Vietnam Generation

Volume 1
Number 1 *The Future of the Past: Revisionism and Vietnam*

Article 10

1-1989

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On the cover of the 7 April 1988 *Rolling Stone* there is a picture of Martin Luther King. He's looking toward the future and his head fills the page, even covering a portion of the *Rolling Stone* logo — and the issue carries the headline "Portrait of a Generation." "An unprecedented poll of young Americans: What they think about their lives, their county and their leaders."[1] *Rolling Stone* paints a picture of a generation whose idealism springs from the example of the civil rights movement, and whose disillusion is born partly of the assassinations of its cherished heroes — Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy — but "more profoundly the bitter disillusionment resulting from the war in Vietnam"[2]. According to the *Rolling Stone* survey, the lessons this generation learned from Vietnam were "totally negative"[3]. The result of the Vietnam experience is that a generation consumed by the idea that it could rebuild the nation in its own idealistic image has given up this dream and retreated back into itself. No longer interested in the big issues, most members of the generation prefer to involve themselves in local causes like anti-drunk driving campaigns and neighborhood crime watches.

According to *Rolling Stone*, the members of this generation have also turned against the idea of enlisting in the military and fighting for their country.

> Asked to select situations under which they would enlist, 27 percent of the men surveyed could not identify any situation that would lead them to enlist; 22 percent said they would enlist if America's strategic interests were threatened; 19 percent said they would enlist to keep a third-world nation from falling to communists; 33 percent would enlist if our close European allies were attacked; and 73 percent would enlist if war broke out on the North American continent[4].

Rolling Stone concludes that foreign-policy planners are just going to have to live with this "stunning political fact". They argue that there is

no longer a patriotic consensus supporting the cold war, and that skepticism has replaced belief in the necessity of foreign entanglements. Only 16 percent of the members of the generation think that the U.S. should have fought the Vietnam War. 55 percent favor staying out of other conflicts which might resemble Vietnam[5]. Top on this generation's list of foreign policy objectives is slowing down the arms race, chosen by 47 percent.

All of this might be heartening if the rest of the study didn't present so many troubling contradictions. For example, when asked why the U.S. had not won the Vietnam War the largest percentage of respondents (36 percent) said that they "felt the United States failed to make a great enough military effort." And the second most important foreign policy goal (next in line after arms reduction) is stopping terrorism. "41 percent said they would mildly or strongly favor a president who was committed to developing Star Wars."[6]

Rolling Stone comments on the "split vision" of the generation, remarking that

> This generation favors the idea of redistributing income to produce more equality, but it is opposed to tax increases.... It wants the government to stop terrorism and maintain a strong defense, but it also wants the country to end global hunger and stay out of foreign conflicts. ... The future leader who captures the imagination of this generation will be the candidate who breaks free of his or her party's standard rhetoric and unashamedly embraces these contradictory yearnings[7].

The last sentence in that paragraph is particularly striking. Standard rhetoric will no longer do. Contradictory yearnings should be uncritically embraced. A rational stance is no longer necessary, even as a pretense, asserts *Rolling Stone*. How have we come to this place?

An indication of where to look for an answer is provided by a recent study on the Civil War by historian Eric Linderman[8]. I originally approached Linderman's study, *Embattled Courage*, with the intention of comparing the contemporary process of developing a new improved image of the Vietnam combat soldier to the similar process of revision described by Linderman. Linderman argues that the Civil War resulted in the destruction of cherished soldierly ideals in both soldiers and civilians on both sides. Soldiers, whose notions of honor and glory had undergone radical change when they were subjected to the rigors of the battlefield, resented their treatment by the civilians who had sent them off to war. And civilians, heartily sick of war, wanted nothing more to do with soldiers. This situation lasted some fifteen years until around 1880 when Americans once again became interested in hearing

about the Civil War. Linderman argues that

> As the Civil War was incorporated in public ritual and the
> reputation of soldiering rose, participation in war became an
> important mark of merit. Honor attached itself less to
> courageous or cowardly conduct, battles won or lost, causes
> preserved or destroyed than to one's simple presence in the
> war. ... As community ritual magnified the war, the war began
> to magnify all those who had fought and lived[9].

