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Vietnam: Reality and Remembrance

The Role of Popular Culture in Defining American History

Christopher Brady
The College Scholars Program
The University of Tennessee
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Abstract

The mass public's understanding of the Vietnam War has been largely shaped not by historical record, but popular culture. Movies, music, and myth have created a historically inaccurate "reality" of Vietnam and this mediated reality is quietly replacing the truth about American involvement in Vietnam. Furthermore, the secondary education system in the United States is doing little to remedy the situation, preferring to ignore a topic that still holds political and emotional ammunition more than thirty years since its end. The following paper will examine a wide variety of issues surrounding the public's understanding of Vietnam, including why the educational system has difficulty teaching Vietnam, what has taken education's place in teaching later generations about Vietnam, the differences between the reality of the Vietnam experience and what popular culture teaches, and the consequences of this distorted view of American history may have on future generations of students. Sources will include both historical and contemporary film, music of the Vietnam era, historical texts, contemporary media, and personal interviews.

Part I will discuss the background and history of the nation of Vietnam as well as the basic historical data necessary to establish a context for the complexities of teaching the Vietnam War in contemporary society. Part II will then explore the current knowledge and opinions of the Vietnam War and its veterans held by the mass public and define the stereotypes that have resulted largely from the failure of secondary education's approach to teaching the Vietnam War. The complex reasons that brought about this failure will be explored as well as the role of popular culture in filling the educational void. Part III will provide analysis and examples of the influence of popular culture on current generations of students and the subsequent distortion from this exposure. Part IV will conclude the paper with a forecast of future historical trends concerning the remembrance of the Vietnam War based on current data as well as suggestions and possible solutions to better implement educational approaches to the Vietnam War.

Part I

"No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now. Rarely have so many people been so wrong about so much. Never have the consequences of their misunderstanding been so tragic."

-Richard Nixon

I. Vietnam

In seeking to present a historically accurate and reasonably unbiased view of the Vietnam War and the countless factors that played a role in its development, climax, and conclusion, a wide variety of texts, movies, and research abound. Choosing suitable texts for the following narrative was a daunting task and the idea of using just one book, as in a high school class, to examine the Vietnam conflict is unthinkable. Biases abound in the study of the Vietnam War, but the following narrative has been constructed based on widely agreed upon facts drawn from the research and publications of three leading scholars on the Vietnam War: Stanley Karnow, George Herring, and Frances FitzGerald. While controversy will always surround the teaching of the Vietnam War, using a broad range of sources aids in presenting historical fact in the most clear, fair, and accurate manner possible.

The study of the Vietnam War must find its base in the one factor that played a defining role on both sides of combat, from free fire zones to base camps; the country of Vietnam itself. From a geographic, meteorological, and ethnic viewpoint alone, Vietnam presents a unique battlefield to any who would wage war upon its soils. Understanding the geography of Vietnam is the first step in appreciating the role the physical nation played in the Vietnam War. Located on the coast of Southern Asia and extending 1,650 kilometers from North to South, Vietnam is divided into three distinct regions¹. The North is mainly flat and dominated by the Red River Delta with mountainous terrain existing only in the upper Northwest. The South is basically a mirror of the North, a generally flat delta of the Mekong River, and while Vietnam is only 50 kilometers wide at its narrowest point, that point exists in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, a region that separates the North and South with its extremely rugged terrain and largely

¹ Central Intelligence Agency. "The World Factbook – Vietnam." 10 February 2005. <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/vm.html>> (10 April 2005).

uninhabited jungle². The geographic division of Vietnam by the Central Highlands has led to populations being clustered in the North and South, with only the ethnic minority Montagnards existing in the Central Highlands. Furthermore, the agriculturally driven economy requires settlements be established near arable land and the result is that approximately eighty percent of the Vietnamese population lives on twenty percent of a land mass slightly larger than New Mexico³. Given the unique geographic layout of Vietnam, it is no surprise that the majority of combat during the Vietnam War took place either within major population clusters where distinguishing between civilians and combatants became nearly impossible or in largely uninhabited areas where guerilla warfare in six to eight foot stands of razor sharp elephant grass was the tactic of choice. The fact that most fighting occurred in heavily civilian areas or dense jungles served to negate many of the advantages that advanced military technology provided the United States. Large scale bombing was impractical in cities and bombing runs in the jungle often “killed more birds and monkeys than VC⁴.”

The impact of climate on Vietnam is another key aspect to understanding the unique challenges of conducting military operations during the Vietnam War. Vietnam is located on the 16th parallel at 106 degrees latitude, approximately somewhere between Key West and the Panama Canal, dependent on one’s location within the country⁵. The monsoon season dictates climate in Vietnam, with the dry season running from November through April and the rainy season lasting from May through October. Vietnam averages one hundred inches of rain a year and approximately ninety percent of the rain comes during the rainy season. Humidity stands at approximately eighty percent almost year round, with the exception of June and July, the peak of

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Couturie, Bill. *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. Home Box Office, 1987.

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency.

the monsoon season, and temperatures average 95 to 105 degrees during the dry season and 85 to 90 degrees during the monsoon season. Heat indexes during the dry season often approach 120 degrees and because of the monsoon season, the dry season is when the majority of combat during the Vietnam War occurred⁶. Soldiers were often shocked at the heat upon arriving in Vietnam and to this day, many remember the heat as the first memory they have after touching down in Vietnam. Climate therefore played a large role not only on logistics but morale as well. The rainy season was often spent pulling trucks and supply convoys out of the mud during the day while fighting rats and other rodents to find somewhere dry to sleep at night. Using any type of heavy equipment during the rainy season was basically impossible so any troop movement had to be done on foot and most soldiers found the idea of using Government Issue rain gear laughable. The rain season was often matched in extremes by the heat of the dry season. The oppressive heat was combined with increased combat as both the U.S and North Vietnamese saw the dry season as an opportunity to move troops and supplies efficiently. While the United States obviously had the advantage in military technology, the harsh climate and geographic layout of Vietnam served to negate many aspects of this advantage, causing U.S. commanders to search for a new approach to fighting the war in Vietnam.

The ethnic make-up of Vietnam is generally overlooked in discussions of the Vietnam War, but is significant in understanding the cultural identity of Vietnam and its effect during the war. Vietnam was home to approximately thirty five to forty million Vietnamese at the time of the Vietnam War, with most being descendents of Chinese, Thai, or Indonesian settlers. "Viets" were the first settlers in Vietnam, arriving over three thousand years ago in the Red River Valley in the North⁷. Most Vietnamese cultivated rice for a living and never left the village they were

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency.

⁷ Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 108.

born in, instead existing in their own closed world. This family and village centric lifestyle was an obstacle that U.S. strategists and planners could never overcome. The geographic layout of Vietnam separates the North and South physically and that separation carries over both culturally and socially as well. The North and South had little interaction prior to the Vietnam War and generally cooperated only to resist invasion. Military advisors knew that winning the war in Vietnam hinged upon uniting the South Vietnamese against Ho Chi Minh and the North, but they did not fully understand the feudal social nature of the village and subsequently lost the critical battle for the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese.

A complete understanding of the growth and impact of Vietnamese nationalism on the Vietnam War is best understood in light of the historical narrative of Vietnam as a nation. Vietnam is first mentioned in Chinese history in 208 B.C. when China invaded “nam Viet,” land of the Viets, and one hundred years later Han emperor Wu Ti declared Vietnam a part of China⁸. The century was marked by a tenuous relationship between China and its new province. Vietnam began to adopt Chinese language, culture, and religion but always resisted complete subjugation, marking the early seeds of Vietnamese nationalism. The year 39 A.D. marked the first move for Vietnamese independence from China as the Trung sisters led a revolution that brought about temporary independence from China for the next decade. More importantly, the Trung sisters began the tradition of warrior women among the Vietnamese and served as an inspiration for the women who would resist both the U.S. and North Vietnamese forces during the Vietnam War. China eventually recaptured Vietnam and continued its weak hold on the nation until the fall of the Tang dynasty in the late 10th century. Vietnamese warlords recognized the relative weakness of China during the transition between dynasties and defeated Chinese forces at the Battle of the

⁸ FitzGerald, Frances. Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam. (New York, Little, Brown, and Company, 1972) 38.

Bach Drang River in 939 A.D. to win their independence. The next nine hundred years were marked by relative peace and independence but the various lords controlling Vietnam never unified the nation. Families and the village remained at the center of Vietnamese life and the cultivation of rice provided the food and money necessary to live. 1757 marked the expansion of Vietnam to its current size, yet the nation remained divided with rival capitals in the North and South respectively⁹.

The end of the 18th century brought about the catalyst that could finally unite Vietnam, foreign invasion. China attempted to recapture Vietnam in 1789 and the various warlords unified to resist the incoming armies. After fighting off the Chinese again, Nguyen Anh seized control of the newly formed alliance and became Vietnam's first emperor in 1802. Anh established an official capital in the city of Hue and perpetuated the idea of an absolute monarch claiming the "mandate of Heaven"¹⁰. Anh and his successors created a dynasty that lasted until 1955 and more importantly provided an environment in which a Vietnamese national identity could develop and flourish. Determination to fight foreign control was a part of Vietnamese history and soon became a central characteristic of the people and government. While Anh and his heirs ruled with absolute power, Vietnam was not a police state or uncontrolled dictatorship. Every emperor functioned under the ancient proverb "the law of the emperor ends at the village gate"¹¹. The actions of the state were controlled and dictated by the emperor but each village was almost its own independent entity, run by the village elders and never unduly subjugated to an emperor's unfair law. This level of value on the village as an independent entity free from government control was another problem U.S. troops faced during the Vietnam War. When troops would enter Vietnamese villages, village elders and members would see their presence as an

⁹ Fitzgerald 60.

¹⁰ Karnow 65.

¹¹ A traditional Vietnamese proverb, its exact origin is unknown.

infringement of their quasi-independence. VC forces would use this feeling of resentment in recruiting Southern Vietnamese to their cause and the failure of U.S. strategists to fully understand the nature of the village in Vietnamese culture was a major flaw in the planning and execution of the Vietnam War¹².

After the unification of Vietnam, the first contacts with the West were made by traders and missionaries who met fierce resistance from the Nguyen emperors. The scramble for colonization during the 19th century, however, proved to be more that Vietnam could resist and the seeds of colonialism came with Napoleon II in 1858. Napoleon ordered a naval expedition to claim as much territory as possible for France and Vietnam was soon the recipient of a French naval port at Da Nang¹³. Napoleon convinced Nguyen that the port was for trading purposes only and that the independence of Vietnam would be upheld, but two years later Napoleon III claimed all of “Indo-China,” including Vietnam, for the French. France quickly became interested in the abundance of raw goods in Vietnam and took over Saigon in 1861 then forced Nguyen to sign several treaties in 1883 that kept Nguyen in place as emperor, but subjugated Vietnam to the French empire. The expansion and military might of the West had overtaken nine hundred years of independence in Vietnam in just five years and in 1884 Vietnam was split into Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China¹⁴.

II. French Colonialism and World War II

Raw materials were at the heart of France’s colonization of Vietnam and rice, coal, and rubber quickly became the biggest exports. Yet as international trade grew, living standards quickly declined under the French. Vietnamese schools were closed, Chinese classics that had

¹² McMahan, Robert J. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003) 222.

¹³ Karnow 72.

¹⁴ Karnow 78.

become part of Vietnamese culture were banned and the French language was forced on the Vietnamese. Profound social and intellectual changes accompanied the French rule and although resistance was initially limited, a new French-educated class of Vietnamese would begin to lead a revolt against the French. French economic growth had created a new middle class in Vietnam, one that had never before existed in a country where one was either a royalty or a peasant. The middle class brought a new level of social consciousness to many people living in Vietnamese cities and soon the embers of nationalism glowed again¹⁵. Phan Boi Chau was one of the new intellectuals and in 1908 he coordinated a nationwide mass protest against French taxes.

Although the protest failed and he was placed under house arrest until 1941 after being captured in China, he demonstrated that the nationalist spirit could unite the whole country and served to inspire the man who would lead a nation, Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890 Nguyen Tat Thanh, son of a low-level government official. He left Vietnam in 1911 at twenty-one after witnessing the failure of Phan Boi Chau's movement. Ho traveled to New York, London and Paris and was particularly interested by the French Revolution's ideals of universal brotherhood and anti-colonialism. He read Lenin's thesis on *The National and Colonial Question* and soon became involved in groups working to overthrow Western ideas. Ho was equally attracted, however, to Wilson's fourteen-point plan after World War I. He wrote Wilson asking him to add Indo China to the plan but Wilson never replied and refused to meet with him. In 1925 Ho visited China and began to organize a movement to organize Vietnamese workers and peasants against the colonial powers. He wrote *The Road of Revolution* and in 1929 moved to Hong Kong and created the Indo China Communist Party¹⁶. Ho had decided that communism was the only political movement that

¹⁵ FitzGerald 147.

¹⁶ Karnow 119.

would embrace all men universally and return Vietnam to the peace and freedom from colonialism it had once enjoyed. In 1930, Ho began working with local Vietnamese groups while himself staying in Hong Kong and assisted in forming a group that managed to overthrow and kill two French sponsored landlords and redistribute their land before being crushed by the French military. Although the revolution ended in death for most involved, it proved to Ho that the Vietnamese people did desire an independence from France and inspired him to continue his work. Throughout the 1930's Ho traveled and continued to study communism and revolutionary tactics. He began to build a loyal following among Vietnamese based on three ideals: humility, land reform, and peasantry. Ho emphasized his personal connection to the Vietnamese people and his humble attitude, common attire, and soft spoken nature all reinforced his approach. He promised a return to ancestral and family based land reform and renounced the French land taxes that had caused many Vietnamese to give up family land shares. Finally, he gave the peasantry a direct role in bringing about the revolution and change. The peasantry felt as though they once again could control the outcome of their lives and they were willing to fight with Ho to regain that opportunity. Ho's drive for independence made him as much a nationalist as a communist and these factors helped spread his reputation and followers throughout Vietnam.

As Ho's reputation began to build, Bao Dai, France's puppet emperor, became a symbol of Vietnamese emasculation by the French. Dai's power was quickly siphoned away by the French until he served as little more than a ceremonial head of state. As World War II began with the German invasion of Poland, Japan invaded China in 1937 and began to covet the natural resources that had brought the French to Vietnam in the first place. Furthermore, Vietnam could serve as a strategic staging ground for Japanese troops throughout the East Indies and provide

airfields close to China¹⁷. In 1940, Japanese troops moved into Vietnam and French forces offered little resistance because of the German threat in Europe. Jean Decoux, the French governor, gave into all Japanese demands and soon Japan had taken over the entire colonial structure France put in place. Bao Dai cooperated with the Japanese in hopes they might eventually help free Vietnam from the French and because resistance was hardly an option. Vietnam had now become subjects to both the French and the Japanese and Ho felt as though the time to make a change had come.

