s. Broadcasting for the Chinese was done so that the names of fellow POW’s could be communicated to the outside; serving on a ‘Peace Committee’ was done to keep tabs on and control ‘the progressives’; membership on a camp committee was a ‘cover’ for an escape plot; working for the Chinese was a ‘cover’ for purloining rations for one’s buddies, and so on” (56).
brain-washing of communism, more did not break down emotionally” (Rusk). This acceptance began to change when 23 Americans joined the over 20,000 North Korean and Chinese prisoners who refused repatriation. The decision of these “turncoats,” as they were dubbed by the media, to remain in communist China rather than return to the land of the free and home of the brave came as a shock to an American society that saw itself as the antithesis to a communist way of life: how could anyone raised in the US ever prefer a culture so utterly different to their own, and whose politics were not just incorrect, but inherently evil? As Operation Big Switch got underway, and more and more soldiers returned who either self-defined or were labeled “progressive” (meaning they agreed at least partially with the political views of their captors), Americans found it increasingly difficult to dismiss all the POWs’ confessions and attacks on the US as the result of their mental conditioning. Furthermore, some of these returnees apparently were even less innocent than they seemed. On August 11, 1953, the Associated Press ran a story noting the reports of “[r]eturning American prisoners of war […] that some of their fellow captives who fell for the Communist line were being sent through in the prisoner exchange to try to spread Red doctrine in the United States”—that is, that they were now working as agents for the communist enemy (AP). Not only were some Americans convinced enough of the merits of communism to refuse to return to the United States, but some apparently were even willing to work actively against their own country.

The Army took this threat of subversion seriously, and questioned the returning POWs at length as Operation Big Switch continued the prisoner exchange. The ship that returned these men to the US became a kind of floating interrogation complex as Army

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5 Two of these men eventually changed their minds and requested repatriation during the grace period.
6 A brilliant fictionalization of this fear can be found in John Frankenheimer’s film The Manchurian Candidate (1962).
Intelligence officers extensively debriefed every ex-POW. When the repatriation waiting period had passed and it became clear that everyone had come home who was going to come home, the Army began instituting a series of courts-martial, beginning with Edward Dickenson, a POW who had initially refused repatriation but had changed his mind. Over the next several months more POWs would be tried for cooperating with the enemy, and the Army’s unwillingness to forgive its soldiers would conflict with the public’s perception of these soldiers’ actions as excusable. In fact, these courts refused to allow these soldiers to claim duress as a defense at all, only allowing evidence of brainwashing “for the purpose of showing character traits” (UP "Brainwash Plea Lost by Ex-P.O.W."). This focus on “character traits” became pronounced as Americans grew more and more concerned about the success of communist indoctrination of the POWs. As the Army released the results of its interrogations, results that suggested that more soldiers had been convinced by the arguments of their captors than had been previously acknowledged, the question of why these men had broken became more prominent. Although in the end only fourteen courts-martial ever took place, eleven resulting in convictions, the issue of collaboration soon became the focus of discussion of POWs.  

At first, the POWs actions were explained on an individual basis, as the soldiers who gave in to their communist captors were considered to be psychologically weaker than those who remained “reactionary”, in the parlance of the camps. One psychiatrist wrote an article in the New York Times detailing what kind of man was particularly prone to indoctrination:

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7 There were radical differences between military branches in how the returning POWs were treated; the Air Force, for instance, followed a blanket policy of forgiveness for its airmen, many of whom had confessed to germ warfare. The Army was the most stringent in its reaction, and garnered the most press. Lech traces the histories of the 14 men who went to trial, and argues quite convincingly that most of them should not have been held responsible for their actions.
Generally speaking, the man who is the most susceptible to change is the man with no strong focus in his life. He is likely to be a late adolescent, with no career started, no knowledge of world affairs, no real knowledge of his own country and its ways, no great convictions or at least no articulate support for them. Maybe he has a background of family instability or poor school experience. He is likely to be heavily reliant on others for leadership in thought and action [...]. Conversely, the man who responds least to the new indoctrination is likely to be a little older, better educated, with such stable factors as strong religion, success in life and a happy family figuring in his make-up (any single one of these may be enough; it doesn’t take all of them). (Palmer)

According to this description, the men who collaborated did so because of their inherent weakness of character: these conviction-less, ignorant, immature followers could hardly be expected to resist the determination of the enemy, whereas their more normative, successful, wiser, and stable brethren had internal reservoirs of strength on which to draw. Unfortunately, the belief that only the weaker elements of American society fell victim to brain-washing was contradicted by the Army’s own findings: according to the study itself, “[n]othing could be found in the 805 men’s [those the Army considered to have collaborated] heredity, environment, rearing, education, family background, occupation, race, or religion that explained their good or poor conduct as prisoners” (Kinkead 130-1). The POWs who collaborated could not be explained away as simply the weakest elements of American society: “progressives” came from a representative cross-section of the US military, and none of the values lauded by 1950s American culture could be considered a sure-fire defense against brain-washing. But if the failure of these POWs to conform to the image of the virtuous American soldier who would fight to the death could not be attributed to the flaws of individuals, how could these mass collaborations be explained?
In his influential book *In Every War But One*, Eugene Kinkead, a reporter for the *New Yorker* magazine, analyzed the Army’s POW study and spoke to several military sources in an attempt to answer this question. After discussions with numerous military specialists, and after pouring over the transcripts of endless interrogations, Kinkead reached the conclusion that the weakness of these soldiers stemmed directly from a perceived weakness in American society itself, noting that “the roots of the explanation go deep into diverse aspects of our culture—home training of children, education, physical fitness, religious adherence, and the privilege of existing under the highest standard of living in the world.” Korea, he argued, offered an opportunity for introspection: “In the light of what happened in Korea, all of these facets of American life might profitably be re-examined by our leaders in government, education, and religion” (18). The very prosperity of American society was sapping the strength of the nation, producing a generation of soldiers who were unaccustomed to hardship and hence easy prey for the conditioning techniques of Chinese communists. These soldiers collaborated not because they were threatened with death; not because starvation had pressed them to the ends of their tethers; not because after years of captivity they were willing to do whatever they had to do to improve their lots; and certainly not because of any merits in the ideology of communism itself. They collaborated because they were weak; they were weak because American post-war society, with its luxury and moral laxness, had made them weak.

Thus the bad behavior of these POWs specifically reflected larger problems within the United States and could be used to find a solution to those problems. For instance, one of Kinkead’s military sources links the weakness of these soldiers directly to the rise in juvenile delinquency:

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8 The book was tellingly re-titled in its British edition *Why They Collaborated.*
“Loyalty to one’s fellow soldiers and to one’s country should be intrinsically inherent [sic] in every person, certainly in every American, you would say,” [pseudonymous Colonel] Brown went on. “But to speak to a widely-known truth, a certain number of those men who have come into the Army after the Second World War, and as far as that goes today, are completely without loyalty. This means it is necessary to impose a hard, almost blind, discipline to get real efficiency. Look at the juvenile delinquents, the confirmed adult-haters, the slum kids who know nothing but the dog-eat-dog rule. How can you deal with them without discipline?” (172)

Post-war American society, according to this argument, had nothing of the vigor, virtue, and valor of the Greatest Generation, and the soldiers in Korea were nothing more than juvenile delinquents in uniform. The military in particular, and society in general, had become too lax, too forgiving, and as a result was producing men who were weak; the “sad record of our men in Korea” was just one of many signs of the impending degeneration of American society. The only way to counteract this weakness, this decadence, was increasing discipline both in the armed forces and in society more generally.

Kinkead’s study did have its detractors. In his 1963 *March to Calumny*, Albert D. Biderman, a sociologist who had worked for the Air Force, contended that Kinkead too readily accepted the Army’s assumption that the actions of the POWs could not be justified by the conditions they experienced; Biderman rejected Kinkead’s “fundamental thesis […] that these defects are reflections of a prevailing softness in American society” (147). Biderman instead emphasized the extremity of the situation of the POWs, who suffered degradation and torture far outside the experience of the American mainstream. The POWs collaborated, according to Biderman, not because they were weak, but because they had to do so in order to survive. However, because Kinkead’s thesis was
more in tune with prevailing concerns over the degeneration of US power at the time, Biderman’s refutation of that thesis was largely ignored. Kinkead located the failure of the POWs to hold to their democratic, capitalist ideals in an American failure, rather than a defeat at the hands of Asians, and so was actually less threatening to US society at large; his recommendation for tighter discipline over soldiers and over teenagers became the moral of the accepted narrative of the Korean War POWs.

The military responded to this call for increasing discipline by instituting on August 17, 1955 the new Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States. This code for the first time outlined in detail how soldiers taken prisoner were expected to behave. Responding directly to the fear that American soldiers had proven their cowardice by allowing themselves to be captured at all, the Code required that soldiers not go willingly into enemy custody, as well as outlining a rigid rule of behavior once imprisoned: “[T]he American service man will pledge that he will never surrender of his own free will, and that he will endeavor to escape if caught. As a prisoner he will not betray his fellow prisoners. And he will resist brain-washing by refusing to give any information beyond his name, rank, serial number and date of birth” (Leviero). The Geneva Convention declared that a prisoner could not be forced to reveal any information beyond his name, rank, serial number, and date of birth; now the Code of Conduct prohibited soldiers from giving more information. The Code followed the reasoning of the Army Courts-Martial and of Kinkead’s informants in refusing to consider duress as a defense, instead requiring POWs to maintain near-silence without any consideration of possible torture. And in a kind of optimism that would reach its apogee in such popular re-imaginings of the prisoner experience as Hogan’s Heroes, the Code’s insistence that POWs attempt escape ignored the outrageous risks that any kind of attempted escape from a POW camp would likely pose. As Gruner points out, the requirements the Code makes of POWs are entirely unrealistic: a soldier held captive
over years cannot reasonably be expected to say nothing to his jailors beyond his name, rank, and serial number; a soldier held in a camp surrounded by a hostile population would be foolish to attempt escape; and everyone eventually breaks under torture. In order to consider the Code as a fair recommendation to POWs, the military had to ignore everything known about the experiences of soldiers in captivity; instead, the Code describes the ideal soldier as willing to die before surrendering and as impermeable to torture. Unfortunately, putting forward this unachievable ideal as the expected standard of behavior further discredits the behavior of the actual Korean war POWs, who fell short of this impossible benchmark, and belittles the suffering they experienced. Towards the end of his book, Kinkead manifests this dismissal of the pain of captivity, writing: “One of the first, most shocking things noted by all the doctors who had been in the prison camps, [Major Clarence L.] Anderson told me, was the reaction of the average prisoner to the lack of ordinary field and hospital comforts. He seemed lost without a bottle of pills and a toilet that flushed” (189-90). This attitude erases a history of starvation, dysentery, disease, overcrowding, and torture, making it sound as if the worst that POWs encountered in Korea was a lack of aspirin and indoor plumbing. The Code negates the suffering of Korean POWs, instead dismissing them as weaklings and poor soldiers who should have held to a higher standard of behavior; by refusing to recognize that suffering as an explanation for their actions, the Code implies that that suffering was nothing so extreme that any soldier should not be expected to withstand it. This unachievable ideal set an impossible benchmark and belittled the actual experiences of POWs in Korea and elsewhere.

More subtly, the Code of Conduct also changed what it meant to be a prisoner of war. As Biderman notes, the aftermath of war produced a new definition of the status of these prisoners, who were now defined as “still ‘at war’ with the enemy, rather than as ‘quarantined for the duration’” (18). Before Korea, a soldier taken prisoner was
considered to be out of action, awaiting the end of the war and the inevitable prisoner exchange. The Code of Conduct, which insisted that soldiers continue to resist their enemy even as prisoners, changed that status. The war took place not only on the battlefield but in the POW camps themselves. Ironically, this reclassification of POWs accorded with the understanding of captured soldiers that was originally used by the Chinese and North Koreans to justify their treatment of prisoners (UP "G.I. Families Told to Spurn Red Lure"). While the US government criticized the communist nations for this approach during the war, the post-war Code of Conduct made it official US policy. Furthermore, just as the perceived weakness of the Korean POWs came to be seen as an indictment of the weakness of the country at large, the Code of Conduct was put forward as a guide for all of American society: “What has now evolved from the careful study of the prisoner-of-war problem is indeed far more than a military code. It is an assessment of citizenship, a study in responsibility, a guide to better conduct in the future. It should be applicable to civilians no less than to soldiers” ("A Code of Behavior"). The ideology of the Code—nationalism, patriotism, and militarism—was presented as the answer to the increasing decadence of America in general.

Until 1969, this legacy of the Korean War determined the expectations and depictions of prisoners of war in Vietnam as well. For the first several years of that war, American POWs received the same lack of publicity that had characterized their counterparts during the Korean War. The Johnson administration intentionally pursued a policy of silence on the question for fear that excess attention to POWs would lead the North Vietnamese to use their prisoners for political gain or to worsen the situation of the prisoners in retaliation. Like North Korea, North Vietnam, designating those prisoners as war criminals rather than POWs, refused to release a list of their names (Beecher). Although nowhere near the mass deaths occurred in Vietnam that had decimated the prisoner population in North Korea, and although conditions were
generally portrayed as much closer to humane than in those camps along the Yalu, this communist enemy seemed to be following the same propagandistic methods as the last one; the Times reported:

There is a general feeling that the prisoner-of-war camps in North Vietnam come close to meeting the requirement of the Geneva Conventions. However, there have been reports of the North Vietnamese parading American prisoners through city streets and of exposing them to “undue publicity” by making them available to filmmakers and writers […]. Also, the North Vietnamese, like the Vietcong, are reported to subject prisoners to indoctrination sessions. (Treater)

Each time a prisoner “confessed” to war crimes, each time a recording of a prisoner thanking his captors was broadcast, the similarities between these POWs and the disgraced prisoners in Korea was reinforced in the public consciousness. As the antiwar movement, as well as the counterculture generally, was featured more and more prominently in the news media, and as soldiers themselves were increasingly speaking out against the war and against American foreign policy, the same concerns of the degeneration of American society into decadence and effeminacy that had haunted the late 1950s again were linked with the behavior of our soldiers in wartime.

However, the path of the history of the Vietnam War POWs diverges sharply from those of Korea: while Korean POWs were consigned to a kind of ignominy and disgrace, Vietnam POWs to this day are lauded for their bravery. This recovery of the figure of the Vietnam POW began in late 1968, when Sybil Stockdale, wife of POW (and later Vice Admiral) James Stockdale, determined to change the government’s official policy towards POWs. In October of 1968, she published a story on the POWs, their treatment, and what the government knew about that treatment in an intentional move to influence the 1968 presidential election in favor of Richard Nixon, who she believed would change the US position on POWs (Gruner 18). Stockdale’s faith was rewarded:
shortly after taking office, Nixon dramatically altered Johnson’s policy of silence and made the issue of the POWs the single most prominent question in the peace talks, completely changing the focus of debate over the war. On March 1, 1969, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird held a news conference in which he openly questioned North Vietnamese claims that they were treating American prisoners humanely as the opening move in what would become a public campaign for the release of all American POWs (Franklin M.I.A. 49). There followed a kind of media blitz in which the North Vietnamese treatment of prisoners was described as cruel not just to the prisoners themselves but also to their families, who had no way of knowing if their relatives were alive or dead. Laird demanded that North Vietnam hold to the Geneva agreement on the treatment of prisoners, in particular to provide lists of names and allow Red Cross inspections (Beecher). This construction of the North Vietnamese as cruel jailors, in direct opposition to the Johnson administration’s claims that POWs were by and large treated well, relied on a tacit acknowledgement of the parallel between the Vietnam and the Korean POW, and on the memories of the treatment American prisoners had already received at the hands of Asian communists.9

Following this redefinition of the status of American POWs, the Nixon administration proceeded to shift the priority of the Paris peace talks to the POW question, eventually isolating that question from other matters under discussion. The Times reported in late 1969: “President Nixon, describing enemy treatment of American prisoners of war as unconscionable, pledged today to seek a settlement of the prisoner issue apart from other matters at the Paris peace talks” (Semple Jr.). Instead of being

9 It also relied on inaccurate depictions of the French experience in Indochina; as the New York Times reported: “President Nixon inadvertently stirred a controversy last night by telling his televised news conference that when France ‘got out of Vietnam’ in 1954, ‘15,000 French were never accounted for after that’ […]. A French Embassy spokesman said somewhat indignantly today that ‘we are certain that the North Vietnamese gave us back all the prisoners they had’ after the war ended” (“Nixon Is Disputed on French P.O.W.’s”).
one item on a long list of matters under discussion at the talks, the fate of the POWs
now jumped into prominence as an issue separate from any other considerations of war
and peace. Furthermore, this issue soon became the most important question to be
solved by the talks. The US government made any cease-fire discussions dependent on
a settlement of the fate of the POWs, and refused to discuss any military or political
matters until the POW question was resolved, eventually refusing even to consider
withdrawing American troops from Vietnam until the fate of POWs was decided (H. Smith).

The US negotiating position was re-centered around the POWs, and Nixon
declared that American forces would remain in Vietnam until its POWs were released.
This refusal to discuss anything but POWs led to a stalemate in the peace talks, as the
administration made any other settlement dependent on the prisoners’ release but the
North Vietnamese delegation refused to release any prisoners without a settlement (T.
Smith "The Chips in This Poker Game Are Human Beings"). In order to hold this
position, the US negotiators had to ignore centuries of precedent for the treatment of
POWs; H. Bruce Franklin makes the absurdity of the US tactic quite clear:

This dizzying inversion of history conveniently ignored the fact that the United
States, like most nations, has never been involved in a war in which either side
released all its prisoners prior to an agreement to end the war. But through the
strange logic of the administration’s negotiating position and its masterful public
relations campaign, the American prisoners of war had indeed been successfully
transformed—in the public mind—into “bargaining chips” and “hostages” held
for “ransom.” (M.I.A. 59)

To insist that North Vietnam release all American prisoners before the end of hostilities
required the erasure of the role of the prisoner as soldier; after all, no country could
legitimately be expected to provide an enemy with resources, in the form of fighting men
no less than ammunition. In fact, during the Korean War, the UN allies had used this
very reasoning to refuse a blanket prisoner transfer (Parrott "Korea's Prisoners a Difficult Issue"). Instead, the POW was now a “hostage”, being held by the North Vietnamese in a manipulative ploy to force the US to agree to its peace terms.

