

Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

---

All Graduate Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

---

8-2022

## Vietnam Continued: The Battle for American Public Memory in Public School History Textbooks

Donnie Owens  
*Utah State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Owens, Donnie, "Vietnam Continued: The Battle for American Public Memory in Public School History Textbooks" (2022). *All Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 8522.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/8522>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usu.edu).



VIETNAM CONTINUED: THE BATTLE FOR AMERICAN PUBLIC  
MEMORY IN PUBLIC SCHOOL HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

by

Donnie Owens

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Communication Studies

Approved:

---

Nicole Allen, Ph.D.  
Major Professor

---

Mollie Murphy, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Dustin Crawford, M.A.  
Committee Member

---

D. Richard Cutler, Ph.D.  
Interim Vice Provost for Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2022

Copyright © Donnie R. Owens 2022

All Rights Reserved.

ABSTRACT

Vietnam Continued: The Battle for American Public Memory in Public School History  
Textbooks.

by

Donnie R. Owens, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Nicole Allen

Department: Communication Studies

This thesis analyzes the public memory of the Vietnam War as constituted by the narratives of the most widely circulated American History Textbooks. More so than any other American conflict, Vietnam is shrouded in a contested legacy, one that is not as loudly celebrated as our engagement in the World Wars or the Revolutionary War. Through the concept-based application of public memory and narrative, I argue for the further study of educational rhetoric in public memory. More importantly, I argue that the narrative themes seen throughout the seven texts construct a memory of Vietnam as an American misstep, but an event that has little significance in changing the belief in an exceptional America.

(88 Pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Vietnam Continued: The Battle for American Public Memory in Public History Textbooks

Donnie R. Owens

The question of “how do we *actively* remember the past?” can perhaps best describe the purpose of public memory studies. Acknowledging this question, I analyze popular public-school textbooks to assess the way in which educational literature constructs the public memory of the Vietnam War. In total, the narratives of the texts construct a public memory of Vietnam as a controversial conflict contained within a decade of American uncertainty. However, these narratives also take care to minimize or leave aside the details of Vietnam’s lasting impact and in favor of reaffirming American exceptionalism. Ultimately, this thesis finds that students who read these texts will walk away with a view of Vietnam as a small note of erring in the otherwise consistent American story; an event that does not detract from the United States’ exceptional legacy.

Donnie R. Owens

## Acknowledgments

I give thanks to my family, friends, graduate cohort, and the faculty at USU for their support, their inspiration, and their feedback in my efforts to write this final document. I also note gratitude for my thesis committee, whose mentoring knowledge has been an invaluable asset while pursuing this work.

## Contents

Copyright .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Public Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	v
Contents .....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Vietnam and American Exceptionalism.....	9
A Public Memory-laden Timeline of The Vietnam War .....	9
Indochina and the Beginning of the Vietnam War .....	10
The Suffering of Vietnam .....	12
An Incomplete End .....	15
Public Memory and Narrative: The Methodologies of Remembering and Retelling Vietnam..	16
Public Memory: Forgetting, Confronting, and Celebrating the Past in the Present.....	17
Public Memory is not “all-encompassing” .....	18
Public Memory is not “Fixed” .....	21
Public Memory is not solely tied to physical monuments and memorials.....	23
The Function of Narrative Theory Alongside Public Memory .....	26
Chapter 2: Research Methods and Summary of Materials.....	29
Selection of Methods; Application of a Concept-Based Analysis .....	32
Considerations Made in Artifact Collection .....	36
Summary of Included Texts, Chapters, and Sections .....	37
Chapter 3: Analysis and Conclusion.....	41
Vietnam’s Escalation and Johnson’s Legacy—Agency and the Timeline of the War .....	43
Kennedy and Johnson’s Legacy in Scholarship.....	48
“Turbulence” and Turmoil. Vietnam as a Symptom of a Decade.....	52
Vietnam and the American Story—Scholarly Perspectives .....	57
The Absence of Lasting Consequences and the “Vietnam Syndrome” .....	59
Scholarship and The Vietnam Syndrome.....	69
Conclusion .....	72
Bibliography .....	76

## Introduction

To understand the exceptionalist interpretation of United States history is to perhaps understand one truth above all, that to be an American is to believe that our military might will always preserve our freedoms through its victory. From the stories of a stitched-together revolution that sent Britain back across the sea have sprung consistent generations of American citizens believing in the might of their country.<sup>1</sup> These conflicts, and the narratives repeated about them assign attributes of victory, valor, and righteousness to the identity of America. Moreover, U.S. citizens seek to protect and preserve proud parts of their identities which are, more so than any other nation, tied to their country.<sup>2</sup>

What happens, though, when our memory is selectively uncertain, and the stories we would share about an American conflict do not line up with the U.S. identity of exceptionalism? Since the victory of the North Vietnamese over 50 years ago, the Vietnam War has been engulfed by a controversial public memory, a history that many still consider un-settled and unending.<sup>3</sup> Such a history, coupled with the U. S's loss in the war directly contradicts the story of American exceptionalism. In U.S discourse and memory, this contradiction is never faced head-on, and the Vietnam War is only

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Onuf, "American Exceptionalism and National Identity." *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 85, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Tyrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History." *The American Historical Review* (1991): 1032, JSTOR

<sup>3</sup> George Herring, "America and Vietnam: The Unending War," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 5 (Winter 1991-1992): 10, Heinonline; Hess, Gary R. "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War." *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 2 (1994): 242. JSTOR.



commemorated when we eulogize its veterans and allow the country to share in the memory of their bravery.<sup>4</sup> In short, Vietnam is not remembered as an event to face head-on-- often there is some overshadowing of My-Lai, some way of rationalizing our defeat as an instance where we “beat ourselves”, or a lack of recognition in defeat at all.<sup>5</sup>

The war is also the focal point of numerous pieces of public memory work, examples of which include the work of David Kieran’s comparison of the Vietnam War to other warfare memories. Kieran notes that Vietnam’s inability to be remembered in the lines of clearly right or wrong prompts deeper questions of moral certainty within those who remember. As we remember Vietnam, Kieran asserts, we also ask questions related to the justification and righteousness of previous American endeavors (including the second world war).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Espiritu and co-authors contrast the American response to the Holocaust to that of the Vietnam War. Where the former event contains easily accessible narratives of U.S. victory and heroism, there are no such direct capabilities in a remembrance of the Vietnam War<sup>7</sup>

If the legacy of Vietnam does indeed clash against the patriotic shades of an exceptionalist narrative, what stories of the Vietnam War *do* we share? How do we wish the rising generation to remember an event that we feel more comfortable forgetting? I

---

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kunzick, "The United States of Amnesia: The Dangers of Forgetting or Sanitizing the U.S. Invasion of Vietnam." *Nanzan review of American studies* 36 (2014): 123-128.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Ehrenhaus, "Commemorating the Unwon War: On Not Remembering Vietnam." *Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1 (1989): 99, Wiley Online Library.; Cahill, Charlotte. "Fighting the Vietnam syndrome: The construction of a conservative veteran's politics, 1966–1984." Northwestern University, 2008. ProQuest.

<sup>6</sup> David Kieran, (2014). *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory*. Massachusetts. Cited by Iden, Michelle Catherine. "Lasting Legacy: Public Memory of the Vietnam War." (2015): 720, JSTOR

<sup>7</sup> Yén Le Espiritu and Diane Wolf. "The Appropriation of American War Memories: A Critical Juxtaposition of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War." *Social Identities* 19, no. 2 (2013): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2013.789213>

frame these questions in reference to a public memory and narrative-driven analysis of public-school history textbooks and their discussions of the Vietnam War. Ultimately, I argue that these educational texts not only weave specific narratives of Vietnam, but they do so in a way that preserves American Exceptionalism in a partial and specific remembrance of the Vietnam War.

More specifically, I find seven of the most popular public-school texts as noted by the American Textbook Council (ATC) to construct a particular memory of Vietnam through three narrative frames. Firstly, the texts use comparison and focused detail to situate the burden of Vietnam's legacy away from President John F. Kennedy and squarely upon President Lyndon B. Johnson. Secondly, the use of chapter titles, subheadings, and in-chapter framing constitute the Vietnam War as *part* of something important rather than an event designating sole importance—a controversial war within a chaotic time. Lastly, the enduring effects of the Vietnam syndrome and the larger suffering of the War is omitted or underdiscussed in the narrative. I note the memory created and sustained by these narrative themes to be one of exceptionalism despite unique circumstances. I posit that the students who engage with these chapters will ultimately be primed to remember a war within Vietnam, while being encouraged not to remember its legacy nor question the overall presence of American exceptionalism.

In terms of rhetorical lenses for this analysis, I offer public memory as the most efficient theoretical grounding for this work, with narrative theory as a secondary lens aiding in the construction of memory. Defined as the way in which a culture, country or people assigns recollection and meaning to history to meet the needs of the present,

public memory studies focus on the served functions of these collective recollections.<sup>8</sup> As public memory continues to find its footing away from the familiar topics of monument, memorial, film, film, and more physically constituted “place,” I situate the classroom and its accompanying rhetoric as a consequential space for the creation and study of memory.<sup>9</sup> For, surely, just as public memory is created through an act or participation in a space, memory also sprouts in the *act* of reading history and in the space of the public classroom.

Moving forward, I highlight two primary factors in my focus on public memory for this work—the applicability to the source and the relevance of the theory to the ultimate question posed by my research. Firstly, public memory has enjoyed a strong applicability to warfare-related rhetoric and shows growing potential in the field of educational rhetoric. As Reinhardt Kossler has observed, the struggle for coherent societal public memory often emerges as a second state of warfare in the aftermath of conflicts. Furthermore, Kossler adds that the need to reconcile, make sense of, and come to terms with the causes and damages of the war is a phenomenon experienced both by those at the individual/community levels and “continuing right up to the national level and formal politics.”<sup>10</sup> Not only is the construction, challenging, and maintenance of public memory a naturally occurring consequence of war, these rhetorical actions are of great importance to both individual and collective identity. Essentially, a public memory-

---

<sup>8</sup> Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time." *Framing public memory* 68 (2004): 19.

<sup>9</sup> David Sutton, "The rhetoric of the Vietnam War: An annotated bibliography." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 24, no. 3-4 (1994): 131-147, JSTOR, Zelizer, B. (1995). Competing memories: Reading the past against the grain: The shape of memory studies." *Review and Criticism*, 224; Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp and Lori A. Lanzilotti. "Public memory and Private Grief: The construction of Shrines at the Sites of Public Tragedy." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 2 (1998): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639809384211>

<sup>10</sup>Reinhard Kössler, "Public Memory, Reconciliation and the Aftermath of War." *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia* (2003): 99, Researchgate.

led analysis aids in assessing the challenges to identity brought on by a war, as well as the rhetorical decisions made in remembering and forgetting that allow a people to come to terms with a specific recollection that encourages the proper identity.

I also select public memory as this work's dominant rhetorical lens, plainly, because it best answers the primary questions of my research. Though this point will be covered in more detail within Chapter two, it is sufficient to say that I am focused primarily on the artifacts' construction of memory rather than questions of pedagogy and ideology. While these are relevant in terms of how or why the textbook narratives are constructed in, my ultimate question is one of *remembrance*. While being made to understand the larger story of America, I assert that students are also asked to understand America's "accurate" version of the Vietnam War through their class-assigned textbook rhetoric. Additionally, I emphasize the notion that public memory answers anxieties and conflicts of the present, that our understanding of the past effects the rhetorical needs of our present (and vice versa).<sup>11</sup> Such an implication is noted as "the most common conclusion in memory studies" and casts a gaze of importance to the U.S-related conflicts recorded since the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to public memory, I select the secondary lens of narrative theory, applied as a means through which public memory is created and examined within these texts. More specifically, public memory is constructed and understood *through* the telling

---

<sup>11</sup> Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, eds. *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*. University of Alabama Press, 2010. 6, Texas Tech Publications.

<sup>12</sup> Micheal Schudson "Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative Versus Non-commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory." *Communication Review (The)* 2, no. 1 (1997): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714429709368547>.

of stories.<sup>13</sup> As narrative theory implies the importance of the structuring, sequencing, and assigning of implications concerning a retelling of events, I employ narrative theory in the interest of understanding how these narrative decisions effect the specific memory of Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> I argue that the presented *story* of Vietnam contained within public school texts, as well as the way in which the story is organized and ordered, creates and sustains a specific public memory for the students who read them.

In terms of the U.S. textbook's potential for public memory studies, I offer these texts as an especially consequential form of non-commemorative public memory. I reach this conclusion largely due to the common presence of exceptionalism in our told, as well as the assumed authority of textbooks by those who read them.<sup>15</sup> Notably, Michael Schudson has said of non-commemorative public memory studies that there exists a slower pace in racing toward their artifacts due a lack of convenience. The intents and effects of a site *dedicated to memory* are, after all, more readily accessible to a scholar than rhetoric where the implications of memory require further inspection. Schudson situates this realization as a primary reason for scholars to quicken their advances toward non-commemorative rhetoric, that within rhetoric not constructed *to* remember, we may arrive at the implications *of* remembrance.