In early 1941, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam after a thirty-year absence with the goal of removing the French imperialists who had become weak during World War II. Ho immediately formed the Vietnamese Independence League, known as the Vietminh, and tapped into his already strong following to create a band of revolutionaries who harassed and sabotaged Japanese troops. Ho remained decidedly uncommunist in order to appeal to the nationalist feelings across the country. Ho recruited throughout villages in Vietnam and soon appointed General Vo Nyugen Giap to orchestrate his guerilla campaign against the Japanese forces. He had been a close friend of Ho since the founding of the Vietminh and had worked closely with the Chinese previously in developing a system of spies against the Japanese. Through Ho's recruiting and Giap's training the Vietminh's rank had grown to over ten thousand by the end of World War II¹⁸.

The later stages of World War II had brought another unique power into Vietnam, the United States. The U.S. had entered Vietnam as a common ally against the Japanese and had begun attacks against Japanese forces in 1942. The U.S. was allied with China and supplied monetary and physical resources to them and China in turn supplied much of the Vietminh's

¹⁷ Karnow 143.

¹⁸ Karnow 151.

materials, creating an indirect relationship between the U.S. and the Vietminh. The Office of Strategic Services also contracted with the Vietminh providing materials and intelligence for members to sabotage and attacks Japanese installations¹⁹. By early 1945, allied forces had begun direct bombing against the Japanese in Vietnam and suddenly even the French were allied with the Vietminh. Japanese forces took major exception to their former allies turning on them and brutally retaliated against French forces, effectively wiping out French control in Vietnam. Japan soon withdrew from Vietnam, establishing an “independent” government under Bao Dai, yet the taxes and colonial influence remained²⁰. August 1945 marked a major turning point however, as the atomic bombs ended the Japanese war effort and created a major power vacuum in Vietnam. Ho quickly stepped in to power and Giap seized control of the military, killing any who opposed Ho’s rise. Ho immediately began redistributing land from landlords and the August Revolution was launched. On August 31 the ceremonial sword and seal of Vietnam was given to Ho by Bao Dai and by September 2, 1945 the Vietminh controlled every major city in Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam was founded²¹.

After the founding of the Republic of Vietnam, Ho began courting the U.S. for support of Vietnamese independence. Franklin D. Roosevelt had repeatedly preached “self determination” throughout the world and the Atlantic Charter seemed to strengthen Ho’s hopes. Ho went public with his desires for an alliance, calling the United States “a good friend with no colonial ambitions²².” Unfortunately, the Potsdam conference²² showed Ho that Vietnam was second to U.S. world strategy as the Cold War loomed in the future. FDR had hoped from independence in Indo China but France presented its plans to recapture Vietnam in the next decade and FDR was

¹⁹ Karnow 147.

²⁰ Karnow 153.

²¹ Karnow 156.

²² Karnow 147.

forced to sacrifice the new found independence in Vietnam in order to keep a strong alliance with France in the face of the Cold War and communist threat. From October of 1945 through November of 1946 all of Ho's messages to the White House were ignored and Truman eventually gave France several loans in order to help recolonize Vietnam²³.

Truman's commitment to France after World War II was an abandonment of both Wilson's and Roosevelt's principles, yet it came in the face of a new threat to American security, communism. U.S. ideology was directly threatened by communism and U.S. government advisors felt that resisting a threat to the Democratic world order was more important than continuing to champion self determination. The Truman Doctrine and its theory of containment grew out of this fear of communism and stated that the U.S would resist communism wherever it occurred in the world. The "fall" of China in 1949 to communism along with Soviet development of nuclear weapons further heightened Truman's anticommunist agenda. NSC 68 officially declared that the U.S. and communist Russia had "fundamentally antithetical objectives" and set forth the idea of containment as a military strategy²⁴. Upon closer examination of Ho's history and rise to power in Vietnam, along with his Chinese ties, Truman now began to see Ho as part of a communist movement.

Now Ho was pitted against both the French and the Japanese as a communist threat. Japan released French soldiers taken hostage during World War II and fought together against the Vietminh. France sent more troops back to Vietnam and soon the Vietminh in the South were forced to resort to guerilla warfare. Chang Kai Shek invaded and looted Northern Vietnam before trading it back to the French and violence between Ho and the French escalated rapidly from 1945 to 1946. In November of 1946, France bombed Haiphong harbor, killing six thousand

²³ McMahon 55.

²⁴ Herring, George. *America's Longest War: United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. (New York: McGraw-Hill College, 1985) 41.

civilians and the U.S. began pressuring France to reform their efforts in Vietnam. In 1949 after continued fighting, the Vietminh and France reached the Elysee Agreements in which an independent Vietnam was to be established under Bao Dai in 1950. While Ho's goals were clearly not reached, he agreed to cease hostilities and began regrouping. The U.S. offered a continuance of the lend-lease program with France, as it had become stretched across Vietnam, and the recognition of Ho and the Vietminh by Stalin eventually prompted full U.S. support of France in Vietnam. In 1950, the domino theory was introduced and stated that if one country fell to communism all countries surrounding it would also come into risk, starting a progressive spread to worldwide communism. Under this theory, the fall of Vietnam would mark the end of democracy in Southeast Asia and in order to prevent that, the U.S. was paying over eighty percent of France's expenditures in Vietnam by 1954.

The early 1950's brought more violence in Vietnam for the French as diplomatic recognition of the Vietminh led to increasing troop numbers for Ho and increasing casualties for the French. Vietminh forces approached 250,000 in the mid 1950's and the logistical support they received from local peasants gave them a distinct advantage over the French. Vietminh night attacks had all but eliminated French control in the North and French casualties were now over one thousand a month²⁵. In 1952 France launched Operation Lorraine, sending thirty thousand troops and armored tanks to destroy the Vietminh. However, the Vietminh would never openly fight the French, instead running away and leaving the French firing at nothing. Following the failure of Operation Lorraine, the French announced the Navarre Plan in 1953. The plan called for arming non-communist Vietnamese to fight against the Vietminh but France found itself short four hundred million dollars in financing. France's Prime Minister Laniel asked Eisenhower for the money, and Eisenhower, afraid of "losing" Vietnam like Truman lost China,

²⁵ Herring 79.

agreed. John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's new secretary of state, predicted that if the United States kept supporting France that monetary issues alone would defeat communism by the end of 1955²⁶. In the middle of 1954, Eisenhower sent the first U.S. troops to Vietnam to provide air cover to French units but did not allow U.S. troops to actually fly the bombers in combat, hoping to keep the U.S. officially uninvolved as possible. Both the French and Vietminh continued building for a major conflict and in April of 1954, French commanders stationed twelve thousand French troops in the valley at Dien Bien Phu to attempt to draw out Vietminh forces. General Giap immediately jumped on the opportunity and laid siege to the French forces. Although the Vietminh lost two thousand men in the initial attacks, they quickly regrouped and built a tunnel system around the garrison, eventually taking the six hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu. Giap then moved sixty thousand troops into the hills around the French and began shelling the garrison. Eisenhower considered helping the French but did not want to provoke China by sending in troops, so the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed using B-29 bombers to reduce the Vietminh forces and allow the French to retreat. Congress would not support the action however, and after Eisenhower lobbied Britain for support and was rejected, the French garrison's fate was sealed. On May 7, 1954 Dien Bien Phu was overrun by Vietminh troops and France began plans to abandon Indo China permanently.

The French met with Bao Dai and Ho at the Geneva Conference in the summer of 1954 but no other nation joined in the meeting, hoping that the French would continue fighting rather than leave Vietnam. The Geneva Accords were produced after three months of negotiation and entailed an immediate ceasefire in Vietnam, temporary dividing the nation at the 17th parallel and national elections to be held in 1956 supervised by an international commission to decide the

²⁶ McMahon 64.

future of the country²⁷. Shortly after signing the accords however, France underwent a governmental change and abandoned Southeast Asia, leaving no major country to support South Vietnam. Eisenhower and his staff were forced to take on direct support of South Vietnam or risk testing the domino theory and so in early 1955 the U.S. became the primary protector of South Vietnam and firmly established U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia.

III. Prelude to War

While the Geneva Accords ended the open conflict between North and South Vietnam, it did nothing to settle the idealistic conflict growing rapidly throughout the country. Neither the Northern communists nor the new democracy in the South were satisfied with the results of the Accords and long term stability was highly unlikely. Bao Dai remained emperor of the South while Ho remained strongly committed to communism in the North and the mandatory elections in 1956 seemed to be a perfect opportunity for both sides to solidify their claim to Vietnam. Ho and Bao Dai both sought to build a base of support, but a Central Intelligence Agency study in 1955 showed that almost eighty percent of the country would vote for communism in the upcoming election²⁸. Fearing an official vote for communist government, CIA operatives began harassing the North and engaged a series of psychological attacks using every tactic from dropping pamphlets to hiring astrologers to predict harm for the North. Secretary Dulles also created the South East Asia Treaty Organization in 1955 to further “defend” democracy in the South. SEATO called for collective security for all nations and recognized South Vietnam as an independent nation with the full support of the United States. Meanwhile, Bao Dai’s popularity was quickly waning in the face of the upcoming elections and he decided to step down in early

²⁷ McMahon 108.

²⁸ FitzGerald 242.

1955. Ngo Dinh Diem, Prime Minister under Bao Dai immediately stepped in to fill the power void and the “miracle man of Asia” was now in control of South Vietnam²⁹.

Ngo Dinh Diem was a charismatic nationalist who had a flair for elitist behavior. Known for his bold suits, Diem proved to be a wildcard for U.S. advisors at all times. Diem’s brother had been shot by communists several years earlier and therefore Diem was staunchly anti-communist but he was also a devout Catholic with a low tolerance for other religions. Following several attempts to overthrow his rule, Diem called for national elections to legitimize his leadership. Although Diem was elected by ninety eight percent of the vote, massive fraud had occurred and voters who opposed Diem were either not allowed to vote or had their ballot thrown out after leaving the voting station³⁰. Following his mandate in 1955, Diem refused to take part in the national elections in 1956 mandated by the Geneva Accords, mainly because of Ho’s continued popularity throughout the country, and unrest in both China and Russia left Ho without the military support to force an election. Several months later, Diem closed the border between North and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel and the idea of war between the two sides had become more of a question of “when” than “if.”

Following the division at the 17th parallel, U.S. advisors realized that in order to keep South Vietnam from falling under communist control, a great deal of resources would have to be invested and the South would have to be able to eventually stand on its own. Therefore, from 1955 through 1961 the U.S. spent over one billion dollars on South Vietnam, making it the fifth largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world, and the U.S. embassy in Saigon became the largest U.S. embassy in the world³¹. Building up a military force in the South became a top priority for U.S.

²⁹ McMahon 98.

³¹ Karnow 251.

strategists and in 1956, the U.S. sent fifteen hundred advisors to South Vietnam to take over and revamp the army of South Vietnam. The Military Assistance and Advisory Group, MAAG, was charged with providing training, uniforms, heavy equipment, and tactical training to the two hundred and fifty thousand soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN. By 1960, MAAG had succeeded in training over sixteen hundred Vietnamese officers and had a viable troop base of over one hundred fifty thousand men. Unfortunately, the U.S. was trying to maintain the illusion of an advisory role and therefore Diem and his regime were allowed to retain the final authority over the disbursement and use of the newly trained troops. Furthermore, while training the ARVN, the U.S. had also set up a massive import program in South Vietnam that revolutionized the cities and created a thriving industrial center. Because the majority of South Vietnam's population were farmers however, the new advancements in Saigon were never seen nor appreciated by most of the populous. As the 1960's began, South Vietnam had become totally dependent economically on U.S. trade and Diem's regime was becoming increasingly corrupt. Diem had never openly committed to democracy and the influx of power and money around him led him to seek an absolute dictatorship and blind loyalty from the people of Vietnam. Reeducation camps were established for political protestors and although Diem still remained popular in the United States, advisors in the Vietnam knew the time for a change was quickly approaching.

The division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel set off a chain of effects in North Vietnam as well as the South. Following Ho's communist revolution on January 1, 1955, the division of Vietnam firmly entrenched Ho as the undisputed leader of the North. Ho's regime was based on a Marxist-Leninist model and land reform was the first step he took towards equality. Landlords who resisted were executed and by the end of 1956, a state sponsored economy was in place and

the majority of peasants actually saw a marked improvement in their lives under Ho's leadership. With the support of the Northern population secured, Ho began to look for ways to weaken Diem and the hold of the United States in the South. From 1957 through 1958, a group of independent communists had been harassing Diem throughout the South and in 1959 Ho decided to lend his support to the Southern communists. Special Force Group 559 covertly supplied the Southern communists and in 1960 Ho openly committed to liberating the South through armed struggle if necessary. Special Force Group 559 marked the beginning of the first significant hostilities between the North and South and served as a precursor for the war brewing in the future³². Throughout the rest of 1960, Ho used various Special Forces groups to recruit and build support throughout villages in the South, promising land reform and a return to past traditions, and by 1961 over two thousand government agents had been assassinated in the South by Ho's agents and sympathizers.

The election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1961 marked a new chapter for the developing situation in Southeast Asia. While Eisenhower had made Vietnam a direct protectorate of the United States through SEATO and had violated the Geneva Accords, making it difficult for any future President to leave, Kennedy took an even more vigorous approach. Youth and democracy were at the center of Kennedy's idealism and he viewed communism as the antithesis to everything he and the United States stood for. Furthermore, Kennedy realized the importance of the "third world" in the Cold War and felt that as decolonization continued, a "new frontier" was being established around the world between communism and democracy³³. The drive of Kennedy's youth was matched by a lack of experience in foreign policy and therefore Kennedy surrounded himself with a group of advisors who came to be known as the

³² Herring 87.

³³ Johnson, Lyndon B. The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969. (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1971) 115

“best and the brightest,” four men who would play a large role in creating U.S. policy in Vietnam over the next several years³⁴. Robert McNamara was named Secretary of Defense, Dean Rusk Secretary of State, McGeorge Bundy Special Assistant, and Walt Rostow Deputy Assistant. While every one of these men was highly intelligent and capable in the realm of foreign policy and international affairs, their ability was juxtaposed with a profound lack of a historical understanding of the country of Vietnam and its culture. This lack of understanding would prove to be a major factor in the failure of the U.S. effort to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese population.