Redefining the POWs as victims and hostages as opposed to combatants (potential or actual) ignored the implicit logic of the Code of Conduct, which required continual heroism from American soldiers and refused them the position of passive casualty. In order to force the POW into this role, the administration relied on memories of the cruelty of North Korean captors mixed with fears of the inscrutable Asian other. In part, the POWs were hostages rather than prisoners because that was how their captors were painted as treating them. The Times reported at the time:

[M]any observers here believe that the enemy’s intransigent attitude on prisoners is rooted more in their philosophy of war and the expendability of the men who fight in wars […]. “So far as the North Vietnamese are concerned,” one ranking official in the United States Embassy here said last week, “prisoners are an asset in war—an asset to be exploited just like a tank or a gun. They apply an altogether different ethic to the situation than we do. I’m sure than in their view there is nothing inhumane or cruel about it.” (T. Smith "To Hanoi, Prisoners Are an Asset")

The North Vietnamese used American POWs as hostages because they put no value on individual human life, just like their Asian communist allies in North Korea, China, and even the USSR. The North Vietnamese were not refusing to return American POWs because no rational government would release enemy soldiers just so they could return to the battlefield; they were refusing to release POWs because they saw individual lives in terms of their political and economic value. When North Vietnam and the NLF were later accused of holding prisoners specifically to force the US to agree to pay war reparations, the reduction of human life to currency was complete. This kind of
barbarous attack on individual human dignity could only be expected by the evil, Asian, communist foe.\textsuperscript{10}

Franklin, in his definitive analysis of the POW mythos, \textit{MIA: or, Mythmaking in America}, argues persuasively that the Nixon administration intentionally mobilized the vocabulary of hostages and victimization in order to provide a moral justification to a war that was rapidly coming to seem unjustifiable. When the administration first turned the Vietnam debate to POWs in 1969, support for the war was at a low point, and the antiwar movement was gathering momentum; furthermore, as previously discussed, visuals both from the Tet Offensive and from the My Lai massacre were competing for airtime with those from the Chicago Democratic Convention and Dewey Canyon III. The emphasis on POWs allowed these images to be obscured: “America’s vision of the war was being transformed. The actual photographs and TV footage of massacred villagers, napalmed children, Vietnamese prisoners being tortured and murdered, wounded GIs screaming in agony, and body bags being loaded by the dozen for shipment back home were being replaced by simulated images of American POWs in the savage hands of Asian Communists” (\textit{M.I.A.}, 54). In the same fashion, a narrative of rescue replaced one of imperialism and conquest. The original justifications for entering the Vietnam conflict—to allow a small nation its right to self-determination, to keep South Vietnam safe from communism, to protect all of Southeast Asia from the Red Menace—had largely been undermined by the actual course of the war; defining POWs as hostages provided a new, moral rationale for a continuing American presence in Vietnam:

\textsuperscript{10} In fact, the exact same charge had been leveled at North Korea during that war: “The argument they [communists] wield is human; its components are flesh and blood. To an enemy callous of human life, and reckless of human values, like the Russians, the Chinese, the North Koreans, to a philosophy nurtured on the doctrine that the state is God and man the creature of it, and to armies that build victory upon windrows of the dead, prisoners are no more than hostages to be used or abused as expediency or the whimsy of primitive men may indicate” (Baldwin).
In much the same way that the notion of rescue offered soldiers in the field an acceptable moral framework for acting in combat (“I’m killing to save my buddies”), the POWs and MIAs of the early 1970s offered Americans at home a way to imagine that the war in Vietnam remained, as many had thought it was in the beginning, a form of altruism. If, after Tet, Americans could no longer imagine themselves rescuing the “small and brave nation” of South Vietnam, they could at least imagine themselves saving their own helpless soldiers. (Turner 102-3)

What under Johnson had been a war of imperialism became under Nixon a rescue mission. Americans were not POWs, they were hostages; freeing them required not an end to the war but a continuation of it. As Jonathan Schell observed in the *New Yorker*: “Following the President’s lead, people began to speak as though the North Vietnamese had kidnapped four hundred Americans and the United States had gone to war to retrieve them” (qtd. in Franklin *M.I.A.,* 60).

By shifting the war’s ostensible ideological underpinnings from the active containment of the communist menace to the reactive rescue of “innocent” American soldiers, the Nixon administration hamstrung the moral basis of the antiwar movement. As the *New York Times* reported: “Conceding that there was dissent over the war in this country, Mr. Nixon insisted nevertheless that ‘on this issue, the treatment of prisoners of war, there can be and there would be no disagreement’” (Semple Jr.). The legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government and of America’s attempts to sustain that government might be a justifiable topic of national debate, but who would be willing to argue that the POWs shouldn’t be treated humanely? And if those POWs weren’t being treated humanely, what upstanding American could argue against demanding their return?

Despite the lacunas in logic in the Nixon Administration’s policy toward the POWs, the emotional appeal of that policy—playing into the format of the American captivity narrative, as outlined by Richard Slotkin—made the arguments of the antiwar movement
seem naïve at best and actively cruel at worst. In addition, this newly moral justification for war allowed Nixon to continue the conflict in Vietnam without seeming to contradict his campaign promises of peace: the administration was doing all it could to end the war, but after all, we couldn't leave our men behind to be tortured, could we? The war continued, not because the US refused to allow Vietnamese self-government, but because the North Vietnamese refused to release their hostages. As long as one American remained in North Vietnamese captivity, Nixon could not justifiably withdraw US troops from Vietnam.

Naturally, this position brought the peace talks to an immediate halt, as the North Vietnamese predictably insisted on the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam before it would release American POWs. But more subtly, it allowed for the possibility of an indefinite police action. As long as the US government could argue that there were troops being held captive in Vietnam, the war would continue; since the North Vietnamese refused to release a list of the prisoners, the US could argue that any missing soldier was potentially a POW. For a time this problem seemed insoluble, as the North Vietnamese government refused to deal directly with the US; however, in mid-1969 it released several partial lists of prisoner names to various antiwar groups, and in 1970 it provided “what it described as a final and definitive list of all the American prisoners of war it is holding” to antiwar Senators Edward Kennedy and J.W. Fulbright (T. Smith "Senators Receive Hanoi P.O.W. List"). The existence of this list should have indicated, at the very least, a finite number of POWs to be rescued or released; however, the American government was unwilling to relinquish the ambiguity in numbers on which it had come to rely. Instead, the Nixon administration’s response was to discredit this list, claiming that the information it contained was both old and incomplete; Robert J. McCloskey, the spokesman for the State Department, commented: ““This is nothing more than old information passed through two fancy channels in an effort to get the
maximum possible propaganda’’ (T. Smith "Senators Receive Hanoi P.O.W. List").

Strangely, a large part of the administration’s argument that the list was incomplete rested on the fact that there were no names on this list that had not appeared on previous lists released to antiwar groups and that were not already known by the Pentagon; rather than seeing this consistency as an indication of accuracy, the fact the North Vietnamese government did not reveal its duplicity was treated as proof of that very duplicity.

According to Franklin, Nixon’s dismissal of these lists stemmed not from a distrust of the honesty of the North Vietnamese government, but from a covert plan to continue the war. Franklin writes:

Hanoi’s previous failure to identify its prisoners was essential to any conceivable logic in the administration’s attempt to hold it responsible for each and every missing person (since then any MIA might be a POW). Once North Vietnam listed its prisoners, even this tenuous line of reasoning was shattered. Hence it was necessary to discredit its list. The only way to do so was to make a case that North Vietnam was holding more prisoners than it acknowledged. And so the government proceeded to concoct the issue of concealed prisoners, which would become the core of the postwar POW/MIA myth. (MIA, 70-1)

In order to stymie North Vietnamese attempts to move past the issue of POWs in the peace talks, the administration not only refused to accept the North Vietnamese prisoner list as legitimate, it demanded an accounting of GIs so thorough that no government could possibly have provided it, creating ghost POWs: soldiers who the US government claimed could be POWs. These phantom POWs came from the ranks of the hundreds of soldiers who were classified as missing. Once the North Vietnamese released their list, the US responded with their own list of both captured and missing, demanding that the North Vietnamese account for everyone from both groups. Attached
to the official list presented to the North Vietnamese delegation was the following declaration: “‘We are holding the Communist authorities in Southeast Asia responsible for every individual on this list whether or not he is internally classified by the services as captured or missing’” (M.I.A. 68, emphasis added). Suddenly the North Vietnamese were not just expected to release all American prisoners immediately, they were also expected to find those Americans who had simply disappeared. When they argued that they had no knowledge of any American soldiers besides those they had acknowledged as prisoners, the US government responded that they must be hiding them. According to Franklin’s extremely persuasive argument, the numbers game that occupied the last three years of the war, during which every day seemed to see a new number of suspected POWs announced by the US government, was not just an artifact of collapsing bureaucracy during a guerrilla war fought in nearly impenetrable jungle but was the deliberate policy of the Nixon administration, which used these phantom POWs to continue the war, and the Pentagon, which muddied the accounting waters to hide its own covert activities in Cambodia and Laos. Since a full accounting of all missing soldiers is an utter impossibility, particularly given the nature of the Vietnam War and the terrain over which it was fought, demanding that the North Vietnamese government provide such an accounting before the US would withdraw troops allowed the Nixon administration to continue the war indefinitely.\footnote{As Franklin points out, the Vietnamese government has in fact done an unprecedentedly thorough job of accounting for missing American soldiers in the years since the war, despite its own internal turmoil: in 1992, when Franklin’s book was first published, only 2,273 Americans were still “unaccounted for” in Indochina, following the US government’s overly stringent criteria; more than 78,000 were still missing from WWII, and more than 8,000 from the Korean War (M.I.A. 11).}

Any examination of government statements on POWs at the time only serves to reinforce Franklin’s argument. There is not only a near obsessive focus on small disparities in numbers between American and North Vietnamese sources, disparities that could only be expected in such a messy war, there is also the occasional almost
hysterical over-inflation of estimated numbers of POWs. One article from 1970 implies that the Defense Department doubts the veracity of a North Vietnamese list of 334 prisoners both because it was furnished to an antiwar group and because it does not contain the names of 42 men it knows are prisoners but refuses to identify; the article reads: “We believe it is the responsibility of the North Vietnamese to provide an official list through accepted government channels,’ a Pentagon official remarked. ‘If we publish our list, then they know whom we know about and whom we don’t know about. This could be dangerous. For example, at the end of the war, Hanoi could just keep the men we don’t know about” (“Hanoi Said to Confirm List Putting Prisoners at 334”).

Nowhere does this official explain what possible reason the Hanoi government would have for wanting to hide US prisoners; after all, what good is a hostage no one knows you have? Instead, the disparity in numbers alone is held up as evidence that the North Vietnamese must be squirreling away hapless POWs. In that same year, the number of suspected prisoners of war appeared to make a huge leap when David K. E. Bruce, the chief of the US delegation to the peace talks, changed the estimate of US prisoners from 378 to about 1,500 (Ginger). Bruce gave no explanation of where these extra 1,100 POWs came from, or of where he is getting his numbers: in fact, he is adding the number of missing soldiers to those known to be prisoners (and then rounding up). When Nixon himself made the same conflation he was forced to back down. A Times article following a press conference given by Nixon, in which he claimed that there were 1600 POWs, reported the White House’s “clarification” the next day, containing a helpful chart that underlined that only 460 men at the time were officially listed as captured. Still, as many charts and recapitulations as newspapers might publish, the

12 One oft-repeated reason why Vietnam would keep American POWs after the war was to use as slave labor, an absurd justification given the overabundance of cheap labor in Indochina but one which would become prominent in the POW/MIA cycle of films in the 1980s.
very focus on these constantly-shifting numbers could not help but produce an impression that somewhere, POWs were slipping through the cracks. As Franklin notes, the Nixon administration intentionally produced this atmosphere so as to cast doubt on the official North Vietnamese lists and to suggest that a government that would lie about how many prisoners it held could only be doing so for a nefarious reason.

When the war finally did end in 1973, and Nixon brought home the American POWs, his restructuring of the war as a rescue mission rather than as nation-building allowed him to claim a kind of victory. We may have left the struggle in Vietnam in much the same position as we found it, and a North Vietnamese victory might seem inevitable, but the US was victorious in the task of bringing its boys home; Gruner writes: “The POW struggle, in large part, came to represent the whole of the Vietnam war to Americans. The POW experience provided the United States with an ersatz victory, with a face-saving litany that could be read comfortably: the POWs resisted the North Vietnamese Communists at the frontier, thus saving America both physically and psychologically from the threat of Communist infiltration” (35). Nixon had more than fulfilled his goal of “peace with honor;” he had heroically freed his people from captivity, and it should come as no surprise that his “Operation Homecoming” parades welcoming home the POWs bore a strong resemblance to the victory parades that ended WWII. Unlike the Korean POWs, whose return to the US was marked by suspicion and later courts-martial, the Vietnam POWs had not been converted to a communist ideology, and so could be lauded as heroes, men who had fought on the front line of a war that had been reconceived from a jungle combat against an unseen enemy to a psychological battle against inhuman captors. The victory of the POWs over their captors became the victory of America over the North Vietnamese. We may not have successfully stopped North Vietnam’s designs on the independent, democratic government of South Vietnam, but we stopped them from infecting our soldiers with the
virus of communism; and if the conflict in Vietnam was originally intended to prevent the spread of communism to the US, the valor of our POWs proved that we had been successful in that goal, regardless of what happened to the government of South Vietnam.

By the end of the Vietnam War, the figure of the POW had undergone a dramatic transformation. No longer seen as weak-willed or as a sign of the degeneration of American society, the POW was now praised as the victor of the Vietnam War. His successful resistance to the nefarious Asian enemy proved his heroism. Again we see the concept that the POW is an active combatant in war, but here the nature of that combat is not violent or physical but rather the strangely passive notion of resistance. In fact, the very fortitude of the Vietnam POW was described as deriving from their resistance of their captors’ ideology; another contemporary newspaper account relates:

Probably the most important explanation for [the POWs’ good] condition was noted by Colonel Lurie, an articulate, pipe-smoking father of three children. The prisoners did not waste away, nor did they merely try to survive. They had a positive, and, they felt, vital mission—resistance [...]. That mission provided the structure and purpose of life for most of the prisoners, particularly the more than 80 per cent captured in North Vietnam. And it helped produce the extraordinary uniformity and zealous patriotism that have marked their public utterances since their return. (Roberts)

The POWs were depicted as victors in the only war that still mattered: the war of resistance against their captors. Focusing on this kind of passive warfare allowed a displacement of guilt for the war from the US, as the conflict became something done to us rather than something we had done. Strangely, the Vietnam POWs were considered heroes who had resisted the indoctrination of their communist captors despite the acknowledgement that many of them had in fact not resisted, but had collaborated with
the enemy in the same ways POWs usually do, but the sympathy that by-and-large was denied to the Korean war POW was lavished on his Vietnam compatriot. One article describes the experience of the POW: “At first, the interrogators were seeking mainly military information. Almost every prisoner would end up giving a good deal more than his name, rank and serial number, and for many, this was the lowest point in their entire captivity. Out of touch with other Americans and unaware of their experiences, the new prisoners lacerated themselves with guilt” (Roberts). It seems that the POWs did not resist their captors as successfully as the narrative of victory would suggest. And yet the Vietnam POWs did not share the rebuke given to those from the Korean War because of their behavior upon their return home: unlike the returning POWs from Korea, some of whom continued to identify as progressives and many of whom were publicly investigated, the prisoners returning from Indochina were by and large a conservative and patriotic bunch. Whatever collaborating they might have engaged in ended when they crossed the South China Sea.

In fact, unlike the images of soldiers in Vietnam, who were depicted as suffering from low morale and possibly drug addiction, and unlike the images of veterans of Vietnam, who were identified with the antiwar movement as a result of the actions of VVAW, the returning POWs represented the clean-cut American soldier that seemed to have become extinct somewhere around 1969: Gruner calls them “time travelers, Rip Van Winkles from an era before Vietnam changed almost everything. Imprisonment in North Vietnam was a human ‘time capsule.’ The POWs carried intact through captivity values and standards that were unaffected by the frictions within American culture in the late sixties and early seventies” (Gruner 34-5). When these soldiers came home, they held to moral standards that seemed in danger of disintegrating; they were representatives from a more innocent, honorable past. They were largely unabashedly patriotic, supporting the Nixon administration in general and its war aims in particular, and they were
untainted by the corruption of the decadent sixties. American culture responded by embracing the POWs. The Times, for example, hopefully describes their rejuvenating role in a demoralized America:

Figure 31: Returning POWs on a flight to the US; these boys look significantly more clean-cut than VVAW members did.

To the returning prisoners, the answer to this division and disruption is a renewal of national pride, a resurgence of the patriotism they feel has been lost. After so many years with so little, they see the best in their country, the doughnut rather than the hole, and most agree with Colonel Thorsness [an ex-POW] when he says, “I’d like to see every flag double in size and talk about apple pie and motherhood for the rest of my life.”

A few dissident prisoners and their allies in the antiwar movement find this flag-waving dangerous. To them, Colonel Thorsness is expressing the sort of
uncritical, over-confident attitude that they feel got the country involved in Vietnam in the first place.

They tend to focus on the hole in the doughnut. They feel that skepticism is a sign of health, not disease. And they are afraid that in the rush to exalt the prisoners of war and recite the litany of “peace with honor,” the hard-won lessons of Vietnam are in danger of being lost. (Roberts)

Although this article does acknowledge that not all returning POWs were poster-boys for patriotism, it dismisses those who question “flag-waving” as overly pessimistic, focusing on “the hole in the doughnut” to the point of ignoring the pastry entirely. Using this metaphor rather than the more balanced but equally clichéd half-full glass removes a level of impartiality, and suggests that the more pessimistic, less jingoistic position is both nonsensical and self-defeating. Anyone who does not see the best in this country, this article implies, has been corrupted by indulgent, luxurious living in America; only the POWs, who have spent years denied doughnuts, are able to see clearly the greatness of this nation.

Furthermore, the returning POWs were unassociated with the violence of the combat soldier. These men had not lived lives of mundane violence, killing Vietnamese as a 9-to-5 job; they were good kids, pilots mostly, who were indisputably victimized by the North Vietnamese government. They were throwbacks to the ideal of martial heroism left by WWII, men whose willingness to serve their country was untempered by doubt. There is a certain air of class prejudice about this categorization: the POWs, mostly officers and mostly Air Force, tended to be from the middle to upper-middle classes, to have more education, and to be volunteers; the combat soldiers who fought on the ground in Vietnam, whether Army or Marines, tended to be draftees of a lower socio-economic status, who could not get college deferments. Thus the clean-cut image of the returning POW in a crisply-pressed uniform was opposed to the vision of the
soldier created by television news reports of an extremely young, rather dirty, unshaven, and long-haired boy with an accent that marked him as either rural or urban (but never suburban) and who seemed very callous about the taking of human life. The POW brought the image of heroism back to the job of soldiering both because his actions had never disgraced him (the violence of bombing being somewhat less visceral than ground combat) and because he looked the part.

Still, despite the eminent suitability of the POW as hero, despite the parades, and despite the concerted efforts of the Nixon administration, this narrative of victory in Vietnam barely outlasted the celebration of the POWs’ return. In essence, the Nixon’s administration’s plan succeeded too well: the numbers game had so convinced the American public that the North Vietnamese were hiding vast numbers of prisoners of war that the 591 prisoners who did come home in 1973 were anticlimactic. Because the administration had undermined both their own and the North Vietnamese prisoner lists, its claims that all prisoners had now been returned were immediately questioned. Many families of missing soldiers whose hopes had been raised by the government’s policy of assuming that soldiers were alive and prisoners rather than dead refused to accept the administration’s about-face; in particular, the Victory in Vietnam Association (VIVA) instructed its members to demand that Congress deny reparation payments to Vietnam until all the missing were returned (Franklin M.I.A. 83). As much as Nixon might claim to have brought all the POWs home, the American public, convinced by his numbers game, would not believe him. This confusion was exacerbated by the Pentagon’s sudden decision to make policy what had previously been confined to easily-recapitulated statements: the conflation of prisoner with missing, and then with those previously categorized as killed-in-action (Franklin M.I.A. 97-8). Now the North Vietnamese government was responsible not only for all the missing throughout Vietnam, but also for those whose planes exploded, or who stepped on landmines, or who drowned: those
whose deaths had been witnessed but had left no remains to identify officially.\textsuperscript{13} By adding to the number of missing those known to have been killed in action the Pentagon nearly doubled the number of men considered to be “unaccounted for” in Vietnam; applying the administration’s previous logic, by which anyone missing could be a prisoner, suddenly makes the 591 prisoners who did return seem a fairly paltry percentage.

\textbf{Figure 32: Lines of American civilians evacuating the US Embassy in Saigon.}

Because there were so few prisoners who finally came home, the administration’s claims that the US had won the war came to seem disingenuous at best. Nixon’s narrative of victory in Vietnam was built on the idea that he had successfully freed the POWs. When the Vietnam war was restructured to be about rescuing the missing rather

\textsuperscript{13} This number is the basis for the earlier statistic of 2,273 unaccounted for in Vietnam. Franklin also notes: “In the ensuing years, exhaustive case-by-case investigation, together with the absence of contradictory evidence, has led the Department of Defense to make a presumptive finding of death for every single person in the combined POW/MIA total except one” (\textit{MIA}, 14).
than keeping the world safe from communism, Nixon promised that he would indeed bring home every soldier from Vietnam. If he had failed in that promise, and if there were still soldiers left in Vietnam, hidden by the North Vietnamese government, then Nixon’s claims of peace with honor were hollow. Even this frail and tangential concept of victory could not be sustained with a substantial portion of the American public proclaiming that there were still prisoners being held by our communist foes; just one American still in North Vietnamese hands made Nixon into as much of a liar as the Watergate scandal would. Furthermore, when the news footage of the fall of Saigon reached the US at the end of April, 1975, the visual proof of defeat in Vietnam overwhelmed this flimsy narrative. The news media were flooded with images of the last-minute evacuation. Whatever victory the rescue of the POWs had provided the United States was drowned out by the demands of those who believed their relatives were still over there, and the images of welcome-home parades were replaced by those of mobs storming the Saigon embassy and helicopters pushed into the South China Sea. The many pro-American Vietnamese admittedly left behind in the rush to escape the advancing North Vietnamese Army were only reminders of the phantom American POWs whose best hope of freedom evaporated with the last US troops to leave Vietnam. The United States had not only lost the Vietnam War, it had left its boys to die in the jungles of Indochina.