As Schudson implies, scholars have lacked in their efforts to expand the public-memory centered study of textbook rhetoric. Indeed, though more than two decades have passed since Glassberg remarked on the lack of scholarly work connecting public history

---

<sup>13</sup> Valerie Schrader, "'Who Tells Your Story?': Narrative Theory, Public Memory, and the Hamilton Phenomenon." *New Theatre Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2019): 264, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X19000265>

<sup>14</sup> Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice*. Waveland Press, (2017).321

<sup>15</sup> Robert Bain, "Rounding up Unusual Suspects: Facing the Authority Hidden in the History Classroom." *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 10 (2006): 2083

and public memory, there has not been a vast influx of work to fill in the gap since that time.<sup>16</sup> Of the still- growing collection of analyses seeking to bridge this academic gap, notable examples include Marshall Lindsay’s work in asserting the narratives of secondary school texts.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, Lindsay highlights textbooks as a rhetoric of particular interest for American exceptionalist scholars, displaying the textual malleability of more “controversial” moments in our nation ‘s history.

It can also be said that textbook rhetoric presents a unique ability to contribute to memory among other forms of rhetoric. For example, it has been argued that countries, states, and organizations do not “have "memory, but rather they can only *construct the* memory they choose, that textbook rhetoric shares a powerful connection to a nation-state seeking to construct a memory.<sup>18</sup> It primarily is through the distribution and reception of history texts that a nation can share a collective” autobiography.”<sup>19</sup> Common throughout these works are the degree to which the selective nature of a narrative memory is noted to constitute textbook rhetoric as a” cornerstone of public memory creation.”<sup>20</sup>

This study stands to contribute to multiple areas of interest to both public memory and Vietnam War scholars. Firstly, I assert that as the most widely circulated texts are found to promote American exceptionalism within their retelling of Vietnam, previously

---

<sup>16</sup> David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory.” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (1996): 8, JSTOR

<sup>17</sup> Marshall Lindsey, “Teaching Us to Forget: United States History Textbooks, the Plains Wars, and Public Memory.” (PhD Diss., University of Oklahoma, 2019)

<sup>18</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between history and memory." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2008): 49-72. Pp.62, Project Muse.

<sup>19</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between history and memory." 62.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall Lindsey, “Teaching Us to Forget: United States History Textbooks, the Plains Wars, and Public Memory.”

described notions of the Vietnam War's unending nature are substantiated. Secondly, this study puts forth the implication that textbook rhetoric may yet become focal point of public memory studies, the pursuit of which will aid in the analysis of narrative decisions that contribute to public memory in education. The almost universal authority attributed to history textbooks by students and teachers alike may guarantee that these stories continue to contribute to the memory of Vietnam.

## Chapter 1: Vietnam and American Exceptionalism

My purpose in this initial chapter is to provide a thorough background for the controversial history of The Vietnam War, as well as an overview for how scholars of narrative and public memory have analyzed its legacy. In beginning a discussion on the public, narrative-based memory of the Vietnam war, I first detail the major elements of the War's history. Specifically, I cover the events, dates, actors, and outcomes that act as stalwarts in the general understanding of the Vietnam War. Secondly, I introduce the rhetorical theories of public memory and narrative, explaining their relevance to both the Vietnam War and my analysis of textbook rhetoric.

### **From Johnson's Declaration to the "after" left behind: a Public Memory-laden Timeline of The Vietnam War.**

Just as public memory is partial, so too is public history, as no two perspectives of an event will tell the exact same story. Additionally, every reader will have a partial interest in remembering one group or another more than its counterparts.<sup>21</sup> This being noted, I offer a basic timeline of the Vietnam War, a collection of events that provide context for the conflict of Vietnam. Plainly, the purpose of this introductory section of the chapter is

---

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hurka, "The Justification of National Partiality." *The morality of nationalism*, 139 (1997): 140, Brandeis.edu.



not to determine the undoubtedly correct telling of the Vietnam War, but to provide a frame of reference for the historical events covered by today's analyzed textbooks.

### **Indochina and the Beginning of the Vietnam War**

While most conflicts carry an easy marker for their beginnings, Vietnam presents an interesting question of inception. A global perspective of the War notes tensions between the French colonies and the Indochina region (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) since the 1880's. A tension wherein a near century of colonization by the French paved the way for Ho Chi Minh to emerge as a political leader of the people in Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> Ho Chi Minh promoted a sense of unity in country and pride in traditions, elements of the Vietnamese cultural lexicon that had struggled under French colonization. Specifically, Ho's tenure as a Vietnamese nationalist with communist associations added support to the plight of communism within the country, as he became the leader of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930.<sup>23</sup> As the world surged toward the midcentury, Ho Chi Minh and his constituents surged toward a unified Vietnam. The most significant of their early efforts occurred in two fronts in the 1940's and the 1950's. Firstly, in September of 1945, The ICP and Vietminh (a militant group dedicated to the liberation of Vietnam) secured Hanoi as the capitol of the newly formed DRV (Democratic Republic of The Vietnam).<sup>24</sup> Secondly, the Vietminh forces won the long, attritionary Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1953, leading to a final exit of French occupation in Vietnam.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Oxford Encyclopedia of Research. "Origins of the Vietnam War." Accessed 02/09/2022

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Anderson, "The Columbia History of the Vietnam War. *Columbia University Press (2010)*

<sup>24</sup> Sudhir Kumar Singh, "Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam's Struggle for Freedom." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 70 (2009): 795-801. JSTOR.*

By 1950, the world had taken notice of Ho Chi Minh's rise to relevance, and not all observable parties were pleased with the leaders' communist ties. The U.S., for its part, began a course of steady intervention in Vietnam in 1954, committing over \$2 million dollars of economic and military support to the South Vietnam in combatting the communist North.<sup>25</sup> In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower further expanded the scope of U.S. involvement by pledging his firm support of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. This support was rooted primarily in financial aid rather than military effort, but it continued into the next decade. In total, it has been estimated that of the cost of supplying, training, and maintaining the South Vietnamese army during Diem's regime, 83% of the funds were supplied by Eisenhower and the U.S.<sup>26</sup>

Though some U.S. military involvement had been present since the initial instances of support in 1954, and the presence of ground troops steadily increased over time, the true beginning of the War in Vietnam did not take full shape until the early 1960's. The U.S. foreign policy on Vietnam became influenced by the "Domino Effect", a growing concern that communist victory in Vietnam would fuel anti-capitalist sentiment in other foreign powers.<sup>27</sup> These tensions, coupled with the still smoldering embers of the Cold War, ultimately planted the seeds of the Vietnam War. Such seeds were set to bloom due to the successive actions of two U.S. presidents. First, the assassination of North Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem ordered by John F. Kennedy in November of 1963 drew more blood than it intended and replaced an uncooperative

---

<sup>25</sup> Sudhir Kumar Singh, "Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam's Struggle for Freedom," 798

<sup>26</sup> Daniel L Anderson, "The Columbia History of the Vietnam War." 72, JSTOR.

<sup>27</sup> George Herring, "The Cold War and Vietnam." *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004): 19, JSTOR.

military leader with an arguably less stable one in Duang Van Minh.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation of war on July 28, 1965, saw the number of committed troops soar from 75,000 to 125,000.<sup>29</sup>

Johnson's escalation is often credited with being the more accurate "start" of the war for Americans, as it demonstrated a sense of America being "all in" on Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This congressional decision granted the sitting President the authority to "take all necessary steps" to ensure peaceful end to the situation and is thought by many historians as a blank check written to Johnson.<sup>30</sup> Though Johnson's decision was criticized by voices both inside his cabinet and within allies in world leadership, America would hold the course and continue the war.<sup>31</sup> This decision would eventually claim over 58,000 American soldiers, over 1 million Vietnamese soldiers and roughly 2 million civilians in a 10-year span.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Suffering of Vietnam**

While U.S. Citizens grappled with the reality of another war in, U.S. soldiers in Vietnam experienced unique challenges overseas. Boasting an average serving age of 22 (four years younger than the average in WWII), soldiers were thrust into territory that was damp with humidity and extremely well-mapped by the opposing Vietcong. Along with

---

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Sterner, "President Kennedy and the Escalation of the Vietnam War." (2015). 16, Cedarville University Online.

<sup>29</sup> Robert McNamara, "President Johnson Announces More Troops to Vietnam." *This Day in History*. (2022) <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/johnson-announces-more-troops-to-vietnam>

<sup>30</sup> Allen Pusey, "The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution begins a war." *ABAJ* 102 (2016): 72, Heinonline.

<sup>31</sup> Max Hastings, "Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975" (2018): 379, Taylor and Francis Online.

<sup>32</sup> Arnold Barnett, Timothy Stanley, and Michael Shore. "America's Vietnam Casualties: Victims of a Class War?" *Operations Research* 40, no. 5 (1992): 856. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/171812>.

terrain that was unfamiliar, uniquely deadly, and that resisted them at every turn, the sheer military logistics of movement and advancement seemed incompatible with the small country.<sup>33</sup> In addition to deadly traps and surroundings that made threat indistinguishable from terrain, soldiers also faced a lack of traditional warfare motivation. While other conflicts in American history have seen members of the military draw from a sense of duty in marching to war, analyzed narratives of Vietnam memoirists state that any traditional binding to duty for American soldiers in the Vietnam War faded after the onset of aggressive North Vietnamese attacks (The TET offensive).<sup>34</sup> Indeed, rather than patriotic ideology or love of country, it was largely the personal feelings of comradery and brotherhood between fellow soldiers that kept U.S. troops “fighting the good fight” in Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> Such country-absent motivations would need to carry the soldiers through roughly 5 more years of fighting, when the last American military unit was pulled out of Vietnam.

The suffering of the war, though, was not limited to the difficulties faced by American troops. Though multiple unsuccessful attempts have been made for an accurate casualty count, historians estimate that between 2-3 million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians died during the Vietnam War.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, it is estimated that the U.S. deployed 26 times the amount of firepower in the Vietnam War than that which was used

---

<sup>33</sup> Hermann Gruenwald, "Military Logistics Efforts during the Vietnam War Supply Chain Management on Both Sides." *Journal of Social and Development Sciences* 6, no. 2 (2015): 59.  
file:///C:/Users/DONNI/Downloads/843-Article%20Text-843-1-10-20160308%20(2).pdf

<sup>34</sup> David Vaughan and William A. Schum. "Motivation in US Narrative Accounts of the Ground War in Vietnam." *Armed Forces & Society* 28, no. 1 (2001): 11, Sage Publishing.

<sup>35</sup> David Vaughan, and William A. Schum. "Motivation in US Narrative Accounts of the Ground War in Vietnam." 19.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Hirschman, Samuel Preston, and Vu Manh Loi. "Vietnamese Casualties During the American War: A New Estimate." *Population and Development Review* 21, no. 4 (1995): 791. JSTOR.

in WWII.<sup>37</sup> In addition to this firepower, it is important to note the significance of U.S. deployment of Napalm in Vietnam, as the fire-inducing bombing agent was deployed in an ultimate quantity of 380,000 tons over the course of the war, burning jungle fields and the Vietnamese people indiscriminately.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, these instances of heavy firepower were not limited to carpet bombings in the jungles, or skirmishes with the Vietcong. Most notably, the Massacre of My Lai stands as the largest and most well-documented account of civilian slaughter by American troops. Testimonies of My Lai construct harrowing imagery of those of every age and gender being rounded up into groups, corralled into ditches, and gunned down.<sup>39</sup> In certain instances, more reluctant soldiers came across the handiwork of their superiors and fellow soldiers and, seeing wounded Vietnamese too far gone for medical care, “finished them off.”<sup>40</sup>

In total, it is estimated that the small village of My Lai was all but wiped out that day, with a death toll of somewhere between 300-500.<sup>41</sup> Testimonies of surviving villagers note the sudden nature of the attack, as well as the way in which some of them had to hide under the corpses of their neighbors in a mass grave to survive. Additionally, other survivors remember the pain of losing their entire families, including small children

---

<sup>37</sup> Nick Turse, “Was Mai Lai Just One of Many Massacres of the Vietnam War.” *BBC* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23427726>

<sup>38</sup> Marie Guillaume. "Napalm in US Bombing Doctrine and Practice, 1942-1975." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 14 (2016):7, <https://apjjf.org/-Marine-Guillaume/4983/article.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> William Raymond Peers, *Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations Into the My Lai Incident: Volume I, The Report of the Investigation*. Vol. 1. The Department of the Army, 1974.7 [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=2c4LAAAIAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&ots=hT5h3VqaUl&sig=Bp\\_qeS8lKoxGGyEyKGHgDK5rWEE#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=2c4LAAAIAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&ots=hT5h3VqaUl&sig=Bp_qeS8lKoxGGyEyKGHgDK5rWEE#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>40</sup> William Raymond Peers, *Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations Into the My Lai Incident: Volume I, The Report of the Investigation*.9

<sup>41</sup> Nick Turse, “Was Mai Lai Just One of Many Massacres of the Vietnam War?”

who were gunned down like everyone else. These accounts also corroborate stories of air support deployed to My Lai, as helicopter fire ravaged the edges of villages, snuffing out those trying to escape.<sup>42</sup> Despite multiple soldier testimonies confessing to mass assault, murder, and even rape of a village in which no hostility or fire from the other side was recorded, only one soldier was convicted with a staying punishment. Even in this instance, President Reagan eventually reduced the life sentence of Lt. William L Calley to a period of house arrest.<sup>43</sup>

### **An Incomplete End**

After a decade of War, on April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese troops overtook Saigon, forcing a complete surrender of South Vietnamese forces, ultimately drawing the conflict to a close. Through haunting research and insight, it has become apparent that the “end” of the war was very much an incomplete one. This was true both for American soldiers and civilians, and for the mourning Vietnamese, for whom the Massacre of My Lai was simply the most notable instance in a collection of civilian and military slaughters.<sup>44</sup> The end of the war brought soldiers to a country that was very much worn out from the Vietnam War, a place that longed to move on from the Vietnam syndrome that had already set in. Though many Vietnam veterans adjusted well to the homecoming and re-integration into society, and many popular narratives of the spat upon soldier are exaggerated, those who returned did not do so seamlessly or without lasting ties to

---

<sup>42</sup> Michael Bilton and Sim, Kevin. “Four Hours in My Lai”. As quoted in <https://blogs.baylor.edu/mylaimassacre/234-2/>

<sup>43</sup> The New York Times. “U.S. General Charged in the Massacre of My Lai Died at 86.” 2006 <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/11/world/americas/us-general-charged-in-my-lai-massacre-dies-at-86.html>

<sup>44</sup> Nick Turse, “Was My Lai Just One of Many Massacres of the Vietnam War?”

Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> For instance, many families of veterans struggled to adapt to the psychological issues of those who came home. Of these, present was a loss of identity and a fear of isolation, as soldiers asked themselves who were they without the marching orders of Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> Such sentiments are further conveyed by the numerous veterans turned authors/memoirists, of which Tim O'Brien is one of the most recognizable in the public sphere of American knowledge. In an account of his return to Vietnam as a tourist/journalist some 25 years after his initial entry as a soldier, O'Brien writes:

The hardest part, by far, is to make the bad pictures go away. On war time, the world is one long horror movie, image after image, and if it's anything like Vietnam, I'm in for a lifetime of wee-hour creeps. Meanwhile, I try to plug up the leaks and carry through on some personal resolutions. For too many years I've lived in paralysis -- guilt, depression, terror, shame -- and now it's either move or die.<sup>47</sup>

Along with the soldiers themselves, America also felt the past pangs of Vietnam in the years following the war. While soldiers fought overseas, civilians in the U.S. engaged in struggles of political engagement, civil rights outcries, and rhetorical questions of the motives of U.S. leadership. In the years that followed Vietnam, many of these questions remained, as civilians grappled with the question of both U.S. involvement in Vietnam as well as the result of the Vietnam War itself.<sup>48</sup>

### **Public Memory and Narrative: The Methodologies of Remembering and Retelling Vietnam.**

---

<sup>45</sup> John Wood, *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War*. Ohio University Press, 2016. ProQuest.

<sup>46</sup> Kathleen Jordan, Charles R. Marmar, John A. Fairbank, William E. Schlenger, Richard A. Kulka, Richard L. Hough, and Daniel S. Weiss. "Problems in families of male Vietnam veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder." *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology* 60, no. 6 (1992): 916, Ebscohost.

<sup>47</sup> Tim O'Brien, "The Vietnam In Me." *The New York Times*. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/20/specials/obrien-vietnam.html>

<sup>48</sup> George Herring, "America and Vietnam: The Unending War," 110.

Having reviewed a short history of Vietnam, the next step in contextualizing the proceeding analysis is to highlight the rhetorical concepts of public memory and narrative theory. Here, I provide an overview of Vietnam War-centered examples of analysis which also draw from these two rhetorical lenses. As mentioned above, scholarly perspectives and applications of these theories will serve to demonstrate the applicability of public memory and narrative theory to Vietnam and to my analysis of history textbooks. More broadly, I argue that public memory and narrative are among the most effective lenses from which to view public school textbook rhetoric; that their inclusion garners a more vivid understanding of the public remembrance of Vietnam.

### **Public Memory: Forgetting, Confronting, and Celebrating the Past in the Present**

To begin with public memory (also known as collective memory in the field of History and the broader social sciences), I begin by establishing it as a useful foundation in its application to both Vietnam and public history. At a conceptual level, public memory is a lens through which we make sense of the present (and even future) through collective understandings and interpretations of the past.<sup>49</sup> Public memory may be best understood through the recounting of three primary principles of operation that are consistent across scholarship. These principles highlight public memory's ability to shape the present, while also aiding our understanding and application of the concept to Vietnam. In order of discussion: 1) Public memory is not all encompassing, 2) Public

---

<sup>49</sup> Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," 17



memory is not fixed. 3) Public memory is not solely constructed in physical statues or commemorative monuments.

**Public Memory is not “all-encompassing”**

The first principle that facilitates an understanding of public memory is that memory is not “all encompassing.” Zelizer speaks of memory as being partial, that a culture’s, countries, or group’s memory of an event will only ever be a part of the story, however large or small a part it represents.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Zelizer states that the incomplete nature of memory is a quality used to benefit those who cling to a particular version of the remembrance, that each interpretation can play a role in maintaining and upholding group identity, dignity, and purpose. This is accomplished as those seeking to remember engage in a type of narrative shopping, selecting the partial remembrance that can re-establish qualities or re-imagine a people.

In other words, if memory is incomplete and does not rely on a whole picture for each memory, there is power and agency in *how* we choose to remember. For example, it has been noted that the use of memory has been crucial for Germany and Russia following recent totalitarian chapters of their national history.<sup>51</sup> Countries going through such types of drastic political/ideological change are often faced with the task of “memorialize(ing) past acts of state-perpetrated violence as part of its heritage.”<sup>52</sup> Following the conflicts that change their national landscape, such countries face the

---

<sup>50</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "Competing Memories: Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies." *Critical Studies of Mass Communication*, "224.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Forest, Juliet Johnson, and Karen Till. "Post-Totalitarian National Identity: Public Memory in Germany and Russia." *Social & cultural geography* 5, no. 3 (2004): 357-380.358, Taylor and Francis Online.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Forest et al., “ Post-Totalitarian National Identity: Public Memory in Germany and Russia.” 359

choice of running from, facing, or commemorating the past sins and scars of its national actions.<sup>53</sup> To make this choice, a nation must decide which instances of memory to cite, and which ones to forget or shade in with patriotic colors. In the specific instances of Germany and Russia during the aftermath of WWII, both countries took a different approach to their collective memory of the war. Germany sought to assign the marker of true evil to the regimes that had ravaged the country, remembering its past as a cause for repentance and as a means to move forward. Russia's approach, in contrast, centered on the construction of scattered sites of remembrance that left the past as easy to disregard or forget.<sup>54</sup>

An additional caveat of public memory is the understanding that conflicts are *particularly* vulnerable to the appeal of a selective remembrance. Perhaps more importantly, efforts to paint an ideal commemoration of that conflict shape public policy decisions and national identity throughout the decades following the conflict.<sup>55</sup> A country does not simply gain an annotated record of the conflict after the smoke clears. Rather, it *chooses* which figures to sketch through the haze—it includes and forgets the details that bring its citizens closer to moving forward with faith in the nation. This detail is significant in moving forward to a discussion of Vietnam, as the struggle for national identity following the war connotes similar questions of agency and remembrance. Namely, which facets of an incomplete Vietnam are *chosen* to be remembered, and why?

---

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Forest et al. "Post-Totalitarian National Identity: Public Memory in Germany and Russia." 358

<sup>55</sup> Paez, D. & James H. Liu. "Collective Memory of Conflicts." *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution: A social Psychological Perspective (2011)*: 107, Researchgate.

In citing additional consequences of public memory's incomplete nature, Zelizer notes that the partiality of public memory "can never fully be resolved," that there will always be a differing perspective to the one chosen by the remembering party.<sup>56</sup> One of the most important implications of Zelizer's observations here is that the purpose of examining public memory can never be to settle disputation of fact or to arrive at the wholistically "correct" interpretation of history. Rather, through public memory work, we note the decisions made in remembering as well as the consequences of the selected interpretation. In terms of the Vietnam War, Zelizer also notes the oft-studied Vietnam Veterans memorial as offering agency in rhetoric. Those who visit the memorial may honor the fallen, decry the war and all that was lost, or reignite dying embers of American patriotism-- the choice is up to the observer. Where other memorials and pieces of rhetoric *present* a specific memory, the simple statue almost allows for objective agency to those who view it, as previously described options become accessible to each without judgement.<sup>57</sup> Though fluid within the context of the memorial, agency is strained within the context of American textbook rhetoric. By the very nature of instruction, the narratives expressed in the textbooks offer a distinct picture of what happened in Vietnam, as well as a clear idea of what actions and feelings should be expressed towards the War. In this medium of rhetoric, then, there is less agency in objectivity; the authority

---

<sup>56</sup> Barbie Zelizer. "Competing Memories: Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies." 225.

<sup>57</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "Competing Memories: Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies." 220.

of the texts depends on the student's continued assumption that the record of events as we understand it is an "open and shut case."<sup>58</sup>

### **Public Memory is not "Fixed"**

Because public memory is not beholden to one correct interpretation and is subject to partiality, the act of remembrance is also not fixed. In other words, the public memory of today is not guaranteed to be the public memory of tomorrow. Edward Casey best discusses this principle in stating that to be public is "to be subject to harassment and revision."<sup>59</sup> That is, there is no fixed stability in the emotions, perceptions, or narrative tied to an event, person, or time frame., Casey also describes memory as entropic, reflecting an inevitable destiny of commemorative emotion. Even as certain events such as the pride of the American Revolution and the famine of the Great Depression enjoy more stable remembrances in our history, the amount of relevance or detail they enjoy in the public sphere of conversation can never be certain as time moves forward.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, still ongoing and ever mutable discussions on The Vietnam and Iraq Wars show the impact of time. Rising generations, the challenging of dominant perspectives, and the questioning of country-laden principles; all of these contribute to the entropic effect of uncertainty through time in relation to American public memory.

Public memory can also be stated as unfixed and uncertain for much of the same reason that a piece of interpretive art or literature cannot be held to one sole

---

<sup>58</sup> Gary Hess, "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War." *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 2 (1994): 242, JSTOR.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time." 30.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time." 30.

interpretation. That is, the viewer themselves bring in the inferences, emotions, and prejudices of their lived experience.<sup>61</sup> So, too, do new generations discover new mediums in which to tell the story of a memory, and sew in threads of previously un-connected emotions to the consequences of the event. The certainty of public memory is also left bare and unprotected to the vicissitudes of public forgetfulness. In many cases, certain details of the memory are left out of the story for the sake of convenience or even to protect national identity and individual pride. In short, details forgotten or underplayed by one generation may be entirely omitted in the next, as convenience replaces commemoration. Forgetfulness, though, does not only deal with the exclusion of details or the omission of key figures; the act of forgetting can also be thought of as a type of selective amnesia. Simply, we do not forget a memory altogether, we “remember the event in a different way,” doing so in a way that highlights favorable attributes of our country or culture.<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, the public memory of the Vietnam War is noted as having the same mutability as all collective recollections of trauma, a mutability prone to the needs of cultural healing. Through a memory warfare, we go beyond citing its occurrence—we share stories about why the conflict occurred, what made it important, and what happened after the dust settled. Especially where Vietnam is concerned, memory also provides an avenue through which citizens make sense of the experienced trauma in a way that re-stabilizes a patriotic narrative.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, if the memory of a traumatic war remains

---

<sup>61</sup> Sonja Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans memorial." 330.

<sup>62</sup> John Hatch(2003) p. 750 As cited in Houdek, Matthew, and Kendall R. Phillips. "Public memory." In *Oxford research encyclopedia of communication*. 2017.JSTOR.

<sup>63</sup> Ron Eyeran, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring. "Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory and the Vietnam War." *Politička misao: časopis za politologiju* 54, no. 1-2 (2017): 22.

mutable, considerable weight exists in the narrative decisions made in constructing the memory that carries a culture forward after the war.

**Public Memory is not solely tied to physical monuments and memorials.**

Thirdly, public memory is understood as being not only an established rhetoric within the bounds of brick and mortar and physical statues but is also present in verbal and visual rhetoric. This is not to say that public memory is not effectively studied and constituted in statues and memorials. This efficacy is evidenced by the enduring impact of the “Mural of Hope” that continually commemorates the September 11 World Trade Center.<sup>64</sup> This mural, much like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM, hereafter), offers public memory through a specific image-based evocation. One can stand at the memorial, run their fingers across the names of the departed, and ask difficult questions concerning the worth and meaning of individual and collective American sacrifices in Vietnam.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, the VVM has also been analyzed as an exemplar of the emotional weight behind public memory decisions. At first, the “black gash” (as the design was infamously notated during early construction) was said by many political figures of the time to evoke feelings of shame rather than celebration.<sup>66</sup> This tonal decision, as well as the lack of a more traditional memorial structure that rose from the earth in triumph was decried by many as an insult to patriotism and the efforts of Vietnam veterans.<sup>67</sup> The outspoken, consistent public outcry voiced over such decisions aids in demonstrating the

---

<sup>64</sup> Edward Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time.” 26.