Kennedy’s election also marked the beginning of the end for Diem’s regime in South Vietnam. In response to the increasing communist assassinations and agitation, Diem began arresting villagers whom he suspected were communist sympathizers and began a program called Agroville. Agroville removed peasants from their ancestral farmlands and moved them to industrial centers to attempts to stop the growing communist influence. Unfortunately, Agroville directly violated the ancient sanctity of the village and led to an increased resentment of Diem and his government as well as more evidence for communist recruiters to use in support of communism. The U.S. launched a similar program called the Strategic Hamlet program in which peasants were moved together into armed compounds but the compounds were constantly overrun and U.S. supplies were ending up in the hands of Southern communists. In October of 1961, unrest had grown to a point that President Kennedy sent Rostow and Taylor to assess the situation in South Vietnam. The infamous Rostow-Taylor report followed and concluded that Diem’s government was failing miserably, the new army had again become weak and lost most of their trained skills, and that eight to ten thousand U.S. personnel were needed to stabilize the situation in South Vietnam. McNamara recommended sending two hundred thousand U.S. troops

³⁴ Johnson 121.

to Vietnam after reading the report and the “best and the brightest” seemed to unanimously agree that the U.S. either needed to abandon Vietnam or commit troops immediately. Kennedy had no intention of allowing communism to spread any further and in early 1962 sent nine thousand U.S. personnel to Vietnam. Project Beefup was the first of two practical results from the Rostow-Taylor report and involved replacing MAAG with Military Assistance Command Vietnam, MACV, the body responsible for retraining the ARVN and utilizing the small amount of Green Beret and Special Forces groups present in Vietnam. Operation Ranch Hand was the second result of the Rostow-Taylor report and by far the most controversial. Ranch Hand called for the use of chemical defoliants across Vietnam to wipe out the hiding areas for VietCong, or VC. A variety of defoliants were used including agent purple, white, pink, and the infamous orange. Each plane averaged eleven thousand pounds of defoliant and the nine-year campaign destroyed over half of Vietnam’s timberland with little practical result³⁵. Health complication from exposure later became wide known and while the effect of U.S. soldiers from second hand exposure is well documented, the effect on those Vietnamese who received direct exposure in the forests is still relatively undocumented.

As the results of Project Beefup and Operation Ranch Hand began to take effect, the ARVN was given an opportunity to test its newfound mettle against the VC when a series of VC camps were discovered at AP BAC, fifty miles southwest of Saigon. The ARVN sent its 7th division, three thousand of the most highly trained soldiers and pilots, to confront and eliminate roughly three hundred and twenty VC troop armed with only automatic rifles³⁶. The battle went surprisingly well for the VC initially and they succeeded in shooting down two ARVN helicopters, prompting the ARVN armored column to turn around. Fortunately, John Paul Vann,

³⁵ FitzGerald 269.

³⁶ Herring 97.

the commanding officer turned the column back to the battlefield but the ARVN refused to attack and a defensive stalemate began. Vann radioed Diem asking for more troops but Diem was reluctant to send troops after hearing initial reports because he did not want to face the political ramifications of the ARVN losing their first battle with the VC. Diem therefore delayed the reinforcements allowing the VC time to flee before the battle could really begin. The standoff resulted in a major psychological victory for the VC which boosted recruiting while showing U.S. commanders that ARVN troops could never be counted on in the heat of battle and that Diem was untrustworthy and overly concerned about himself and his political career.

Tension between the U.S. and Diem continued to grow following the battle at AP BAC and eventually came to a boiling point in 1963 with the Buddhist Crisis. Madame Nhu, Diem's sister in law, adopted the role of First Lady of Vietnam and tried to lead a massive conservative movement across South Vietnam. Nhu and Diem also were devoutly Catholic and had established a record of abuses towards other religions, especially Buddhism. In mid-1963, Buddhist monks attempted to have the Buddhist flag flown over Hue in honor of Buddha's birthday just weeks after the Catholic flag flew in honor of Diem's brother's birthday. Diem refused and on May 8, 1963 ten thousand Buddhists took to the streets in non-violent protest³⁷. Diem sent in the army to end the protests and seven Buddhists were killed, sparking nationwide protest. Self-immolation was practiced throughout Saigon and pictures of burning monks were front page news in the United States. Madame Nhu responded by calling the protests "a barbeque" and offering to supply free matches and gasoline³⁸. Kennedy and all of America was shocked at the brutal callousness and as the summer continued, Diem sponsored the desecration and destruction of Buddhist temples throughout the country. Kennedy sent Ambassador Henry

³⁷ Karnow 279-80.

³⁸ Karnow 281.

Cabot Lodge to attempt to reform Diem, but Lodge reported back to Kennedy that “victory in Vietnam is impossible with Diem in control³⁹.” Even in the face of such condemning news, Kennedy was reluctant to remove Diem because Kennedy himself was caught up in the Civil Rights Movement and other domestic issues and could not divert the necessary time to Diem’s successor. However, in October of 1963, military advisors discovered Madame Nhu had been in negotiations with Hanoi and the decision was promptly made to remove Diem. Military commanders had already been planning the coup because of their unhappiness with Diem’s handling of the military and on November 1st, 1963 Diem was captured and forced to resign. Diem and Nhu attempted to break free through a secret tunnel but were quickly captured and assassinated in the back of an armored car⁴⁰. The U.S denied any contact and may have done nothing to kill Diem, but the CIA was in contact with the ARVN throughout the coup and the government did nothing to spare Diem’s life. Turmoil grew in Vietnam following Diem’s assassination and the unrest bred more feelings of responsibility for Vietnam in American advisors because of their indirect connection to the assassination. Many have questioned what plan Kennedy would have used in Vietnam and unfortunately the world will never know as Kennedy was assassinated three weeks later on November 22, 1963. President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in hours after Kennedy’s assassination and inherited perhaps the most difficult burden ever placed on American President, deciding the future of American involvement in Vietnam and in doing so, the future of the country of Vietnam itself.

When Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, twenty five thousand Americans were already on the ground as advisors and Special Forces in Vietnam. Along with the Presidency, Johnson inherited many of Kennedy’s advisors as well as his prejudices against communism and belief in

³⁹ Karnow 289.

⁴⁰ Karnow 310.

the domino theory. Therefore, while one can never know exactly what path Kennedy may have taken in Vietnam, it is safe to assume that U.S. involvement had already reached a point at which future military involvement was all but inevitable. And while it is unfair to label Vietnam “Johnson’s War,” President Johnson did make four monumental decisions that eventually lead to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. The first was his declaration to that “We [America] are going to win this war⁴¹.” While war had not been formally declared, Johnson sought to fulfill what he felt was Kennedy’s legacy in foreign policy and believed Kennedy would never have abandoned the South. A marked difference between Kennedy and Johnson, however, is that while Kennedy was heavy in his use of political rhetoric, Johnson followed his rhetoric with physical action. Johnson wanted the conflict to be solved as quickly as possible and felt U.S. troops would turn the tide in Vietnam in mere months. Johnson was also faced with the difficult decision of replacing Diem as the ceremonial leader of South Vietnam. Three different generals would swap control of South Vietnam over the next decade: Duong Van Minh, Nguyen Kahn, and Nguyen Van Thein. All three were hand picked by the U.S. but failed in winning the domestic support of the South Vietnamese people and served mainly as puppets for the U.S. military advisors. The inability to find a strong yet cooperative leader for the South was another key factor in the escalation of U.S. involvement. Johnson also decided to pledge “full U.S. support” to South Vietnam as communist popularity grew throughout the country and this commitment would guarantee future U.S. involvement⁴². The final and most damaging decision made by Johnson was the decision to begin air strikes against the North. Johnson warned Ho that continued support of the South would result in air strikes against known supply routes, including the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail and Ho’s silent response launched the first official U.S. use of

⁴¹ Johnson 211.

⁴² McMahon 173.

force in Vietnam. Yet in light of the aggressive nature of Johnson's actions, his memoirs indicate a whole hearted desire to end the conflict as soon as possible, "I was willing to take every step necessary to prevent the deployment of U.S. troops and explore every possible option to secure the South⁴³." Unfortunately, on August 2, 1964, an incident occurred that would mark the beginning of a decade long war in which over fifty thousand American troops would lose their lives and countless lives on both sides would be forever changed.

IV. War

The Gulf of Tonkin incident is undoubtedly one of the most controversial occurrences during the Vietnam era. On August 2, 1964, the USS Maddox was attacked by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats in response to an earlier attack by ARVN forces on radar installations in the North. Although the CIA had been covertly operating countless missions along the coast of North Vietnam, Ho had not openly attacked a U.S. vessel. The Maddox quickly counterattacked with air support from the USS Ticonderoga and drove off the attackers. President Johnson, although angered by the attack, remained restrained and ordered all forces on alert but issued no call for a counterstrike. Two days later on August 4th, the USS Turner Joy joined the Maddox off the coast and reportedly attacked without provocation by a barrage of thirty-five torpedoes. The Maddox and Turner Joy immediately returned fire and requested assistance, but approximately thirty minutes after the attack, all torpedo activity ceased and no sign of any North Vietnamese boats was ever discovered. Subsequent studies have shown that it is highly likely the second attack did not occur and theories on the radar indications range from malfunction to government conspiracy. Regardless of the cause of the incident, President Johnson viewed the attack as a personal challenge to both himself and U.S. power and on August 10th, asked Congress for a resolution authorizing the use of force in Southeast Asia. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed

⁴³ Johnson 321.

88-2 in the Senate and 416-0 in the House and authorized Johnson to take “all necessary measures” to resist the spread of communism, marking the official start of U.S. military action in Vietnam⁴⁴. Bombing campaigns that had been underway prior to the resolution in a limited spectrum were now expanded to include all military targets in the North. The North immediately responded by declaring its formal readiness for war and received immediate aid from China and Russia in the form of shoulder to air missiles [SAMS] and Mig fighter jets to combat the American offensive. As conflict intensified, Johnson interpreted his election in November of 1964 as a mandate of the war effort and continued to funnel economic and military aid into South Vietnam. Yet it was not until a February 8th attack by the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA, at Pleiku that the first major operation of the war began. Eight Americans were killed and McGeorge Bundy had been close to the attacks, resulting in Bundy recommending Johnson “step up” the bombing of North Vietnam⁴⁵. Operation Rolling Thunder was launched in March of 1965 and after flying fifteen thousand sorties in two months, civilian installations began to be targeted in June of 1965. Official combat troop deployment also followed the attack at Pleiku; thirty five hundred Marines landed at Da Nang on March 8th, 1965 to serve as a security for the nearby air station. The troops were also authorized for offensive ground operations and began these operations after securing the airfield. April 20, 1965 saw the first massive influx of U.S. troops as General Westmoreland’s request for eighty thousand troops was granted and contributions from other SEATO countries brought the total troop count to well over one hundred thousand. While military offensives continued, Westmoreland soon realized the ARVN would play little more than a supporting role based on their lack of training and resolve and therefore requested another one hundred and fifty thousand American troops. In July of 1965 the

⁴⁴ McMahan 164.

⁴⁵ McMahan 213.

troop ceiling was raised to two hundred and twenty two thousand and by the end of 1965, American was firmly entrenched in the Vietnam War.

The first major battle of the Vietnam War occurred in the Ia Drang Valley in November of 1965 when four hundred and fifty U.S. soldiers were dropped into the middle of over two thousand NVA regulars. The battle that followed revealed the problems the U.S. would face throughout the war as well as the importance and potential of the air cavalry system. The U.S. never had enough soldiers to hold the Ia Drang Valley nor much of the area they captured throughout the war, so much of the fighting done by American troops became seen as pointless as they would be forced to withdraw from their positions just days after fighting to capture it. Ia Drang also revealed that the NVA and VC would dictate when and where battles occurred. The NVA had chosen to engage the American troops in the Ia Drang Valley, yet in other circumstances, had chosen to flee rather than fight. The unconventional manner in which many of the battles of the Vietnam War were fought played a large role in the failure of U.S. strategy. Johnson's limited goal of preventing the North from attacking the South did not provide troops the freedom to capture territory and move into the North. U.S. commanders were ordered to allow the VC and NVA to flee without being pursued and to not invade the North for fear of Chinese retaliation. Johnson's focus was primarily on finding a quick diplomatic end to the war, while Ho and the North were focused and intent on capturing the South. The diametric nature of these two goals made it impossible for Johnson to succeed and Johnson's ignorance of the facts gave Ho and the North the decidedly upper hand in the ground war.

The air war was an entirely different story as air superiority was almost guaranteed by the advanced systems of the U.S. military. The effectiveness of bombing campaigns, however, was highly questionable. Operation Rolling Thunder had become a massive enterprise by 1967 and

just about every major city in North Vietnam had sustained heavy bombing damage. The damage had little effect on the NVA or the North Vietnamese, however, as Hanoi had evacuated all major cities and scattered the populous, military, and industry into the countryside to eliminate any major targets. Bombing targets were therefore small and extremely scattered, increasing the number of sorties necessary to run an effective campaign and the risk posed to American pilots. Even when successful, the effects of bombing runs were short lived as the people of North Vietnam rallied together in their "People's War" to quickly rebuild damaged infrastructure and homes. Ho also called in more assistance from China and Russia and by the end of 1967, Hanoi and Haiphong were heavily defended with anti-aircraft guns and SAM sights. Although bombing continued at a massive rate through 1968, the bombing campaigns cost had rose to ten U.S. dollars for every dollar of North Vietnamese equipment destroyed⁴⁶.

The frustration with the air war and lack of centralized strategy on the ground led to General Westmoreland dictating troop movement. Westmoreland felt that a strategy of attrition would eventually wear down Hanoi and lead to a diplomatic end. Attrition was based around the tactic of search and destroy, and called on U.S. troops to actively hunt down and eliminate any and all VC and NVA forces. Attrition unfortunately has few tangible rewards, as territory and fronts become non-existent, and was a large factor in the creation of the body count system later in the war and the general brutality of combat. Operation Cedar Falls, beginning in early 1967, marked the beginning of air and ground force coordination and called for carpet bombing with B-52's followed by search and destroy sweeps through an area and then another pass of carpet bombing. Utter destruction followed the beginning of Cedar Falls and while thousand of acres were wiped out, the tactical impact was small, again a result of the decentralization of NVA and VC forces. Yet even with the seeming futility of standard combat tactics, U.S. forces had never

⁴⁶ McMahon 223.

lost a battle and victory was easily obtainable if they could garner the support of the South Vietnamese. Throughout the war American soldiers were constantly plagued by the challenge of fighting an enemy they could not see. The natural resistance to foreign control present in Vietnamese history and culture had led many villagers who would walk next to American GIs during the day to work with the VC at night to attack the same soldiers. Furthermore, the villages would constantly feed and shelter VC when American patrols threatened their camps. Unfortunately, the destruction of civilian villages by American bombing and the general destruction brought about by napalm, cluster bombs, and white phosphorus all aided the VC in their recruitment strategies. Upon realizing that a cooperative effort between the majority of the South Vietnamese villages and U.S. forces was unlikely, commanders began to operate under the mindset that “we had to destroy the village to save it [from the VC]⁴⁷.” Although the U.S. never became heavily involved in propaganda and pacification of the South Vietnamese villages, a tactic that might have had a limited effect given the strong VC presence already established, the Revolutionary Development Program was a small program aimed at turning the villages to the U.S. Small fifty man teams would move into villages and attempt to convert them through social work and propaganda. However, the U.S. felt they could utilize the ARVN to carry out the program and stories of extortion and murder soon became prevalent, ending the program shortly after conception. Both ARVN and Saigon had fallen into deep corruption and money allocated for civil programs and local villages was often embezzled before leaving the city. U.S. forces had to attempt to control the villages through force and in doing so violated the ancient proverb, “the emperor’s rule ends at the village gate.” In never winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese, the U.S. and Saigon missed out on their greatest possible ally and a chance to win the war.