Over the next seven years, this narrative of failure associated with the American military, and with the American fighting man, was again reinterpreted as a victory through the battle to construct the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The grunts that had seemed so menacing and squalid were redrawn as everyday heroes valiantly struggling against cowardly feminized peaceniks and an uncaring bureaucracy. These soldiers had gone from being violent threats to the state, to victims of psychological damage, to men who went up against Washington and won. And yet, no matter how valiant the struggle
of Jan Scruggs and the VVMF, this victory on the home front was a far cry from victory in Indochina. American soldiers may have won this battle, but they had still lost the war, and as a result could not resume the role of soldier-hero that had been destroyed by news coverage from Vietnam. Vietvets were still victims of Vietnam, with the lack of power that definition implies. However, the POW/MIA myth provided a means to overturn this failure in Vietnam itself. If victory in the Vietnam War is defined through Nixon’s goals of rescuing the POWs, then as long as POWs remained in Vietnam the war had not been won; however, at the same time, as long as those POWs remained, a possibility existed that they could be rescued. The war was not a loss: it simply was not over yet, and would not be until all the POWs left in Vietnam were freed. That recasting shifted gradually into a new goal: free those POWs, and win the war.

![US Carrier staff push a helicopter into the ocean to make room on the flight deck.](image)

Figure 33: US Carrier staff push a helicopter into the ocean to make room on the flight deck.
The emphasis on prisoners-of-war that haunted the 1980s first manifested as a particular concern with hostages more properly. The decade began with a hostage crisis, when 52 Americans were held in Iran for 444 days, and Jimmy Carter’s failure to rescue those hostages certainly contributed to his loss in the 1980 presidential election. As television news made abundantly clear, this was not only a problem for the 52 Americans in Iran, this was a national problem, and America itself was being held hostage. The new president, Ronald Reagan, would make no such mistakes, even to the extent of invading Granada in order preemptively to rescue a number of medical students who could have become hostages. The only reason that this invasion to rescue a few medical students who did not actually need rescuing could be presented as anything other than absurd was the link drawn to the Vietnam POWs both through the Reagan administration’s rhetoric, which strongly echoed Nixon’s and which mobilized the same discourses of inhuman communists and captivity narratives, and by the visual resemblances between their homecomings. In his discussion of the invasion of Granada, Fred Turner points out:

[…] Reagan offered Americans a chance to return to and repair the wounds of the past when he staged the rescues of Grenadian civilians and American medical students. When they kissed the pavement of various runways, the returning students became the hostages coming home from Iran and the POWs, back from Hanoi. In essence, they became the images of an America no longer held hostage, either by foreign powers or by recollections of its own impotence, and all across the country, Americans cheered what they thought was their newfound independence from the past. (112)

After a decade of failing to rescue our boys from various different inhospitable countries, this time no one was left behind. The successful invasion of Granada, lopsided though it was, proved that the US had finally entered a new phase of its
history, one which would not be marked by foreign policy failures and military defeats, and one which would not call into question the link between heroism and violence. Of course, Granada was no Vietnam; but as Turner notes, as a symbol in the popular consciousness it seemed to do just as well (112).

Still, as much as the invasion of Granada may have echoed that of Vietnam, its victorious outcome could only replace the failure in Vietnam—it could not erase it. Correspondingly, the Reagan administration did not limit its foreign policy solely to military adventures in small Caribbean and Latin American countries but also renewed the American focus on Vietnam POWs: “In 1983, ten years after the last official U.S. combat in Indochina, the president of the United States solemnly pledged that the fate of the POW/MIAs had now become ‘the highest national priority’” (Franklin M.I.A. 3-4). Reagan repeatedly spoke of the need to rescue the remaining POWs in Vietnam, even at one point authorizing a commando raid on a POW camp that had to be cancelled at the last minute when the camp turned out not to exist, and made American diplomatic relations with Vietnam contingent on a satisfactory settlement of the POW question (Franklin M.I.A. 144). Furthermore, administration officials were not the only ones actively championing the POW cause: after five years of relative quiet, the election of a president so outspoken on the issue energized several organizations dedicated to finding American MIIAs. One figure, retired Special Forces Colonel James “Bo” Gritz, became especially famous as a result of his well-publicized military adventures into Laos in search of POW/MIAs. Unfortunately, none of these raids, fact-finding missions, or investigations ever turned up any evidence of surviving POWs in Vietnam.14 In order to declare the Vietnam War a victory rather than a failure the US had to rescue the over

14 Or, in fact, that any POWs had been held after the end of the war at all. Franklin’s book has an exhaustive account of the missing soldiers, coming to the conclusion that the only American POW left in Vietnam after the cessation of hostilities was one who had willingly defected.
2,000 phantom Americans it claimed to have abandoned in Indochina, but since these POWs were never more than phantoms, this victory was impossible.

But what was impossible for the American government was well within the abilities of the host of fictional commandos who littered American popular culture in the 1980s. What Bo Gritz and the Reagan administration could not do, popular culture could, and in novel after novel and film after film starving POWs were liberated from cruel Asian communist captors. The first of these many continuations of the Vietnam War, released in 1983 to box office success, if not critical acclaim, was Ted Kotcheff’s *Uncommon Valor*. The director of *First Blood* followed up his story of a PTSD-beset Green Beret with a film dealing with a father’s determination to find and rescue his MIA son. Gene Hackman’s Colonel Rhodes, whose characterization bears not a little resemblance to Bo Gritz, scours Indochina for any proof that his son might still be alive, and when he finally discovers this proof he enlists the rest of his son’s platoon for a rescue mission. This rescue mission is, of course, successful, finding and saving several POWs. The financial success of *Uncommon Valor* paved the way for a host of similarly-structured films, novels, and television shows, eventually creating a genre out of back-to-Vietnam POW rescue narratives that would come to displace the facts about POWs in popular memory. And just as this genre edited the history of POWs in Vietnam to one of abandonment and eventual rescue, it also transformed the figure of the soldier in Vietnam from a victim of a brutal war to a hero and a symbol of strength in its most famous protagonist: John Rambo.

The release of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) coincided with the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, which perhaps contributed to its extreme box office success: it had the third highest opening gross up to that time, eventually taking in over $150 million (Fry and Kemp 368). This was nearly three times the box office take of *First Blood*, which earned $57 million (Jeffords *The Remasculinization of America* 187).
The film rapidly insinuated itself in popular culture, even to the extent of possibly inspiring Reagan’s foreign policy: microphones inadvertently picked up a comment from the president that was subsequently broadcast far and wide: “‘Boy, after seeing ‘Rambo’ last night, I know what to do the next time this happens’” (“Reagan Gets Idea from ‘Rambo’ for Next Time”). While *First Blood* had been popular, it had nowhere near the cultural resonance of its sequel. Although the first film depicted a veteran in crisis, encapsulating fears of violent and unstable soldiers rampaging through the American countryside, the second removed the taint of victimization from the veteran, changing his violence from a threat to a virtue. *First Blood* depicted a man whose experiences as a soldier had nearly destroyed him, but *Rambo* reversed this formula, showing how those experiences were precisely what made Rambo into a kind of super-soldier. By mobilizing two stereotypes of soldiers in Vietnam, the traumatized veteran and the killing machine, the film presented the American soldier as *simultaneously* the victim and the aggressor, with the strength of the aggressor and the righteousness of the victim. When Rambo defies his orders to rescue the POWs and single-handedly proves that America’s loss in Vietnam was the fault of incompetent bureaucrats, not her fighting men, he provides a means to rewrite actual failure into mythical victory.

Figure 34: The opening shot of *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (Cosmatos).
The film opens with an explosion, a direct reference to images from the war, but the camera then pans down to reveal not the jungles of Vietnam, but an American hard-labor camp: the explosion was not a bomb but a demolition charge. Having been talked down from his murderous rampage on the town of Hope by Colonel Trautman, Rambo has not been given help for his PTSD, or a job, or any of the sympathy elicited by his monologue at the end of the first film; nor has he been given the opportunity to turn his arrest into the political action claimed by Billy Jack in his third film, *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974). Instead, he has been imprisoned, and is being used as slave labor for the state. Rambo, it seems, escaped a life of slavery as a POW in Vietnam only to find the same existence in the US. The film cuts between long shots of prisoners slinging sledgehammers in an almost lunar landscape and medium shots and close-ups of their captors, prison guards wearing enormous mirrored aviator sunglasses and holding shotguns, shot almost entirely from below to emphasize their absolute authority. Not only does this scene suggest the inhumaneness of the American penal system, it also references the imagined fate of thousands of phantom POWs retained as slave laborers.
in Vietnam. When the camera finally picks our protagonist out of the crowd, we are left with no doubt that Rambo has been abandoned once again by the country he served.

Rambo himself, however, seems strangely reconciled to his fate; in this scene his face is almost entirely devoid of affect from the moment when he turns to face the camera through the entire conversation with Trautman that follows. Between the films, he has undergone a profound transformation. As Jeffords writes: “And though Rambo broke down at the end of *First Blood* and cried on Trautman’s shoulder for his lost friends and uncertain status at home, by *Rambo*, he is emotionless” (Hard Bodies 35). *First Blood* displayed Rambo’s pain as an apology for his violence and as an indictment of a country that refused to acknowledge his plight, but that pain itself suggested a certain amount of weakness on Rambo’s part: Rambo was a victim, a status that implies an aggressor who is bigger and stronger. But Rambo’s lack of emotion here proves his toughness; not even being sentenced to hard labor can break this man, because, as he tells Trautman, he has “seen worse.” Whatever weakness Rambo displayed at the end of the first film has disappeared, and instead we are given a man who would almost rather stay in this hellhole of a hard labor camp than work for Trautman again. Furthermore, this toughness is directly linked to his painful experiences in the past.
Rambo can survive this camp that horrifies Trautman because of his time spent in Vietnamese prisons. The traumas that were presented as responsible for breaking Rambo in the first film are now portrayed as the root of his strength.

Figure 37: Rambo's helicopter flies over picturesque Asian villagers (Cosmatos).

While Rambo has become more stereotypically masculine, avoiding the feminine displays of emotion with which the first film ended, Trautman has become more emotional: he apologizes to Rambo for his situation, demonstrates his revulsion towards the camp, and, when Rambo looks likely to turn down his offer, becomes increasingly pleading in tone. Throughout First Blood Trautman’s character was positioned as a father-figure to Rambo, and whereas Rambo came apart utterly by the end of the film, Trautman remained in control, both of the mission and of his man. Here those positions are reversed, as Rambo obviously holds the power in this interaction. When Rambo agrees to the mission, Trautman’s relief is palpable in his exhaled “Good. Good.” This role reversal is reinforced when Rambo asks what is probably his most famous question: “Do we get to win this time?” Trautman responds with: “This time, it’s up to you,” returning agency to Rambo—and the Vietvet he embodies (Cosmatos). In First Blood Rambo’s actions were not his fault: Trautman made him a killing machine, and the horrors of war destroyed his humanity. That John Rambo was first and foremost a
victim, passively subject to his fate. This John Rambo, on the other hand, is not only in complete control of his own actions and emotions, he is even in control of the outcome of this newly reborn Vietnam War.

When Rambo arrives in Thailand, the launching point for the mission, he finds the same threats that caused the US to lose the war the first time: bureaucrats and technology. After the opening credits, the camera pans across a rice patty populated with workers in conical hats as a helicopter enters the frame; the reference to images of the war, both archival and fictional, is obvious, and suggests that Rambo is in great danger of repeating the mistakes of the past. When he arrives at the base, he is greeted by Trautman and introduced to Murdock, the suit-and-tie-wearing representative from Washington. The battle for the VVM cemented in popular memory the idea that bureaucrats and government interference were to blame for the outcome of the Vietnam War; the appearance of this civilian with ties to politicians bodes no good for the mission’s success. As Rambo’s orientation continues, he is taken to the operations room, a space filled with computers and flashing lights; Murdock then tells him: “Rambo, you can feel totally safe, because we have the most advanced weapons in the world available to us.” Unfortunately, this faith in the power of American weaponry and technology is obsolete: when the North Vietnamese defeated the US army, they did so despite, even according to some interpretations because of, the US’s superior weaponry. As Paul Budra writes: “[T]echnology was the god that failed in Vietnam, and in the myth that these films construct, it becomes the prop of the bureaucrats, the wimps, the egg-heads, the liberals, the very people who lost us the war” (189). In

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15 When Murdock is later revealed to be CIA and his men to be mercenaries, he links the twin demons of bureaucrats, who did not allow the soldiers to do their job and who were too cowardly to fight themselves, to CIA operatives, who were strongly associated with the Phoenix program of assassinations and with Air America smuggling operations. The guilt for the atrocities committed in the war was gradually shifted from rank-and-file soldiers to sub-contracted spooks even as the guilt for losing the war in the first place was shifted to besuited politicians; Murdock’s characterization thus kills two scapegoat birds with one stone. See Chapter 6 for more discussion of the depiction of CIA mercenaries in Vietnam narratives.
Vietnam, the US relied on technology instead of on the skills of her soldiers, and failed. Accordingly, Rambo challenges Murdock’s faith, responding: “I’ve always believed that the mind is the best weapon.” Rambo is rejecting Murdock’s blind assumption of success based on machines, rather than men.

![Rambo's highly developed arm](image)

**Figure 38: Rambo's highly developed arm (Cosmatos).**

In direct contrast with the kind of warfare suggested by Murdock’s computer room, Rambo’s preparation ritual involves no flashing lights or advanced technology of any kind: he sharpens his oversized knife. In this opening shot of a montage depicting preparations for the mission, the camera lingers on Stallone’s muscular physique as he slowly draws his knife across a whetstone; the montage ends with Stallone contemplating the knife briefly before thrusting it into its sheath. We know from *First Blood* how much damage Rambo can do with just his knife; the camera’s focus on Rambo’s physique—to the point where this isolated arm is so disconnected from the rest of his body as to be unidentifiable at first—further emphasizes Rambo’s physical, lo-tech nature. Furthermore, Stallone’s extreme fitness reminds us that Rambo’s body is itself a weapon. William Gibson explains in his discussion of the emerging paramilitary culture of the 1980s:
Modern warrior heroes are almost all in superb physical shape, often having extensive martial-arts skills. Neither the classical Western hero with his fast-gun draw nor the soldier leader achieved his power from tremendous bodily strength. The new warrior is a unified biological and mechanical weapons system; there is no separation between body and weapons. Rambo is, as Colonel Trautman calls him, a “pure fighting machine.” ("Paramilitary Culture" 91)

Rambo may believe, as he tells Murdock, that the mind is the best weapon, but this film makes obvious that his mind is only effective because it is housed in this ubermensch-like body. Rambo’s strength comes not from tools, technology, or strategy, but from his overwhelming force.

Figure 39: Rambo battles mankind's original enemy (Cosmatos).

Naturally, despite all Murdock and Trautman’s plans, this technology itself nearly gets Rambo killed, as he gets hung up by his gear when parachuting into Vietnam. Rambo is forced to use his enormous knife to cut away his equipment to free himself, leaving behind all of the advanced technology that was supposed to compensate for the lack of fellow team members. Instead, he begins his wild-goose-chase of a mission
armed with nothing more than his knife and his bow. Still, far from undermining Rambo’s effectiveness, this freedom from technology seems to revitalize our hero, and for the first time in the film Stallone’s face displays some sort of emotion. The jungles of Vietnam are Rambo’s home, as Trautman has told us, and Rambo does not need technology because he is at one with nature; he is the prototypical American hero who is at home in the savage wilderness. In fact, just in case the symbolism was not clear enough, Rambo’s first encounter in Vietnam is not with a soldier but with a snake, but Rambo does not repeat original sin; he remains in his untainted state and allows the snake to live rather than killing it, thereby suggesting his integration with the natural world. The US famously waged war not just on the PAVN and the NLF, but on the very landscape of Vietnam, using napalm and Agent Orange to destroy thousands of acres of

![Vietnamese soldiers, bearing a striking resemblance to WWII-film Japanese villains, attempt to recapture Rambo using mortar shells (Cosmatos).](image)

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16 Ironically, despite the low-tech nature of the bow conceptually, Rambo’s bow itself is significantly more advanced than the ones his Native American ancestors would have carried: it is a collapsible compound bow complete with exploding arrowheads. However, by the time the advanced nature of this bow becomes obvious, Rambo has already made his peace with technology: the explosions he causes are only one small step on the road to Rambo’s domination of both nature and technology.
jungle. In contrast, Rambo is at one with the landscape, moving silently and rapidly through terrain that bogged down the American military machine and saving his violence for human enemies.

Rambo’s affinity for the jungles of Vietnam does not work solely to repudiate the history of US reliance on technology during the war, but specifically reverses the positions of American and Vietnamese soldiers. During the war, the Vietnamese, and specifically the NLF, were presented as being almost supernaturally associated with the land, disappearing into the jungle at will and using the lowest-tech weaponry to bring the overconfident Americans to ruin. *First Blood* already demonstrated Rambo’s affinity for the methods of his enemies both through his choice of weaponry and his ability to disappear at will, but in that film Rambo’s skills were threatening: like those returning Korean POWs, Rambo seemed to have almost turned into the enemy, using their methods against his homeland. Here, in contrast, Rambo is out-guerrilla-ing the guerrillas, using the methods of the NLF against the new Vietnamese regime. Completing the inversion, the Vietnamese themselves have slipped into the role previously played by Americans. When Rambo almost single-handedly rescues a POW from the camp that was not supposed to exist (with a minimum of help provided by Co Bai, his female sidekick), the Vietnamese resort to the kind of weaponry and tactics that so determinedly failed the US during the war. Rambo infiltrates the camp silently, using only his knife and bow. However, when the bodies he leaves behind are discovered, the Vietnamese attempt to capture him using helicopters and mortars. They hunt him through the jungle in formations that echo the platoons of US forces; they chase him on swift boats; and they blow holes in rice paddies with artillery. By reversing the roles of these combatants, *Rambo* reverses the history of the war, in which the US came to play Goliath to the Vietnamese David; Rambo is now the underdog, fighting against an almost comically evil enemy (when Rambo reaches the POW camp he finds one
American actually being crucified) that now possesses all the trappings of imperialist warfare.

Figure 41: Japanese-Vietnamese soldiers salute the visiting delegation of Russian Nazis (Cosmatos).

But while this film revises the logistical and moral positions of the Americans and the NLF, giving Rambo both the NLF’s tactics and their moral authority, it retains the excuse for American loss in Vietnam: betrayal. According to the narrative reified by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the US lost the Vietnam war because of incompetent bureaucrats who betrayed both the soldiers in the field and the American public at large; these bureaucrats have continued this policy of betrayal by abandoning the thousands of phantom POWs still in Vietnam to their fate. It should come as no surprise, then, that Rambo is captured by the Vietnamese not because of any failure of his own—just the opposite, as his ability to elude their overwhelming forces is almost magical—but because Murdock, who never wanted to find proof of POWs, orders his mercenaries to leave Rambo behind. Two of Murdock’s men have come to the rendezvous point with Trautman to collect Rambo, but when Murdock learns that Rambo has brought a POW with him, he orders his men to abort; Trautman objects: “You goddamn mercenaries! There’s men down there! Our men!” Unfortunately for Rambo, these mercenaries don’t
feel the same way, and one pulls a gun on Trautman to keep him from interfering, reminding him: “No, your men. Don’t be a hero”. The entire history of the Vietnam war is here represented by a mercenary’s and a bureaucrat’s refusal of a heroic position. The problem is not that soldiers in Vietnam were not heroes; it is certainly not that soldiering in general is not a particularly heroic practice; the problem is that American soldiers were forced at gunpoint to be cowards.