<sup>65</sup> Sonja Foss, (1986) “Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial.” 334.

<sup>66</sup> Marita Sturken, “The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial.” *Representations* 35 (1991): 118-142.JSTOR

<sup>67</sup> Sonja Foss, “Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial” 336.

impact of public memory. In short, the VVM tells us that the emotions we experience and envision alongside a memory can be just as consequential as the memory itself.

Combining the visual and speech-centered aspects of rhetoric, film stands as another strong channel from which memory is constructed, repaired, and made sense of. Film remains an especially viable means through which to access public memory due to its high level of engagement, accessibility, popularity, and its ability to create a synchronous experience in an audience. All of this is to say, film, and especially historically-centered film, is uniquely situated to bring a quality of “aliveness” and engagement to memory. Through film, the audience is not only being presented a select narrative memory, but they are also living it, and remembrance becomes active and accessible.<sup>68</sup> Such an example of public memory in film is found in the oft studied Schindler’s *List*, the Steven Spielberg film detailing the efforts of Oskar Schindler during the Holocaust. Specifically, Schindler’s *List* has been said to create a hollywood-esque happy ending amid tragedy while keeping to the painful accuracy of history. It is in this way that the film seeks to construct a Holocaust memory with an included moral “take away” of the good of some humanity despite the evil of others.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Victor Frankl’s “Man’s Search for Meaning” asks us to remember the theme of survivability and redemption in the face of Auschwitz-laden suffering rather than cruelty and despair.<sup>70</sup> Such affects are also seen in the John Wayne film *Green Berets*, where the smiling image of

---

<sup>68</sup> Anton Kaes, "History and film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination." *History and Memory* 2, no. 1 (1990):112, JSTOR.

<sup>69</sup>Miriam Hansen, “Schindler’s List” Is Not” Shoah”: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory." *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 298, JSTOR.

<sup>70</sup> Timothy Pytell, "Redeeming the Unredeemable: Auschwitz and Man's Search for Meaning." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003):103, Project Muse.

John Wayne constructed the Vietnam War as an winnable war in an ideal time through themes traditional U.S. masculinity. Ultimately, *The Green Berets* asks its reader to favor a view of the Vietnam War as a simple, justified conflict rather than as a dangerous war without clear motivation.<sup>71</sup>

Other films have tackled the topic of the Vietnam war, contrasting familiarity in narrative with the reality of the war. Such a tension is noted in the difference between films like *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, when compared against that of *The Wild Bunch* and the subtle hero narrative of *Jaws*. In the former duo of films, the narrative hearkens back to the Western themes of unfamiliar terrain and a “lone hero.”<sup>72</sup> The evocation of these themes can be understood as an attempt to speak a language familiar to the American public, even as the soldiers are thrust into uncertainty themselves. The contrast between common Western themes and the unfamiliar, hellish landscape of Vietnam acts as a sort of Trojan Horse for American viewers-- they are drawn in by the plot devices and narrative functions that feel familiar.<sup>73</sup> Yet in this instance, there is no John Wayne, there is no ideal war, there is Vietnam. Comparatively, in *The Wild Bunch* and *Jaws*, time removed from the Vietnam war shows a clear need for what Robert Torry describes as a “Therapeutic Narrative” regarding the War. Similar to *The Deer Hunter*'s use of familiar western themes, *The Wild Bunch* integrates the familiar narrative of characters set against an unforgiving frontier and can be said to both

---

<sup>71</sup> Peter Rollins, "The Vietnam War: Perceptions Through Literature, Film, and Television." *American Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1984): 423, JSTOR. Herzog, Tobey C. "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness: The American Soldier in Vietnam". As Found in *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*. By Searle, William J. 20

<sup>72</sup>John Hellman, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in the Deer hunter and Apocalypse Now." *American Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1982): 425, JSTOR.

<sup>73</sup> John Hellman, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now." 422



uphold and undermined the classic American myth of “frontier justice” through its clear-cut imageries of violence.

### **Telling the Story of Vietnam: The Function of Narrative Theory Alongside Public Memory**

As previously stated, narrative has been a common companion in discussions of public memory, while also holding significant rhetorical merit on its own. In the preceding paragraphs, I offer a short review of Narrative theory that will serve two primary purposes: 1) Defining narrative theory and the foundational assumptions of the rhetorical principle of narrative. 2) Describing more fully the way in which narrative theory acts as a companion to the study of public memory, and to today’s analysis of Vietnam War textbook rhetoric.

The original utility and premise of narrative theory could be most directly linked to Walter Fisher. Specifically, Fisher conceptualizes narrative as being more than the simple rhetorical form of storytelling—rather, through narrative we can understand all human interaction/communication as “stories that compete against other stories”.<sup>74</sup> Fisher additionally tells us that narrative in itself can be interpreted as “a series of symbolic actions that have sequence and meaning for those who live, relate, or interpret them.”<sup>75</sup> According to Fisher, we ask ourselves the ultimate questions of whether the stories we hear make sense in reference to our experiences and the way in which we see the world. Narrative theory can then be understood as the degree to which we engage with texts,

---

<sup>74</sup> Walter Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument." *Communications Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 1-22.

<sup>75</sup> Walter Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” 2

speakers, and other accounts as a form of interpersonal communication rather than a one-way, linear model of knowledge transmission.<sup>76</sup> More importantly, this interactive property of narrative contextualizes the role of the audience in narrative. When an audience believes or refuses to believe the story being told, they participate in the construction of history, they decide to carry on or to forget a part of the past. So, too, is it true that the students to who read the Vietnam-related content of their textbooks carry with them the decision to believe or challenge the constructed narratives and embellished memory of the war.

Having established narrative theory as the way in which we interpret and frame our communication as competing stories, we can then apply this theory to the application of public memory. Such examples of this complimentary application are found in the work of Hess, who tackles the unique medium of the electronic video game in detailing the narrative public memory of *Medal of Honor, Rising Sun*.<sup>77</sup> Rather than presenting a standard set of goals and mission objectives for the player to march through, Hess finds that the game asks players to engage with the story of America's engagement in WWII, and see themselves not just as a soldier, but as an agent of vengeance carrying out justified duties. By making the war feel personal for the player and accentuating the desire to engage in retribution for lost brothers in arms, those who engage in the narrative of *Medal of Honor: Rising Son* remember the war in a specific manner. They understand the conflict as necessary, the U.S tactics as justified, and the Japanese forces as

---

<sup>76</sup> John Rodden, "How do Stories Convince us? Notes Towards a Rhetoric of Narrative." *College Literature* (2008): 152, Taylor and Francis Online.

<sup>77</sup> Aaron Hess, "You Don't Play, You Volunteer": Narrative Public Memory Construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 4 (2007): 349, Taylor and Francis Online.

dehumanized others.<sup>78</sup> While ludology (the critical study of electronic gaming titles) is a new medium, the practice of analyzing narrative framing in public memory certainly is not, and it is through narrative that we move from the “what” of remembrance into the “how”. The work of Rowling et al, for example, displays the truth that the use of narrative framing and the needed study of framing decisions is still alive and well in the arena of press coverage. Furthermore, through the analysis of Iraq War media coverage, we better understand Fisher’s presentation of narration as a form of “moral argument” which signifies the way in which a person believes the world works or *should work*.<sup>79</sup>

Ultimately, narrative theory enjoys an applicability to public memory rooted in their similar utilities. Indeed, if we are said to see history as a framed story, then one could surely posit that public memory is difficult to study *without* the use of narrative. Furthermore, narrative also enjoys congruence to public memory within the principle of partiality, as a story does not have to be held up as the unequivocal truth to be believed. Rather, a story that carries truth or rationality *for the audience* may also carry the title of a true *story*.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, a narrative does not have to appeal to broader or societal truth, necessarily, but the cultural truths implicated in the audiences group membership. For the storyteller, the task at hand is to make sure the story is presented in a way that leads their audience to the desired response and recollection.

---

<sup>78</sup> Aaron Hess, “You Don’t Play, You Volunteer”: Narrative Public Memory Construction in Medal of Honor: Rising Sun” 348.

<sup>79</sup> Walter Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm, the Case of Moral Public Argument” 10; Charles Rowling, Jason Gilmore, and Penelope Sheets. “When threats come from within: National identity, cascading frames, and the US war in Afghanistan.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 20, no. 4 (2015): 479, Sage Publishing.

<sup>80</sup>Walter Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm, the Case of Moral Public Argument.” 10.

## Chapter 2: Research Methods and Summary of Materials.

This chapter's purpose is to detail the methodological choices made in pursuing and organizing this paper. Specifically, I note my decisions in selecting the artifact of history textbooks, the rhetorical approach of a concept-based criticism, and the specific list of texts from the American Textbook Council (ATC). This chapter serves to note both my reasoning involving these decisions, as well as the significance of each in contributing to the overall research work engaged here.

### **Selection of Artifacts**

This project began with a question of how current American public-school students remember the Vietnam War. Specifically, I wondered what space the Vietnam War and its controversial tenure earn in the teaching of American history; I wondered how America teaches a war that is commemorated, but that can never be celebrated. Reflecting on my own secondary education experience, I do not recall discussing the Vietnam War beyond a quick overview of the draft and the basic dates which the war spanned. My first real exposure to the history of the war did not arrive until an introductory American Studies course during the third year of my undergraduate career. Of course, my own secondary education experience in rural Utah certainly cannot account for the larger scope of American history education, and I needed to widen my

gaze. To truly ask a question of public consequence rather than individual experience, it was necessary to consider the rhetoric that *most* American students would have access to; I needed to find the most accurate rhetorical approach for my question of memory.

As Sonja Foss has noted, the central focus of study for a rhetorician may either be an act or an artifact; something “done” in the presence of an audience, or something that exists for the viewing or participation of an audience.<sup>81</sup> Though the *act* of teaching certainly deserves scholarly attention, the collection of teaching accounts or lesson plans would prove a difficult task and would limit the ability to account for a larger whole of an American student’s experience in secondary school due to the variance in instructor and material presentation. Therefore, I determined that a suitable starting point for a rhetorical analysis concerning Vietnam’s memory construction would be to focus on an *artifact*, one that could act as a bridge rather than a barrier.

Ultimately, I arrived at an analysis of U.S. textbook rhetoric primarily due to its potential for influencing current and rising generations. In addition to its accessibility and reach, the American history textbook has largely enjoyed an air of authority, despite the possibility of different texts to tell their *distinct* version of the history which it describes.<sup>82</sup> This authority prompts students to assume that they are reading the unequivocally correct version of U.S. or world history. This rarely-questioned assumption makes the inclusion of U.S. patriotism and the exclusion of ethical discussions nearly foregone conclusions for the students who participate in their

---

<sup>81</sup> Sonja K Foss, “Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice.” *Waveland Press*. (2017). 6.

<sup>82</sup> Dana Goldstein, "Two States. Eight textbooks. Two American Stories." *The New York Times* 12 (2020).

narrative.<sup>83</sup> Ultimately textbook qualities of accessibility in reach, authority in message, and flexibility in narrative made their selection as my artifact for analysis a necessary choice. The decision to focus my analysis on the artifact(s) of history textbooks can also be understood as a decision to focus on the relationship between material, memory, and student. A focus on textbooks as an artifact may yet open the door for questions on how we *teach* the Vietnam war, but its primary utility here centers on how we *construct* and *remember* Vietnam using educational rhetoric.

More specifically, I selected from the American Textbook Council's list of the most widely circulated public school history texts. I reached this decision primarily due to these text's ability to meet demands of applicability and integrity. As I made the decision to focus on textbook rhetoric, it became clear that I would be analyzing multiple textbooks rather than a single text. As this thesis concerns itself with the primary narratives that construct a memory of Vietnam, a glimpse at a single textbook would be insufficient in understanding the complete story of the War. I could not, though, simply pick a random selection of current texts and justify their merit for analysis. After all, how could I account for their ability to be contribute to public memory If I was unsure as to *who* was reading them or the degree in which they were distributed? Therefore, I chose to analyze the American Textbook Council (hereafter ATC)'s list of the most widely circulated U.S history textbooks. As the ATC is not only a private organization, but a reputable base of knowledge on textbooks. Founded in 1989, the long-tenured

---

<sup>83</sup>Michael Romanowski, "Excluding Ethical Issues from US history Textbooks: 911 and the War on Terror." *American Secondary Education* (2009): 29, JSTOR.

organization states their own purpose as lying in a dedication to “solely textbook analysis, review, studies and evaluation.”<sup>84</sup>

The ATC has also published a list containing seven of the most widely adopted U.S. History Textbooks, a list which I ultimately decided to draw from in my collection of methods. I will discuss this list and the individual texts featured in the collection in more detail later in the chapter. For now, it is sufficient to say that I have chosen to study the ATC’s list due to the organization’s tenure, lack of ties to specific universities or publishers, and focus on textbook rhetoric. I deemed their list of widely circulated texts as the most effective selection of artifacts for my analysis.