⁴⁷ Karnow 425.

As frustration increased among U.S. troops and violence escalated under the strategy of attrition and the body count system, several atrocities occurred that would put the war in Vietnam on center stage back in the United States. The first occurred in August on 1965 at Cam Ne when news reports showed American troops rounding up civilians from a village and then burning down the homes. Another was the infamous Tiger Force, a group of Special Forces who went AWOL and conducted an eight-month rampage from 1970 to 1971, indiscriminately killing an unknown amount of people, with estimates ranging from two hundred to five hundred killed. The most notorious of the atrocities occurred on March 16, 1968 in My Lai. A search and destroy mission led by Lt. William Calley led two platoons into a village in search of VC. When no VC were found but large stores of rice thought to be feeding local VC were, Calley ordered the execution of three hundred and forty seven villagers⁴⁸. The My Lai massacre was covered up until Life magazine broke the story in 1969. Calley was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to ten years in prison, a sentence later commuted by President Nixon. But more importantly showed the psychological effects the compounding stress of Vietnam had on American troops. Soldiers were unable to distinguish VC from civilians, unable to dictate battle occurrences, under constant pressure from booby traps and VC infiltration, and unable to form support groups because of the one year rotations employed by the military during Vietnam. It is critical to note, however, that the three isolated events discussed above were not the behavioral norm for troops in Vietnam. Movies and popular culture have stereotyped a generation of soldier who served their country as murders and baby killers, but nothing could be farther from the truth. While it would be an injustice to those who died to overlook the isolated atrocities committed by American troops, it is just as fraudulent to believe such actions were the norm. Hundreds of thousands of men and women served in Vietnam and less than one tenth of one percent were involved in any type

⁴⁸ Karnow 530

unauthorized killing. As the war droned on for those soldiers in Vietnam and public opinion began to question the purpose of American troops in Vietnam, the first eight weeks of 1968 would mark a monumental turning point in the war and the beginning of the end for public support of Vietnam.

At the end of 1967, Johnson gathered all of his top advisors together to take a critical look at the war in Vietnam and assess the current situation. While some minor criticisms came out and several civilian leaders such as McNamara questioned U.S. policies, Johnson's military advisors were optimistic the war was being won and the end was very much in sight. January 30, 1968 changed everything discussed at that meeting. January 30th marked the beginning of a new lunar year in Vietnam in 1968 and a ceasefire had been called across Vietnam sending much of the ARVN home on leave. In the middle of the night the heart of the Tet Offensive began, following its three-stage plan. Phase one had occurred earlier in the day, an attack in the Central Highlands that was actually a bluff to draw U.S. forces North from major Southern cities. Fortunately Westmoreland's intelligence informed him of the nature of the attack and he responded with a small number of troops⁴⁹. The evening of January 30th brought simultaneous attacks on every major town and city in South Vietnam. The U.S. embassy was overrun temporarily in Saigon, yet the popular uprising the VC had hoped to spur with the attacks never occurred. Fighting continued to rage and reached a climax in the city of Hue. The battle for Hue lasted one month after NVA forces took the citadel of the city and were subsequently laid siege to by U.S. forces. Massive bombing raids were started immediately and by the time the last parts of the citadel were recaptured on February 24th, over eight thousand soldiers had died on both sides and seventy five percent of the population of Hue was left homeless⁵⁰. The final stage of

⁴⁹ Herring 129.

⁵⁰ Karnow 531.

the Tet Offensive had been an NVA siege of the U.S. marine base at Khe Sanh. Six thousand U.S. marines and a small contingent of ARVN forces were surrounded on January 21st by approximately twenty five thousand NVA troops. Fearing another Dien Bien Phu, the U.S. immediately launched Operation Niagara, a massive bombing campaign against imbedded NVA forces, and Operation Pegasus, a supply line running up Highway 9 to resupply the base. On March 31st, the siege ended after American firepower killed ten thousand NVA and overpowered the remaining forces⁵¹. Overall, the Tet Offensive was a massive failure for the VC and NVA, with their combined casualties over fifty eight thousand. The VC was basically eliminated by the attack in the South and the NVA were now responsible for filling their loss. While it was a stunning military victory for the U.S., it was a domestic disaster. Widespread photos of the fighting shocked the American public, who for the first time saw the brutality of combat as well as the tenacity of the North Vietnamese. The public realized the war was far from over, unlike what government officials had promised just weeks earlier and public support for the war dropped from sixty percent prior to Tet to just below forty percent following Tet⁵².

Following the public fallout after Tet, Johnson again consulted his advisors on the future of American involvement in Vietnam. Earl Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked for two hundred thousand more troops to be sent to Vietnam, a suggestion met with vehement protest by McNamara. McNamara believed more troops would lead to more destruction, the levels of which were occurring had not been foreseen by any of the advisors, and that an exit strategy should become the focus. McNamara would soon resign from his post and be replaced by Clark Clifford, who also was against sending more troops and played a critical

⁵¹ Karnow 563

⁵² Karnow 580.

role on changing U.S. policy⁵³. Unfortunately, *The New York Times* found out about the troop request and printed the story, causing public outcry and a split in the Democratic Party.

Johnson's advisors met again and agreed upon pursuing a plan of gradual withdrawal and on March 31, 1968 Johnson announced he would not run for re-election, instead concentrating on the situation in Vietnam. The war was now moving to its conclusion and Johnson and his cabinet would try their best to create a manageable situation for the next President out of one that had spiraled out of control beyond anyone's belief.

V. The Endgame and Post-War Legacy

The political attitude in the U.S. following the Tet Offensive and Johnson's announcement was one of crisis. Protest was growing across the nation and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago was marred by a clash between protestors and police in Grant Park that became known as the Battle of Chicago. Nixon built his campaign around the protests, speaking to the "silent majority" of Americans and promises that he had a secret plan to end the war if elected. His conservative attitude eventually carried the polls narrowly on Election Day, as he won by a narrow margin and only five hundred thousand votes. Nixon had always supported the war and been against negotiations with Hanoi, and his secret plan was truly a lie. He improvised strategy in Vietnam for the first two years in office and relied heavily on his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. Kissinger had never supported the war but realized the importance of a graceful diplomatic exit for the United States in the world political system. Kissinger and Nixon worked to normalize relations with China and Russia in hopes of using them to influence Vietnam, but as it became clear Hanoi did not want to bargain, a new response was necessary.

⁵³ Johnson 394.

Vietnamization was that response and it involved attempting to prepare South Vietnam to stand on its own, “Vietnamizing” a war that had become America’s own. Nixon renewed bombing campaigns that Johnson had put on hold to attempt to bring Hanoi to the bargaining table and sanctioned Special Forces incursions into Cambodia and surrounding countries known to be aiding the North. While Nixon had hoped to keep these activities out of the press, leaks within the administration soon made them public and sparked increasing protest and the beginning of Nixon’s paranoia. Vietnamization also called for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops and the first withdrawal occurred in June of 1969 as twenty five thousand troops came home. Nixon had hoped the U.S. withdrawal would convince Hanoi that the U.S. did want to end the war, but Hanoi would settle for nothing less than complete withdrawal before entering negotiations. The crux of Vietnamization was preparing the ARVN to stand on its own and in 1969 almost one million troops were trained and supplied by U.S. personnel⁵⁴. Yet even with the influx of attention and training the ARVN remained corrupt and unprepared to defend the South from Northern aggression. Vietnamization was truly a glorified method of abandoning the South while trying to preserve the American image. Vietnamization also moved away from previous U.S. tactics of search and destroy and attrition and employed a pacification program nation building rather than combat as the primary goal. The U.S. helped institute land reform from corrupt members of the government and tried to build a sense of community between the cities and outlying areas. Fighting between the NVA and U.S. forces dropped off considerably throughout 1969 as Hanoi realized the U.S.’s intentions and began pooling resources as they waited for the U.S. to leave. The battle for Hill 937 in the Ashau Valley, also known as Hamburger Hill, marked the last battle of attrition in the war. The ten-day battle began on May 10th and was for control of a hill that had absolutely no tactical advantage. Fifty-six marines and six hundred

⁵⁴ FitzGerald 407.

NVA died in the battle and the United States abandoned the hill just three days after capturing it. The battle received extensive press coverage and harsh criticism from the public over the apparent waste of U.S. lives and Nixon sent out an order to all U.S. commanders to take whatever steps necessary to limit U.S. casualties for the remainder of the war⁵⁵.

The U.S.'s intentions were clear not only to Hanoi, but to its soldiers on the ground as well and 1969 was marked by a steady drop in morale as well as desertion and sporadic drug use. Protest images were beginning to filter through to the fronts and groups like Vietnam Veterans Against the War asked young soldiers "who wants to be the last soldier killed in Vietnam⁵⁶." Protest marches were taking place across the country and news of the five hundred thousand protestors who marched on Washington on November 15, 1969 reached the troops in Vietnam just days later. Although much is made of the impact of the protests on the war, Nixon remained largely unfazed in his assessment of the situation and relied of his advisors who showed him poll data indicating that while most Americans did not approve of the war, most also did not approve of the protests. 1970 was marked by the most violent protests of the war, as on May 4th four students were killed when National Guardsmen opened fire on a riot on the Kent State Campus in Ohio. Students had set fire to the ROTC building two days before and Governor James Rose had called in the Guard to control the students. Guardsmen responded to rocks and bottles from the students with tear gas and while no one know exactly what happened next, the deaths of the student sparked nation wide campus protests. One millions students walked out of class the next day and one fifth on the nations universities were shut down⁵⁷. Protests continued sporadically throughout the rest of the year, but more importantly the silent majority who had once supported the war no realized that the war could not be won.

⁵⁵ Herring 148.

⁵⁶ McMahan 442.

⁵⁷ McMahan 449

The Paris Peace Talks began in 1971 between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Ho's successor after his death in 1969, and centered on the issues of letting the South decide their own fate. Nixon had already withdrawn all but one hundred and fifty six thousand troops and the U.S. demanded that South Vietnam's democratic government be left intact after their withdrawal. Hanoi, of course, refused to guarantee anything as the South and reunification under communism had been their primary goals since French colonialism and upon learning of the North's refusal, Nixon launched a desperate bombing campaign to try to pressure Hanoi. In February of 1971, sixteen thousand ARVN troops moved into Laos near the DMZ to try to capture the Ho Chi Minh trail and put more pressure on Hanoi. Supported by U.S. airpower, the ARVN marched into Laos easily but was met with thirty six thousand NVA regulars just two days later. B-52's begin immediate support but the ARVN was simply outgunned and over nine thousand ARVN were killed before being able to retreat. While the ARVN fought to the best of their capabilities, the conflict in Laos further reinforced to Nixon and his advisors that the South would never be able to stand independently. Nixon was struck another damaging blow in June of 1971 when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers to the press, which showed that throughout the Vietnam conflict facts had been given a "spin" before being presented to the public. The leak outraged the public and created a credibility gap between the government and the public that would only widen as Nixon's Watergate scandal was revealed. As negotiations continued to stall into 1972, the North launched the Eastertide Offensive in the spring of 1972 in an attempt to overrun the South in a conventional war. The ARVN fought unbelievably well and were able to hold off the NVA until bombing runs began and the NVA lost over one hundred thousand men in the attack and gained only a marginal amount of territory. Nixon, angered by the attack during the peace process, ordered increased bombing runs against the North and finally brought Hanoi

to the table. The failure of the Eastertide offensive and pressure from Russia, who was funding the defense of Hanoi and Haiphong, were the two critical components of bringing Duc Tho back to the table and eventually reaching an agreement⁵⁸.

In October of 1972, an agreement was finally reached that called for the South and North to stay separated until the Committee of National Reconciliation could come together to hash out the future of Vietnam. The committee was to have members from the North, South, and neutral parties. Nixon also agreed to recognize the communists in the South in exchange for the North's release of all prisoners of war. The U.S. continued to support the ARVN and gave some limited aid to the North to rebuild, but Nixon instructed Kissinger not to sign until after the upcoming election. Kissinger declared that "peace is at hand" on the eve of the election in order to secure more votes and Nixon won reelection against George McGovern. Now safely reelected, Nixon began to rethink the agreement and launched another bombing campaign against the North to attempt to force more concessions. The Linebacker II raids ran from December 18th through December 29th and became known as the Christmas bombing as approximately one hundred U.S. airmen lost their lives and fifteen hundred Vietnamese civilians were killed. The entire world rose against the bombings and rumors began to circulate throughout the U.S. and Congress that Nixon had lost his sanity. On January 27, 1973 the Paris Peace Accords were signed and almost identical to the earlier agreements; the U.S. was to remove all troops, the North will release all POWS, the North promises not to invade the South, and the democratic government remains sovereign in the South. Kissinger and Du Thou win the Nobel Peace Prize for their work on the accords later that year.

On March 30th, 1973, the last five thousand combat troops assembled at Tan Son Nhut air force base to leave Vietnam and two days later only two hundred and ten U.S. troops were left to

⁵⁸ Karnow 643.

guard the U.S. embassy in Saigon⁵⁹. Neither the ARVN nor the NVA had any respect for the ceasefire agreement and both sides were fighting to gain as much territory as possible. The ARVN was overly aggressive because they believed the U.S. would come back if the North violated the peace agreement when in reality nothing could be farther from the truth. The government in the South continues to fall into corruption and stretches the ARVN dangerously thin while the North prepares for the final offensive into the South. In October of 1974 the NVA began its offensive, and by December of 1974 had violated the peace talks without response from the United States, confirming their beliefs of non-retaliation. On March 10th the NVA moved across the 17th parallel into the South and ARVN forces retreat to the South to Saigon to attempt to save the government. The ARVN makes a desperate stand at Xuan Loc before surrendering to the North on April 17th, 1973. On April 10th President Ford had asked Congress for financing to save the South in a largely theatrical stand and by April 22nd, the NVA easily entered Saigon. Airlifts began immediately at the U.S. embassy and April 29th marked the last day of airlifts as Operation Frequent Wind attempted to evacuate as many U.S. personnel and sympathizers as possible. Saigon fell the next day, April 30th, 1973, just fifty-five days after the North began its offensive and the will of the communism had officially triumphed over American firepower.