Having been left behind by his faithless teammates, Rambo and the POW are captured at last. At this point the film reveals both its Cold War ideology and its historical influences, morphing into something of a WWII film, where the Japanese are played by Vietnamese and Russians are their German masters. As Gibson points out, even the costuming reflects America’s WWII enemies more accurately than her enemies in Vietnam, and the stereotypes common to those earlier war movies are here employed to change the Vietnam war into something more straight-forwardly black and white (“Paramilitary Culture” 91). Rambo is suspended by his captors in a pool of pig slop until a helicopter bearing a group of “damn Russian bastards” arrive, as identified by a POW. The power relations between these two nationalities are immediately drawn, as another POW says of Rambo: “He’s dead now,” and as the Vietnamese formally salute Lieutenant Colonel Podovsky and his staff. Naturally, the non-white Vietnamese could not possibly have won a war against the US on their own, but here are revealed to be nothing more than puppets of Moscow in an echo of wartime propaganda depictions of Japanese and Germans (not to mention of the North Vietnamese). Even Podovsky displays his disdain for his Asian accomplices, saying: “These people are so vulgar in their methods.... They lack compassion,” as he removes a leech from Rambo’s chest. The Vietnamese are again inscrutable, alien Orientals, utterly incomprehensible in their
primitive methods, while the Russians, like their Nazi ancestors, might be evil but are not inhuman.¹⁷

Still, these Russians are far from opposed to torture; Podovsky might call Rambo a comrade, and attempt to explain his situation to Rambo in logical terms, but when Rambo refuses to talk, he rapidly resorts to less companionable methods. His enormous henchman tortures Rambo with electrodes before resorting to threatening him with his own, now super-heated, knife; Podovsky might not think these methods are vulgar but they are far from compassionate. But the questions Podovsky asks Rambo are not the ones the viewer ignorant of the history of American POWs in the second half of the twentieth century might expect: he does not ask Rambo what he was doing in the camp, or what he was doing in Vietnam, or for whom he is working. He asks Rambo his name, but he doesn’t particularly seem interested in discovering the answer. In fact, Podovsky already knows what Rambo was doing in the camp—”trying to facilitate the release of war criminals held by this republic”—and cares not at all about the details of Rambo’s mission, never asking if Rambo had help, or if there might be other soldiers planning another attack. Instead, he informs Rambo with a wince: “This incident, your capture, is... embarrassing.” The problem here is not one of life or death, but of the US and the Vietnamese saving face: the lives of the POWs are unimportant in comparison. Thus, Podovsky has found a way to turn this embarrassment to his advantage: following the lead of the North Koreans, he does not ask Rambo for information but for a confession: “I wish you to radio your headquarters and say that you have been captured and condemned for espionage activities, and that no such criminal aggression should be attempted in the future or they will meet with the same fate as yours.” Podovsky’s lack

¹⁷ Tellingly, the actor depicting Podovsky, Steven Berkoff, had previously been the evil Russian General Orlov battling James Bond in Octopussy (1983) as well as the ambiguously gay Aryan drug smuggling villain Victor Maitland of Beverly Hills Cop (1984), and would go on to play Adolf Hitler in War and Remembrance (1988). Berkoff himself was born in London.
of factual questions makes no sense without the background of the experience of the Korean War POWs: why else would Podovsky want Rambo to make this politically-loaded broadcast instead of asking him, for instance, where this headquarters might be located? Only within the POW narrative, in which soldiers are sources of propaganda rather than information, does Podovsky’s focus on what he calls a “radio broadcast” make sense. The threat here is not that Rambo will betray his fellow soldiers but that he will betray his country’s ideology.

Of course Rambo remains the perfect soldier, and refuses to provide Podovsky with any information, going even further than the strictures imposed by the Code of Conduct and responding only once, with a muttered “Fuck you.” Accustomed as he is to being abandoned by his government, he does not even crack when Podovsky reveals that Murdock ordered him left behind; being physically tortured has even less impact. Only when his fellow POW is threatened with blinding with Rambo’s own knife does Rambo seem to agree to Podovsky’s terms. When Rambo is positioned in front of the radio microphone, however, he does not broadcast a confession to war crimes or a plea for his government and compatriots to give up the fight, but instead threatens Murdock—“I’m coming to get you”—before knocking Podovsky’s henchman out with the microphone stand. Podovsky had already recognized that Rambo’s strength comes in part from his previous experience as a captive of the Vietnamese, saying: “I see you are no stranger to pain. Perhaps you have been among my Vietnamese comrades before.” In this moment we see that Rambo has learned from his POW experience to the point where he is able radically to subvert the enemy’s weapons: he takes the microphone, which was once a propaganda tool directed towards the destruction of the US, and changes it into a symbol of the very overwhelming force that the US used in Vietnam even as he denies the technological nature of that force, turning a piece of electronics into
a primitive club. In Rambo's hands, that advanced technology, that overwhelming force, does not fail.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 42: Rambo's inventive use of a radio microphone stand (Cosmatos).**

Again, with minimal assistance from Co (whose very name is a gender marker, as “Co” means “Miss” in Vietnamese), Rambo escapes from the camp. Believing themselves safe, Co and Rambo share a quiet, romantic moment during which Rambo promises to take Co with him to America, but this peace is soon shattered when the Vietnamese commander guns Co down. Repelling the soldiers in time to catch Co’s dying query—“You not forget (me)?”—Co here exhorts Rambo to the same remembrance that everyone else in the film has tried to dismiss. Murdock may be determined to forget Rambo just as the entire American government may be determined to forget the men it left behind and even the war in Indochina itself, but as he assures Co, Rambo refuses to forget: his scars mean he must remember, and he will stand as a reminder to his nation of a war that this film makes clear it is trying to forget. Co’s plea further reminds Rambo of his duty toward the forgotten POWs, and he is inspired by her words in essence to re-fight the Vietnam War.
Figure 43: Rambo becomes one with nature (Cosmatos).

The sequence that follows Co’s death greatly resembles the sequence in First Blood when deputies from Hope are first chasing Rambo through the forests of the Pacific northwest: here, as there, hapless men in uniform stumble through the trees only to be blindsided by the silent but deadly V(i)et Cong, who relies on the most lo-tech of weaponry and his ability to blend into the landscape for his success. But whereas First Blood suggests that Rambo’s skill will be turned against his nation, as if Rambo had been brainwashed into being an enemy of the state at the same time that he learned the tools of that enemy, here he battles against his Vietnamese captors, bringing the role reversal first suggested by his original escape from the camp to an apogee. An orgy of violence follows, as Rambo slaughters Vietnamese soldier after Vietnamese soldier in many and varied ways, all of which serve to reinforce his affinity with nature. This time, however, Rambo is on the offensive. He is not running away from the Vietnamese, using their skills to try to escape: he is attacking them with such effectiveness that one is forced to wonder how the US ever lost the war at all.18 Sneaking up behind Vietnamese and

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18 In fact, as Dionisopoulos points out: “While trying to elevate the character of the Vietnam veteran by portraying him as a ‘super-warrior,’ these films tend to cheapen the sacrifices and accomplishments of those who actually fought in Vietnam. The Stallone/Norris ‘super-veteran’ accomplishes more in two hours than
Russian alike, hiding in the landscape, using only his bow, his knife, and what might be his shoelaces, Rambo slaughters everyone he faces, a slaughter implicitly justified as revenge not only for Co’s death but for the death of thousands of American troops as well as the continuing enslavement of the POWs.

Figure 44: Rambo runs through a village filled with women, children and monks (Cosmatos).

Still, the expectations of the action genre begin to impinge on Rambo’s lo-tech style. Now that Rambo has thoroughly proven his ability to do without technology and his mastery of the tools of his enemy, he begins waging a war that looks a great deal more like the one familiar from news footage. To facilitate his escape, Rambo uses his lo-tech bow and arrows with high-tech exploding tips to destroy an entire village—a village which even inexplicably contains a group of Buddhist monks, as well as a running child who seems destined to recreate the famous photograph “Vietnam Napalm.” Perhaps Rambo here is destroying the village in order to save it; whatever his motivation, he displays no remorse for the innocent lives that must have been lost.

the entire U.S. military did in 10 years, and the impression is that, if we would have had enough soldiers like these, we could have beaten the Vietcong at their own game” (94).
Furthermore, the image of an American blowing up a Vietnamese village (and, incidentally, of children and monks on fire) is one which is immediately associated in the popular imagination with US actions in Vietnam, but whereas this kind of over-the-top violence was far from comfortably justified during the actual war, when the moral basis for US actions was tenuous at best, Rambo’s actions go unquestioned by the film: what was done to him, what was done to Co, and what continues to be done to the POWs is more than enough to demand Rambo’s use of extreme force, even if some villagers and monks might get caught in the crossfire. To be fair, the only burning bodies shown are of Vietnamese soldiers, not monks or children, and Rambo is not aiming at the village itself but at the soldiers who are swarming it. Nevertheless, the image of explosions surrounding a Vietnamese village, complete with burning humans, has too direct an ancestor in Vietnam War footage to be ignored. Still, here those images are linked to a different narrative that allows for a drastic reinterpretation. Rambo has been positioned as the underdog, being chased by hordes of Vietnamese and Russian soldiers: his use of overwhelming firepower does not seem a cruel action but a necessary, perhaps even desperate, one. This new legitimacy, by extension, confers a similar justification on the US military’s actions during the war itself.

Rambo continues to confuse American and Vietnamese methods of warfare: he beats the Vietnamese commander in an AK-47/exploding arrow duel; he escapes a bomb dropped from a helicopter; he then leaps into the helicopter and throws his enemies from it, echoing yet another image of atrocity that haunted US forces. And in the climax of the film, he attacks the POW camp using his stolen helicopter in a direct echo of so many attacks on Vietnamese villages. Having somehow mastered technology to the extent of being able to control the helicopter’s doorgun with the power of his
Mind, Rambo is a one-man assault platoon, gunning down soldiers and exploding huts in a virtuosic display. Russians and Vietnamese alike fall under his assault, and Rambo is able to rescue all of the camps’ prisoners in this one, magic, helicopter. As Rambo leaps from the helicopter to free the prisoners, Stallone’s highly developed chest is paired with the now-portable helicopter door gun to prove Trautman’s description: Rambo truly is a killing machine. After an extensive helicopter battle, during which Rambo continues to demonstrate his facility with the technology of flight and which again brings back memories of the war in its images of a Huey, a Cobra attack helicopter, and fleeing civilians, Rambo at last kills Podovsky with an unlikely rocket launcher shot and returns to headquarters.

Figure 45: Rambo throws his enemy out of a helicopter (Cosmatos).

At last Rambo confronts his nemesis: his first action upon his return, after kneeling the mercenary who abandoned him somewhat below the belt, is to storm into the base’s computer room and destroy the banks of computers with his machine gun. Just as

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19 The helicopter Rambo has captured has an M-60 machine gun mounted in its door that can be seen to be firing throughout his assault on the camp, but this gun is not automated or linked to the helicopter’s controls: it requires a door gunner to operate. How Rambo manages to fly the helicopter and fire the door gun at the same time remains unexplained in the film.
20 This final third of the film is increasingly unlikely; but I believe that the very absurdity of Rambo’s successes constitute part of the pleasure of viewing, not to mention reinforcing the notion that Rambo is something more than human.
the narrative of the VVM showed the grunt locked in battle with the Vietnamese on one side and the government on the other, Rambo too has two enemies. He has unarguably defeated the first, likely leaving no one alive at the POW camp, but the film is not complete until he defeats the second, and so he attacks the impersonal technology that was meant to replace humans without ever displaying their capacity for compassion. The rational thinking exemplified by these computers and demonstrated by Murdock, who is willing to sacrifice the few POWs for the good for the many Americans, as well as by Podovsky, who looks to avoid the embarrassment of an international incident, is entirely rejected by Rambo in the most emotional moment of the film. His lack of affect from the beginning of the film is reversed, as no one could possibly still call Rambo effeminate or weak after his rampage; instead, he displays a justifiable anger in the face of Murdock’s, and the government’s, blasé dismissal of American lives, encapsulating the fury not only attributed to the phantom POWs but also to the thousands of Vietnam veterans ignored by their nation. When he goes on to attack Murdock, who seems to be literally shaking in his loafers, Rambo finally reverses the power dynamic that kept him at the mercy of his civilian superior, and in the process redeems the reputation of the

Figure 46: At last, Rambo does battle with technology (Cosmatos).
soldier in Vietnam: Rambo is not weak, he is not insane, he is not traumatized, he is not a victim, and most importantly, he did not lose. When Rambo tells Murdock “Mission accomplished,” he is also telling the viewer what the US could still do in Vietnam, if it were not hampered by government bureaucracy.

This narrative of a Vietvet’s triumphant return to Vietnam, epitomized by Rambo, permeated popular culture—even Magnum, PI left the paradise of Hawaii to return to Indochina on a rescue mission, and a slew of films and television shows featured veterans refighting the Vietnam War. In fact, this narrative inspired an entirely new genre of pulp fiction. One such series, published by Jove press under the house pseudonym of Jack Buchanan, was known (descriptively enough) as the M.I.A. Hunter series. First appearing in 1985, the series follows the exploits of Mark Stone: “Former Green Beret, ex-P.O.W., Stone has devoted his life to rescuing M.I.A.’s” (Buchanan back cover). Although Stone’s adventures are not entirely confined to the jungles of Vietnam, and he does occasionally turn his violence loose in other countries, still he always returns to his quest to free every last POW in Indochina. These books share the same ultraviolent aesthetic as Rambo, naturalizing a level of savagery as long as it is employed for moral ends; they also continue that film’s demonization of the Vietnamese, depicting them not simply as enemies, but as inherently brutal, primitive and evil.

Stone: M.I.A. Hunter is the seventh book in the series and is described as the “special blockbuster edition,” perhaps because it chronicles the rescue not just of any POW but of Stone’s one-time fiancée from a North Vietnamese general who has kept her for thirteen years as a sex slave. The narrative moves from Laos, to Los Angeles, to El Salvador, back to Laos, in a pattern that became increasingly familiar throughout the 1980s and that linked South America with Southeast Asia, just as Reagan himself did.
through his invasion of Granada and general policy of the Reagan Doctrine. But while this novel does not really move beyond the plotline laid out by Rambo, it exaggerates the concerns of that film to a level that is well beyond absurd, demonstrating how accepted this revision of the history of Vietnam had become. The novel, and the series more generally, rely on an acceptance of a version of Vietnam that was only available once Rambo had redescribed that war.

The novel begins with Stone and his two assistants, Hog Wiley, the savvy redneck, and Terrance Laughlin, the British ex-SAS officer, in the midst of an operation to rescue a small group of American POWs from Vietnamese-occupied Laos. Supported by a number of Laotian “anti-communist guerrillas,” Stone and his men intercept a convoy of trucks transporting slave laborers, mostly Laotian but with a few Americans: “Behind the jeep the six-by-six trucks would contain slave labor, heading for the worst work in the occupied nation—the Vietnamese attempt to activate some old gold and silver mines” (4). American POWs are being kept solely for their use as slave labor, not at all out of any political need; in fact, they are mixed in with a general population of slaves. These Vietnamese do not discriminate in their depravity. Nowhere does the novel question the premise that the Vietnamese would employ slave laborers, or that they would keep American prisoners from a decade-past war for such a purpose. Furthermore, the novel presents the idea that all communists are just as nefarious, not just the Vietnamese. After successfully assaulting the convoy, Stone and his group begin their march back to Thailand, only to run across a village that has inexplicably been attacked by Laotian communists. The scene is unrelentingly graphic: “Five naked men hung from the corner posts of the Laotian houses. All were stripped

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21 See chapter 6 for a more in-depth discussion of the transfer of the Vietnam War to other arenas, such as the War on Drugs.
22 The overly descriptive names of these characters give a good impression of the general aesthetics of the novel itself.
naked, all had been cut, slashed and probably hacked with machetes, tortured terribly before they died” (27). The novel nods towards an explanation, suggesting that communist troops have attacked this village because of some connection to the anti-communist guerrillas, but that explanation is so vague and unformed that the scene mostly generates the impression that all communists are this savage by their very nature. Like Rambo’s Vietnamese foes, who would go so far as to crucify a prisoner, these communists do not just stop at torture but seem to revel in their brutality. The Vietnamese and the Laotians are conflated through their shared communist ideology and their complete and utter lack of any humane sentiment, and these enemies of America are consistently depicted as depraved.

We first meet Rosalyn James, Stone’s long-lost love whom he has only just discovered is alive and in communist hands, in a series of flashbacks that again make clear the dire threat these communists present, not just to soldiers, but to women. Rosalyn, an Army nurse, narrowly survives a helicopter crash during the war only to find herself captured by a band of Viet Cong; the novel immediately demonstrates the brutality of these men when their first action is to force her to strip to the waist. The threat here is immediately sexual; there is no possibility that these guerrillas might treat their captive with any decency. When Rosalyn is brought back to their village, the depiction of these villagers indicates both their indecency and their primitivism: “The men stopped and pointed at her, and yelled something she didn’t understand. The women hooted and screeched at her. The men ran up and tried to touch her. When she turned away from one, another touched her shoulders, then her breasts. She kicked one in the crotch and he limped off, screaming at her” (151). The men prod her, the women “hoot” and “screech;” the description seems straight out of caricatures of indigenous tribes of head hunters confronted with their first blonde heroine. Not only are these Vietnamese inhumane, they are nearly inhuman, seeming more like a pack of wild
animals than individuals who exist within a civilization. There is no possible response to such a threat other than violence, and the greater American project in Indochina is justified through this characterization of the vile Vietnamese enemy.

However, the book does not stop with this definition of the Vietnamese enemy as primitive and evil, but demands the reader’s utter rejection of America’s foe through the description of Rosalyn’s final captor. She is sold to a North Vietnamese general, aptly named the General, who directs his heroin operations from a fortress on the border of Laos and China. This headquarters seems to come not from war stories but from fairy tales: “A fortress, etched into the side of a towering mountain. A huge castle of both Chinese and Western design loomed overhead, surrounded by a giant wall of gray rock” (156). Rosalyn has become Rapunzel, kept in a tower against her will, waiting for her hero to save her. This is no longer a story set in a complicated history of international politics, this is a medieval romance in which Rosalyn is the princess and Stone the knight in shining armor. When the novel goes on to describe the intricate torture chamber in the dungeon of the castle, complete with a rack, an iron maiden, and even a pit and a pendulum, the setting elicits little surprise; naturally such a stock villain would come complete with such a predetermined lair.

Of course, Stone himself is not beyond a little brutality himself. The novel shares the glamorization of ultraviolence with Rambo, and Stone seems just as competent a one-man army. The descriptions of the damage Stone inflicts in his attacks are often quite gruesome: “A guard rushed out of the cab of the first truck, his AK-47 ready for a butt stroke to silence the American. A pair of stingers from a 15 stopped the plan as the rounds bored their way through the Vietnamese’s chest and exploded out his back,

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23 To be fair, Rosalyn does encourage one of the General’s guards to stage a coup in an attempt to gain her freedom, and so is not entirely passive; however, the coup attempt fails, and she is about to be executed on the rack by the General when Stone rescues her in the nick of time.
taking two bloody vertebrae with them” (8). The emphasis on blood and gore here is somewhat obsessive, and mimics the bloody-minded film that is its progenitor.

However, Stone’s violence is justified by the savagery of his foes: like Rambo, he has learned violence from the Vietnamese and is now turning that violence back on its creator. Strangely, the novel seems somewhat obsessed with making Stone’s prowess in violence believable, as can be seen in the descriptions of various weapons and the continual inclusion of the Asian names for martial arts moves: “Stone pivoted and slammed a fumikomi, a front stamp kick, into the youth on the left. He went down with a scream. Stone looked to his right and saw the knife man thrusting hard. He threw up his hands into a juji-uke, a crossed arm ‘X’ block, catching the knifer’s wrist, avoiding the blade” (67). This violence is described in fanatic detail even to the point of interrupting the narrative flow, and in fact the descriptions serve a purpose that is ideological rather than aesthetic. In this example, the Japanese term and its English translation both are unnecessary for the plot and distract from the action; they are included solely to increase the sensation of realism and to reaffirm Stone’s access to a mysterious wisdom not possessed by the civilian, who only throws punches.