The decision to focus on the collection of ATC-reviewed texts also allows for a more complete narrative analysis; one concerning the construction of Vietnam as seen by multiple publishers as opposed to a singular example. More importantly for the purposes of this analysis, this text selection more widely contributes to the public memory and the “take-home” lessons of Vietnam would be more accurately settled on most of the public education. Further description of the ATC and the titles included in the list for analysis will be included later in this chapter.

### **Selection of Methods; Application of a Concept-Based Analysis**

Having clarified my selection of artifacts, I will next discuss the selection of rhetorical methods. Specifically, I take time here to consider the choice of a concept-based rhetorical criticism concerning public memory and narrative. In providing context for a

---

<sup>84</sup> The American Textbook Council “About Us.” <https://www.historytextbooks.net/about.htm>. Accessed 3.19.22

conceptually- oriented critique, I first revisit James Jasinski's perspectives on the distinction between theory and method in rhetorical criticism. Jasinski notes that a focus on method in rhetorical criticism must often contain an "articulation of the specific critical procedures that are performed in the analysis."<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Jasinski places method-based rhetoricians in the camp of those seeking to ask questions about methodologies—to develop newer and more succinct tools for rhetoricians to approach artifacts.<sup>86</sup> Theory-based rhetorical criticism, then, is understood as analysis that is guided by a question of contribution to theory rather than a development or explication of method.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, a rhetorician seeking a conceptually oriented (theory-based) approach will engage in *abduction* rather than *deduction*. According to Jasinski, this means that the rhetorician will treat the concept and artifact as counterparts in a conversation that further develops the meaning and resonance of the concepts as situated in the larger field of rhetorical studies.<sup>88</sup>

In the instance of my thesis, I organize this work as a conceptually oriented criticism. That is, I offer that it is the application of public memory and narrative rather than the use of a specific method that understand the text's contribution to Vietnam War public memory. In this critique, the artifact is important, but not paramount; the organization of the analysis is not the key to deriving meaningful assertions from this research. More accurately, the concepts of public memory and narrative can be said to

---

<sup>85</sup> James Jasinski, "The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism." *Western Journal of Communication (includes Communication Reports)* 65, no. 3 (2001): 255, Taylor and Francis Online.

<sup>86</sup> James Jasinski, "The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism." 255.

<sup>87</sup> James Jasinski, "The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism." 256

<sup>88</sup> James Jasinski, "The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism." 256



add consequence to student remembrance of Vietnam, just as the analyzed memory of Vietnam adds weight to the applicability of these concepts in other historical contexts.

The decision of public memory as the primary theory of this work was made simple due to its application to the question at hand. In analyzing the public-school texts, I ask how the construction of their narratives contributes to a specific memory of the Vietnam War. Not only does public memory theory posit that memory *can* be actively altered or upheld, but that there are implicit cultural and ideological ties to decisions made concerning memory. The lens of public memory, then, allows me to address the current state of the Vietnam War's memory, rather than engaging in the well-treaded territory of arguments on *how* it should be remembered. Additionally, a focus on public memory permits me to address the cultural and ideological influences on memory creation, without deviating attention from the Vietnam war. Though the public memory of Vietnam was indeed found to communicate the ideology of American exceptionalism, an analysis prioritizing ideology would reduce the focus on and impact of the Vietnam War itself and be more centered on the hegemonic nature of the textbooks in their entirety.<sup>89</sup> In short, this project focuses on the way a constructed memory of Vietnam could lend itself to understandings of American exceptionalism in education, rather than it being the other way around. Such a distinction makes public memory my obvious choice for this analysis.

Public memory's application to this work is made even more direct through the addition of narrative theory, a rhetorical lens often used as a companion to public

---

<sup>89</sup>Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Waveland Press, 240

memory. Stories can even be understood as the primary agent of sharing and remembering events that contribute to public memory. For example, the construction of the 9/11 World Trade Center attack as a day of American solidarity amid tragedy is not made possible through the statement of the occurring events and the accrued casualties of the day. While this restatement facilitates commemoration, it is through the sharing of stories concerning 9/11 that the *memory* of that day is facilitated.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the memorial at ground zero has been said to fill the space of memory for U.S citizens who experienced the attack precisely due to its ability to relay a single, simple story of national solidarity with its function.<sup>91</sup> All of this is to say, events of consequence require stories for the creation and maintenance of cohesive public memory.

Secondly, Narrative criticism works well in tandem with public memory for much of the same reasons that narratives themselves are found in every form of rhetoric, that we have a natural tendency toward storytelling.<sup>92</sup> Not only do we interpret our own experiences through situated stories, but we also readily interpret our larger public culture, our national history, and even the constitutions of our familial and individual identities through the lens of storytelling and story formation.<sup>93</sup> Non-fictional narratives can, through their organization of timeline, structuring of events, and use of form, constitute the same narrative power that fictional narratives often do. That is, narrative

---

<sup>90</sup> Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," 21.

<sup>91</sup> Ekaterina Haskins, and Justin P. DeRose., "Memory, Visibility, and Public space: Reflections on Commemoration (s) of 9/11." *Space and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2003): 377-393.2, Sage Publishing.

<sup>92</sup> Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice*. Waveland Press, 320; Fisher, Walter R. "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument.," 4.

<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Flood-Grady, and Jody Koenig Kellas. "Sense-making, Socialization, and Stigma: Exploring Narratives Told in Families About Mental Illness," *Health Communication* 34, no. 6 (2019): 609, Taylor and Francis Online.

presents a setting and associated characters in a world that is changed by at least two events.<sup>94</sup> Noting these two primary events as the beginning and ending of the Vietnam War, I can ask the question of how the narrative world constructed by each author is changed by these events, while also gaging the effect of public memory that these narrative consequences pertain to.

### **Considerations Made in Artifact Collection**

While seeking out the obtainment of both physical and e-book copies, I took additional care to acquire the most current version of each of the listed textbooks. This distinction provides the most accurate picture of *current* public memory construction in textbook rhetoric. Among these current editions, the years of publication are as follows: 2021, 2020, 2019, 2016, 2016, 2015, 2013, with varied distribution of complete textbooks and the latter halves of two-part collections. Of note in this collection of texts is the fact that school textbooks in the United States are said to be replenished and updated on a 7–10-year average (depending on school district, budget concerns, and state-specific curriculum).<sup>95</sup> This sampling will then not only allow for a comprehensive analysis of the Vietnam-related narratives being espoused to today’s students, but also for the students of the last decade and those that reach into the next decade. My selection of the ATC’s list

---

<sup>94</sup> Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice*, 319.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Schwartz, “Who Decides What History We Teach? (2021) *Edweek.org*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/who-decides-what-history-we-teach-an-explainer/2021/08>

of texts will provide the most complete measure of educational rhetoric's contribution to the Vietnam War's public memory.

- *Unfinished Nation* (2016), McGraw Hill
- *America: Past and Present* (2013), Penitence Hall
- *Out of Many* (2016), Penitence Hall
- *America's History* (2021), Bedford Macmillan
- *The American Pageant* (2020), Houghton Mifflin
- *A People and a Nation* (2015), Houghton Mifflin
- *America: A Narrative History* (2019), Norton

In acquiring these texts, I purchased both physical and electronic copies from Chegg.com, except for *America's History*, which was purchased via VitalSource. My decisions regarding a physical or electronic copy of each text were purely related to the factors of cost and access, as both versions are formatted in the same manner.

### Summary of Included Texts, Chapters, and Sections

Though more detail on the content of each text is found in chapter three, the following few pages provide the basic information required to proceed with an analysis of the texts. Such information includes publisher, edition, and release date. This information has been organized in a table-based format for more conciseness in outline and accessibility to the reader.

Title	Publisher/Author	Edition	Date of Release	Summary/Additional information
<i>America's History</i>	Bedford/St. Martins; Rebecca Edwards, Eric Hinderaker. James Henretta.	10th	2021	This Edition of <i>America's History</i> begins volume two at the building of America's Transcontinental railroad, framing chapter 16 as "Conquering a Continent.". Moving forward, the timeline of this textbook extends to conclude with a larger discussion of the advances/events in American History in the

				<p>early 21<sup>st</sup> century. More Specifically, chapter 31 ‘Confronting Global and National Dilemmas: 1989 to the Present’ ends with a heavy focus on American Presidential shifts in the last few decades, as well as the harrowing events of 9/11 and the Iraq war.</p> <p>Where other textbooks in this collection include spatterings of Vietnam-centered discussions in neighboring chapters, the bulk of information concerning the War is found in chapter 28: ‘Uncivil Wars: Liberal Crisis and Conservative Rhetoric.’</p>
<i>The American Pageant</i>	Cengage Learning; David M. Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen	17th	2020	<p><i>The American Pageant</i> is a comprehensive textbook where many other collected texts are the second volumes of their respective books. Given this, it spans a broader American History, beginning in Chapter 1: “New World Beginnings” with the shaping and settling of America. The newer release date of this text also allows it to end on a 2018 view of American politics, culminating with the state of America under the Trump White House and the aftermath of the 2016 election. The Vietnam-centered chapters within these texts are 35, “The American Zenith 1952-1963” and 36: “The Stormy Sixties”.</p>
<i>America: A Narrative History: Volume Two</i>	Norton; David Emory Shi	11th	2019	<p>Volume 2 of <i>America: A Narrative History</i> begins, as many other separate-volume textbooks do, with the reconstruction era in post-Civil War America in Chapter 1: “The Era of Reconstruction—1865-1877”. The textbook concludes with chapter 32: “Twenty-First Century America: 1993-Present”, which spans the election of President Bill Clinton and ends with a</p>

				<p>summarization of Donald Trump’s contributions to American political thought and policy. The Vietnam-Specific chapters in “A Narrative History” are 29: ‘A New Frontier and a Great Revival.’, 30: ‘Rebellion and Reaction—1960’s and 1970’s, and 31: ‘The Conservative Revival, 1977-1990’.</p>
<p><i>Out of Many: A History of The American People</i></p>	<p>Faragher, John Pentience Hall</p>	8th	2016	<p>This text begins with chapter 17, “Reconstruction: 1863-1977”. The bulk of the Vietnam-centered discussion is had in Chapter 29, “War Abroad, War at Home.” This chapter concludes with the end of the Nixon Presidency, a discussion intertwined with the fallout of the Watergate scandal.</p>
<p><i>Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People, Volume 2, from 1865.</i></p>	<p>McGraw Hill; Alan Brinkley</p>	8th	2016	<p>Volume two begins its dialogue in Chapter 15 during the reconstruction era of the United States after the carnage of the Civil War. The text carries into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, concluding with Chapter 26 and a focus on the Iraq War and America’s policy decisions post-9/11. The Vietnam War, specifically, is discussed most singularly within chapter 29: “The Turbulent Sixties”</p>
<p><i>A People and A Nation</i></p>	<p>Cengage Advantage; Mary Beth Norton et al</p>	10th	2015	<p><i>A People and a Nation</i> begins with Chapter 14: ‘Reconstruction: An Unfinished Revolution, 1865-1877”. Its final chapter is a more encompassing view of the American Landscape beginning just before the 2000’s titled: “Into the Global Millennium: America Since 1992.”. Vietnam is primary death “The Tumultuous Sixties”, though the inception of the war is discussed intermittently in the previous chapter “The Cold War and American Globalism, 1945-1961,</p>

				and the aftermath of Vietnam is discussed more specifically in Chapter 27: “A Pivotal Era”. “The Tumultuous Sixties” begins with a discussion on Kennedy’s Election and his policies on the cold war and concludes with a glimpse into Vietnam War-centered protests and Nixon’s Election.
<i>America: Past and Present</i>	Pearson; Robert A. Divine et al.	10th	2013	This part-2 text also begins its discussion in the aftermath of the Civil War with Chapter 16: The Agony of Reconstruction; concluding with Chapter 32 “Into the Twenty-First Century” and a discussion of the Barack Obama U.S. Presidency. The Vietnam-specific chapters in this text are 29: “The Turbulent Sixties” and 30: The Rise of a New Conservatism.” The latter chapter is a smaller bit of inclusion wherein the End of the War marked a transition into the Reagan Era.

### Chapter 3: Analysis and Conclusion

The exceptional public memory of America that has been embraced throughout its tenure is not a difficult one to follow along with. Indeed, if it is true that evil and error “has no place in our national mythology”, then it would stand to reason that a War wherein both misstep and malevolence occurred would be controversial.<sup>96</sup>The idea that America is and always has been exceptional also comes in direct conflict with Edward Casey’s observation that public memory is not stable, becoming less so with the passage of time and with the addition of more voices lending themselves to the construction of memory. I argue that narrative decisions made within these texts attempt to bridge the dissonance between memory and history in terms of the Vietnam War. More specifically, I argue that the Vietnam-centered chapters within these texts acknowledge the controversy of Vietnam, though they do so in a way that demonstrates a clear commitment to American Exceptionalism.