The country of Vietnam underwent a complete communist revolution in 1975 and remained impoverished and depended upon Chinese aid over the next decade. Southerners faced discrimination from Northern communists and the economy remained inactive until Doi Moi instituted land reform and limited capitalism in 1986⁶⁰. An incentive based economy was established and Vietnam has slowly recovered, becoming a tourist hotspot in Southeast Asia because of its warm climate. The Vietnam War had quite an effect on the American populous as

⁵⁹ Karnow 653.

⁶⁰ CIA Factbook.

well. Distrust of the government finds its seeds in Vietnam and the anti-establishment movement was founded during in the decade following Vietnam. Foreign policy came under tighter controls from Congress and the fear of “another Vietnam” greatly limited foreign policy options until a clear mandate and opportunity for victory existed in any conflict. Veterans returning home were often greeted by silence in reference to their experience and a lack of psychological support from both the government and their communities. No formal recognition was given until the mid-eighties when ticker tape parades were finally held to honor the men and women who served in Vietnam. Unfortunately, not much more has been done to remember those who fought in Vietnam and while the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial stands as a stark and humbling reminder of those who gave their lives in service to the United States, more and more people are never learning about Vietnam. The secondary education system has largely failed to remember the sacrifices and tribulations of an entire generation and popular culture has moved into to sell a stereotype, and in doing so, inadvertently “educated” an entire generation on the Vietnam War.

Part II

*There's battle lines being drawn, nobody's right if everybody's wrong
Young people speaking their minds, getting so much resistance from behind.
-Buffalo Springfield*

VI. Vietnam's Role Today

The role of the Vietnam War in contemporary society is one marked by controversy and a general lack of clarity. An issue in everything from education to Presidential elections, the importance of having a complete understanding of the facts about Vietnam is clear. Yet while the relevance of Vietnam in today's society is without question, such was not always the case. The Vietnam War caused a deep division in American society that took several decades to even begin to heal. The scar that remains was often thought to be better left ignored than explained. History books, educators, parents, and even some veterans initially treated Vietnam as though it had never happened, for a variety of reasons. Some believed that continuing to remember what many thought of as a mistake would only make it harder for the nation to reconcile its differences over Vietnam, while other did not want to see America's image in the minds of its youth tarnished by a controversial war. Regardless of the reasons, the importance of the Vietnam was lost on the generations of youth who grew up in the decades after Vietnam. Even today's generation is tragically short-changed as the education system still battles with itself as to how much information, time, and money to devote to the most controversial war in American history. Yet American society has taken an important step towards recognizing the mistakes of their past. The past year's Presidential election has played a critical role in bringing the Vietnam War back to the surface of the American psyche. While some advisors and commentators stated that there was no need to bring up painful images and that history was better left in the past, nothing could be farther from the truth. History has always served as a guide to the future and as Generation X gradually becomes the wardens of U.S. interests and actions around the globe, nothing could be more important than a fundamental understanding of prior U.S. involvements.

A generation of Americans was called upon to serve to the United States in Vietnam and the demographics of enlistees provide a number of striking reasons to study the Vietnam War. The average age of the soldiers in Vietnam was twenty-two and over eleven thousand of the men and women killed in action were less than twenty years old. Approximately eighty percent of those who served had their high school diploma, making the majority of them eligible for college study⁶¹. While the above numbers should present a striking connection to any college student, the large effect on a generation of youth should warrant close investigation from any party. While some events remained removed from the American psyche because of time and a lack of correlation, the Vietnam War had such an effect on a large student population just three decades ago that it is easy for current students to imagine themselves serving in the Vietnam era. The close correlation and recent nature of the event make the lack of education and knowledge concerning it extremely disquieting. Even more compelling, however, are the facts on veterans today. The average age for Vietnam veterans' today is approximately fifty-five and as many veterans took advantage of government financing for their continued education, Vietnam veterans occupy management positions and other advanced positions at companies throughout the country. While the Vietnam War and its veterans are both bound to affect the lives of students through some form or fashion, whether it be an employer's past or student activism founded during the Vietnam era, the question remains concerning why the educational system does not properly educate students on the Vietnam War.

A survey of undergraduate history students at the University of Vermont in 1990 revealed that one in four students believed that the Vietnam War was fought between North and South Korea and that four in five students did not know the meanings of *dove* and *hawk* in the context

⁶¹ Westmoreland, William C. Speech before the Third Annual Reunion of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association. Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association *Historical Reference Directory*. Volume 2A. Washington, 1986.

of the Vietnam War⁶². These startling statistics reveal the deep and dangerous inadequacies of the U.S. educational system in teaching recent history, especially the Vietnam War. The lack of historical instruction on the Vietnam War has led to the perpetuation of the ignorant and sometimes dangerous myths that popular culture portrays as reality. So while the problem is obvious, the cause finds its roots in three main sources: time, money, and politics. Time is the most critical of the sources, as standardized testing and other “measures of achievement” have begun to force teachers to forgo education in order to provide time for test preparation. Individual school districts across the country provide guides and suggestions as to how much material must be covered by the end of the year and teachers are made aware of what will be expected of their students at the end of the year. Teachers are therefore driven to cover all the necessary information as quickly as possible, ignoring any information not deemed important enough to be included on a two hour test of two and a half centuries of American history, and allocate the last several weeks of class to review and preparation. The system naturally focuses on early history, for logistically early history is at the front of textbooks and covered first. The most recent history, such as Vietnam, is always found at the end of textbooks and was traditionally taught at the end of the semester. Now as test preparation has become the sole focus of the last weeks of school, the Vietnam War has been replaced by time management and practice tests in the curriculum of many high school students. Students leave high school having passed the tests necessary to receive a diploma yet lacking a sense of the contemporary events that have shaped the world around them.

Money is also another large factor in the education system’s failure to teach Vietnam. Standardized tests come into play here as well, for government and state funding are often tied to

⁶² Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Book Got Wrong*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) 240.

a school's performance on the battery of tests at the end of the year. Teachers are pressured to have their students pass for their own evaluations and administrators are pressured to make sure their school passes to ensure adequate funding for the next year. Money drives contemporary American life and again school and bureaucracy get in the way of education. Another monetary issue concerns the textbooks used by most high schools. Ten textbooks account for the majority of texts used across the nation in high school history classes and each of these texts average less than thirty five pages for coverage of the 1960's and approximately seven for coverage of the Vietnam War⁶³. While seven pages of analytical text might be enough for a basic history of Vietnam, it is important to remember that images represent almost a third of the page space in these samples. While recent history is neglected, early American history flourishes. The War of 1812 took place almost two centuries ago and receives an average of approximately nine pages in most history books⁶⁴. A war that many historians place little historical significance on and killed only two thousand Americans is given the same quantitative coverage as a war that played a critical role in shaping modern foreign policy approaches and killed over fifty thousand American servicemen and women. Most school systems would have to replace their current texts or add a large supplemental body of information to the text to accurately teach Vietnam and both teachers and districts lack the financial resources to undertake such a cause.

Even if the money to replace distorted texts were available, politics would provide a daunting hurdle to overcome in the implantation of a new system. Textbook manufacturers and buyers are often of an age that they were alive during the Vietnam War and were given the opportunity to witness firsthand the controversy surrounding it. They remember the sharp divide within the country and still feel as though one must ignore it or face unearthing those divisions

⁶³ Loewen 240.

⁶⁴ Loewen 241.

once again. Vietnam was one of the most emotionally charged periods of American history and the feelings present during the era may have faded for some, but for many have not. The past Presidential election has shown the heightened emotions Vietnam still commands thirty years after the war. Manufacturers know that buyers will not purchase texts with controversial pictures or prose, especially that which might portray American involvement as negative. Images from the Vietnam era are limited to nondescript pictures of Hueys in formation and servicemen on patrol and only one text in ten even mentions the atrocity at My Lai. Some of the most eloquent and famous speeches given by Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali are left out, deemed too controversial and negative for public school. Even the domestic front is ignored as the antiwar movement receives little coverage and the few facts presented mean little in light of the positive light the war is presented in. Frances FitzGerald commented on the secondary education system's approach to Vietnam in *Fire in the Lake*, calling textbooks "remarkable reading...since it is really quite hard to discuss the war and evade all the major issues... [textbooks] are neither hawkish nor dovish on the war – they are simply evasive⁶⁵." The epic shortcomings of the educational system to honor those who served and remind a generation of past mistakes, in the hopes of preventing future ones, begs the question "why." While time, money, and politics have all played a role in sweeping the Vietnam War under the rug of American history, why have administrators, teachers, and even the mass public allowed it to happen. The key lies in one of the lesser discussed roles of public education, socialization. Socialization refers to the process of learning and internalizing the basic social rules necessary for an individual to function in society⁶⁶. While school is often thought of as an avenue to promote inquiry, the role of iconography is equal if not greater than inquiry. Education helps shape how people think, act and

⁶⁵ Loewen 247.

⁶⁶ Loewen 307.

what they believe, then requires them to conform to succeed. Furthermore, education as an agent of socialization teaches students to believe in the rightness of our society and often overtly tell students to be proud of America. Strict allegiance grows from this socialization and America's negative role in Vietnam has no place in the rubric. Therefore, as generations of students continue to pass over the realities and lessons of the Vietnam War the risk of history being forgotten or even rewritten becomes more and more acute. While popular culture has currently stepped in to fill the educational void, only time will tell if the current "neutral" depiction of the Vietnam War slowly becomes more and more positive or even worse, fades away.

Part III

Nothing is over!!! Nothing!!! You just don't turn it off! It wasn't my war! You asked me, I didn't ask you! And I did what I had to do to win! But somebody wouldn't let us win! And I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spitting. Calling me baby killer and all kinds of crap! Who are they to protest me? Who are they?

- Rambo

VII. Movies

Throughout the history of the United States, the mass media has played a central role in creating and molding the public's view on issues ranging from representation and taxation to the war against terrorism. The vast influence mass media has enjoyed since from its humble beginnings in newspapers and pamphlets is largely due to the fact that it presents information in a unpretentious manner that even the most common of men can absorb and comprehend. The power that comes with the pervasive presence and appeal of mass media, however, has become a major liability to not only the media itself, but to the value of truth in America. The mass media has overwhelmingly become the soundboard of political interests in America and one of the most glaring examples of partisan media is found in Hollywood's portrayal of cinematic war.

Cinematic war refers to war as it is portrayed in feature films, focusing primarily on combat and the conduct of military operations, including the impact of war at home and upon veterans when they return from the war⁶⁷. During the Vietnam War and the decades that followed, cinematic war reflected a wide spectrum of political beliefs about the role of the United States' military around the world and because of the immense influence of media and the failure of education in teaching Vietnam, played a crucial role in shaping an entire generation's perceptions of the "truth" about Vietnam. Movies such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Rambo* focused on the realities of combat and the situation at home while films such as *Uncommon Valor* and *Apocalypse Now* discussed issues ranging from prisoners of war to the inherent evil and chaos at the heart of mankind. While each film presented a different reaction to the war and its aftereffects, what every film had in common was a lack of complete historical accuracy.

History does not often make money at the box office and therefore directors and producers stretch the truth and in some cases fabricated it in order to turn a profit. While none of these

⁶⁷ Fitzgerald, Michael. Lecture. Political Science 410, The University of Tennessee: Spring 2004.

films ever claimed to be historically precise, unfortunately many came to be treated as such. Because students were not being educated on the realities of the Vietnam War, believing film to portray a reasonable version of the truth did not seem far fetched. Soon, Vietnam became a war marked in the minds of many as one of brutal aggression and unrestrained killing. Veterans became type cast as Rambo-esque characters, emotionally unstable and obsessed with Vietnam. While statistics show nothing could be farther from the truth, movies played a major role in filling the educational void concerning Vietnam and created stereotypes about everything from combat to veterans that many still hold as more truth than fiction today.

Combat was one of the major focuses of cinema concerning Vietnam, especially as veterans began to relay how brutal the fighting had become in limited regions. *Platoon*, *We Were Soldiers*, and *Full Metal Jacket* are three of the most prominent and popular movies to address combat in Vietnam and present three unique approaches to the combat narrative. The physical and mental breakdown of virtually every soldier in *Platoon* presents a striking example of the psychological and physical difficulties U.S. soldiers faced during the Vietnam War. From the moment the film opens, the every aspect of Vietnam challenges Taylor and the rest of his platoon to maintain their sanity and strength. Blinding sun, intense heat, and endless labor grind down Taylor's flesh and spirit as he "humps all day, digs a hole...and maybe sleeps three or four hours"⁶⁸. Taylor's role as a "cherry" presents a massive psychological burden because nobody tells him what to do and nobody cares about him because his life is not worth as much as a man who has been in Vietnam for several months. As a newbie, he constantly serves as point, leading the platoon through the dense jungle where "a gook could be three feet in front of my face and [he] wouldn't know it"⁶⁹. He quickly finds that "hell is the impossibility of reason... [Vietnam]

⁶⁸ Stone, Oliver. *Platoon*. Cinema 86, 1986

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

is hell⁷⁰.” While Taylor’s inexperience multiplies the severity of the problems he faces, even veteran soldiers break down under the pressure of combat. Junior sprays bug repellent on his feet to try to get out of duty, Francis stabs himself to be medivaced, and O’Neill hides under a corpse rather than face the enemy. Though exaggerated in some aspects, much of the action in *Platoon* is reasonably accurate through the first half of the movie. As the movie progresses however, the “civil war” inside the platoon between Barnes and Elias further strains the men, who find themselves in a war against each other rather than the enemy. Moral clarity becomes blurred within the platoon and even Taylor comes to the brink of insanity, forcing a one-legged Vietnamese cripple to dance by firing at his feet. Taylor breaks down before he can kill the man, realizing how close the stress of combat and just trying to stay alive brought him to murder. Both of these incidents also find a base in events which did transpire in Vietnam, but the manner in which they are portrayed in *Platoon* makes them seem more common than not. In actuality only a fraction of the soldiers serving in Vietnam ever engaged in any violation of the rules of engagement and while the stress of living in a combat zone was intense, many found other ways to relieve stress rather than harassing civilians. The chaos of war comes to a climax for Taylor in *Platoon* when he sees pure evil in Barnes’s eyes the instant before Barnes would kill him in a violent rampage. Taylor is saved by a napalm explosion and then kills Barnes, defeating the evil essence that lay within him, and yet even at this moment of victory feels suicidal. The death and violence around him pushes him to end his mental and physical suffering. While a recon soldier frightens him into dropping the grenade he intended to kill himself with, and he realizes his life will never be the same, for although “the war is over...it will always be there⁷¹.” Vietnam appears to have defiled Taylor and every man in his platoon, leaving some with a physical scar

⁷⁰ *Ibid*

⁷¹ *Ibid*

and all with a psychological one. Again, while some attacks on commanding officers were reported as morale dropped near the end of the war, they were few and far between. The idea that Vietnam ravaged every soldier both emotionally and physically is embellished throughout *Platoon* to feed the plot. A stereotype soon developed and some of the atrocity and trauma present in *Platoon* began to be held as the normal experience of every soldier in Vietnam. Veterans will often be more than willing to tell you that this was not the case and that “we [soldiers] often employed and worked with local Vietnamese in moving supplies and defending villages. I never saw one civilian murdered⁷².”