Given Stone’s excessive expertise in killing, it comes as no surprise when he and his two assistants manage successfully to assault the General’s fortress without receiving anything more dire than a flesh wound. Just as Rambo is a one-man army, Stone and his cohort’s abilities far outweigh that of their Vietnamese enemies, and the final battle at the castle seems so easy for Stone it is almost anticlimactic. However, the ease of the General’s defeat makes more sense upon remembering who the Vietvet’s real nemesis is: not the Vietnamese, not even the communists, but the American bureaucracy. After escaping the castle, Stone runs directly into an ambush set by Coleman, a CIA operative in Thailand who seems to have nothing better to do than to try to kill him. Coleman’s motivation for persecuting Stone is never directly explained in the novel, but anyone
familiar with the MIA narrative could easily supply it: Coleman needs to stop Stone’s MIA rescue activities because the American government cannot acknowledge those MIAs, and Coleman is willing to let all the remaining POWs rot in captivity for the sake of foreign policy. Coleman arrests Stone, has him imprisoned in California on trumped-up charges, tries to have him assassinated in Thailand, and then finally sends a force of mercenaries to kill him and his band all to protect the dirty secret that MIAs are still alive in Indochina.

Of course, just as Murdock is no match for Rambo in a direct confrontation, Stone easily defeats Coleman time after time, seeming not even to consider him much of a threat. After the assassination attempt, Stone confronts Coleman, demanding he share any information he has on the General; Stone easily overpowers Coleman, who immediately apologizes, blames his actions on his orders, and then tells Stone everything he knows. Just as Rambo does not kill Murdock, Stone lets Coleman live, and his final words to him indicate his utter contempt: “‘Little C.I.A. man, you have not seen me. You do not know that I am here. This conversation never took place. You do not make out a report to your control or to the head man in Virginia. If you do anything like that, I’ll come back and kill you. Now, do you fully understand? I’m still mad as hell at you, scumball!’” (163). Even Coleman, with the whole weight of the American government behind him, is no threat to Stone: Coleman is nothing more than a “little C.I.A. man,” and Stone is utterly unfazed by any menace Coleman might present. Coleman’s assassination attempt has only left Stone “mad as hell.” Coleman might be a significantly more dangerous threat than the non-American General, but he is still no match for this Vietvet. At the end of the novel, when Stone seems pinned in an unwinnable situation surrounded by Coleman’s mercenaries, he is rescued by his girlfriend Carol, who has learned how to operate a helicopter door-gun on the ride over;
Coleman isn’t even a match for an untrained civilian girl. The novel ends with Stone just as determined to rescue MIAs as he was when it began, and despite Coleman’s best efforts, we know that Stone will soon be back in Vietnam.

Just as Stone: M.I.A. Hunter leaves Stone in conflict with the government, Rambo doesn’t end with its title character receiving a second medal of honor, or even the promised presidential pardon. Instead, like the western hero he gestures towards, Rambo strides off into the sunset alone. As he walks away from headquarters, Trautman tries to get Rambo to stop and forgive the society that abandoned him and his fellows; there follows possibly the most famous exchange of the film:

TRAUTMAN. You can’t keep running, John. You’re free now. Come back with us.

RAMBO. Back to what? My friends died here. Part of me died here.

TRAUTMAN. The war, everything that happened here may be wrong, but damn it, don’t hate your country for it.

RAMBO. Hey, I’d die for it.

TRAUTMAN. Then what is it you want?

RAMBO. I want what they [indicating the POWs] want, and every other guy who came over here and spilt his guts and gave everything he had, wants. For our country to love us as much as we love it. That’s what I want.

Implicit in this explanation, of course, is Rambo’s accusation that his country does not love him; that until it does, he can never return home, and will be forced to wander, living “day by day.” On one level, this implied rejection of Rambo refers specifically to the supposed poor treatment soldiers received from civilians and from the government upon their discharge after the war: Rambo repeats the indictment that motivated the

24 Carol works for the Defense Department, but does not seem to have any military background.
building of the VVM. But that poor treatment itself, the rejection of returning Vietnam veterans, stemmed in large part from a fear of their uncontrolled and uncontrollable violence. After watching a film whose entire last half hour was devoted to displaying its hero’s infinite capacity for killing, could one expect the US to welcome Rambo with open arms? Furthermore, *First Blood* demonstrated the kind of life Rambo could expect to have if he did return; could one expect him to repeat that experience? Keith Beattie writes: “Early in the film Trautman[…] advises another character that ‘what you call hell, [Rambo] calls home.’ Thus, logically, what ‘we’ call ‘home,’ Rambo calls hell. Home is infernal for Rambo because as a loner and a warrior, he would simply be out of place in such a homogeneous unity (142). Rambo cannot return to the US because the rehabilitation of the figure of the Vietnam veteran is not yet complete. Although this film shows us that the violence of the veteran can be used against our enemies instead of against us, that violence is still threatening; Rambo may have defeated an army of Vietnamese, but he still attacked Murdock, who, although a bureaucrat, is still an American. Rambo may have redeemed the virtue of the American soldier who not only could have but did win the war; he may have reversed the victimization of the veteran, transforming his experiences from a source of weakness to one of strength and knowledge, but like Odysseus he cannot come home until a place is found in American society for him, and an outlet created for his destructive tendencies. Stone gives a hint of what this outlet might be when, about half-way through the novel, he muses on what he will do once there are no more MIAs to rescue: “Someday soon he might consider tapering off his M.I.A. work and looking at some of the injustices in his own backyard that needed cleaning up. The drug trade would be one place to start” (87). Luckily for Sylvester Stallone, who would go on to make *Cobra* (1986), as well as for fictional Vietnam veterans and characters in cop buddy films everywhere, popular culture soon
found a place in society for the Vietvet in the final role he would take on: that of society’s defender, the state-sanctioned, lethal weapon, police officer Supervet.
6. The War at Home

If I’m zapped  bury me
with a
comicbook  let

Tennyson keep his
buried William Shakespeare  put

a comic
on my chest and shovel
me overtight

in my new life I’ll be

Clark Kent

instead

of

Superman.
—D.C. Berry, “If I’m Zapped—Bury Me”

On October 6, 1986, a plane carrying supplies for the Contra movement was shot
down over Nicaragua, an event which on its own may or may not have made headlines
in the United States. When one of the plane’s passengers was discovered to have a
White House telephone number in his pocket, however, the crash certainly came to the
attention of the American news media. By October 10, The New York Times was running
front page stories that investigated the links between Eugene Hasenfus, the one member
of the crew of four who survived the crash and was subsequently taken prisoner by the
Nicaraguan government, and Air America, the CIA, the National Security Council, and
the Reagan administration (LeMoyne). This incident was only the most dramatic of
several revelations which would eventually come to be known as the Iran-Contra Affair,
the scandal that almost seems to sum up the Reagan era. Lieutenant Colonel Oliver
North, the tragic hero of the piece, could have been trying to recreate any number of
action films from the time, attempting to embody the new paramilitary aesthetic William
Gibson outlines in his study Warrior Dreams. The entire affair has a quality of unreality
to it, as if its actors were adlibbing a blockbuster, attempting to turn real life into a spy
film but doing a poor job of it. No one seems to have known exactly what was going on,
and each operation was treated as if it were an escapade. As Ann Wroe puts it in her
exhaustive study of the many government documents, memoranda, and public
statements of the affair: “So Iran-contra did not happen much, except to certain people,
and even those people often felt caught up in events that were exceptionally odd and
different, adventures they might have watched on television, and in which they
especially did not expect to find themselves. They were actors in a world of secret
agents, codenames and mysterious papers: a place where the ordinary values and rules
were possibly suspended, although they could never be quite sure of that” (29). Even
those who organized Iran-Contra felt like they were extras on a set, but unlike the troops
in Vietnam, they did not “hate this movie;” this film was a thriller, not a tragedy, and
the excitement and adventure that had been removed from war stories by the Vietnam
Experience was restored in these poorly-organized and ultimately unsuccessful cloak-
and-dagger actions. The overt imperialism of North’s plans to sell weapons to Iran to facilitate the release of hostages by Hezbollah, and then to take the profits from those illegal arms sales to fund right-wing rebels in South America, also illegally, may be the same nation-building project that instigated the US involvement in Indochina, but the style of the operation, with everything from military-built secret airstrips to clandestinely-smuggled cakes, could only have been possible in a post-Vietnam environment. North and his co-conspirators were trying to relive the Vietnam War, but not as it happened; rather, they were fighting the Rambo version of Vietnam, a glamorous adventure filled with secret missions carried out under the noses of ineffectual bureaucrats. Furthermore, they were not trying to revise the Vietnam War; they were applying the already-revised history of that war to future foreign policy, using lessons learned from Rambo and the M.I.A. Hunter series as blueprints. Furthermore, they were transforming the direction of the violence of Vietnam, turning it from the US government and an ineffective bureaucracy and instead using it in the service of that very government.

This re-appropriation of the methods of Vietnam mimics the transformation of the Vietvet into his final role: the Supervet. Films like Rambo: First Blood, Part II and pulp novels like Stone: M.I.A. Hunter had restored a certain heroism to the figure of the veteran by showing him in control of his violence and by turning that violence upon an enemy that was uncontrovertibly evil. After Rambo, the Vietvet was no longer simply a victim to be pitied. However, his violence, now transformed into the ultraviolence of these V(i)et Cong who can wipe out whole armies single-handedly, is still dangerous: the Vietvet still resents his treatment by Americans upon his return and so still could conceivably decide to turn that violence against his own society. In order for the Vietvet to be fully welcomed back into American culture, he had first to learn to control his violence. He did so by directing his anger towards other threats to America; no longer
simply battling demonized Vietnamese or even calculating CIA agents, the Vietvet now entered the War on Drugs, and in dozens of narratives a Vietvet hero uses techniques learned in the battlefields of Vietnam to protect American society, and the American family in particular, from dangerous criminals. At the same time, this redirection is accomplished by again redefining the source of the Vietvet’s trauma. Whereas once the morality of military action in Indochina was restored by depicting Vietvets as wounded not by the war in Vietnam but by the war at home, and by the uncaring government and the antiwar movement that fought against them, now that war at home was itself recharacterized as not an internal division, but as a threat from the outside forces of criminals and drug dealers on the American family. Vietvets had been driven crazy not by warfare, and not by the controversy over warfare, but by specific incidents that had happened to their specific families. The greater context for these incidents was not the Vietnam War, but the threat to the American family structure presented by the War on Drugs. The *Punisher* series of comic books and the film *Lethal Weapon* demonstrate this shift in their Supervet protagonists whose superficial hauntings by dead wives hide the deeper damage done by their service in Vietnam.

Iran-Contra is only one example from a decade filled with similarly packaged American actions: the invasions of both Granada and Panama, for instance, smack of the same general approach to international relations. But the aesthetic of the affair, the later exuberant lauding of Oliver North, and the final disintegration of any memory of the scandal in the nation’s consciousness make it particularly emblematic of this moment that saw final iteration in the many lives of the Vietvet. There is a certain reveling in warfare, a certain lauding of violence, that is typical of this paramilitary culture and that made the Supervet such a popular figure. Rambo is paradigmatic of this kind of hero; the violence he unleashes is well beyond that exhibited by heroic figures before the Vietnam War. Still, he is not the only protagonist to display this kind of nihilistic
approach to saving the world. Most action heroes of the decade were just as savage, and the texts that featured them foregrounded an ultraviolence that was spectacular in its excess. As Gibson describes them: “Post-Vietnam mythic heroes are completely enraged when they fight, and the violence they inflict is shocking. The scores of scenes featuring dismemberment, torture, and shredded bodies oozing fluids are absolutely central to the culture and are far removed from the older, dispassionate moral accounting” (Warrior Dreams 30). The extreme violence manifested by soldiers in Vietnam has become a virtue, a necessary quality for any hero that they literally embody in their rippling muscles and overdeveloped physiques. As Susan Jeffords points out, this was a decade of hard bodies, where the strength of the nation was localized in the physical strength of its heroes and in the brutality of their actions.

Furthermore, the violent images from Vietnam that had originally been so shocking were returned to almost obsessively but were at the same time recontextualized; if ultraviolence could not be removed from the figure of the veteran, then that violence had to be transformed into something to celebrate. Rambo makes that violence heroic by turning it on evil Vietnamese and Russian Communists instead of on innocent civilians, and the POW stories from the early 1980s more generally restored violence as a virtue, even at its most extreme. Still, these POW narratives kept that violence far from US borders; the villages being destroyed in these tales are in Vietnam. Rambo still cannot return to America at the end of his POW rescue mission, full presidential pardon or not, because his violence is too extreme; Rambo might extol his actions, but the memory of his attack on innocent citizens of the Pacific Northwest in First Blood is too fresh.1 In addition, Rambo’s violence is still on some level directed against the nation itself. His attack on Murdock at the end of Rambo may not have ended in Murdock’s death but still

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1 See chapter 3 for a complete discussion of First Blood and chapter 5 for one of Rambo: First Blood, Part II.
demonstrates conclusively his resentment towards the government that was willing to leave him to die in the jungle. When he explains his decision not to return to the US to Trautman, he may claim that all he wants is his country “to love [him] as much as [he] loves it,” but the viewer is nevertheless left with the impression that bringing Rambo back to the home front might somehow result in armed insurrection.

In contrast, the veterans from the middle and end of the decade kept that extreme violence but contained it within a logic of service to the state by separating the bureaucracy of government from the larger ideals of the nation. These Vietvet heroes were still outsiders, but like North, their outsider status was less an indication of any antagonism toward the US government or America at large but instead stemmed from a willingness to break arbitrary rules to further a higher cause. Gibson explains: “Classic heroes have been reworked into a new version of the warrior and war culture. This new hero is the paramilitary warrior, paramilitary because he is rarely a member of conventional military or law-enforcement bureaucracies. This new hero is in fact the center of an emerging paramilitary culture that is actively redefining notions of war and peace” ("Paramilitary Culture" 91). American culture of the mid to late 1980s embraced the ultraviolence associated with Vietvets as a reassurance of the strength of the nation and depicted that violence as the pinnacle of masculinity; more, a kind of masculinity necessary to allow the US to survive, let alone thrive, during the late Cold War. But in an echo of John Kennedy’s affection for the special forces branches of the military, it associated this ultraviolence with a particularly American focus on the individual working outside of formal, bureaucratic, state control. These violent heroes are furthering the cause of the nation by paradoxically working outside its strictures.²

² Richard Slotkin has famously outlined this trend in American society, but the level both of violence and of individualism was taken to extremes in the post-Vietnam environment.
This antagonistic relationship to centralized organization runs throughout American history, but is particularly apparent in US Cold War culture. In particular, the Cold War encouraged an ambivalent relationship both to the military and to masculinity more generally. Suzanne Clark writes in her study of masculinity and the Cold War: “The American Cold War seemed to impose a militarism that exaggerated the masculinity and emphasized its aggressiveness at the same time that national policy defended itself against just such masculinity in the Soviet Union, disavowing the identification” (14-5). The Cold War required a certain kind of paternalistic imperialism in its project of protecting the Third World from the Communist threat, but the military upon which such imperialism depends demands a large, organized, bureaucratic army—the exact type of organization that came to define fascist-inflected Communism in the US. As much as the military requires de-individualized soldiers in order to function, and in fact sends recruits to boot camp in large part to suppress their individualism, the heroic soldier that figures so prominently in American popular culture is nothing if not an individual: sometimes quirky, always strong-willed, operating in an environment far removed from the regulations of military life. Furthermore, throughout the Cold War but particularly during the Reagan administration, US foreign policy followed an extremely aggressive approach while simultaneously decrying the same kinds of aggressive actions towards other nations on the part of the USSR. These contradictions were embodied in the ambivalent relationship of US culture to the Vietvet, and eventually were resolved by linking the veterans’ overwhelming violence with both an aggressiveness defined as masculine and an individualism defined as American.  

Furthermore, by the mid 1980s this masculine aggressiveness was no longer related to a specific American goal. America was not training its soldiers to be

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3 Of course, most of these popular Vietvet heroes would make terrible soldiers, given their seeming inability to follow orders or to operate within any kind of team structure.
aggressive and violent so that it could further its imperialist goals, or so that it could
create an army of jack-booted Soviets; instead, that kind of aggressiveness became an
end in itself, and was defined as the pinnacle of masculinity; as Gibson argues: “Two
hundred years after the ratification of the Constitution, the American mythology of war
and the warrior was no longer connected to any idea of founding a sacred order.
Instead, the New War culture portrayed the warrior as the epitome of masculine power
and self-development, and combat as the only life worth living” (Warrior Dreams 32).

Once again military service conferred a secret knowledge, and once again serving in the
military was the ultimate coming of age rite for American boys. But after Vietnam the
kind of knowledge gained through military service changed. Veterans were no longer
simply worldly, or self-sufficient, or even worthy of leadership; they were elite killing
machines. Their violence, once threatening, was now glamorous; their knowledge was
not just secret, it was sanctified.

The inherent problem in this kind of lionization of military service during the
1980s, of course, is the lack of wars to fight. How could one obtain this special
knowledge without opportunities for combat? The US government provided a solution
by redefining war itself. Gibson points out this trend in reference to the post-Cold War
Bush administration: “President Bush—once the director of the CIA under Gerald
Ford—and other seasoned U.S. political and military leaders had spent their entire
careers fighting the Cold War. Without a devil figure and the powerful mobilizing
dynamics of war, they were completely disoriented. To provide the missing purpose,
terrorists and drug traffickers were now magnified into greater threats than ever”
(Warrior Dreams 289). The War on Drugs replaced the Cold War as the defining threat
against the nation, and drug dealers became a new conflation of hippies and the Viet
Cong: a nefarious army working to bring America down from within. Vietnam had
provided a war at home, in which antiwar protestors did battle with National Guard
units, but the weapons of this new war were Uzis instead of flowers: the drug war contained both the ultraviolence specific to Indochina and the counterculture’s threat to the nation. Consequently, the new warriors fought not guerrillas in jungles but drug dealers, criminals and terrorists in Miami, New York and Los Angeles.

Transforming the enemy from guerrillas to drug dealers also had the added effect of displacing the anxiety over US dominance from the foreign to the domestic. At the same time that news coverage from Vietnam was undermining the heroic ideal of the masculine soldier, the counterculture was questioning the very structures of American society, rejecting the patriarchal nuclear family in favor of a more expansive, less authoritative model. This counterculture was inextricably associated with experimental drug use, and as a result the war on drugs came to be characterized as a particular attack on the American family. As Jeffords describes in relation to Lethal Weapon, discussed at greater length below:

At the most obvious level, the men working for General McAllister (Mitchel Ryan) represent enemies because they are drug dealers, one of the most fully drawn domestic evils created by the Reagan mythology, a narrative in which evil drug dealers were ruining the fabric of the nation through attacking the family, a family that was, like the external body of the nation as a whole, made vulnerable because of the failures of the Carter years to uphold a territory the Republicans would successfully claim for the next twelve years—“family values.” (Hard Bodies 55)

Just as communists had been seen as undermining American society from within, drug dealers were destroying America by blighting the family. When the war in Vietnam was transformed into the war on drugs, Vietvet heroes came to be depicted as fighting specifically for the American family, or as Michael Clark puts it: “A new image of the
veteran came to dominate popular culture, that of an idealistic avenger whose mission was to set society back on the right track” (75).