This narrative construction is displayed in three primary themes throughout the texts; 1) Lyndon B. Johnson as the scapegoat of U.S. military action, 2) Vietnam as a symptom of the “turbulent” sixties, 3) The Vietnam syndrome and the overall suffering presented by the Vietnam War as largely absent in the texts. Overall, I posit that these

---

<sup>96</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Vietnam in Me*. New York Times, 1994.



narrative themes have consequential implications for the American public memory of the Vietnam War. Separately, these frames shift any controversy or blame for Vietnam to presidential and military leadership, shuffle the impact of Vietnam within a larger deck of a culture-defining period, and situate the war as a one-off event whose scope of consequence did not rival that of other conflicts. Altogether, these themes constitute a memory of the Vietnam War as a consequential event, but not one consequential enough to dim the ever-shining light of American exceptionalism. More simply, the public memory of the Vietnam War presented here is that of a conflict we should not remember in the same breath that we recite the stories of World War II and more “American” U.S. conflicts.

Before getting into the specifics on analysis, I feel a need to differentiate between a critique of textbook rhetoric and a regulatory analysis of such texts. I do not seek to refute or measure the accuracy of the information provided in the texts. Such work is already well-undertaken by organizations such as the American Textbook Council. Rather, the purpose of this thesis is to note the *memory* of Vietnam that these texts construct, to assess the story we ask students to accept as true. Though a portion of my critique focuses on the differences in content between textbook and scholarship, I center my discussion on the *impact* to memory presented by the included or omitted content in the textbook. My purpose is not, then, to refute the ATC’s endorsement of these texts as legitimate teaching tools.

In terms of outline, this analysis’s basic structure is as follows. Firstly, I discuss each narrative frame as created and contextualized by the texts themselves, explaining how the instance of framing across the texts contributes to the public memory of the

Vietnam War. Following the discussion of each individual narrative theme, I draw a comparison between the viewpoints offered within the textbook narratives and conclusions found in scholarship discussing public memory and the Vietnam War. This additional perspective will provide insight regarding the ways that the textbook narratives echo and/or diverge from the consensus of rhetorical scholarship.

Finally, I conclude this chapter with the tangible details of this work's importance, the significant rhetorical answers arrived at through this analysis. I detail the contributions of such an analysis within rhetorical studies and the theories of public memory and narrative, noting the paths of research which may emerge following this work. Here, I pay additional attention to the larger consequences that this research has on our understanding of American culture, educational rhetoric, and the legacy of the Vietnam War.

### **Vietnam's Escalation and Johnson's Legacy—Agency and the Timeline of the War**

The first narrative theme found throughout the seven reviewed textbooks is that of Lyndon B. Johnson's near sole association with the Vietnam War's infamy. Ultimately, the branding of Vietnam as a stain on Johnson's record reassigns agency and accountability of the Vietnam War away from the warring culture of America, situating Johnson as the scapegoat in its place. This shifting of agency and accountability is accomplished through two primary means. Firstly, the texts discuss the Kennedy presidency's "Hollywood" symbolism in a way that diverts accountability for the Vietnam War away from Kennedy himself. Secondly, the texts use unique

characterizations and selective description to focus the blame steadily on Johnson, to frame him as the natural resting place for the Vietnam War's less than exceptional legacy.

Across the seven textbooks, a consistent narrative decision is made to mark John F. Kennedy's involvement in the Vietnam War as less consequential to both the timeline of Vietnam and to Kennedy's presidential legacy. While Kennedy is noted as being the instigative force behind Diem's assassination and the father of America's containment policy in Vietnam, textbook chapters are clear in noting Kennedy's Vietnam legacy compared with Johnson's. Even Kennedy's ordered assassination of Diem, an event that is described as a blunder, is often a story told in short paragraphs before moving on to Kennedy's own assassination. In this transitional writing, the latter man's assassination is made the focus without noting the consequence of Diem's own removal. These decisions wash away any perceived character flaws of the young President's through the focus on his assassination. The exacerbation of the Vietnam threat is tabled for Johnson to pick up later, as the focus moves to a fallen President and a grieving nation:

A sense of loss swept the nation in the wake of the assassination, heightened in part by Kennedy's youthful image and popularity. The Kennedy White House was the center of a glamorous "Camelot," where power, celebrity, and high fashion mixed.... Even though Camelot was a fantasy, the Kennedys' popularity was real — and proved that image mattered as much as reality in conducting the modern presidency. Kennedy took on an even more profound mystique after death.<sup>97</sup>

As noted here, the textbooks focus a great deal of attention to the representation of Kennedy's Presidency as a symbol of youth, hope, and energy for the country— characteristics which are unrecognizable in descriptions of Johnson's reign.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, as the narrative of the chapters move into Kennedy's death, these

---

<sup>97</sup> Rebecca Edwards, Eric Hinderaker, and James Henretta. *America's History: 10<sup>th</sup> Edition Bedford/St. Martins* (2021): 837

<sup>98</sup> David Emory Shi. *America: A Narrative History: Volume Two. Norton Education.* (2019): 1369

symbolic identifiers of his legacy overshadow any wrongdoings, miscalculations, or missteps on the part of the late president. Indeed, Kennedy's missteps are lost in the wake of his nation-shaking death. Errors including the botched assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Even when textbook sections note these errors, Vietnam is still referred to as Johnson's war, and questions concerning Kennedy's missteps in the conflict are washed away in the "what if" of his assassination.<sup>99</sup>

Additionally, Kennedy's legacy also benefits from the historical assumption that he would have soon ended the Vietnam War. In other words, the texts are sure to note that all signs pointed to Kennedy ending U.S. involvement in Vietnam—an alternate reality that is juxtaposed with the true timeline of the War after Kennedy's death.<sup>100</sup> As the reader is caught in the possibilities of "what if?" they are made aware of the reality of what *was*. Succinctly, the reality of history is not a youthful exit from Vietnam, but a long conflict spurred by Johnson's tired regime. As Kennedy's likely exit from Vietnam is contrasted against Johnson's War, so too is Johnson's ideal Great Society contrasted with the tumultuous results of his presidency and the many combustible elements that emerged from the 60's.

Secondly, the text situates the legacy of Vietnam by characterizing Johnson as deserving of blame opposite his predecessor. While Kennedy is youthful, personable, confident, well-spoken, and described as "wary" to overzealous military support, characterizations of Johnson lack such positive leadership traits.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, The texts are clear to note Johnson's lanky frame, hawkish nature, and manipulative tendencies that

---

<sup>99</sup> David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*. 1383

<sup>100</sup> David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*. 1367

<sup>101</sup> David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*. 1387

helped him rise through the political ranks.<sup>102</sup> In his ascent to power, Johnson is even described as a bully, prone to badgering friend, foe, and party member alike to meet his needs in congress.<sup>103</sup> Additional characterizations of Johnson note his perception as an “insecure man with a big ego,” (quoted by Kennedy himself) and as a leader who “gambled on a quick victory in Vietnam.”<sup>104</sup> Even comparatively kinder depictions of Johnson throughout the texts note a distinct difference in his public perception when compared to that of Kennedy.

..yet LBJ found it impossible to project his intelligence and vitality to large audiences. Unlike Kennedy, he wilted before the camera, turning his televised speeches into stilted and awkward performances. Trying to belie his reputation as a riverboat gambler, he came across like a foxy grandpa, clever, calculating, and not to be trusted. He lacked Kennedy’s wit and charm, and reporters delighted in describing the way he berated his aides or shocked the nation by baring his belly to show the scar from a recent operation.<sup>105</sup>

Such descriptions not only succeed in driving differentiation between the two presidents, but they also provide the reader with an easier target for the blame of Vietnam. Indeed, why should we view the presidential decisions of a bully with mercy? What considerations does the man who could not live up to Kennedy’s successes deserve? Perhaps most noteworthy of all among these identifiers are both Johnson’s considerable difference in age over Kennedy and his lack of foreign policy/foreign relations expertise. The focus on foreign policy, especially, is an area where Johnson is described as both incompetent as well as untested.<sup>106</sup> Along with those previously mentioned, these two signifiers paint the image of an old man clinging to an old

---

<sup>102</sup> Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation*. 968

<sup>103</sup> David Kennedy and Elizabeth Cohen. *The American Pageant Cengage Advantage*. (2015) 887.

<sup>104</sup> David Emory Shi, “America: A Narrative History” (2020) 1400; Edwards, Rebecca et al. 841

<sup>105</sup> Robert Divine., et al., *America: Past and Present*. Pearson Publishing. (2013). 719

<sup>106</sup> Alan Brinkley (2016). 723

conflict—unaware and unmoving in the face of a tumultuous decade and a changing generation.

The texts also work to frame the Vietnam War as being inseparable from President Johnson, and vice-versa. For instance, every text contains a subheading that refers to the escalation of troops by Johnson. Specifically addressed here is his commitment of 50,000 more American soldiers which resulted in the draft lottery. Such subheadings are often referred to as “Johnson Escalates the Vietnam War”, or, even as “Johnson's War”.<sup>107</sup> Within the paragraphs following this subheading, public school texts mark Johnson’s commitment of troops as the defining moment that began the Vietnam War, as this section is never more than a few paragraphs behind other subheadings which note “The Vietnam War Begins.”<sup>108</sup> By giving Johnson consistent credit for the beginning of the war, there is to be no mistake in public memory as to who should get the blame for any damage accrued by our conflict overseas.

Ultimately, the distinction of Johnson as being tied to Vietnam diverts the implications of the Vietnam War to Johnson rather than to the ideals of the nation. While America is seen as an enduring nation with respect to a discussion of the sixties, it is made clear that Johnson will forever be tied to Vietnam, and, furthermore, that the War defeated the president. Johnson’s ties to the Vietnam War are clearly demonstrated by subheadings such as “Vietnam Undermines Lyndon Johnson,” “Vietnam Topples

---

<sup>107</sup> John Faragher, *Out of Many: A Concise History of the American People*. Pentience Hall. (2016) 650; Divine, Robert A., et al. *America: Past and Present: 10<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Pearson (2013) 721.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Divine et al., *America: Past and Present*. 732; Kennedy, David M and Lizabeth Cohen. *The American Pageant*. 901; Shi, David Emory. *America: Past and Present*. 1414.

Johnson," or "Johnson's Legacy in Vietnam".<sup>109</sup> In the text of such sections, Johnson's efforts to escalate and continue the war are often the final commemorative nails in the coffin for Johnson's presidential legacy.

In addition to firmly situating the negative characteristics of the Vietnam War around Johnson's influence, the texts make little comparison of Vietnam to other conflicts that predated it. This both separates the Vietnam War from the record of U.S. history and isolates it from the story of American exceptionalism—banishing Johnson and "his" war alone on an island of infamy. Even as the Vietnam War is made to be a consequence of the Cold War and the red scare, the failures of Vietnam are made unique; a sporadic incident primarily spurred by one president in a chaotic term. Through this narrative choice, the authors acknowledge some of the consequences of Vietnam while also assigning their occurrence to a president who viewed the Vietnam War as a "test of his manliness".<sup>110</sup> Thus, the texts preserve the exceptional standing of the United States and the positive remembrance of John F. Kennedy by damning the public memory of Lyndon B. Johnson.

### **Kennedy and Johnson's Legacy in Scholarship**

While Vietnam is commonly referred to as "Johnson's War" in public and academic spheres, scholarship reveals a less certain history than the textbooks concerning Kennedy's less implicative Vietnam War legacy. Furthermore, scholars estimate that

---

there has been a “public determination” to preserve the regal legacy of Kennedy by situating the Vietnam War under the accountability of Johnson and Nixon.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, scholarship reveals a more recent to re-situate the legacy of the Vietnam War away from Kennedy, an effort which public school texts are apt to participate in.

Specifically, the early seventies saw a battle for the public perception and memory of Kennedy emerge amid the closing chapters of the Vietnam War. While some events such as the 1970 dedication of the national Kennedy memorial called for admiration in remembrance, others were less eager to paste the President’s charisma over his involvement in Berlin and Vietnam.<sup>112</sup> Questions of memory continued to emerge; was Kennedy’s charisma simple American charm, or the traits of a smiling charlatan advancing his political career? Was Kennedy truly the great successor for FDR that he was touted to be? Is Kennedy responsible for creating the chaotic Vietnam conflict that became Johnson’s inherited war? The answer to such questions from a public memory standpoint are crucial in determining the remembrance of Lyndon B. Johnson, as much of his legacy is said to hinge on his ability to follow Kennedy’s performance.<sup>113</sup>

Despite the initial panic concerning Kennedy’s legacy, the effect of time on the American memory has prompted gentle remembrances of his overall presidency and his relation to the Vietnam War. U.S. film and television, for example, has been instrumental in recreating and maintaining an image of Kennedy as a bright spot in American leadership that was snuffed out too soon. Gregory Frame found the television series *The*

---

<sup>111</sup> John Murphy, "Crafting the Kennedy legacy." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2000): 579, Project Muse.

<sup>112</sup> Kent Beck, "The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* (1974): 46, JSTOR.

<sup>113</sup> Kent Beck, "The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam,"49.