This reassessment (which came some fifteen years after the Civil War) seems mirrored in the revisionist histories of the Vietnam War which began appearing in the early 1980s. The current reinterpretations seem particularly ominous in light of Linderman's observation that: "The values young men carried to war in 1898 were again those of 1861.... But the picture of war that sons carried to Cuba was false because their fathers' memories had become false to the war of 1864-65."[10]

With this argument in mind, I began to document and describe the phenomenon of the appearance of the Vietnam War in public ritual and popular culture, and correlate that process with our growing military presence in Central America. The argument seemed particularly compelling in light of the recent headlines describing U.S. troop movement in Honduras, and the first hints that we might consider using military means to secure our access to the Panama Canal.

But the 7 April issue of *Rolling Stone* forced me to reevaluate both my argument and my methodology. Pop culture rag that it is, *Rolling Stone* had a point: as a generation, we *do* contradict ourselves. Somehow, those contradictions must be dealt with. I don't buy the *Rolling Stone* ideal of synthesis — the idea that one candidate, or party or platform might really be able to reconcile all of those conflicting desires. Many of those desires are mutually exclusive, and anyone who looks at it rationally ought to be able to see that. But I do think they are correct in identifying *what it is that we want*. And this raises new questions: What is the process which causes clearly drawn ideological lines to blur and fade over time? What are these clear ideologies replaced by? How do new ideologies come into being?

The first possibility that comes to mind, of course, is a comparison with Kuhn's[11] description of scientific paradigms — old paradigms do not fall apart gradually, but are replaced only when a complete new paradigm emerges and when the powerful proponents of the old paradigm have died off. Kuhn's explanation, however, is not sufficient for understanding the gradual process of paradigmatic metamorphosis which seems to be occurring as this generation shifts piece-meal from one ideological stance to another.

Another problem with Kuhn is that ideologies cannot be equated with scientific paradigms; the purpose of an ideology is not to explain a given set of phenomena, but to provide a social, cultural and political framework with which a human being can assimilate and interpret events. Ideologies "render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful," they "construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them"[12]. Exchanging one ideology for another is almost always the result of some discomfort, some problem, with the original ideology.

The decision to shift from one ideology to another is not made at the level of group decision, however. Psychologist Daniel Goleman provides us with a description of one of the important factors shaping ideological shift in his book Vital Lies, Simple Truths: A Psychology of Self-Deception. Goleman attempts to tackle the difficult question of how people choose their particular versions of reality in order to cope with the anxieties of their day-to-day lives[13]. "Technically speaking," he says, "'coping' is the term for a range of cognitive maneuvers that relieve stress arousal by changing one's own reaction rather than altering the stressful situation itself."[14] He adds: "If the locus for anxiety in the world is immovable, then that leaves room for change only in how one perceives the world."[15] Certain areas of thought, or events, are blocked out or revised — seen in "shadow".

Though coping mechanisms occur on an individual level, they have a cumulative social effect:

> The collective mind is as vulnerable to self-deceit as the individual mind. The particular zones of shadow for a given collective are the product of a simple calculus of the schemas shared by its members. The areas of experience blanked out in the most individual minds will be the darkest zone for the group as a whole.
>
> Cultures and nations offer the best examples of this principle writ large. ... An index of a culture's uniqueness, I suggest, is its blind spots, the particular elements of reality the cultural 'we' represses to ease anxieties[16].