Jeffords identifies at great length this association of Vietvets with the reclamation of patriarchy in the US, and in particular makes clear the link between the veteran’s supposed victimization and his claims to restore a deposed masculinity:

But as the mythology of regeneration discussed earlier makes clear, the veterans’ “mission” is intimately and inextricably linked to the restructuring of masculinity as well, so that the veteran’s position as “rebuilder,” as therapeutic guide, cannot be severed from his position as victimized and regenerated man. This then is their mission—[...] not simply to revive men who can keep promises but to revive the promise of masculinity itself. (The Remasculinization of America 138)

The promise of the Vietvet stems directly from his trauma and from the secret knowledge he gained as a result of this trauma. Because he has seen the world the way it really is, because he understands the true nature of violence, he can restore America to its pre-Vietnam glory. This mission does not come only from the crisis in masculinity Jeffords documents, or from the threat of the burgeoning post-war feminist movement, but also is a result of the simple proximity of war reports and domestic features in the news and of the determined push in the mid to late 1980s to shift the focus from foreign affairs to the internal war on drugs. The trauma that had led veterans to possess such secret knowledge had been shifted from the battlefront to the home front by the debate over the VVM, when veterans fought a battle they were able to win against an unfeeling government and a callous antiwar movement. In addition, once the POW narrative had rewritten Vietnam as a moral cause, in which the ultraviolence of American troops was justified, that war could no longer serve as the root cause of returning veterans’ PTSD; if Vietnam was a just war, without atrocities or brutality, then it could not have been
uniquely traumatic. Vietvet heroes from the late 1980s have all suffered, but their suffering was no longer ostensibly defined as stemming from their actions or experiences in war. Instead, their suffering is described as entirely separate from the events of Vietnam, whether in Indochina or in America, and instead to be a result of personal family breakdowns. The heroes of the late 1980s might have learned to be lethal weapons in Vietnam, but according to their narratives, their war wounds come from the personal, not the political. The true source of these traumas in Vietnam is hidden, superficially replaced with family dramas, but remains the subtext.

One of the first characters to demonstrate this displacement from war trauma to family trauma is Frank Castle, better known as Marvel Comics’ Punisher. The Punisher made his first appearance in 1974 in the pages of Amazing Spider-Man #129, and rapidly became a fan favorite; he got his own miniseries in 1986 and his own continuing series in 1987, and as of this writing has a monthly series published under Marvel’s mature “MAX” imprint as well as being featured in a few miniseries. However, as is the nature of any character in a long-running serial, his depiction has changed greatly over the years, and as a result he at some point or other presents every iteration of the iconic Vietvet. When the Punisher first materialized he was far from the heroic figure he would later become. At first he was a villain, not a hero, and he tries to kill Spider-Man repeatedly in his first issue. Of course, even in this early moment the Punisher is not all bad; he plans to assassinate the webslinger because he has been manipulated by the Jackal, another villain, into believing that Spidey is himself a criminal. Furthermore, he refuses to kill Spider-Man in any but the most honorable fashion, berating the Jackal for attacking Spidey from behind, and insisting: “If I’m ever to live with myself, I have to know I’m doing the right thing” (Conway, Andru, Giacoia, Hunt et al. 14). Once Spider-Man explains that he’s not a murderer, the Punisher leaves him alone, swearing vengeance on the Jackal instead. Still, the Punisher by definition breaks the cardinal rule
of superheroes; he does not arrest, wound, or contain villains, he kills them, often quite violently. The Punisher has to be the super-villain to Spider-Man's hero because he is in fact what he mistakenly accuses Spidey of being: a murderer.

Furthermore, the Punisher is given no background that might explain his determination to kill, rather than capture, criminals. Like the other psychotic Vietvets of the early 1970s, whose violence was uncontrolled, the Punisher's extreme response to crime seems entirely unmotivated by any mitigating cause. His second appearance in Amazing Spider-Man #134-135 is almost a duplicate of his first: again the Punisher attacks Spider-Man, mistakenly believing him to be guilty of a crime, while the real criminal escapes in the confusion. He appears again in Giant Size Spider-Man #4, but throughout these cameos no explanation is given for the Punisher's motivation. In fact, at this point he does not even have a name, much less a secret identity or back story. The only facet of his character that is made clear is his veteran status when he tells Spider-Man he spent three years in the Marines.

As a result, on some level his actions seem to stem directly from this veteran status. When Spider-Man asks the Punisher to explain his actions and his determination to eradicate criminals everywhere and asks if he likes killing and inflicting pain, the Punisher evasively answers:

It's not something I like doing... It's simply something that has to be done... And I've got nothing to lose by risking what's left of my life wiping out your kind of parasite. You're all alike... using whatever means to get control of the public... drugs, gambling, loan-shark operations... some of it legitimate, but all of it evil. Sometimes I wonder if that evil's rubbed off on me... but I know that doesn't matter. All that matters is the job. (Conway, Andru, Giacoia, Hunt et al. 10)

The Punisher is on a mission to wipe out crime, but this seems not to be a mission he has chosen; it is simply something that has to be done. Still, because all we know about the
Punisher is his Vietvet status, his mission seems like a home-front extension of the Vietnam War. The Punisher has nothing left to lose, one can only assume, because he’s already lost it all in Vietnam, and the evil that has rubbed off on him is both the evil of the criminals he assassinates and the evil of the war he fought, a war he brought back to the US. The Punisher mindlessly pursues criminals just as soldiers in Vietnam went
about their job of killing babies—he is a killing machine, unstoppable and uncontrollable, liable to become violent at any moment.4

Once Spider-Man has convinced the Punisher of his innocence, he again looks for some kind of understanding of his new nemesis, asking why the Punisher is fighting “over here;” the US, after all, is supposedly not a war zone. But to the Punisher it is. He embodies the threat that returning Vietvets presented to American society: that he would bring back the violence he learned in Vietnam and turn that violence on the American public. He responds by again signaling his disaffection with Vietnam, saying: “Maybe when I’m dead it’ll mean something,” and telling us that he remains at war, even if not in Indochina. Ross Andru and Frank Giacoia’s artwork here reminds us that the Punisher is a villain—his eyebrows in particular are terrifying, and the depth of his widow’s peak is proof of his warped nature—and his uncontrollable violence is more than demonstrated when he punches a hole in a brick wall in his fury at the Jackal.5 The Punisher’s brow is permanently creased in a scowl, and his hairline gives the impression of horns, further demonizing him; the lines in his face suggest an intensity bordering on psychosis. But the dialogue reminds us to be sympathetic to this ex-marine. Even Spider-Man, who has just nearly been killed by the Punisher, still recognizes his pain, commenting: “Something tells me that man has problems that make mine look like a birthday party” (19). Even at this early point in the character’s development there is the suggestion that the Punisher’s violence is not just pathological and frightening, but somehow tragic. When in Amazing Spider-Man #135 Spidey asks the Punisher if he has

4 The lack of motivation for the Punisher’s war on crime is emphasized by his appearance in a Spider-Man comic: unlike the Punisher, Spider-Man actually possesses superpowers, but he still refused at first to employ those powers for society; not until his uncle was killed did he learn that “with great power comes great responsibility” and finally commit himself to this greater, social cause. Because the Punisher, as far as we know here, has had no such lesson, his determination to do the job of hunting criminals seems even more mysterious.

5 Ross Andru’s style, reminiscent of Jack Kirby, tends to depict everyone with beetled brows and lantern jaws, but his drawings of the Punisher still project a menace missing from his portraits of Peter Parker and other more innocent characters, and Frank Giacoia and Dave Hunt’s thick inks only increase that perception.
any ideals, his only response is: “I did—once;” the reader understands that the Punisher somehow lost his ideals in Vietnam (Conway, Andru, Giacoia and Simek 18). He cannot be an uncomplicated hero because the ultraviolence he’s learned leads him to kill rather than capture his enemies; he is still too dangerous, and his violence against people and architecture too threatening, to allow him to be the hero of the piece. But his violence, his threat, comes from what he has learned in Vietnam. The Punisher was not born bad—his experiences of the Vietnam War have made him so. Although he can team up with Spider-Man, he cannot replace Spider-Man because Spider-Man is still an idealist, trying to make the world a better place, whereas the Punisher is simply “fighting a lonely war,” without further explanation. Spider-Man still idealizes soldiers, considering them “heroes whose boots [villains] aren’t fit to shine,” but the Punisher has experienced the reality of combat and it has turned him into a villain himself (17). Like the US in Vietnam, like the American combat soldier, he has lost his ideals, his moral justification, and all that remains is his violence.

However, comic-book continuity abhors a vacuum, and the Punisher’s background does not remain shrouded in mystery for long. Marvel Preview #2, published in 1975, finally provides the character with both a name and an explanatory trauma, but this trauma unexpectedly came not on the battlefield but on the home front. Framed by a discussion by two police officers, the comic presents a tale far removed from Vietnam. Frank Castle, it seems, watched his wife and children be brutally murdered when the four of them stumbled upon a mob execution while on a picnic. Before this moment, Castle was an outrageously exemplary soldier, winning “the Medal of Honor, the Bronze Star, the Silver Star, and the Purple Heart—four times,” and was almost awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom (Conway and Dezuniga 15). When his family was slaughtered while he was on leave, Castle went AWOL, leaving the war in Vietnam for his personal war against the Mafia. As the Punisher himself recognizes: “After a thing
like that, I suppose a man does go—mad” (Conway and Dezuniga 17). The reader now understands Castle’s violence as a symptom of his PTSD; he has become the victimized Vietvet, who is not responsible for his actions but rather has been driven mad by his suffering. Still, unlike the victimized Vietvet stereotype, even as early as 1975 the traumatic incident that made Frank Castle into the Punisher has been shifted from his Vietnam experiences, as implied by his early Spider-Man appearances, to his domestic loss. There is no overt questioning of Vietnam or of Castle’s actions there contained in this narrative; instead, all the violence happens in the US. Castle has been driven mad, not because of any wartime atrocity, but specifically because of the destruction of his family. This transfer of the Vietvet’s trauma from Indochina to America reinforces the impression that the war was really fought at home, and the emphasis on Castle’s family makes it clear that that war was a domestic one, both in the general and the specific senses of the world. The Vietnam War in America victimized not just Vietvets, but the American family itself.

Nonetheless, as much as the narrative tries to lay the blame for the Punisher’s insanity on the murders of his family, the story itself continually contradicts this reasoning, compulsively returning to Vietnam. Castle’s disaffection with government is made manifest on the second page of this comic, when in the process of protecting a politician, he remarks: “I didn’t care about the politician haranguing the crowd below—I’d had enough of his kind when I was younger and believed that sort of drivel—but I knew what another assassination would do to this country—and that was something I cared about” (2). The Punisher was once an idealist, just as he told Spider-Man, and it was this idealism that led him to enlist in the Marines to begin with, but the reality of his wartime experiences has left him with no taste for the fancy words of politicians. He loves his country, but is no longer moved by patriotic speeches. This disaffection did not come as a result of the slaughter of his family, but results directly from his military
service; after all, seeing the Mafia kill his family is unlikely to have affected his impressions of politicians. Instead, his cynicism stems from his victimization not by the Mafia or by the Vietnamese but by the US government, which forced him to fight an immoral and absurd war. Just as John Rambo was turned from a hero into a threat to America by the brutality of US policy in Vietnam and by the US society’s subsequent rejection of him once that brutality had transformed him into a killer, Castle has lost his faith in America and in the idealism that led him to enlist in the first place. The rest of the comic continues to return to Vietnam, making the slaughter of Castle’s family secondary. When he confronts the attempted sniper, he finds none other than his old sergeant from Vietnam; he then uncovers a plot to hire Vietvets as assassins by a group called the International Industrial Alliance as part of their plan to overthrow the government. In the end, Castle’s back story takes up three pages of thirty-two; the other twenty-nine seem significantly more concerned with reappropriating the history of Vietnam in very familiar ways.

The comic continues to confuse the domestic sphere with the battle front, bringing the violence of Vietnam back to America. When Castle goes to his sergeant’s family to question them about the Alliance, the Alliance bombs the house using napalm, that signature incendiary of the conflict in Indochina. When Castle at last finds the headquarters of the Alliance he ends up trapped behind a force field; the leader of the alliance exclaims: “You didn’t anticipate a truly technological defense, did you, wild man?” (29) This alliance has taken over the role played by the US in Vietnam, napalming women and children, relying on technology to fight well-trained guerilla patriots, and all for the benefit of industrial concerns. But the most telling parallel between this post-war story and the history of Vietnam happens as the two detectives discuss the massacre of the Castle family. One detective asks the other: “The children too?” The other responds: “The children too” (17). The parallel to Mike Wallace’s
repetition of “Even babies?” during his interview with Paul Meadlo is almost inescapable, and the horror of the murders of Castle’s wife and children are inextricably linked to atrocities in Vietnam. However, here the victims are not the villagers of My Lai but an innocent American family, and the heartless murderers not US soldiers who have been overwhelmingly desensitized to violence but criminals on American soil, inverting the reality of Vietnam and again suggesting that the Vietnam War was something the Vietnamese did to Americans. US imperialism in Southeast Asia has been displaced by violent crime on Americans. Castle’s wartime experiences did not traumatize him but only gave him the tools necessary to go on to fight his one man war on crime, yet this war on crime is haunted by memories of Vietnam.

Figure 48: These detectives echo Mike Wallace’s exclamation “even babies” in *Marvel Preview* #2 (Conway and Dezuniga 17).

Throughout the rest of the decade, the Punisher continued to make cameo appearances in various Marvel titles, but despite his popularity he still did not receive his own title; his violence made him too volatile a character. Castle may have been
victimized, and his violence might not be his fault, but he is still a dangerous threat to the mores of American society, and his determination to kill rather than incarcerate criminals was entirely at odds with the prevailing moral code of superheroes. Captain America even went so far as to call him a Nazi in the pages of Captain America #241. In fact, in most of these comics the title hero ends up protecting various criminals from the Punisher’s murderous impulses. And in 1981, Castle’s rampage is finally brought to something approximating an end in the king-size Amazing Spider-Man Annual #15 with his arrest. The difference in Frank Miller’s pencils from Ross Andru’s is striking. While Castle still has arched eyebrows and a widow’s peak, he no longer looks like a thug. This Frank Castle is a handsome man who actually bears a passing resemblance to Clint Eastwood. Instead of the crazed, impulsive, violent veteran of the Punisher’s first manifestation, we now have a Vietvet more appropriate to the early 1980s: the emotionless, affectless, killing machine. The top of the page shows a standoff between Castle and a policeman; the beat cop’s fear is evident as he stares into the determined eyes of the Punisher. However, in the last panel of the sequence Castle’s brow has cleared as he has chosen not to shoot the policeman and instead to surrender; he has restrained his rage, and instead takes an almost paternal attitude with his comment: “No problem, son” (O’Neil et al. 28). And yet the shift between the first panel of the sequence and Castle’s obvious menace and the last, in which his face is relaxed and his eyebrows have lost their distinctive arch, is in itself disturbing; the violence of the Punisher is hiding behind the placid features of Frank Castle. As Castle sits in the back of a police cruiser contemplating his likely lifetime incarceration, he regards his future with a perverse satisfaction, telling his arresting officer: “One nice thing about prison, though... there are lots of criminals there. Lots of them” (28). This is not the emotional avenger who took his frustration out on innocent brick walls: this is a stone killer who might snap into violence at any moment.
Figure 49: Castle hides his violence in *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #15 (O'Neil et al. 28).

Of course, the Punisher does not stay incarcerated long and escapes Riker’s Island in 1982, in *Daredevil* #182. Here, just as Frank Miller’s art changed the Punisher from his original incarnation as a crazed psychotic vet to a calculating psychotic vet, his writing takes Castle down a more violent, less accountable path. When one drug dealer attempts to surrender, throwing his gun away, the Punisher shoots him in cold blood, saying: “This is war. I don’t take prisoners” (Miller, Janson and Rosen 19). This is quite a remove from the version of the Punisher who refused to attack Spider-Man from behind. If anything, his violence has increased even as his moral code has simplified: this is war, and criminals deserve to die. The mercy bullets he regularly employs in the pages of *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Captain America* are only a memory here. When on the next page Castle discovers that this drug dealer was little more than a child, he is not beset by guilt over his actions; instead, he becomes even more determined: “The enemy enlists children. The war has gotten dirtier. I’m needed more than ever” (20). There is no soul-searching here, or grief, or any question that perhaps his level of violence is
leading him to burn villages in order to save them; there is only the conviction that any level of violence, any amount of killing, is justified in pursuit of this just cause. This version of the Punisher is, like Paul Meadlo, a remorseless baby-killer, and his violence threatens every aspect of American society.

Figure 50: The Punisher doesn’t take prisoners in Daredevil #182 (Miller, Janson and Rosen 19).

In fact, when the Punisher returns in the pages of Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-Man in 1983, his definition of his enemies has become exceedingly broad. No longer simply in pursuit of drug dealers or of murderers, he now opens fire on litterers and cabbies who run red lights. His violence has become utterly uncontrollable, and like the Rambo of First Blood his inability to see outside the moral code he acquired in Vietnam makes him a threat to America itself. When he is again caught and put on trial, the judge orders him to a maximum security mental institution rather than Riker’s Island because Castle, a man who would shoot a civilian for throwing away a newspaper, is obviously insane, despite his protests. The Punisher is no longer a super-villain, exactly, nor is he quite Miller’s cold-blooded killer, and when he breaks down in the courtroom his emotional pain is obvious. Now, Castle has moved fully into the role of the victim,
like Rambo losing his strength through his emotional outburst. The Punisher who once seemed so cold, so unstoppable, that he could even turn a prison into a playground for violence, has been reduced to weeping in the middle of a crowded courtroom. Castle’s menace is mitigated by his emotional pain, and he is left weak and at the mercy of the US justice system. Like Rambo, Castle has been effeminized by his madness.

The source of his insanity is still not superficially described as Vietnam but now has shifted slightly from his family’s murder to include his experiences in prison. Castle was locked up with criminals rather than in a POW camp while the outside world disintegrated, but the lessons he learned there, and the damage done to his psyche, were the same for him as for any Vietnam POW. His experiences on Riker’s Island have left
him broken and tortured, as shell of a man, and these panels, showing Castle’s face in slices, lined with shadows like bars, strongly suggest his disordered personality.

Castle’s personality has been shattered by his prison experiences, leaving him divided between victim and hero, a divide particularly illustrated by the two center panels of the strip, one of which seems to show half of Castle’s face weeping, the other, enraged.

Figure 52: A fragmented Castle in *Spectacular Spider-Man* #82 (Mantlo, Milgrom et al. 2).

Although these panels move through time in the sense of illustrating two complete thoughts, one of victimization, one of vengeance, their proximity force them to be seen as a single image of a face, split down the center just as Castle’s personality is split.

Because of his experiences as a prisoner, Castle oscillates between victim and aggressor, but because his mission is still solely one of violence rather than rescue he is not yet able to unify these two roles. Still, the suffering he has survived has again provided him with
an understanding not available to those who never served, and the caption of the final panel makes it clear that America needs the Punisher, as crazy as he may be, whether it knows it or not.

In 1985 the Punisher at last got his own series, albeit a five issue mini-series. By this point, of course, the image of the psychotic Vietvet had to a great extent been replaced by that of the super-soldier Vietvet. By the middle of the decade, Rambo was no longer crazy or even simply victimized, he was wronged. Consequently the character of the Punisher also went through a fairly drastic revision. In order to remove the threat of Castle’s insanity, Marvel retroactively altered the comic’s continuity, and The Punisher #1 makes it clear that Castle was never actually crazy: he was drugged. The Riker’s prison warden and his aide discuss the prisoner who has recently returned to them from a stint in a mental hospital. When the Warden asks: “What about his recent bout with madness?” his assistant responds: “Drug induced. Bad stuff. And not his idea. Once he de-toxed, the psych-boys shipped him back to us. He tests so sane now, it’s spooky” (Grant, Zeck et al. 4). Castle has not been driven crazy by his experiences, wartime or not; he was simply on too many drugs. Now that he is sober he sees the world as it is, and knows exactly how to save it: with cold-hearted violence directed at appropriate enemies.