*Kennedys* and the film *Thirteen Days* as creating specific imagery such as that of a “noble king cut down by evil forces” and of “a presidential utopia” whose end brought the U.S. to a dangerous, downward spiral.<sup>114</sup> These examples utilize a utopian version of Kennedy’s reign to further pull Vietnam away from JFK, emphasizing the assumption that the president had planned to move military forces out of Vietnam before his untimely death. Additionally, Frame theorizes that the recent efforts to steer a remembrance of Kennedy towards away from Vietnam stems from the American desire to long for the simpler times presented by Kennedy’s early campaign. Such memorialization longs for a more “certain” U.S that had not seen the Vietnam War or recent political divides.<sup>115</sup> Through this selective remembrance, U.S. citizens can associate easier, brighter days with the youthful image of Kennedy. As we mourn these less controversial times, we saddle Johnson with the divisive periods occurring in the days since JFK’s assassination.

Though Johnson is remembered less fondly than Kennedy, some have argued for a gentler remembrance of the 36<sup>th</sup> U.S. President.<sup>116</sup> Such interpretations encourage further emphasis on the scope of Kennedy and Eisenhower’s involvements in shaping the situation in Vietnam before it arrived on Johnson’s newly elected shoulders.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, other historians have argued for the more specific inclusion of Johnson’s attempts at the Great Society, and his efforts to combat poverty as a consequential piece of his presidential legacy aside from the controversy of the Vietnam War. Views such as

---

<sup>114</sup> Gregory Frame, "The Myth of John F. Kennedy in Film and Television," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 46, no. 2 (2016): 25, Project Muse.

<sup>115</sup> Gregory Frame, "The myth of John F. Kennedy in Film and Television." 25

<sup>116</sup> George Herring, "Lyndon Johnson's War?" *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 4 (1997): 647, JSTOR

<sup>117</sup> Edward Cuddy, "Vietnam: Mr. Johnson's War—Or Mr. Eisenhower's?" *The Review of politics* 65, no. 4 (2003): 351-374.

this argue that it was Johnson's worry about preserving the morale of his great society that drove his escalation, as economic strides could not afford a loss overseas.<sup>118</sup> Despite these perspectives, the name of Lyndon B. Johnson and a discussion of the Vietnam War are never far removed from one another, and, more so than any other president, Johnson's legacy bears the weight of his inability to avoid or win the Vietnam War.<sup>119</sup>

While scholarship differs from the texts in partial assignment of Vietnam's legacy to Kennedy, Johnson cannot escape his association with the conflict. Rather, the textbooks seem to emphasize and exaggerate an existing facet of public memory concerning the two presidents. In centering the "Hollywood" aesthetic of Kennedy's Presidency as a more central part of JFK's story, the texts preserve an exceptional legacy of a leader whose "we choose to go to the moon" speech often contributes to sentiments of an exceptional country.<sup>120</sup> Just as the textbook narratives are quick to elucidate stark differences between Johnson and Kennedy, scholarship confers the story of presidential successor who was unable to maintain the allure of "Camelot".<sup>121</sup> Indeed, Johnson's lack of grace, youth and energy seemed damning images to U.S citizens; a confirmation that the older, paler face on their television screens would not be the one to carry on Kennedy's presidential precedents.

---

<sup>118</sup> George Herring, "Lyndon Johnson's War?" 647; Norman J. Glickman, Laurence E. Lynn Jr, and Robert H. Wilson. "Fifty Years Later: Legacies and Lessons of LBJ's Domestic Policies." In *LBJ's Neglected Legacy*, 430. University of Texas Press, 2021. *Lyndon Johnson Reshaped Domestic Policy and Government* edited by Robert H. Wilson, Norman J. Glickman and Laurence E. Lynn, 427-450. New York, USA: University of Texas Press. (2021)

<sup>119</sup> Fredrik Longeval, *Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam*. Routledge, 2017.110

<sup>120</sup> Nikki Wells, "American Exceptionalism Throughout United States History." (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2014) 40, Baylor.edu.

<sup>121</sup> Kent Beck, "The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* (1974): 50, JSTOR.

### **“Turbulence” and Turmoil. Vietnam as a Symptom of a Decade.**

The second narrative theme found within the texts was that the Vietnam War is framed within the context of the 1960's, not as a standalone event of consequence. I found that the textbooks engage in a labeling of certain chapters which undermines the Vietnam War's impact and preserves American exceptionalism. Specifically, the Vietnam War is never named outright in chapter titles. Rather, chapters concerning Vietnam center their focus on describing the decade or contextualizing political shifts that occurred within that decade. This means that as students scan the contents of textbook glossaries, the modern American story moves from the U.S emergence in the Great War and WWII to the tension-filled victory of the Cold War. From this point, though, the U.S simply stumbles over a brief period of turmoil before arriving safely in the advanced American ages of Reagan, Clinton, and modern technology. I argue that the texts' notation of Vietnam-related chapters in reference to the turbulent, tumultuous, or stormy sixties creates and sustains a narrative wherein the Vietnam War is not consequential to the American story in itself. Rather, according to the texts, we should refer to Vietnam only in reference to the decade of change in which it occurred, interpreting the war as a symptom of the 60s. Such a decision allows the open discussion of the Vietnam War's challenges while using the frame of the 60's to explain the war's occurrence and highlight other events which more sufficiently resemble American exceptionalism.

Ultimately, I argue that this framing cultivates a specific memory of the Vietnam War in two ways. Firstly, the dissonance between the naming of Vietnam-related chapters and other war-centered chapters situates Vietnam as a less important conflict in recent

U.S. history. Secondly, through the inclusion of multiple milestone events within the chapter that intersects with a discussion of Vietnam, the war is framed as the side effect of a particularly chaotic decade in U.S. history.

The texts engage in a naming of Vietnam-related chapters that is distinctly different from the naming of other war-related sections. For example, World War II is noted in chapter titles such as “The Second World War at home and abroad,” “America in a World at War,” and “The World at War: 1937-1945.”<sup>122</sup> Additionally, the Cold War is named just as explicitly as WWII within chapter titles, its content often spanning multiple chapters. Such titles highlight the “onset” or “dawn” of the Cold War, or they simply note “The Cold War” as the marker for the chapter’s discussion.<sup>123</sup> Additional chapter headings mentioning the Cold War often include an emotion or event to be associated with the war. Such titles include “The Cold War and American Globalism” and “The Cold War and the Fair Deal.”<sup>124</sup> Along with assigning greater importance to other U.S. conflicts, the lack of chaptered focus of the Vietnam War ultimately provides less page space to focus on the conflict itself-- the chapters span the entirety of the 60s and beyond.

Through an understanding of history and narrative, the naming of chapter titles is not a matter of inconsequence. If a student, for example, scans their textbook to find that America was involved in the Great War, the Second World War, and the Cold War to arrive at the sixties or at the birth of the conservative revolution, the attention is surely moved away from Vietnam. In this story, there is no great American “loss” to address,

---

<sup>122</sup> Mary Beth Norton et al. *A People and a Nation: 10<sup>th</sup> Edition*. 720

<sup>123</sup> Alan Brinkley et al., *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of The American People*. 653.

<sup>124</sup> Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: 10<sup>th</sup> Edition* 803; Shi, David Emory. *America: A Narrative History*. 1278

there is no need to discuss the questioning of country principles. Therefore, Vietnam is a page, not a chapter in the American story, and this distinction decreases the likelihood that it will be remembered as a consequential event. Through the organization of these texts, it is more likely that student's will discover our involvement overseas in the 60's through rather than to plainly view the war within the larger framework of American history.

Additionally, the titles of larger sections within textbooks construct a view of the U.S that clashes with the controversial legacy of Vietnam. For instance, within *The American Pageant*, the Vietnam-centered chapter "The Stormy Sixties" is found in Part 8: "Making an American Superpower: 1945-1980."<sup>125</sup> Similarly, other overarching sections are titled "The American Age", and "The Modern State and the Age of Liberalism."<sup>126</sup> Framed within these parts, and placed alongside chapters titled "The American Zenith," the naming of Vietnam itself within chapter titles becomes an even more consequential decision.<sup>127</sup> After all, a direct naming of the Vietnam War alongside depictions of a definitive age would require one to explain why the war was definitive. Acknowledging the rhetorical memory-constructing power that lies in the naming/describing of events, I argue that the construction of textbook sections, chapter titles, and chapter focal points further construct a memory of Vietnam as a less consequential event in the span of American history.

Indeed, rather than the chapters beginning with an overview of Vietnam or of the growing tensions in Indochina leading to Johnson's escalation, the topics of discussion

---

<sup>125</sup> David Kennedy, and Lizabeth Cohen. *The American Pageant*.821.

<sup>126</sup> Rebecca Edwards et al. 791; Shi, David Emory. *America: A Narrative History*. 1271.

<sup>127</sup> David Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen. *The American Pageant*. 864.

range from the growing civil rights movement, to lingering fears of the Cold War, and the emergence of Folk music in American culture. The impact of these topics bleeding into one another is that Vietnam is viewed as a contributing factor to a chaotic decade rather than the event leading a culture shift or defining a decade. Where most chapters begin with the election of Kennedy and end with the elections of Nixon or Reagan, the Vietnam War is left situated between administrations, between decades, and sits intermingled with other events of importance. In these texts, Vietnam remains a waypoint in American public memory, a contributing factor to a decade more widely remembered than the war contained within it.

What, then, *are* the focal points of the chapters offered? Where rests the spotlight that might otherwise dawn on Vietnam? I did not find an answer that stood blatantly across all texts, but, rather, different texts succeeded in finding unique focal points to center consequence away from the war. For example, *America's History* centers its Vietnam-related chapter around political tensions within the U.S. This choice is made evident not only by the chapter title “Liberal Crisis and Conservative Rebirth,” but also through the concluding sentences of the chapter’s opening paragraphs.

The years from President John Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961 to President Richard Nixon’s landslide reelection in 1972 proved one of the most complicated, and combustible, eras in American history. From left to center to right, the entire political spectrum hummed with action and conflict. There were thousands of marches and demonstrations; massive new federal programs aimed at achieving civil rights, ending poverty, and extending the welfare state; new voices demanding to be heard; and heated rhetoric on all sides. Political assassinations and violence, both overseas and at home, heightened the volatile mood. The liberal triumphs of the mid-1960s soon gave way to a profound crisis and the resurgence of conservatism.<sup>128</sup>

Of note in this concluding paragraph is the lack of the words “Vietnam” or “War.” In fact, in the introductory paragraphs, the sole mention of Vietnam concerns only the U.S.

---

<sup>128</sup> Rebecca Edwards et al., *America's History*. 824.

presence in the country. The passage above mentions conflict, but not *a specific* conflict. Moreover, the text references violence overseas, but it fails to mention those who *suffered* due to the violence. Such a paragraph placed squarely at the end of the chapter not only provides an overarching summary of the events covered within its pages but also contextualizes consequential occurrences within the decade. Ultimately, the texts *imply* rather than *explicate* the Vietnam War and its consequences through selective framing.

In addition to *what* is discussed, the chronology of a topic's discussion in reference to others is also salient to memory construction. For example, in *A People and a Nation*, the chapter begins with a discussion on the ability of John F. Kennedy's winning smile and youthful energy to calm Cold War tensions. Such discussions go on for 13 pages before Vietnam is mentioned as a source of tension, its entrance undercut by the Kennedy-heavy focus.<sup>129</sup> Thus, Vietnam is often either discussed vaguely in the introductory paragraphs of the chapter or delayed in its introduction and explication.<sup>130</sup> On both occasions, Vietnam is not the primary event of the decade, but it is made important through the reference to other events.

By etching the focus of the chapters more squarely into visions of Kennedy, Johnson, and the civil rights movements, the texts move focus *away* from Vietnam at the same time. Additionally, by shifting concentration away from the Vietnam War, the sixties can be understood as a generally positive chaotic force rather than a negative one. In other words, if the 1960s were a less traditional collection of U.S. years filled with inner turmoil, then the decade at least brought us to a better place socially than before.

---

<sup>129</sup> Mary Beth Norton et al. *A People and a Nation*. 872-891

<sup>130</sup> Rebecca Edwards et al., *America's History: 10<sup>th</sup> Edition*. 824

With the Vietnam War left out of the center light, the image of America righting its ship after an unprecedented (yet productive) decade is an easier memory to facilitate.

### **Vietnam and the American Story—Scholarly Perspectives**

As previously discussed, the discussion of the U.S. as an exceptional nation and a shining city on a hill owes a portion of its roots to a specific reading of American history.<sup>131</sup> In addressing scholarly perspectives of the Vietnam War and the turbulent sixties, an important question to consider is “What role does the *organization* of history, and the labeling of decades/periods have on the creation of specific public memories?” Simply put, the answer to both questions is that these decisions work to instruct the reader as to the correct version of history and the accurate characteristics that are to be ascribed to their nation. In this section, I offer a short overview of the consequences of textbook agency in public memory construction, as well as a contextual discussion about the labeling of historical decades and its consequence to the U.S 1960s.

Despite labels of authority and objectivity that textbooks often receive, it is important to note the agency of textbook authors in telling the story. Namely, variances exist in the organizing of events, as well as the way in which and authors *voice* is constituted to tell the story. The textbooks are not constructed as a bare collection of facts and figures, but they have the agency and potential to construct collective memory in the delivery of their narratives.<sup>132</sup> For instance, two textbooks may each discuss America’s

---

<sup>131</sup> Peter Onuf, “American Exceptionalism and National Identity.”