If this is an accurate assessment, the examination of the popular culture generated by a nation or a people takes on entirely new meaning and significance. The nature of this shift might best be explained by a use of the methaphor of the patient-therapist relationship. The duty of the therapist is to be an objective listener, an outsider, a mirror to the patient who is revealed to him or herself gradually during the course of successful therapy. The therapist listens carefully to what the patient says, and takes even more careful note of what the patient does not say. As a patient's coping methods are

gradually made conscious, the patient then has the opportunity to discard mechanisms which were once successful but which may now be self-destructive or damaging.

Popular culture reflects the unconscious decision of a society to represent or repress particular events and conditions. A culture's representations may provide the best map for those who are interested in studying its blind spots. Susan Kappeler, a feminist theorist who writes chiefly about the implications of pornographic representation, has thought deeply about the significance of representations as cultural objects. In *Pornography and Representation*, she explains that:

> Representations are not just a matter of certain objects — books, images, films, etc. The structure of representation extends to 'perceptions' and self-images, the anxious pose of the bourgeois community in front of the camera of public opinion.... Representation is thus one of the most fundamental structures of conceptualization, centered on the subject. Just as fiction is not just a matter of stories in books, but of narrative conceptualization in general ... perception is the representation of something to oneself, a conflation of the author and the audience in one single subject. Perception externalized inserts itself into the structure of communication between different subjects: author and audience may be separate individuals. It will therefore be expedient to look at representation in the context of communication[17].

Popular culture mediums do not simply reflect the ideas and opinions of the mass culture, but are part of an ongoing dialogue between members of that culture, shaping and being shaped by their individual anxieties and fears.

This process is described quite well by Jean Elshtain, who asserts:

> Narratives of war and politics are inseparable from the activities of war and politics; each — writing about and doing war and politics — are practices existing in a complex, mutually constitutive relationship. I espouse no vulgar notion of mimesis here. Rather, stories of war and politics structure individual and collective experiences in ways that set the horizon for human expectations in later epochs. ... The politics of the text distorts by expressing exaggerated fears and hopes — amplifications that go on to become embedded in practices[18].

And this brings me back to the *Rolling Stone* survey. If we take their challenge seriously and try to create a coherent ideology out of the generation's "contradictory yearnings" we are certainly doomed

to failure. The challenge is, itself, a part of the problem — a gesture of faith in illusion, a declaration of the need for a new coping mechanism. We must, instead, question the ideological framework that supports such a challenge.

The metaphor of the therapist seems, once again, peculiarly suitable. A therapist notes his patient's delusions, but does not participate in them, will not be drawn into the conversation on the patient's terms. The mental health care worker who operates on the level of societies rather than individuals might properly be called a "cultural therapist." And it is as a cultural therapist that I will approach the problems posed by *Rolling Stone.*

The cultural therapist, examining the survey results gathered from questions about the Vietnam War, would formulate certain important questions: 1) What are the bases on which this generation has decided that the U.S. should not have been involved in the Vietnam War? 2) What fears or anxieties are reflected in this generation's reluctance to involve itself in foreign wars which it perceives to be similar to the war in Vietnam? and, 3) In what terms are these issues addressed?

The third question is the most crucial, and it is certainly the one which would benefit most from the examination of a cultural therapist. The terms of a discussion limit and define appropriate topics and arguments. For example, the Rolling Stone survey asked which one of four factors best explained why the U.S. lost the war in Vietnam:

> 36 percent said they felt the United States failed to make a great enough military effort. Twenty percent cited the antiwar protests and the lack of support in the United States for the war. Another 20 percent felt it was because of the lack of adequate military and civilian support from our South Vietnamese allies, and 8 percent said it was because of the strength and numbers of the opposing communist forces[19].