At the same time his methods are somewhat redefined; Castle is sprung from Riker’s by a group calling itself the Trust, which professes to share the same zero tolerance for crime, but Castle rapidly comes to reject them because they are too committed. In the fourth issue, having definitively broken with the Trust, Castle describes the group: “Citizens banded together to stop crime. I like the concept. The goals are good. The methods are insane. They lied to me. Used me. They tried to kill me. And they killed a lot of innocents. They’re out of control” (Grant, Zeck et al. "Final Solution" 1). The trust demonstrates the same rigid stance on criminals and crime that
Castle himself possessed when his character first appeared and uses what were once his methods, but now the Punisher has gone soft. Where once his murder of a youth left him only more determined to pursue his cause, now his witnessing of the shooting of a child nearly sends him into a flashback of his own children being killed. His violence is being contained; he still fights his battles outside the legal system, but he is no longer a danger to law-abiding society. Instead, he takes down the Trust, an organization that “formed to defend the social order against forces the government is unwilling to deal with” (11). The Punisher himself is still a vigilante, but he has his limits; he now fights other vigilantes with no such limits, who would destroy America in order to save it. The Punisher’s actions are not revolutionary but are intended to maintain the status quo. In the end of the miniseries Castle chooses not to kill Alaric, the head of the Trust, and has a revelation about his methods that seems almost unimaginable for the character: “So maybe I’ve learned... there are times you can still walk away without killing... maybe times when it’s better to” (Grant, Duffy et al. 17). The very definition of the character of the Punisher was a man who killed criminals, and yet here he suddenly has decided to try to stop killing criminals. He has not entirely lost his violence—he does let the femme fatale of the series die rather than save her, something more mainstream superheroes would never do—but he is now capable of restraining that violence, harnessing it to protect the state rather than indiscriminately attacking mobsters and litterers alike.

The Punisher received his own continuing series in 1987. This version of the Punisher still does not like to kill in cold blood and is willing to leave criminals alive, but the comic itself is not. When Castle would walk away from the lone surviving crack head after the comic’s first battle, the criminal reaches for his gun, forcing Castle to kill him. Castle has learned to restrain his violence, but that violence itself is glorified by the structure of the comic that leaves no room for taking prisoners. All the criminals die, not because the Punisher is on a rampage, but because they make him kill them. Castle is
thus absolved of responsibility for his murders—on some level, he is always acting in self defense—while at the same time glorified for his ability to kill. The comic never depicts this drug dealer dying; instead, we are shown the Punisher’s graceful knife toss, leaving us to admire his reflexes, which warned him of the imminent attack, and his skill, which allows him to throw a knife accurately across a room. The caption tells us that he doesn’t like to kill in cold blood even as the panel provides the excuse for Castle’s blood to heat. Furthermore, the comic suggests that Castle’s extreme methods are necessary to defeat this nefarious enemy who would beg for mercy but the shoot you in the back. Even when Castle tries to rein in his violence, the comic makes it clear that ultraviolence is the only way to defeat this foe.

Figure 53: The Punisher is forced into violence in *Punisher* #1 (Baron, Janson, Novak et al. 6)

The villains in this first story arc again combine the foreign and the domestic. Castle is working his way up a drug-dealing chain, defending America from the greatest threat to its families, but those drug dealers are inextricably tied to Vietnam. He first hears about this particular organization when he runs into a fellow veteran in front of
the VVM; this Vietvet is being recruited into the organization by a third veteran, Curtis Hoyle, whom Castle also knew in Vietnam and whose name is mistakenly carved into the Memorial. The text reveals that Castle had some kind of disagreement during the war over a shipment of heroin that Hoyle apparently tried to convince Castle to smuggle for him. Castle’s feelings on the subject of drugs seem to have been the same before his family’s demise as after, and he comments: “Curtis Hoyle. If the war had gone on much longer, I’d have had to shoot him” (Baron, Janson, Novak et al. 9). Of course, the war is still going on, just on a different front, and by the end of the arc the Punisher has shot Hoyle, correcting the Wall’s mistake. Furthermore, the ultimate kingpin of this organization turns out to be none other than a South Vietnamese general who also came

\[\text{Figure 54: Figure 52: Recreating the violence of Vietnam and Rambo in Punisher #2 (Baron, Janson, Bruzenak et al. 14).}\]

Indeed, Castle begins his investigations after this veteran friend is killed and is horrified to discover that this organization is largely employing struggling Vietvets; the plot therefore takes on overtones of MIA rescue narratives, and Castle’s vengeance against the South American general seems almost revenge for the suffering of POWs.
up against Castle’s moral code during the war. The climax of the comic is set in the jungles of Bolivia and has Castle attacking the drug compound with the General’s Apache combat helicopter in the same reworking of images from the war employed at the end of *Rambo*. The Vietnam War, the War on Drugs, and domestic tranquility are all inextricably intertwined, and echoes of Vietnam run through all the Punisher’s adventures just as they continually resurface in popular culture of the time more generally.

The Punisher is not the only veteran to face fellow Vietvet villains, and as the war was compulsively fought over and over again in popular culture veterans could increasingly be found on both sides of the battle. In part this trend is because as Vietvets came to be depicted as superheroes, with fighting abilities well beyond that of normal men (of course, they are never women), the only villains who could conceivably present a threat to them were other Supervets. But the increase in veteran-against-veteran plotlines also has a somewhat more complex source that the development of the Punisher’s characterization suggests. Throughout his history, Castle has oscillated from a cold-blooded killer to an enraged avenger, from disordered to organized, from callous to merciful, even as his character has straddled the line between hero and villain. This ambivalent relationship to the veteran can be found in all the Vietvet’s various manifestations. In the war’s immediate aftermath, returning soldiers were both heroes and threats, veterans who served their country and psychotics who would destroy it. After the codification of PTSD they were both wounding and wounded, attacking society because of the pain of their victimization. During the fight for the VVM they were valiant and victimized, bravely battling for their memorial only to break down in front of the wall. POWs were both destroyed and exalted by their experiences, left broken by torture but also transformed into super-soldiers by that torture. But while most earlier veteran characters, like Castle, manifested aspects of both sides of these
dichotomies, popular culture of the late 1980s determinedly divided these two aspects of the Vietvet, giving the heroic Supervet all the sympathetic characteristics—the trauma and emotional scars, the guilt, the patriotism, the individualism—while leaving the evil Vietvets with those qualities that were less acceptable—the emotional dullness, the calculation, and the anti-establishment taint. It then redefined those less savory Vietvets as a new kind of villain: the ex-CIA mercenary.

This figure has his roots in one of the most controversial programs during the Vietnam War: the CIA-directed Phoenix Program. Phoenix was an attempt to root out the NLF infrastructure by removing high-ranking NLF officers from villages across Vietnam, but it was plagued with image problems almost from its inception in 1967. The program was originally designed to arrest these officers in the hopes of either convincing them to defect or at the least of gaining some kind of intelligence from them, but it was soon depicted in the media not only as ineffective but as a thinly veiled assassination program, murdering not only NLF leaders but innocent civilians as well. Many Vietnamese disappeared from their homes in the middle of the night and were then held for years without trial; many more were outright killed. In typical military speak, Phoenix’s mission was to “neutralize” suspected Viet Cong threats, but the exact method of neutralization depended on the situation; many civilians who were killed were then retroactively described as enemy agents as a way both of avoiding the blame for murdering innocents and of making up the fairly high neutralization quotas set by the Program. For instance, Phoenix’s 1970 quota was 21,600 “eliminations,” a target more than achieved with the somewhat horrifying recorded figure of 22,341 “killed, captured or ‘rallied’” (Peterson). When the Pentagon Papers were leaked in 1971 the CIA actions in Cambodia and Laos further tarnished the reputation of the Phoenix Program, and the Program was inextricably associated with all the most distasteful aspects of the war in general, both in terms of its excessive slaughter and in terms of its illegal operations.
While the entire conflict in Indochina was generally regarded as an immoral action, the Phoenix Program did not come in for any special derision. Rather, it was seen as only one element of what was generally considered a particularly dishonorable war. But once Vietnam was rehistoricized as a righteous cause, many of the most unsavory actions of the war were laid at the door of the Phoenix Program. This division was possible in large part because although Phoenix was generally carried out by regular soldiers and ARVN troops, it was conceived and organized by the CIA and not by the American military. The figure of the heroic soldier might have been called into question by the reality of the Vietnam War, but spies have always walked a very thin ethical line. If soldiers in Vietnam acted morally, and yet immoral incidents happened in Vietnam, then the CIA might very well have been behind them. The Iran-Contra Affair, with its clandestine shipments of arms both to Iran and to the Contras, seemed almost a natural outgrowth of the Phoenix Program (although Iran-Contra was run by the NSC and intentionally circumvented the CIA). When Hasenfus’ plane was shot down in Nicaragua, the resemblance to the CIA’s Air America program was unavoidable.\(^7\) In fact, the State Department’s Latin America officer specifically acknowledged in a television interview the connections between the Iran-Contra operations, Air America, and the CIA: “The resupply of the contras, Abrams said, ‘was not in any sense a US government operation. None.’ (‘That would be illegal.’) Instead, it was managed by ‘some people who were in Air America, which had connections with the CIA in Vietnam, and who were in Vietnam, and who were in the CIA... there were a whole bunch of them’” (Wroe 253). Even as North’s attempts to spread freedom around the globe, however illegally, were being praised by legions of Americans, his use of the CIA and

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\(^7\) Air America was ostensibly a private company that transported troops and supplies to American allies in Cambodia and Laos, but as early as 1966 its connection to the CIA had been established (“Line Linked with C.I.A.”). While the Phoenix Program had no official connection to Air America, the two covert operations were indelibly linked in the cultural consciousness.
their methods brought back uncomfortable memories of some of the most nefarious elements of the Vietnam War.

In addition, Air America had already been associated with the illegal drug trade. Alfred W. McCoy’s book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, published in 1972, alleged that the airline had smuggled opium and heroin for Cambodian leaders, and although that allegation was disputed the claim stuck. Iran-Contra’s program of smuggling weapons to Iran to finance counter-revolutionaries in South America was uncomfortably similar to the old charge that Air America had smuggled heroin to finance counter-revolutionaries in Cambodia and Laos. In the climate of the War on Drugs, the CIA was not just unethical because of its assassination program but also because of its illegal drug running. When the reimagining of Vietnam required a new villain, the drug-running CIA assassin seemed ready-made. Air America did not employ soldiers, but rather hired private pilots and mercenaries for its missions; the Phoenix Program did use regular army troops, but was planned by secret agents disguised as aid workers. The figure of the ex-CIA mercenary, suddenly so common in the pages of magazines like *Soldier of Fortune*, was the perfect foil to the simple grunt whose sometimes unscrupulous actions were always motivated by a greater patriotism. Of course these mercenaries, whose only allegiance was to themselves, would have no qualms about turning their destructive violence on the American family by participating in the drug trade. Thus the villains of the second half of the 1980s were often Vietvets themselves, but the wrong kind of Vietvets: mercenaries who recognized no higher cause and were untroubled by any pangs of conscience. These mercenaries had been through Vietnam but had learned the wrong lessons, as Eben J. Muse points out: “In the Land of Nam, the soldier can learn to control his base nature, gain the ‘innocence that changes’; but he can also fail to do so and become another Lt. Calley. The Land of Nam is a proving ground of the masculine self” (91). The Supervet had gone through the fires of war and had gained the
capacity for ultraviolence, but had also learned to restrain that ultraviolence; the mercenary kept the ultraviolence without the control, embodying the original threat presented by the stereotypical psychotic veteran figure but distancing that threat from the heroic Vietvet.

As a result, popular culture of the 1980s is littered with examples of good Vietvets fighting evil Vietvets. The first story arc of the continuing Punisher series is just one instance in which an unsavory past in Indochina returns to threaten American prosperity, and even when the villains were not ostensibly veterans of Vietnam, they still displayed their level of violence: drug-dealing mercenaries and guerillas were thinly-veiled replacements for Viet Cong fighters and CIA operatives. But the film that most strongly manifests this redefinition of the veteran and of the war and that encapsulates this final manifestation of the Vietnam narrative was released in March of 1987 and went on to spawn a four-film franchise: Richard Donner’s Lethal Weapon. Set in Los Angeles over Christmas, the film follows an unlikely duo of detectives as they conduct a murder investigation that leads them to a heroin-smuggling ring—a fairly common plot line for the buddy cop films of the time. However, Lethal Weapon is distinctive in its permeation with themes of Vietnam: all of the major characters are Vietvets, the drug ring is a direct outgrowth of Air America, and both the images and the narrative of the film constantly refer back to the conflict in Indochina. Lethal Weapon embodies the metamorphosis of the war in Vietnam as it refights that war on the streets of LA, and works to sum up the history of the transformation of the Vietvet.

In essence, the film depicts four different versions of the Vietvet in its four main characters: Martin Riggs and Roger Murtaugh, the two detectives, General McAllister, the head of the drug ring, and Joshua his primary henchman. All four served in Vietnam, but all four have come away from the war having learned very different lessons. Murtaugh and McAllister, the elder of the quartet, are paired through their experience, while Riggs
and Joshua both demonstrate the ultraviolence common to the Vietvet; what divides these characters into good and evil becomes their loyalty to the legal system in the specific and to the state more generally. Roger Murtaugh, played by Danny Glover, begins the film on his 50th birthday, and at first we are given no indication that he served in Vietnam at all. Instead, we see him in the bathtub, surrounded by his loving family as they bring him a surprise birthday cake. Murtaugh does not demonstrate any of the pathologies commonly associated with the Vietvet. He has no problems surviving in the domestic sphere, he does not explode with violence at the least provocation, and he seems to have no feelings of antagonism towards the government or the world at large. This is a Vietvet without adjustment problems. The first hint that he might contain hidden depths comes when his wife relays a telephone message from someone she has never heard him mention:

TRISH. Roger? How come I never heard of Michael Hunsacker?

MURTAUGH. I just never talked about him, hon.
TRISH. Vietnam buddy?

MURTAUGH. Uh, yeah. [To the cat:] Get your own cake. Vietnam buddy.

(Donner)

Here we learn not only that Murtaugh is a Vietnam veteran, but also that however well adjusted he might seem, like many veterans he still keeps his memories of Vietnam to himself. When we later discover that Hunsacker saved Murtaugh’s life in the war, it becomes even more obvious that Murtaugh has experienced some hidden traumas he has yet to work through. He has not told Trish about the threat to his life or about the man who saved him because he has on some level rejected that experience, has put it behind him for the safe, sedate family life he now lives. Murtaugh is not dangerously violent, but he is not particularly heroic either. He has a family, but cannot control that family; his eldest daughter has been smoking marijuana in the house, and sneaks out despite her grounding. Murtaugh is not the ideal of masculinity, powerful and in charge; he is—at least, as the film begins—just an average man, who seems to have learnt nothing particularly from his wartime experiences.

In part, Murtaugh’s lack of ultraviolence and the overt aggressiveness and masculinity that go along with that violence results from the period in which he served in Vietnam. Murtaugh fought in the battle of the Ia Drang valley in 1965, one of the few moments of conventional warfare during this mostly guerilla war, in which a small American force battled a much larger body of North Vietnamese Army troops in an encounter much more reminiscent of the battles of World War II than most engagements in Vietnam. Unsurprisingly, Murtaugh thus seems more like a WWII veteran than a Vietvet. Since Murtaugh served in the early years of the war, before My Lai, Tet, or the invasion of Cambodia, and when the war still could be considered ethical, he has not experienced the special kinds of trauma that allow the veteran to become the Supervet.
Murtaugh is still a veteran, but did not encounter the psychedelic and surreal aspects of Vietnam immortalized by Dispatches. The war he fought was still a clean one.

Figure 56: Martin Riggs, unsavory beach bum (Donner).

Martin Riggs, on the other hand, lived through an entirely different version of Vietnam. The narrative tells us he was in Saigon in 1969, and at some point served in Laos. By 1969 popular accounts of the war had changed dramatically. The conflict in Indochina may have been more uniform than is generally described, but in the popular imagination the Vietnam War after the Tet Offensive was so different from what had gone before it might almost have been a different war altogether; Riggs embodies this difference. Unlike Murtaugh, this character has no family besides a dog; he lives in a trailer on the beach and he begins his day with beer, not birthday cake. He is unstable, suicidal, and dangerous. Furthermore, he is the lethal weapon of the title; he explodes with violence at nearly every opportunity, and is well versed in the art of killing. When Murtaugh first meets him he actually mistakes him for a criminal, misled by Riggs’ long hair and disheveled clothing, and attacks Riggs when he pulls out his gun in the police
station. The young, uncontrolled Riggs is the opposite of Murtaugh, and Murtaugh is less than enthusiastic when informed that Riggs will be his new partner. Of course, most of Murtaugh's displeasure comes from Riggs' reputation; not only is Riggs something of a loose cannon, as the film begins he is going through a nervous breakdown. As the police psychiatrist informs Murtaugh, he has a death wish; he takes risks in his work not because he considers himself invulnerable or because he is extraordinarily brave but because he is actively suicidal. The film superficially explains Riggs' burgeoning insanity as the result of his wife’s recent death in a car accident. An early scene shows Riggs crying while looking at a photograph of his late wife and then holding a gun to his head as he contemplates suicide, and the psychiatrist herself explains Riggs' instability as a result of his loss of his spouse. But again, this explanation is one more example of the displacement of the trauma of Vietnam onto the trauma of the domestic: as much as the plot of the film might lay the blame for the destruction of Riggs' psyche on the destruction of his family, that relationship is continually pushed to the background in favor of the trauma of the Vietnam war, and to attribute Riggs' mental disorder to his wife’s death seems disingenuous in the face of the film's obsessive harping on his history in Indochina. While Riggs' wife is mentioned in passing, Vietnam is everywhere in this film, a continual subtext that informs the actions of every character and that entirely overshadows Riggs' personal drama. Moreover, Riggs' insanity is specifically located in his violence, not his despair. Murtaugh is afraid of Riggs because he kills people, and might even kill Murtaugh or himself, not because Riggs is sad or lonely. Riggs is dangerous because he is a lethal weapon, capable of ultraviolence, and he learned that ultraviolence not from marriage but from Vietnam.

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8 Throughout the film, Riggs is characterized as much younger than Murtaugh; at one point, Murtaugh even berates him: “I was driving when you were an itch in your daddy’s pants.” But despite the film’s best intentions, the actors themselves undercut this characterization: Glover is ten years younger than his character, and Gibson, while also younger than Riggs, certainly doesn’t seem particularly youthful. As a result, the film’s insistence on the age difference between the two seems somewhat forced.
In addition, the film itself identifies the cause of Riggs’ madness as his war experiences by referencing the stereotype of the psychotic Vietvet. Riggs and Murtaugh never discuss Riggs’ late wife, but the war is a recurring topic of conversation. When Riggs and Murtaugh walk through the police garage to their car on their first patrol together, they have the following exchange, the first time the two characters address each other:

MURTAUGH. I pulled your file. Said you worked in the Phoenix Project in Vietnam. That right?
RIGGS. Uh huh.
MURTAUGH. Assassination stuff. It’s over, you know.
RIGGS. What is?
MURTAUGH. The war.
RIGGS. Uh, yes, I know.
MURTAUGH. Just thought I’d remind you. [Pause.] That’s some serious shit you carry.
RIGGS. Be my guest. [Hands Murtaugh his handgun.]
MURTAUGH. .9 millimeter Beretta. Takes 15 in the mag, one up the pipe, wide ejection port, no feed jams.
RIGGS. [Taking his gun back] What you got in there?
MURTAUGH. Four inch Smith.
RIGGS. Six-shooter, huh? [Murtaugh nods.] A lot of old timers carry those.
MURTAUGH. [Pause.] File also said you’re heavy into martial arts. Tai chi and all that killer stuff. I suppose we have to register you as a lethal weapon.
RIGGS. Hey, look friend, let’s just cut the shit. Now we both know why I was transferred. Everybody thinks I’m suicidal, in which case I’m fucked and nobody wants to work with me. Or they think I’m faking to draw a psycho pension, in
which case I’m fucked and nobody wants to work with me. Basically, I’m fucked.

MURTAUGH. Guess what?

RIGGS. What?

MURTAUGH. I don’t want to work with you.

RIGGS. Hey, don’t.

MURTAUGH. Ain’t got no choice. Looks like we both are fucked.

Murtaugh’s primary concern after reading Riggs’ file is not his wife’s death, it is his experiences as a member of the Phoenix Program, and the transition in this dialogue from a discussion of the war to one of Riggs’ instability implies a causal relationship. Even the camera backs off for this exchange, cutting from a long shot to an extreme long shot in time for Murtaugh to bring up Riggs’ war record, as if the camera itself wanted some distance from the violence of Vietnam. Murtaugh worries that Riggs might still be fighting that war in his head, and despite Riggs’ protests the film does little to contradict that assessment. His question leaves the audience with the impression that Riggs’ mental disorder in fact results from his Vietnam experiences, however he might try to deny that claim.