Full Metal Jacket takes a different approach to exploring a soldier’s life in Vietnam, starting from the beginning of training in boot camp and following Private Joker throughout his time in Vietnam. While *Platoon* embellishes much of the combat sequences in Vietnam, *Full Metal Jacket* remains quite factual in respect to combat in Vietnam but rather dramatizes the harsh training many Marines endured. Boot camp on Paris Island, “eight weeks for the phony tough and the crazy brave⁷³” is marked by two continuous concepts: becoming a “killer” and having one’s self image torn down and rebuilt by the government. Gunnery Sergeant Hartman berates his recruits constantly, verbally and physically abusing them in hopes of securing their absolute loyalty to the Marines. Private Pyle bears the brunt of Hartman’s abuse as he is overweight and slow to acquire the skills Hartman teaches. Yet even through the constant abuse, even Pyle is able to adopt the killer mentality Hartman espouses. What Hartman did not expect, however, was to witness Pyle’s new mentality before Vietnam and therefore dies with an expression of surprise on his face when Pyle shoots him before killing himself. The killer mentality Hartman preached eventually came full circle and resulted in his death, but this focus

⁷² Owens, Fred. Interview. University of Tennessee, Spring 2004.

⁷³ Kubrick, Stanley. *Full Metal Jacket*. Warner Brothers, 1987.

on the unrestrained violence is what has led to many veterans and active members of the armed forces being labeled as “killing machines.” Much like *Platoon*, most of the action in the first part of *Full Metal Jacket* is based on experience, but is also presented in a manner meant to shock audiences. The second half of the movie focuses mainly on Private Joker’s experience in Vietnam and the battle in his psyche between his own moral values and beliefs and the killer mentality the Marines has ingrained in him. He witnesses the brutality of the killer mentality in the door gunner who shoots at civilians in the rice paddies and is disgusted, but in the end, must choose between killing the female sniper who just killed his friend Private Cowboy and letting someone else do it. His gun jams as he pulls the trigger and Rafterman shoots her instead but she does not die immediately. Joker reluctantly kills her after she begs them to kill her, but even in doing so does not seem to succumb to the killer mentality, but rather kills her in a more merciful act. The internal conflict Private Joker deals with throughout the movie provides a unique perspective on the moral righteousness of war. While promoting critical thinking about such topics is of vital importance in a free society, *Full Metal Jacket* does so at the expense of the average veteran. By painting Joker as a moral philosopher of sorts, *Full Metal Jacket* plays off and reinforces the assumption that most soldiers, and therefore veterans, were unthinking killing machines who followed orders regardless of their own moral convictions or even the rules of engagement. Where as *Platoon* takes a blatant approach towards stereotyping soldiers and combat during the Vietnam War, *Full Metal Jacket* takes a more subliminal approach, which while much less noticeable, is even more effective because of its covert nature.

While *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* provide examples of movies that have blurred reality and helped to define the popular myths and stereotypes about the Vietnam War, *We Were Soldiers* represents a new genre of film beginning to develop about Vietnam. *We Were Soldiers*

details the battle in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 where four hundred U.S. soldiers were surrounded by approximately four thousand NVA and the brutal days of combat that followed. While the heroism and devotion to each soldier Lt. Colonel Hal Moore shows throughout the movie is exceptional, what is even more striking is that the movie is almost completely factual. While obviously based on a true story, it does not take many of the liberties other “true story” films take. *We Were Soldiers* provides a historically accurate depiction of the battle based not only on Lt. Colonel Moore’s book, but also on his personal memories as he helped develop and gave his final approval to the movie before release. While many movies focused on combat in Vietnam have been negative in nature, *We Were Soldiers* provides a unique look at the relationships and more human side of the war and the soldiers who fought in it. *We Were Soldiers* represents a new direction cinematic war, especially concerning Vietnam, is beginning to move towards. Films such as *Black Hawk Down* and *Three Kings* now focus more on the relationships between soldiers during combat rather than the physical acts of combat. Yet while *Black Hawk Down* and *Three Kings* were both released less than a decade after the conflicts they focus on, *We Were Soldiers* was released more than three decades after Vietnam⁷⁴. There has been a distinct trend in cinematic war concerning Vietnam, as movies directly after the war tended to be blatantly critical and full of stereotypes while movies released and recent years tend to be less emotionally and politically charged and more focused on factual representation. *We Were Soldiers* represents a positive step for Vietnam veterans who have been stereotyped for much of their lives. As film becomes more historically accurate and less dependent on stereotypes to sell tickets, perhaps a generation of misguided youth will reexamine their beliefs about the men and women who fought and died in the Vietnam War.

⁷⁴ Wallace, Randall. *We Were Soldiers*. Wheelhouse Entertainment, 2002.

Combat was a major focus of many filmmakers during the years that followed the Vietnam War, but equally popular and perhaps more damaging to the historical record and Vietnam veterans was the portrayal of veterans returning home and attempting to reenter civilian life. *The Deer Hunter*, *Born on the 4th of July*, and the *Rambo* series all served to propagate the stereotype that veterans were mentally unstable and so scarred from military service that they were rendered useless in civilian society. *The Deer Hunter* focuses on the lives of three childhood friends, Michael, Nick and Steven, who enlist and serve together in Vietnam. They eventually all become prisoners of war and are forced to play brutal games of Russian roulette against each other before Michael is able to help them all escape. Steven loses one of his legs because of injuries during the escape and becomes bound to a wheelchair, Nick loses his sanity because of the pressure of captivity and even Michael, the strongest member of the group both mentally and physically, cannot seem to shake the effects of the war. After escaping all three men are discharged and while Michael and Steven return home, Nick is unable to leave Vietnam and spends the rest of his life engaging in high risk games of Russian roulette in backdoor casinos. Steven's handicap leaves him bitter about life and unable to return to his former job at the steel factory and without a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Although Michael escapes Vietnam without any type of obvious mental or physical wounds, he is burdened by a mass psychological trauma. He was charged with "keeping them [Steven and Nick] safe⁷⁵" because of his "big brother" status and feels personally responsible for both men's tragic ends. Michael travels back to Vietnam to try to save Nick but finds him lost in a world of drugs, alcohol and gambling and watches him kill himself in his last game of Russian roulette. Not one of the three men is ever able to readjust to society and seem to carry an invisible burden from Vietnam for the rest of their lives. Even as the film ends at Nick's funeral and the town sings "God Bless

⁷⁵ Cimino, Michael. *The Deer Hunter*. Universal Pictures, 1978.

America,” a sense of gloom pervades⁷⁶. Michael, Nick and Steven quickly became the stereotypical veterans in the eyes of many, especially following *The Deer Hunter's* Oscar. While some veterans did deal with issues of regret and depression following the Vietnam War, many received the help and counseling necessary, from both family and government, to readjust to civilian society. Over eighty five percent of Vietnam veterans made a successful adjustment to civilian life, a fact grossly overlooked by the characterization in *The Deer Hunter* and many other Vietnam films.

While many veterans did make a successful return to civilian life, not all were immediately successful. *Born on the 4th of July* chronicles the life of Ron Kovic, an American soldier whose patriotic mentality led him to enter the war in Vietnam, where he was tragically paralyzed from the waist down and accidentally killed a fellow soldier in combat. Upon returning home, Ron is heavily burdened both by a sense of guilt and self consciousness about his condition and looks for support from his community and government but finds little. After struggling with himself and not being able to find a place back in his hometown, Ron decides to abandon any hope for his future or life and leaves for Mexico where he believes money, alcohol, and sex will help him forget his past and himself. It is only when he is immersed in a lifestyle he thought would erase his former life that he realizes that he must come to grips with his own past, from the accidental killing to his own ideas of what patriotism truly is. Ron begins to understand that sometimes patriotism calls for a new look at old issues and that criticism can still be patriotic. He joins with the anti-war movement and slowly begins to realize a sense of self worth and build back his previously shattered ego. Ron's life becomes an example for those veterans who were not able to immediately come to grips with their lives after Vietnam, but to assume all veterans would have the same opportunities and second chances as Ron would be imprudent.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Again, it is important to remember that most veterans were able to readjust to civilian life without any trouble and that veterans such as Ron were not the norm as film often depicts them. Yet while *The Deer Hunter* and *Born on the Fourth of July* both further some myths about Vietnam veterans, no film has ever done such damage to veterans in the minds of the American psych as the *Rambo* series.

The epic, yet ridiculous, story of John Rambo in *Rambo: First Blood* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* offers a unique look at the problems Vietnam veterans faced upon returning home as well as presenting several overt ideological themes about the nature of the Vietnam War. The treatment Rambo receives when he arrives in the small town of Hope, while not representative of all veterans' homecoming, was not uncommon in the turbulent years following Vietnam. Hope's sheriff tells Rambo his "type" is not welcome here and drives him to the edge of town. When Rambo insists on staying, the police arrest him and beat him. Even in naming the town Hope, the filmmakers further the idea that many veterans such as Rambo had no hope and were desecrated by the war. While the beating at the beginning of the movie by the police officers was creative liberty at best, Rambo's rampage and subsequent breakdown at the end of the movie is both completely unfounded and an insult to any veteran who has served in a combat zone. It portrays veterans as physical superheroes while at the same time emotional cripples who have no place in society. By the time Rambo gives himself up, Troutman's assertion that "there are no friendly civilians" seems true in both war and peace for returning veterans, which while not entirely false would still not be a basis for the guerilla war conducted by Rambo⁷⁷. The treatment of veterans is also discussed in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* when Troutman speaks about the "quiet war" after Vietnam against returning soldiers⁷⁸. The main focus of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* however,

⁷⁷ Kotcheff, Ted. *Rambo: First Blood*. Carolco Pictures, 1982.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

seems to be political. Russian soldiers control the Vietnamese POW camps as the filmmakers blatantly push the idea that Russia was the United States main foe in Vietnam. This ideological mendacity comes to a head when Rambo pilots his helicopter against the Russian Hind in a battle of the superpowers. Fortunately, America has Rambo and he brilliantly defeats the entire Russian army single-handedly. Again the idea of Rambo being a physical superhero is reinforced. Murdock's character also brings up an ideological question, as his callous actions towards Rambo and the POWs seem to suggest the U.S. government cares little for its soldiers. As the movie ends, Rambo's final plea speaks not only to Murdock, but to all of America, "We (veterans) want our country to love us as much as we love our country," again suggesting a serious animosity between veterans and the civilian public⁷⁹. *Rambo: First Blood* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, are not only hampered by ridiculous plot lines, but also present and inculcate ridiculous stereotypes about a veteran's psychological stability and lack of purpose in a non-military environment. While the ridiculous plot lines in both films may lead many to view the series as strictly entertainment, the mere act of watching a film exposes one's self to the ideas and stereotypes a film portrays. Films impact one's psyche whether one wants them to or not and to write off a film as harmless while ignoring the blatant stereotypes within it is reckless and naive.

While many movies which focus on the Vietnam War were made after the war and tended to highlight the more negative experiences and aspects of the war, *The Green Berets* stands as one of the few "positive" films about Vietnam. Supported by the government during production, the characterization of communism within the plot and dialogue of *The Green Berets* clearly exemplifies the Johnson administration's views on communists and communist societies during the Vietnam era and serves as an avenue for underhanded propaganda. In the opening

⁷⁹ Cosmatos, George P. *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. Carolco Entertainment, 1985.

scene, Sergeant Kowlaski explains the violent and repressive nature of communism to the press as well as the viewer, stating that “every mayor, teacher, governor, senator, professor you ever heard of would be tortured and killed” in a communist state⁸⁰. Kowlaski’s dark illustration serves to justify America’s involvement in Vietnam, for America must prevent “communist domination of the world⁸¹.” Throughout the movie, the communist Viet Cong forces are charged with countless heinous crimes such as rape, murder, and robbery. The atrocities committed by the Viet Cong include the murder of Ham Chunk’s parents, the murder and mutilation of a Green Beret who was treating villagers, the murder of the local chief and every man who refused join them, the rape and murder of the chief’s granddaughter, the pillaging of the village’s food supply, and the murder of Lin’s father and brother. Colonel Kirby tells Beckworth the story of another village that tried to resist communist takeover in which the Viet Cong tied up the chief and then proceeded to disembowel his daughters in front of him, rape his wife forty times, and use an iron rod to break every bone in her body. These horrific stories are reinforced when the viewer witnesses the actions of the Viet Cong after they overrun the American base. They swarm over the base like animals, killing everyone in sight and then looting and stripping the dead. These horrific images underpin the evils of communism in the viewer’s mind and suggest the fate of America if it allows communism to spread. American righteousness provides a stark contrast to communism throughout the film however, as Peterson cares for Ham Chunk, Kirby takes in the remnants of the slaughter village, and Doc provides free care for all the villagers. The sinister portrayal of communism coupled with a mediated reality of American involvement allows *The Green Berets* to clearly reflect the Johnson administration’s views on communism while also serving a quasi-propaganda role in furthering American fear and scorn towards the

⁸⁰ Kellogg, Roy. *The Green Berets*. Batjac Productions, 1968.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Viet Cong and communism. While *The Green Berets* does not stereotype combat, veterans, or even the domestic front during the war, it cannot be overlooked as a dangerous piece of propaganda. The Johnson administration used the film to propagate the stereotype of “evil communism” and relied on audiences standing behind the war after viewing and hearing of the horrific possibilities under communist rule. The facts were undeniably embellished, communism was comically exaggerated and distorted to bolster the views of the American government, and again, a sense of history was lost. Whether or not one is focused on a friend or foe, combat or the domestic front, it is vital for the historical record to be preserved as accurately as possible. Film is an incredibly powerful medium and possesses an ability to influence our lives like few other elements; to forget the power of film is to leave one’s mind open to the foreign hands of the film industry. Entertainment can find a balance with fact and while education could eliminate the need for a critical mind while watching movies, until such a time comes one must, as Sergeant Kowlaski said, “don’t believe everything you see on TV⁸².”