What is the framework for the discussion here? Distinctly missing are any factors which might be part of a moral or ethical discussion of American involvement, or which might offer some kind of historical perspective. The designers of the survey cannot be held entirely responsible for their omission, which is reflected in the culture as a whole and has been noted by other Vietnam War scholars. The tendency to limit discussion of the Vietnam War by confining the arena of discussion has been recognized by both traditional and popular culture historians. The following two quotes illustrate this observation. Historian William Gibson notes:

(In the 1980s) The war ... disappeared as a topic for study and political consideration and instead became dispersed and institutionalized in the complex of medical, psychiatric, and legal discourse. It was as if a new series of medical and judicial problems with no traceable origin had appeared in American society. Or rather, although it was acknowledged that Vietnam was the origin, once the word 'Vietnam' was mentioned, the war itself was dismissed and discussion moved on to how an institution could solve the problem[20].

In popular culture discourse, as well, the terms of the discussion have been limited in the ways that Michael Clark describes:

The motive underlying *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2* and all the other back-to-Nam films is ... a desperate wish to restore the community broken apart by that war ... these films possess an undercurrent of bitterness and indignation at the betrayal of innocence that reflects the more profound and utopian longing behind the poignant conclusion of *The Deerhunter*, the sappy optimism of *The Lady from Yesterday*, and the sentimental ritualization of personal correspondence embodied in the most recent memorials. The utopian impulse behind all of these works has come to dominate popular representations of the memory of Vietnam despite the lingering political animosities stemming from that war, and the only uncertainty that remains now seems to be whether that impulse will find expression in the xenophobic vengeance of a chromed steel jungle knife, or the sentimental family ideal of a letter home[21].

Both of these observations shed some light on the fears and anxieties reflected in the answers to questions about Vietnam in the *Rolling Stone* survey. By leaving out moral and historical questions and focusing on the psychic damage the war has caused Americans, we, as a society, can successfully avoid dealing with the difficult issue of responsibility and leave our collective self-image intact. The extent to which we are able to delude ourselves is stunning. In an August 1987 New York *Times* article about the city of Hué, journalist Barbara Crossette penned a line which promised absolution to any remaining Americans who had moral qualms about the war: "Sometimes," she wrote, "the Vietnamese seemed to be blaming Americans less for what happened here than Americans blame themselves."[22]

On a societal as well as an individual psychological level, the penalty for repression is repetition. In Goleman's word's: "On the one hand, we forget we have done this before and, on the other, do not quite realize what we are doing again. The self-deception is complete."[23]

These words from J. Glenn Gray's classic World War 2 narrative, The Warriors seem to most clearly represent the dangers of that process of self-deception:

> I am afraid to forget. ... What protrudes and does not fit in our pasts rises to haunt us and makes us spiritually unwell in the present. ... We may become refugees in an inner sense unless we remember to some purpose. Surely the menace of new and more frightful wars is not entirely unrelated to our failure to understand those recently fought. If we could gain only a modicum of greater wisdom concerning what manner of men we are, what effect might it not have on future events?[24]

[1] *Portrait of a Generation.* Rolling Stone (April 7, 1988).

[2] *Ibid.:* 36

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid:* 43.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.:* 44.

[7] *Ibid.:* 54.

[8] Lindeman, Eric. *Embattled Courage* (New York: The Free Press) 1987.

[9] *Ibid.:* 275-277.

[10] *Ibid.:* 296-297.

[11] Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (New York) 1961.

[12] Geertz, Clifford. "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books) 1973.

[13] Goleman, Daniel. *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (New York: Touchstone) 1985.

[14] *Ibid.:* 51.

[15] *Ibid.:* 104.

[16] *Ibid.:* 226.

[17] Kappeler, Susanne. *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 1986: 32-33.

[18] Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books) 1987: 48.

[19] *Rolling Stone:* 44.

[20] Gibson, William. *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press) 1986: 4.

[21] Clark, Michael. "Remembering Vietnam," *Cultural Critique* 3 (1986 Spring): 75-76.

[22] Crossette, Barbara. "Where Tet Meant Death, Life Goes On," *New York Times* (1987 August 26).

[23] Goleman: 116.

[24] Gray, J. Glenn. *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (New York: Harper & Row) 1959, 1967: 24.