If the viewer still has any doubt that Riggs’ trauma is war-related, a later scene, in which Riggs briefly discusses his war experiences, erases that doubt. Riggs and Murtaugh have bonded, after a fashion, and Riggs is on his way home after eating dinner with Murtaugh’s family. As Riggs climbs into his truck, he asks Murtaugh:

RIGGS. You don’t trust me, do you?

MURTAUGH. I tell you what. You make it through tomorrow without killing anybody, especially me or yourself, then I’ll start trusting you.

RIGGS. Fair enough. [Throws beer can in trash.] I do it real good, you know.

MURTAUGH. Do what?
Riggs. When I was nineteen, I did a guy in Laos from a thousand yards out. A rifle shot in high wind. Maybe eight or even ten guys in the world could have made that shot. It’s the only thing I was ever good at. I’ll see you tomorrow.

Figure 57: Riggs reveals his affinity for violence (Donner).

Riggs is not opening up to Murtaugh by discussing his distress over his wife’s death; he is revealing his affinity for assassination. He is admitting to exactly the kind of ultraviolence which Murtaugh finds so disturbing. As Riggs’ admission makes abundantly clear, his extraordinary capacity for violence stems from a time well before his marriage, much less his wife’s death, and as this uncontrolled ultraviolence is identified as the primary symptom of his pathology, the origin of this pathology is located in Vietnam. However, far from making Riggs a threatening character, this admission makes him more sympathetic, both to Murtaugh and to the audience. Once Riggs’ victimization is understood, once his original trauma is identified, his violence inspires empathy rather than fear. When Riggs describes his rifle shot, the camera holds him just slightly off center, the only subject in the frame with any color or light; Gibson’s
affect is not menacing, but rather comes off as upset and confused. Once he describes the rifle shot, the camera cuts to a reaction shot of Murtaugh, who is speechless. When the camera cuts back to Riggs for his admission of his innate ability to kill people, the framing has moved to a medium close-up. Whereas earlier the camera seemed to distance itself from Riggs’ history in Vietnam, here it moves closer in sympathy with his trauma. Riggs appears to be just as disturbed by his capacity for ultraviolence as Murtaugh is, and he has been wounded not by his wife’s early death but by the atrocities he was forced to commit by the Phoenix Program in Indochina.

![Image of Riggs](image)

**Figure 58**: The camera moves closer to Riggs in sympathy with his trauma (Donner).

Joshua and McAllister, on the other hand, demonstrate absolutely no distaste for their violence. These two men were part of Riggs’ war, rather than Murtaugh’s, but seem to bear no scars from their experiences; these men were not soldiers, they were mercenaries. As Hunsacker describes them: “I ended up working with a group called Air America. A CIA front. They secretly ran the entire war out of Laos. I was with a special unit called Shadow Company. Mercs. Trained killers.” They are manifestations
of the evil twin of the Vietvet: mercenaries with no loyalty to anything or anyone besides their own small group, killers without remorse or regret. McAllister, possibly because of his parallel to the family-oriented Murtaugh, is somewhat more human: he is the leader of these men as he was of Shadow Company, and seems somewhat reasonable, if also cold, unfeeling and ruthless. Joshua, on the other hand, is terrifying in his violence. In one of the film’s most disturbing scenes, McAllister proves Joshua’s loyalty by having him hold his arm above the flame of a lighter. Despite his obvious pain, Joshua does not move his arm until directed by McAllister. Both McAllister’s willingness to inflict pain and Joshua’s willingness to receive it here are incredibly upsetting. The moment seems to go on forever as the camera cuts between the flame, Joshua’s grimace, and McAllister, who looks to the drug dealer for his reaction. The fact that McAllister would be so cruel to his most trusted lieutenant is disturbing enough, but Joshua’s stoic acceptance of that torture, his blind loyalty, is worse; Joshua could almost have been brainwashed. He has entirely subverted his individuality for the needs of the group and comes off as both

Figure 59: Joshua resists removing his arm from the flame (Donner).
more and less than human as a result; while his willpower and capacity to withstand pain are enviable, his robotic willingness to do so is unnatural, and the even drug dealer who is the audience to this demonstration is horrified. These men may be as insane as Riggs, but where Riggs’ madness inspires sympathy, Joshua and McAllister are utterly alienating, even to characters the film acknowledges are evil.

As Jeffords argues, this scene proves Joshua and McAllister’s perversion not simply through their comfort with inflicting and receiving pain but also because of the unthinking loyalty it suggests: a loyalty not to the state, but to each other. Jeffords writes: “What truly makes these Vietnam veterans enemies rather than heroes is not simply their drug smuggling efforts, which do seem after all to be rather small time; it is their alienation from the military and government. They have a sense of the law, but one entirely oriented toward their immediate group of veterans and separate from the nation” (Hard Bodies 56). These mercenaries have no sense of patriotism, and are not at all concerned with the damage their drugs might do to the fabric of the American family; Riggs, on the other hand, might be crazy but is still a patriot, and goes so far as to tell Murtaugh that the only reason he has not yet killed himself is “doing the job,” i.e. enforcing the law. At the same time, Joshua’s very loyalty to McAllister and to his cadre of fellow veterans is in itself threatening: Joshua has entirely given up his individuality, following McAllister’s orders without question. If Riggs is a lethal weapon, Joshua is certainly a killing machine. In contrast, Riggs flaunts the regulations of the police department not because he is a criminal but because he is an individual, because he rejects the mindless conformity which Joshua embraces.

Shadow Company is not only attacking the American family on the conceptual level of their drug dealing; they also act more directly when they kidnap Murtaugh’s teenage daughter Rianne. Murtaugh’s family is the only one shown in the film, and Donner goes to great pains to show us what a happy family it is, despite Trish
Murtaugh’s inability to cook and Rianne’s tendency to act out. When Joshua abducts Rianne to gain leverage over Murtaugh, he proves Shadow Company’s threat to the nation: this is not simply a group of criminals, these are men to whom families are nothing more than tools. Like CIA assassins in Vietnam, these men have no interest in protecting civilians or in respecting the sanctity of the home. The first murder in the film is that of Hunsacker’s daughter Amanda, killed as a threat to her father, and Hunsacker continues to protect them because of threats to his other child. The danger these men present is specifically to the American family, and they have brought the war home to an extent that references psychotic Vietvets like *Dog Soldiers*’ Ray Hicks even as it exaggerates that extent.

The dire nature of this threat, the extreme violence of these mercenaries, requires an extraordinary response. The Vietnam War is not really over; it has just moved. Riggs’ ultraviolence is the only way successfully to fight the menace to American dominance that began in Vietnam and has now become the traffic in illegal drugs. Riggs’ violence, his status as a “lethal weapon,” disturbs the non-violent Murtaugh because he does not yet understand that only that kind of ultraviolence is effective in this new kind of war. The one character in the film that Riggs does not kill is a drug dealer he arrests in his first assignment of the day; this dealer can be brought to justice under the legal system because he is nothing more than a drug dealer. He might lead a group of criminals, but their loyalty to each other is never particularly overpowering, they don’t seem particularly organized (Riggs is able to overpower the entire group in about 30 seconds, only needing backup for the leader), and they aren’t shown threatening anyone other than Riggs. Shadow Company, on the other hand, must be entirely destroyed because of the threat they present both to the American family and to the nation itself.

As a result, although before Rianne’s kidnapping Murtaugh is continually trying to convince Riggs to tone down his violence, to shoot criminals in the leg rather than the
head, and more generally to stay within the confines of acceptable police behavior, once Joshua has threatened Murtaugh’s family personally he too embraces Riggs’ ultraviolent methods. Once Joshua has called to demand a meeting, Riggs tells Murtaugh:

RIGGS. You know they’re gonna kill her, don’t you.
MURTAUGH. Yes.

RIGGS. And if you want her back, you’re gonna have to take her away from them.
MURTAUGH. I know.

RIGGS. We do this my way. You shoot, you shoot to kill. Get as many as you can. All you gotta do is just not miss.
MURTAUGH. I won’t miss.

RIGGS. We’re gonna get bloody on this one, Roger.
MURTAUGH. Are you really crazy? Or are you as good as you say you are?
RIGGS. You’re gonna have to trust me.

Ordinary drug dealers might require nothing more than the minimum amount of violence necessary to complete an arrest, and might be able to be brought to justice within the confines of the legal system, but these are not ordinary drug dealers. These are Vietvet villains, and their ultraviolence requires the same level of violence in response, a level only available to the Supervet. By the end of the film, both Riggs and Murtaugh come to occupy this position, albeit to different degrees. Murtaugh looks to Riggs to lead him in this violence because Riggs’ war experiences have left him with a much higher level of skill, but Murtaugh also learned some things in Vietnam, and once the need for ultraviolence has been demonstrated to him by the threat to his family he has no problem engaging in that ultraviolence, eventually causing McAllister’s fiery death. It seems the qualification for Supervet status is not extensive martial arts training, excellent marksmen skills, or even an uncanny ability to kill people. Service in Vietnam,
and the familiarity with ultraviolence that service provides, is what transforms these cops into heroes that are larger than life.

The climax of the film begins when Riggs and Murtaugh attempt to rescue Rianne from Shadow Company. Despite their own ultraviolence, they are overwhelmed by Shadow Company’s hardware and all three are captured and tortured.\(^9\) The violence continues as McAllister beats Murtaugh bloody and Joshua brings his own personal Asian torturer to electrocute Riggs, but our heroes inevitably escape. Murtaugh shoots McAllister’s driver as he flees, leaving him to explode with the grenades and heroin he has in his car, but Joshua eludes Riggs after an extended chase scene to go on to reassert his threat to the family. As Murtaugh points out, “the son of a bitch knows where [he] live[s],” and Joshua flees Riggs only to go directly to Murtaugh’s house to exact his revenge. This turns out not to have been the smartest move on Joshua’s part, and he is immediately surrounded by a squad of police, as well as Riggs and Murtaugh, but the film does not and cannot end with Joshua’s arrest; he is too dangerous, and his level of threat requires an extreme response. Thus rather than simply put Joshua into the back of a squad car and drive him to the station, Riggs hands his gun over to Murtaugh and engages in a one-on-one mano-a-mano duel. The two Supervets do battle on Murtaugh’s front lawn, both demonstrating their extraordinary martial arts skills, until at last Riggs has Joshua in a choke hold. Still, just as Riggs has led Murtaugh to recognize the need for ultraviolence, Murtaugh has taught Riggs to restrain that ultraviolence. Rather than become the uncontrolled threat that Joshua personifies (and despite Murtaugh’s exhortation to “break his fucking neck”), Riggs chooses not to kill Joshua in cold blood, but releases him, saying: “It’s not worth it. You lose.” Riggs manages to contain his rage and is satisfied with having proven his superior masculinity on the field of battle.

\(^9\) That hardware, of course, includes a helicopter, which chases Rianne down in a scene that could be straight out of a Vietnam film were it not set in the desert and if only the door gunner were exclaiming “Git some!”
Murtaugh’s lawn has become. Riggs is therefore distinguished from Joshua, and the good
Supervet from the evil, by his ability to restrain the ultraviolence he learned in Vietnam
and therefore eliminate the threat of that violence to American society.

![Figure 60: Riggs and Murtaugh again resort to violence (Donner).](image)

Of course, Joshua’s stay of execution is only temporary, as the structure of the
film requires that someone as threatening and deranged as he is must be wiped off the
face of the planet. The logic of shooting to wound and not kill, of showing mercy to
these criminals, is again proven to be faulty when Joshua promptly steals a police
officer’s gun and turns to shoot Riggs. These threats cannot be left alive; their training
and their special knowledge demands their extermination. Of course, Riggs and
Murtaugh are more than capable of dispatching Joshua’s threat, and both turn and fire
their weapons in unison, killing Joshua and reaffirming the need for ultraviolence. Their
firing in unison again confirms that both these men are Supervets; despite Riggs’ superior
skill set, these men are equally capable of dispatching the threat Joshua presents because
their heroism resides in their shared experience of Vietnam. Murtaugh has remembered
the lessons of war, and he will never again make the mistake of shooting to wound rather than to kill.

Jeffords argues that the ending of the film, which shows Riggs invited to Christmas dinner at the Murtaughs’, is an example of the depiction of the veteran as the savior of the American family, who can finally ‘come home’ now that the family recognizes the necessity of his aggressively masculine protection, and she is far from wrong (“Reproducing Fathers” 214). However, Riggs is not welcomed back into the family simply because he has proven their need for him, but because he has also conclusively demonstrated that he is not a threat to that family. Like Joshua, Riggs is violent, determined, and unstoppable by any normal means, but unlike Joshua he has dedicated the abilities he gained in Vietnam to the protection of the American family rather than its destruction. In addition, according to the logic of the film, the difference in menace between these two characters on some level stems from the difference in their personal pain. Joshua is cold and unfeeling throughout most of the film, and only demonstrates any appreciable emotion in his encounters with Riggs. Furthermore, these emotions are limited to frustration and anger. Riggs, on the other hand, is depicted throughout as suffering as a result of his capacity for ultraviolence. He is not a machine, he is a man; he feels guilt over his wartime actions; he mourns his wife. After Joshua is dispatched once and for all, Riggs collapses into Murtaugh’s arms, and Murtaugh comforts him, saying: “I gotcha. I gotcha, partner.” This is no killing machine, and as much as Riggs might be a lethal weapon, he is still able to manifest a certain level of weakness—in fact, he needs the American family, and Murtaugh as a father figure, as much as it needs him. He is able to be welcomed back into the family structure not only because he can protect them but also because his need for them humanizes him, proving him to be something more than just a killing machine or a lethal weapon. Riggs is made
sympathetic through his weakness, through his trauma. The same experiences that made him a Supervet also make him a man.

Figure 61: Murtaugh catches Riggs as he collapses (Donner).

By the end of the decade, the stereotype of the Supervet was firmly established to the point where it seemed almost as if every second action hero was a veteran of Vietnam. This final portrait of the Vietvet restored the Vietnam veteran’s heroism once and for all, reinscribing his violence as both necessary and glamorous, defining his traumatic wounding not as weakness but as the source of his exceptional knowledge, and proving his loyalty to the state and to American society. It should come as no surprise, then, that once the figure of the Vietvet was once and for all rehabilitated, the US was again able to mobilize its military might in increasingly imperialistic projects. The challenge the Vietnam War presented to the image of the soldier-hero was more than met by the creation of the Supervet, and any questioning of the morality of American actions in Indochina or abroad more generally were silenced through the characterization of Vietnam not as a mistake, not as a failure, and not as immoral, but as an assault on
America from outside forces that had wounded the nation but in the end left it even stronger than before. By 1991, the US was again engaged in a war on foreign soil, using advanced technology to overcome an enemy characterized as primitive and led by a demon, but unlike Vietnam, here victory was unquestioned, and any narrative of opposition to the war was drowned out by the proclamations of a new birth of American freedom. Through the rehistoricization of the Vietnam War, and through the transformation of the Vietvet into the Supervet, American culture had again created a space where violent warfare could be defined as unchallengeably heroic. America had, as President Bush exclaimed, “kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all” (Simons 340-1), and violence was again established as the pinnacle of American masculinity and valor.


7. Postscript

Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there.
—Michael Herr, Dispatches

Throughout this study, I have employed the basic conceit of a chronology. I have constructed a critical narrative around the various representations of the Vietvet in order to better elucidate the role of American cultural concerns in creating those representations. But like all constructions, this is to some extent an oversimplification. The emergence of new depictions did not silence previous ones, and all these faces of the Vietnam veteran continue to be employed in various ideological projects. The birth of the Supervet in the late 1980s no more put an end to his other personas than the first Gulf War truly put an end to the Vietnam Syndrome. The war the US fought in Indochina and the soldiers who fought in it are still the subjects of debate, and what peace American society has made with its Vietnamese demons is due at least as much to the simple passage of time as it is to the standardization of the history of that war in popular media.

However, the impact of the reclamation of the Vietvet as an icon continues to structure how American society defines itself and its soldiers. For the last several years it has been nearly impossible to live in the United States and go a day without being reminded to “support our troops;” opinions on the Vietnam War and on the morality of that war have played large roles in the last two American presidential elections; and the rhetoric surrounding the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is lifted wholesale from debates over the American presence in Indochina. Exhortations to “stay the course” and not to “cut and run” have more resonance now than when Richard Nixon first
employed them because of their association with that first American foreign defeat. The impact of these wars is again structured as something happening to Americans, rather than either Afghans or Iraqis, as the media focuses on stories of returning veterans. Shortly before this writing, a Muslim Army psychiatrist about to ship to Iraq went on a rampage at a Fort Hood hospital, shooting several fellow soldiers. Because of the legacy of Vietnam, when this incident is discussed in the media, the framework echoes the depiction of Dwight Johnson in its focus on the psychiatrist’s possible PTSD rather than any consideration of the structures, both military and societal, that would ever make such violence seem an acceptable response. Again this violence is assumed to be personal rather than political, and again there is no space to question whether American culture’s obsession with violence is not to some extent an invitation for such massacres.

In 2008, Sylvester Stallone released the fourth film in the saga of that most iconic of Vietvets. Titled simply Rambo, this film follows Rambo, still living in Thailand rather than the US, in his crusade against a cadre of Burmese government soldiers to rescue a group of missionaries the soldiers have captured. While ostensibly set in the present, and apparently intended by Stallone as a direct attempt to bring attention to the harsh military dictatorship of Myanmar, the ghost of Vietnam runs throughout the film: the Burmese soldiers are Vietnamese in different uniforms, and the missionaries are as blameless, victimized, and innocent in their intentions as the POWs ever were. In essence, Rambo, like America, is still fighting the same war: the recurring, unending war in the dreamscape of Vietnam. Yet this film elucidates the escalation in the level of violence that has continued since the US first deployed soldiers in Vietnam, and more men and women are killed in this film than in the previous three films combined. The narrative of Vietnam almost requires this ultraviolence, this amplification of brutality: the Supervet must continually prove himself more dangerous, more manly, more savage than his foes.
The depiction of foreign policy, of soldiers, of masculinity in popular culture is constrained by the narrative of Vietnam, and the history of the Vietnam War as understood by American society is repeatedly imposed over current events. As a result, critique of these events is confined within those narratives as surely as Rambo is forever forced to top his violence from film to film. It is impossible to separate the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from the paradigm of Vietnam, despite the fact that both wars actually bear little resemblance, either in their structure or in their details, to the conflict in Indochina as it happened or as it is remembered. The second Indochina War was only possible within an ideology formed by World War II; now US foreign policy is similarly forced by its memories to repeat its mistakes. At the same time, American masculinity is just as tied to the history of the Vietvet. Warfare is still seen as somehow the most dramatic right of passage for American men, and the secret knowledge of the battlefield is still described as the best access to strength and power. American society continually laments the high levels of violence in its populace even as it lauds violence as the essential component of masculinity.

The actions of a nation and the structure of its society are determined by its culture, and the cultural products of the United States are haunted by the ghost of Vietnam. The threat that Vietnam once presented both to an imperialist foreign policy and to a violent masculinity was contained by the rehistoricization of that war, and that very rehistoricization works to silence any other possible critique. As long as challenging foreign policy is equated with attacking American soldiers, as long as soldiers are defined as unquestionably heroic, as long as wars are seen as something that happens to Americans rather than something Americans do, US society will never free itself from the quagmire of its memory of Vietnam.
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Biography

Kathleen McClancy was born in New York City on September 26, 1975. She received her Bachelor’s of Arts degree in English from Yale University in 1997 and briefly studied forensic science at John Jay College. Her article “Reclaiming the Subversive: Victorian Morality in Neal Stephenson’s The Diamond Age,” was published in Tomorrow Through the Past by Cambridge Scholars Press in 2006. She received the William Preston Few Dissertation Fellowship and the Aleane Webb Dissertation Research Fellowship from Duke University in 2007.