VIII. Music

The Vietnam War stands as one of the United States’ most controversial military engagements and music of the era reflected the divisive nature of the war as songs of both protest and patriotism filled the air. Popular artists and groups such as Bob Dylan, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and Bob Seger spoke out against the chaotic nature of war and the government’s role in it with some of the most famous protest songs of all time. While popular culture and history often focus on the countless anti-war songs written during the war, patriotic music also played an important role. Songs such as “Minute Men” and “Okie From Muskogee” reflected the attitudes and beliefs of the “silent majority” of Americans who may not have necessarily supported the war, but opposed the radical nature of the protest movement. The availability of these songs to

⁸² *Ibid.*

soldiers on the front lines through official and pirate radio stations helped cement Vietnam as the first true rock and roll war. Yet even with the massive amount of music both supporting and denouncing the war, a limited amount of it reached the public and even less reached the soldiers in Vietnam. The majority of both protest and patriotic music received limited playtime in the United States because of the unpopular nature of the war and much of the pro and anti-war music never made it on to the Top 40 charts that were the main source of music in Vietnam. Yet while music of the Vietnam era accomplished little in its effort to sway the minds of the public, it does portray an accurate image of the divisions within the American public over the Vietnam War. Music defines the Vietnam era and some of these emotionally charged musical definitions have become commonly mistaken with historical fact.

Music and war have always had a unique relationship throughout the history of the United States. From “Yankee Doodle” to “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” American wars have had their music, but no war has had such a powerful soundtrack as Vietnam. Unlike previous wars, protest music concerning Vietnam vastly outnumbered music of patriotism and this historical disparity provides sharp evidence of exactly how unpopular the war was in the United States. Although protest music existed from the start of American involvement in Vietnam, the Tet Offensive in 1968 marked the beginning of a dramatic explosion in the popularity and production of protest music⁸³. Yet even after Tet, only two protest songs, Edwin Starr’s “War” and Guess Who’s “American Woman,” would ever hit number one on the Billboard charts and the majority of music produced by both genres stayed relatively underground⁸⁴. Protest music focused on a wide variety of topics during Vietnam, but three of the most common subjects were

⁸³ Andresen, Lee. Battle Notes: Music of the Vietnam War. (Madison: Savage Press, 2003) 30.

⁸⁴ Billboard Hits, 1965-1975. <http://www.recordresearch.com/numones/numone_pop_7074.html> (20 April 2004).

the inequity of the draft, the lack of credibility from the government, and the soldier's experience in Vietnam⁸⁵.

Many protestors saw the Vietnam War, like many other American wars, as the "rich man's war and poor man's fight" and the underlying bias of the draft only furthered this presupposition⁸⁶. "Fortunate Son," by Creedence Clearwater Revival, vehemently attacks the flawed draft system that allowed those "born silver spoon in hand" to avoid military service while the common citizen is asked to give "more, more, more." The song's chorus, "It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son...I ain't no fortunate son," added a personal note for those soldiers listening to the song and many GI's regarded the song as a morale booster and personal anthem⁸⁷. Pete Seeker's recording of Phil Otis' "Draftdodger Rag" presents a humorous satire of the countless trivialities healthy men could list to avoid being drafted. The young man in "Draftdodger Rag" responds to his draft notice by telling his recruiter "I'm only eighteen, I've got a ruptured spleen and I always carry a purse. I've got eyes like a bat, my feet are flat, and my asthmas getting worse." While the excuses appear comical on the surface, the draftdodger's true reasoning reflects Seeker's sharp criticism of those who "worked the system" to their advantage when he states, "Someone's gotta go over there but that someone isn't me"⁸⁸. While the inequity of the draft and the excuses used to dodge it were rampant in protest music, the reality of the draft presents a striking turn from popular history. Two thirds of the men who served in Vietnam were volunteers, a number that stands in striking contrast to both World War II, when two thirds of the servicemen were drafted, and the widely held assumptions about the totality of the draft⁸⁹. Furthermore, approximately eighty percent of the soldiers in Vietnam had at least a high school

⁸⁵ Andresen 32.

⁸⁶ Andresen 34.

⁸⁷ Fogerty, John. *Fortunate Son*. Fantasy Records, 1969.

⁸⁸ Seeker, Pete. *Draftdodger Rag*. Columbia Records, 1966.

⁸⁹ Westmoreland.

education, making the soldiers in Vietnam the most educated military force to ever see combat up to that point in American history⁹⁰. While the educational difference may be more of a result of progressive society, both the volunteer and education statistics stand completely against the ideas of injustice and inequality many songs reference. While it would be naive to assume some inequality was not present during the draft between social classes, it is safe to say the major injustice many songs espouse did not truly exist.

The credibility gap between the government and the public was another major focus for protest songs during Vietnam. Tom Paxton's "Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation" attacks Johnson for deceiving the public about the true nature of the war. Paxton's lyrics assert that "Lyndon Johnson told a nation 'have no fear of escalation'," and yet by the end of the song Paxton finds himself in a rice patty reminiscing about "way back yonder in November when he [Johnson] said I'd never have to go"⁹¹. Broken promises from Johnson and many others fueled public resentment of a government that seemed to care little for its common soldiers. "Masters of War," by Bob Dylan criticizes the government for its deceitful ways and questions its true motivations, "Like Judas of old you lie and deceive, a world war can be won you want me to believe...you fasten the trigger for others to fire, then you sit back and watch when the death count gets higher"⁹². Although Dylan wrote "Master's of War" before Vietnam became such a controversial topic, the institution of the body count system and the massacre at My Lai seem to corroborate Dylan's charges. Both Dylan and Paxton's lyrics touch on historical realities; Johnson did in fact reassure the American people that military escalation in Vietnam was highly unlikely and Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers stands as damning evidence that the government did in

⁹⁰ McCaffery, Barry R. *Speech by Lt. Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey*, (reproduced in the *Pentagram*, June 4, 1993) assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Vietnam veterans and visitors gathered at The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. 30 May 1993.

⁹¹ Paxton, Tom. *Lyndon Johnson Told a Nation*. Elektra Records, 1965.

⁹² Dylan, Bob. *Masters of War*. Columbia Records, 1963.

fact knowingly deceive the American people. Both songs can be used as powerful teaching tools about the turmoil in both the government and nation during the Vietnam War.

The experience of the soldier in Vietnam provided another issue for songwriters to examine with their lyrics. The Animals' song "Sky Pilot" presents the surreal nature of life in the combat zone as a priest "blesses the boys as they stand in line, the smell of gun grease and the bayonets they shine"⁹³. These young men later return from the battle, "with tears in their eyes, the stench of death drifts up to the skies" and they remember the sixth commandment "Thou shall not kill"⁹⁴. The use of religious overtone in "Sky Pilot" attacks those who would promote the idea that God is on one side of the war while relating the horrors of combat on young soldiers. "The Unknown Soldier" by The Doors tells the story of a nameless victim of the American war machine whose war only ends because he dies when a "bullet strikes the helmet's head and it's all over for the unknown soldier"⁹⁵. The idea that each soldier was just a nameless helmet waiting to die further fueled the public indignation against the government and its casual attitude towards American casualties in Vietnam. While the institution of the body count system and the escalation of American casualties in Vietnam fueled the outrage behind these lyrics, it is again important to separate emotion from historical fact.

Although music of the Vietnam era is largely defined as radical protest music, one often fails to recognize the small, yet strong array of patriotic music produced during the period. This neglect is largely due to the fact that patriotic music was produced mainly within the country genre and remained limited in its appeal to pop culture even after the war⁹⁶. Considerable irony exists in the fact history often overlooks patriotic music from Vietnam, for while protest music

⁹³ Animals, The. *Sky Pilot*. MGM Records, 1968.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Doors, The. *Unknown Soldier*. Elektra Records, 1968.

⁹⁶ Andresen 105.

may have earned widespread fame and notoriety, the majority of Americans belonged to what President Nixon called “the silent majority” that supported the war and opposed the radical ideas of many protestors⁹⁷. The music of patriotism during the Vietnam focused mainly on the traditions of American heroism and loyalty to one’s country, and while it is undeniably naive and illogical in some cases, it remains heartfelt and sincere at its core.

“The Ballad of the Green Berets” by Barry Sandler represents the quintessential patriotic song of the Vietnam era. Extolling the virtues and heroics of America’s soldiers, it tells of “fearless men who jump and die, men who mean just what they say, these brave men of the green beret.” These lyrics conjure up images of brave soldiers, “America’s best” according to the song, who fight and die “for the oppressed⁹⁸.” Written before Vietnam became a military quagmire, “Ballad of the Green Berets” clearly illustrates the stereotypes many Americans held about the military in the early stages of Vietnam. While the “Ballad of the Green Berets” merely suggests the heroics of American soldiers, Marty Robbins’s “Private Wilson White” provides an incredible image of the courage and heroism of American troops. Private White “volunteered to give his life” for his nineteen comrades by attacking the machine guns pinning them down. “Seven bullets found their mark, seven bullets near the heart” from enemy fire and Private Wilson still runs on towards the enemy. He pulls the pin on his hand grenade while crying, “I died for freedom” before destroying the enemy. The song ends with the chorus declaring, “America is proud to claim you for their hero, Private White⁹⁹.” Both of these songs play on the stereotypical “American hero” that many citizens felt represented U.S. forces before the Vietnam War. While heroic acts of bravery and courage occurred throughout the Vietnam War, the situations described in both songs do not represent the common soldiers experience in Vietnam.

⁹⁷ Andresen 107.

⁹⁸ Sadler, Barry. *Ballad of the Green Berets*. RCA Records, 1966.

⁹⁹ Robbins, Marty. *Private Wilson White*. Columbia Records, 1966.

Another common theme in patriotic songs of the era was loyalty to one's country. Merle Haggard's "Fightin' Side of Me" presents one of the most intense patriotic viewpoints of the war by challenging those who would protest the war and speak out against their country. He "don't mind em' switchin sides an' standin' up for the things they believe in," but when they begin to attack the country "our fightin' men have fought and died to keep" while still wanting to partake in its freedoms, Haggard has little patience¹⁰⁰. He issues a bellicose warning at the end of the song, declaring, "If you don't love it, leave it, let this song that I'm singin' be a warning!" Haggard's belligerent sound in "Fightin' Side of Me" was quite atypical for himself as well as the patriotic music scene, as most artists took a more passive approach to speaking out against the protestors. Another of Haggard's song, "Okie from Muskogee," takes a lighter approach to counteracting the protest movement. He describes Muskogee, Oklahoma, where "We don't take our trips on LSD, We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street, We like livin' right and bein' free¹⁰¹." Perhaps the most serious of all the songs of patriotism was Johnny Sea's "Day for Decision." The lengthy narrative begins with the declaration "America is in real trouble!" It goes on to describe the cynicism sweeping America that threatens to bring down the entire nation. People had become so ashamed and afraid of patriotism that "we stare at our shoelaces when they play the nation anthem" and were afraid to sing "America" in public. Sea ends his soliloquy by reminding listeners that our country is based on patriotism offers a self test to make sure the listener is still a patriot, "Lift your eyes to a flag and sing out "America" as loud as you can...now if you feel a little pride welling up inside you, a little mist in you eye, then thank God for you mister, you're still an American¹⁰²!" While not all patriots shared such an extreme view,

¹⁰⁰ Haggard, Merle. *Fightin' Side of Me*. Capitol Records, 1970.

¹⁰¹ Haggard, Merle. *Okie From Muskogee*. Capitol Records, 1969

¹⁰² Sea, Johnny. *Day for Decision*. Collector's Choice, 1966.

Sea's challenge to the listener communicates the growing concerns he felt about the fissure splitting American society as a result of the Vietnam War.

The music of protest and patriotism during Vietnam represented a wide variety of interests and opinions both within their respective movements as well as within society in general. While protest music seems to share absolutely nothing in common with patriotic music, the two genres do share one common bond, the radio. For soldiers in country, the radio was the number one method for hearing these songs and keeping up with current events. Some soldiers did have battery-operated tape players and record players in base camp, but the majority of the soldiers had three different options for the musical enjoyment, Armed Forces Vietnam Network, Radio Hanoi, and pirate radio stations.

The Armed Forces Vietnam Network operated under the auspices of the United States' military with the goal of entertaining and informing troops in Vietnam. AFVN had stations "...from the Delta to the DMZ" that played a wide variety of music, from rock to classical, and just about everything in between¹⁰³. While some soldiers enjoyed the variety, one anonymous soldier referred to it as "the world's shittiest, small-town Mid-west old-woman right-wing plastic useless propagandizing bumper unturned-on controlled low-fidelity non-stereo" station¹⁰⁴. Because the stations were under military regulation, occasional censorship did occur and records had to be approved in order to be played on the air, but DJs did have complete freedom over what they played off the list and what they said on the air. The play list for one show in 1970 included "This Magic Moment," by Jay and the Americans, "Teach," by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, "White Room with Black Curtains," by Cream, "Walk Away Renee," by The Left

¹⁰³ Fasanaro, Charles N. "Music and the Vietnam War." Vietnam War Encyclopedia. 1998. 466.

¹⁰⁴ Fasanaro 458.

Banke, "Ohio," by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and "Magic Carpet Ride," by Steppenwolf¹⁰⁵. While the occasional protest song did make it on to air, the DJs of the AFVN mainly played Top 40 hits, per the soldier's preference, and therefore not much protest or patriotic music made it on air. According to a 1970 AFVN Audience Survey, Top 40 Hits and Oldies were the two most popular types of music among the troops¹⁰⁶. In fact, in the three years the survey was given, Top 40 and Oldies remained the most popular genres¹⁰⁷. Yet if soldiers did want to hear protest music and anti-war propaganda in its purest form, they merely needed to turn the dial and tune in to Radio Hanoi.

Radio Hanoi broadcast out of a small building in downtown Hanoi and directly targeted American troops with a mix of anti-war propaganda and hard rock. The main DJ on Radio Hanoi called herself Thu Houg, the fragrance of autumn, but American troops referred to her as Hanoi Hannah. American troops listened to Hannah for a break from the over-controlled AFVN and for comic relief. Hannah broadcast Combat Action Reports from the day's fighting and soldiers would often listen closely to find out if their company was mentioned, after which a cheer and barrage of beer cans would assault the radio¹⁰⁸. Hannah also recited the names, rank, serial number, and hometown of each American casualty from the day, as well as poems and songs from anti-war protestors and deserters in an attempt to lower American morale. She was infamous for the "philosophical" questions she posed to troops over the radio:

How are you, GI Joe? It seems to me that most of you are poorly informed about the going of the war, to say nothing about a correct explanation of your presence over here. Nothing

¹⁰⁵ Morecook, Robert. "American Forces Vietnam Network Homepage." 1 May 2000. <<http://www.geocities.com/afvn/>> (10 April 2005).

¹⁰⁶ Wiltsie, Steve. "1970 AFVN Audience Survey." <<http://www.geocities.com/afvn/survey1970tableofcontents.html>> (10 April 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Grubaum, Gunar. "1971 AFVN Audience Survey." <<http://www.geocities.com/afvn/survey1971tableofcontents.html>> (10 April 2005)

¹⁰⁸ North, Don. "Hanoi Hannah." 1991. <<http://www.psywarrior.com/hannah.html>> (10 April 2005)

is more confused than to be ordered into a war to die or to be maimed for life without the faintest idea of what's going on¹⁰⁹.

These questions attempted to increase doubt in soldiers' minds and widen the gap between those who supported the war and those who opposed it. Yet even with the dire subject matter Hannah usually conveyed, American troops enjoyed the music she played, which included many songs prohibited from AFVN play lists, and found her propaganda more amusing than serious.

The final option American servicemen had for radio entertainment in Vietnam was pirate radio stations operated by other servicemen in country. The most infamous and well known of these stations was operated by DJ Dave Rabbit, who hosted the show "Radio First Termer" and played "hard acid rock music to blow [people's] mind[s] with¹¹⁰." While little definitive information exists about DJ Rabbit and Radio First Termer, most veterans and historians agree Rabbit was an Air Force Sergeant who remained in Vietnam about a year after his tour in the late sixties broadcasting his pirate frequency at "69 Megahertz on your FM dial¹¹¹." Rabbit's anti-establishment ideology of "fuck it before it fucks you" struck a chord with many incoming troops in Vietnam in the early 1970's as the reasoning and futility of the war became to come to the surface of American politics¹¹². While Rabbit's true identity has never been established, some of the people suggested to have been Rabbit include Roger Abbett of "Internet Radio Hawaii, syndicated radio host Art Bell, and Pat Sajak, who served as an AFVN DJ while in Vietnam¹¹³. Regardless of Rabbit's true identity, the music and opinions he broadcast were some of the most popular among soldiers in Vietnam at the time and many veterans remember "Radio First Termer" even today.

¹⁰⁹ North.

¹¹⁰ Snyder, J. William. "The Radio First Termer Homepage." January 1995. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/jwsnyder/rft/rft.html>> (10 April 2005)

¹¹¹ Kaelin, J.C. "Radio First Termer Wavs." 2000. <<http://www.earthstation1.com/1stermer.html>> (10 April 2005)

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Deitz, Cory. "Who was Pirate Radio DJ Dave Rabbit?" 6 February 2003. <<http://radio.about.com/library/weekly/aa020603a.htm>> (10 April 2005)

Even the divisions between the radio sources in Vietnam present yet another example of the divisions in society during Vietnam. AFVN, while not blatantly patriotic, played little protest music and generally supported the war effort through public service announcements and encouragement while Hanoi Hannah and pirate radio stations questioned the war's purpose. The songs on both sides of the issues that came to be representative of the Vietnam era took on a unique power held by few elements in American culture. When a person listens to the words of any of the music of the Vietnam era, whether it be a soldier in 1969 or a high school student in 1999, a story develops from the lyrics. Soldiers in Vietnam lived some of those stories and students today internalize those same stories as elements of history. While the educational value of many of the songs is immense, it is of vital importance that the educational system not let the songs of either hawks or doves stand as the lone historical source. The "soundtrack" of Vietnam is commonplace everywhere from the local music store to national radio stations, as well as practically every movie ever made about Vietnam, and again serves to easily replace historical texts as the main source of information regarding Vietnam for young adults. The American public was undoubtedly split over the war in Vietnam, and music and radio of the era consistently reflected these divisions. While time has healed many of these wounds, the music of protest and praise lives on and can serve as a constant reminder to new generations of the tumult and turmoil of the Vietnam era.

IX. Popular Culture and Advancing Technology

As popular culture continues to define and shape much of the imagery of Vietnam in contemporary society, a relatively new form of media has begun to influence young adults, the video game. With four major corporations, Microsoft, Nintendo, Sega, and Sony all competing for revenue in a growing market, the amount of video gaming devices on the market today is

unbelievable. Children and adults alike can now be seen playing video games not only at home, but in anywhere from movie theaters to restaurants, courtesy of handheld gaming devices. Even online gaming has developed into not only a major market, but even a subculture, with groups of game players forming groups known as “clans” or “guilds,” in which a hierarchy of players exists based upon anything from seniority to skill. An endless variety of games exist, but many of the first person shooter games have become heavily popular and many of these games focus on the Vietnam conflict. Although many games have been developed over the years and have become outdated, five games currently exist concerning Vietnam and have become very popular since their respective releases. *Battlefield Vietnam*, *Viet Cong: Purple Haze*, *Conflict: Vietnam*, *Men of Valor*, and *Shellshock: Nam 67'* all function under the same general principles; you enter the game as a soldier in Vietnam and progress through the war, in some cases being promoted, and beat the game by surviving every mission, which basically represents surviving the war. While these games may seem like harmless role-playing activities at first, a more in depth look reveals a sinister side to every game listed.

Each game listed above is advertised in generally the same fashion; “dense jungle fighting,” “realistic combat,” and “realistic injury” are some of what developers consider selling points on these games¹¹⁴. *Shellshock* is described as containing the following features: “True-to-Life -- Portraying the brutal atrocities and controversial actions of the Vietnam War, *ShellShock: Nam '67* provides the most true-to-life and completely uncensored depiction of the Vietnam experience...Unconventional Warfare -- From napalm attacks, intricate tunnel systems and deadly booby traps to fighting militiawomen and an elusive enemy, you will experience the

¹¹⁴ Vivendi Interactive Publishing. *Men Of Valor*. 20 September 2004. <www.menofvalorgame.com> (10 April 2005)

chaotic, atrocious and unconventional warfare of Vietnam¹¹⁵.” While these features undoubtedly help to sell games, their effect of gamers’ perceptions of reality is horrifying. One reviewer wrote “The enemys (sic) are surprisingly tough. It takes quite a few bullets to put them down. The sounds on this game are very good...Alot of period music is used to give the game more historical context...The NVA will curse you out as your fighting them. Yes their are sexual themes, but thats (sic) the way it was there. And you’re right, the characters have no "valor", but once again, both sides did bad things in the war (although the V.C. did much worse things)¹¹⁶. Once immersed in the game, gamers easily become convinced that because they were able to “survive” the game, they have a general knowledge of how Vietnam really was and that the games are historically accurate. Another reviewer wrote of *Conflict: Vietnam*, “You have the dumb redneck, the black dude from the city, and the ever-present scream of, ‘I can't take it anymore!!!’¹¹⁷...Usually a headshot will take em [the enemy] down pretty fast. I also like the flying blood and limbs. The heavy use of profanity is cool too¹¹⁸.” Again, the main focus of the games is obviously on killing the enemy and that focus is easily translated as the real focus and action in Vietnam. Only *Men of Valor* pays any more than lip service to the historical background concerning Vietnam, as it plays through several historical sequences in between missions, but killing and violence remain at the center of the game’s missions. *Viet Cong: Purple Haze* takes the idea of unthinking murder to a new level as one of its “quick play” options involves being dropped into a jungle with the sheer goals as killing as many “enemy soldiers” as possible before being killed yourself or killing the allotted number of enemies. “Missions” such

¹¹⁵ Eidos Interactive. *Shellshock: Nam 67*. 10 May 2004. <www.shellshockgame.com> (10 April 2005).

¹¹⁶ Anonymous, et al. “Amazon.com ‘Spotlight Reviews’.” <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B0002GTFJ4/ref=pd_sim_vg_1/002-4002616-8036840?v=glance&s=videogames>. (10 April 2005)

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ All of the above quotes were taken from customer reviews on the five mentioned games at each game’s respective sales site on Amazon.com.

as these only feed and perpetuate the idea that soldiers in Vietnam did nothing but kill during their time in country. While some may feel that these games are nothing more than entertainment, to dismiss the subconscious effects of such a first person based experience is naïve. People assume that the manner in which combat and Vietnam are portrayed in video games is based on some form of fact because of the mere nature of the game; it is meant to be played as though one was in Vietnam. Danger arises when someone feels that the experience they have playing a game is comparable to a real soldiers experience in Vietnam and that somehow by playing a game they have gained a fuller understanding of the realities of combat. In effect this allows game designers and company executives to become teachers of American history. The risk of video game becoming seen as historically accurate and realistic will only increase as various types of technology are introduced. If a child was able to simulate a Vietnam based combat game in virtual reality, there would undoubtedly be a feeling of experience related to the game. While no such game is currently in development, it is only a matter of time before technology evolves and becomes an even more pervasive force in contemporary society.

Manufactured reality, whether it be in movies, music, or even video games is quickly replacing the historical record of the Vietnam War in the minds of many of today's youth. While the change has been gradual, the danger is growing quickly. Those who have a working knowledge of Vietnam based on factual firsthand experience are on average forty seven years old, based on the fact that most people's knowledge based memories generally begin at age twelve, and the gap between the last of the Vietnam generation and those who have been "educated" on the war is growing¹¹⁹. Schools have failed to educate an entire generation of students about the Vietnam War but it is not too late to reverse; educators and citizens alike must work together to ensure that a generation of sacrifices are not forgotten because it is politically,

¹¹⁹ Westmoreland.

emotionally, or financially convenient. The danger is clear and present, yet so is the necessary action; American history must be preserved, not only for its intrinsic value but also to honor those who served and sacrificed. Perhaps in remembrance a nation can stand unified over one of the most divisive conflicts in American history.

Part IV

"The past is never dead...its not even past" Faulkner

X. Vietnam: Today, Tomorrow and Beyond

Movies, music, and a variety of other sources in popular culture have all had a damaging effect of the remembrance of the Vietnam War. Historical reality has been replaced by a fictionalized, mediated version of the truth and the sacrifices of countless men and women are quickly being stereotyped or even forgotten. The honor long associated with military service in the United States is quickly slipping away from those who served in Vietnam, even after the long, hard fight to restore it in the immediate decades after Vietnam. Veterans reception after Vietnam was less than cordial and while both the American people and government have tried to make up for that injustice, the marketing of stereotypes in today's marketplace is moving society backwards. Children that play *Shellshock: Nam 67'* or watch *Rambo* the first time will be overwhelmed with the idea that veterans were mindless killers, the war was more of a killing contest, and that honor, valor, and morality had no place in Vietnam. What is more disconcerting is that their American history teachers will tell these children no differently. Instead, children will learn minute details of the War of 1812 and the Spanish American War. The pattern of "stolen honor" will continue and the possibilities are endless. Even those who protested against the war are quickly becoming stereotyped. "Protestor" and "draft dodger" are becoming synonymous and one of the largest counterculture movements in American history is being boiled down to terms like "hippies" and "peace, love, and music." The question of "how" Vietnam is remembered will become "is" Vietnam remembered until perhaps the mention of "Vietnam" will bring about vague recollections of geography class rather than a generation of sacrifice and turmoil. What is certain, however, is that one cannot depend upon company executive and Hollywood filmmakers to serve as the nation's primary educator about the Vietnam War. The educational system must embrace the challenge of teaching not only the most

infamous war in the history of the United States, but also the most influential decade in the past century. For even as Vietnam is so closely associated with the 1960's, to ignore the remarkable social movements and counterculture of the era is to not fully understand the Vietnam generation. While the task before educators is undeniably difficult, it is crystal clear. Approaches will vary from school to school and even educator to educator, but in teaching Vietnam, there exists a set of critical questions, images, and guidelines that history demands one teach.

While undoubtedly controversial in nature, research points to six central questions about the Vietnam War exist that would serve to lead discussion and discovery into the vital issues in Vietnam:

Why did the United States fight in Vietnam?

What was the war like before the U.S. entered Vietnam? How did we change it?

How did the war change the United States?

Why did the antiwar movement become so strong in the United States?

What were its criticisms of the war? Were they right or wrong?

Why did the United States lose the war?

What lessons can we and the United States take from the Vietnam War experience?¹²⁰

While questions such as these may seem divisive and without definitive answer, they are inherently designed to create thought and discussion, not quick answers. The questions provide textbook makers with the responsibility of merely presenting several interpretations and the background information behind each and then allowing the students to come to their own conclusions about Vietnam. Another problem educators will face in teaching Vietnam may lie in either their own prejudices about the war from personal experience or their lack of confidence in teaching such a controversial and recent subject. Educators with personal beliefs about the war should see their own experiences as an asset to their students as they decide their own beliefs.

¹²⁰ Loewen 248.

While one must be careful because the authority usually associated with a teacher may lead students to treat a teacher's beliefs as truth, encouraging students to look at many different sources, including the teacher, and draw their own conclusions for the above questions is the most unbiased manner in which to teach such a controversial subject. The relatively recent nature of the conflict may also be a deterrent to teachers, especially those who may feel uninformed about the war themselves. Teaching can then become a collaborative exercise for with both the teacher and the students exploring the sources and comparing thoughts on Vietnam. Whatever may stand in the way of educators teaching the Vietnam War must be overcome, not only to preserve the authority of the historical record, but also to honor those who fought, sacrificed, and gave a portion of their life, no matter how big or small, to their country.

As the country moves further and further into the twenty first century, references to Vietnam still exist throughout daily life. The Vietnam War Memorial is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Washington, DC. Political campaigns from national to local levels draw on service in the war or lack thereof in strengthening their campaigns. Opponents of the war in Iraq have ignominiously labeled it the "new Vietnam" and current U.S. foreign policy practices, no matter how controversial, are undoubtedly still influenced by the legacy of Vietnam. There is no question that the Vietnam War continues to have a lasting effect on the lives of many every passing day. Yet as prominent a role as it sometimes plays, too often it is referenced without much explanation or remembrance. Vietnam is used as a tool when necessary, but left buried in the minds of most Americans as much as possible. Perhaps it is too soon to remember Vietnam and those who served in the manner the veterans from World War II are remembered, but that is no excuse to forget their service. Vietnam and its veterans must be respected rather than ignored. Education is the primary tool in instilling this respect and one can only hope that as America

leads the world into a new millennium, it will do well in remembering its own past and instilling in its future leaders a sense of what has happened and what is to come.

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