<sup>132</sup> Sirkka Ahonen,, "The Construction and Deconstruction of National Myths:A Study of the Transformation of Finnish History Textbook Narratives After World War II." *European Politics and Society* 21, no. 3 (2020): 347.tandfonline



deep struggle with slavery, the implications of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Reconstruction. However, as prior textbook analyses have noted, texts may diverge in both the sequencing and emphasis on certain events. Some authors only generally discuss the inhumane treatment of enslaved people, and others discuss slavery solely within the Civil War era, ignoring its history and occurrence during the U.S. colonial period.<sup>133</sup> The implications of such narrative decisions are important to note here, as readers may only understand the painful history of slavery through reference to the period in which it ended. The degree to which stories of U.S. slavery conjures an understanding of enslaved people as being well cared for by white owners cannot be taken lightly in reference to our collective memory, just as the degree to which the Vietnam War was a chaotic conflict brought on by the circumstance of a decade constitutes further implications for our national memory.<sup>134</sup>

Textbooks also exercise agency in narrative construction through specific chapter titling, furthering the U.S tradition of decade labeling. Indeed, Fred Davis has noted that the U.S has a particular fixation with the labeling of decades to suit narrative needs. Through labeling, a collection of U.S. years can be better formatted to constitute more positive or negative meaning for certain political figures or for the country.<sup>135</sup> Such an assertion is especially pertinent in reference to the Vietnam War, as events are subject to the influence of labeling just as figures of history are. If the sixties are not known as war-

---

<sup>133</sup> Peter Kolchin, "Slavery in United States Survey Textbooks." *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998): 1428, JSTOR.

<sup>134</sup> Dan Fleming, "A Review of Slave Life in Fourteen United States History Textbooks." *The Journal of Negro Education* 56, no. 4 (1987): 554, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2295352>.

<sup>135</sup> Fred Davis, "Decade labeling: The play of Collective Memory and Narrative Plot." *Symbolic Interaction* 7, no. 1 (1984): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1984.7.1.15>.

laden years but as a time of turbulence, change and turmoil, U.S citizens can still salvage positive emotions from the embers of the decade. Republican presidents in the decades following the 60s have also been said to engage in this work, using the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr and the civil rights movement to overshadow Vietnam. Furthermore, figures like Reagan have largely been able to connote two separate versions of the decade, one dark period overseen by liberals, and one of positive change overseen by republican leadership.<sup>136</sup> Ultimately, the textbook decisions to label Vietnam-related chapters with anything other than the Vietnam War itself establishes a similar effort of meaning construction, one that more positively reflects an enduring nation in the overall story of the U.S presented in the texts.

### **No Space for Suffering: The Absence of Lasting Consequences and the “Vietnam Syndrome”**

Within the Vietnam-centered chapters of the textbook, the texts *do* engage in a discussion of the Vietnam War’s implications, though very little of it centers on those related to American soldiers or the lasting effects of the War. Indeed, where the lasting impacts, personal consequences, and legacy of the Vietnam War are concerned, texts either minimize or omit the Vietnam syndrome and the accounts of soldiers out of the story. Additionally, the offered narratives leave much of the suffering of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians similarly silenced. This instance of narrative framing works in

---

<sup>136</sup> Charles Griffin, "Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2011): 434, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23884855>.

tandem with earlier narrative efforts to constitute Vietnam as an inconsequential conflict, relegating any consequences as temporary burdens only endured by U.S. Citizens. Specifically, I argue that efforts to omit details concerning accounts of American POW's, the suffering of the Vietnamese, and the enduring presence of the Vietnam syndrome constitutes a memory of the Vietnam War as a long-since settled matter. Such a memory frames the lessons of the Vietnam War as those we have already learned, and the sins of the war as those we have already repented of. Thus, the U.S. narrative retains exceptionalism through the knowledge that we have, morally and militarily, moved on from Vietnam.

Firstly, the mention of American POWs in Vietnam is either shortly described or left entirely out of the story of Vietnam. While overall casualties of the war itself, (both American and Vietnamese) are made mention of in concluding paragraphs as a cumulative summary of a section/chapter, these details often omit a discussion of those Americans who were left imprisoned overseas during the war. This exclusion or lessening of detail with respect to American POWs in Vietnam is impactful due to the amount of scholarship concerning the national response to these imprisoned soldiers. Specifically, Michael J. Allen and others have written extensively of the national outcry concerning the over 1500 U.S. soldiers still declared missing in action in Vietnam.<sup>137</sup> Questions concerning not only the extensiveness of the U.S military's search for the fallen soldiers, but also surrounding the reason for U.S involvement in Vietnam

---

<sup>137</sup> Charles Kartman, "POW/MIA Accounting Efforts in Asia," US Department of State Dispatch 9, no. No. 6 - July 1998 (1998): 18-22

contribute to a conceptualization of the conflict as yet “unending”.<sup>138</sup> Not only is the national outcry of U.S. POW’s absent from textbook narratives, so too are the numbers and details concerning the experience of said POW’s. Such details of suffering include U.S. POWs in Vietnam being held in their captivity at an average length of five years, with some being held for seven. In their captivity, they were also subject to physical torture, solitary confinement, harsh interrogation, starvation, and the feeling of hopelessness present in every POW experience.<sup>139</sup>

Additionally, soldiers are characterized as unprepared and underdisciplined in their youth more so than they are pictured as victims of war. Texts quickly note the average age of soldiers drafted to war, as well as the confusing terrain that greeted the soldiers in Vietnam:

Infantrymen on maneuvers carried heavy rucksacks into this jungle growth, where every step was precarious. Booby traps and land mines were a constant threat, insects swarmed, and leeches sucked at weary bodies, Boots and human skin rotted from the rains, which alternated with withering suns.<sup>140</sup>

This *America’s History* passage comes from a section titled “American Soldiers in Vietnam,” in which some of the most outright effort among the seven textbooks is made to directly discuss the plight of soldiers within the war. Even still, the section of a few paragraphs stands alone in veteran representation, with further discussion on the suffering of soldiers tabled until the conclusion of the chapter and the description of the Vietnam War’s body count. Such representations, and the lack of a more cohesive incorporation of

---

<sup>138</sup> Michael Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2009.

<sup>139</sup> Edna Hunter, "The Vietnam Prisoner of War Experience." In *International handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes*, pp. 297-303. Springer, Boston, MA, 1993, Springer; Ursine, Robert J., and James R. Rondell. "The Prisoner of War." *War psychiatry. Falls Church, Virginia: Office of the Surgeon General Army* (1995): 431-55, JSTOR.

<sup>140</sup> Mary Beth Norton et al., *America’s History*. 895

veteran accounts throughout chapters, remove agency and importance from those that served in the war.

Additionally, in-text discussions noting the difficulties of the Vietnam often do not refer to the struggles of soldiers on the ground, but the obstacles that faced U.S military operations:

American bombing of the North proved ineffective. The rural, undeveloped nature of the North Vietnamese economy meant there were few industrial targets; a political refusal to bomb the main port of Haiphong allowed Soviet and Chinese arms to flow freely into the country. Nor were the efforts to destroy supply lines any more successful.<sup>141</sup>

Such descriptions of the Vietnam War's difficulty are common throughout the texts, involving discussions of the difficult terrain, the craftiness of the Vietcong, and the draining of U.S. resolve. By situating the Vietnam War as tactically and militarily difficult, the war is more justified in being confronted as a loss. Additionally, the greater focus on the struggles that the military faced rather than the individual burdens of soldiers constitute the war as less personal to the American reader. Within this framing, we understand the war as a rare instance of bad tactics that arose while facing a unique fighting force.

Perhaps the most direct example of the texts confronting the individual challenges of soldiers is found in *Out of Many* near the end of a section titled "Teenage Soldiers":

...despite their superior arms and air power, soldiers found themselves stumbling into booby traps as they chased an elusive guerrilla foe. They could never be sure who was friend and who was foe... Vietnam veterans returned to civilian life quietly and without fanfare. Tens of thousands suffered debilitating physical injuries. As many as 40% of the 8.6 million who served came back with drug dependencies or symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Robert Divine et al., *America: Past and Present*.726

<sup>142</sup> John Faragher et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People*,.656

I cite this passage in the service of clarity and accuracy. In discussing the “omission” of a soldier's account, I do not posit a wholesale omission of these details. Rather, the texts engage in an omission of *emphasis*, or the minimization of included events. Even as the texts note experiences of loss, pain, grief, confusion, and displacement concerning soldiers, the details are delineated in a paragraph or two before broader conversations on the tumultuous sixties are resumed. Plainly, the texts are consistent in discussing Kennedy's Hollywood-caliber presidency in detail. Their contrasting inconsistency to explicate the specifics of POW and Veteran suffering paints a clear picture of the preferred, more convenient Vietnam War memory offered by the text.

While the Vietnam veteran receives sparse focus within these texts, even less narrative focus is paid to Vietnamese soldiers, and civilians. More specifically, the way in which these parties suffered causality by American actions is either minimized or omitted within any discussion of Vietnam's implications. To best discuss this lack of Vietnamese suffering the narrative of Vietnam, I focus on the discussion of two historical topics—the Massacre of My Lai and the U.S. deployment of agent orange in Vietnam.

Firstly, the textbook discussions on the Massacre of My Lai engage in an omission of detail, or an omission of the tragedy all together. On March 16, 1968, the U.S. Military's Charlie company set upon a My Lai with rumored intelligence of Vietcong soldiers hiding in the small village. Even after realizing that My Lai contained mostly women, children, and old men, the American troops continued their decided course of action: “Kill anything that moved.” The soldiers seemed to follow this order to the letter, disposing of unarmed men, women, and children alike; shooting them in street, kicking them to death in open fields, and rounding them up in mass graves to be shot to

pieces.<sup>143</sup> Through the course of the day's events, it is estimated that 300-500 Vietnamese citizens (mostly the elderly, women, and children) were killed by U.S soldiers in My Lai.

144

In instances where My Lai *is* discussed, the texts demonstrate an omission of emphasis as to the scale and details of the carnage. *America: Past and Present*, specifically, under-estimates the number of civilians killed during the massacre, citing 200 rather than the estimated 300-500. This text, along with *America: A Narrative History* also broadly constitutes the victims as “civilians”, omitting the fact that the victims of the massacre were largely women, children, and the elderly.<sup>145</sup> Even in *Out of Many*, which confronts the more brutal details of My Lai, offers only a short paragraph in its description, in which Lt. William L. Calley (one of the commanding officers leading the charge of My Lai) is court marshalled. Both the use of a single paragraph or less to explain My Lai, as well as the story's end coinciding with Calley's sentencing are details consistent across the textbooks. This minimization of detail diminishes the impact of My-Lai, effectively negotiating the scope of impact that the days events should have on U.S. exceptionalism. After all, even exceptional nations are prone to individual mistakes, and the broad description of slain “civilians” is a much more convenient mistake to confront or omit than the slaughter of women and children.

In addition to the minimization of detail, the text's particular telling of William Calley's sentencing also constitutes a more forgiving U.S. memory. More specifically, I

---

<sup>143</sup> Christopher Levesque, “The Truth Behind My Lai.” *The New York Times*. 2018  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/opinion/the-truth-behind-my-lai.html>

<sup>144</sup> Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*. Manchester University Press, 2006.

<sup>145</sup> Robert Divine et al. (2013) 726; Shi, David E. (2019) 1461

note that William Calley's initial sentence of life at hard labor was later reduced to 3 years of house arrest, despite the common narrative that Calley's sentencing was an open and closed case.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, among the texts, *America: A Narrative History* is the only source which mentions Calley's reduced sentence.<sup>147</sup> The effect of this detail is crucial to retrieving some form of U.S. redemption from the story of My Lai, as its inclusion may prompt a student to ask why the bloodshed of hundreds of on-combatant elderly, women, and children was quietly met with a slap on the wrist.<sup>148</sup> Without such a detail though, the narrative of My Lai tells the student that at least some measure of justice was met. Even in a massacre, exceptionalism is still afforded a means of existence through various strategies of omission in the texts.

As a final item in the discussion on My Lai, I find it especially important to note that some of the texts observe in a complete omission of the massacre itself. Specifically, *A People and a Nation* and *The Unfinished Nation* cite no record of the slain citizens or the mass graves in My Lai. Through this omission, the image of the U.S. as a faulted savior in the Vietnam War rather than an invading aggressor is preserved. Without My Lai and the harrowing images it evokes, the commonly told stories of U.S. soldiers as an ever-righteous force are uncontested conclusions easily reached by students.

Just as the texts selectively tell the tragedy of My Lai, they also engage in a further minimization of agent orange and chemical deployment in the Vietnam War. While some texts do note the deployment of agent orange, that "the U.S.... conducted the

---

<sup>146</sup> Peter Range, "Only One Man Was Charged for the Massacre of My Lai: This Is What it Was Like to Cover His Trial." *Time Magazine*. 2018. <https://time.com/5202268/calley-trial-my-lai-massacre/>

<sup>147</sup> David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*. 1461

<sup>148</sup> Tim O' Brien, *The Vietnam in Me*. New York Times, 1994.



most destructive chemical warfare in history,” there is less discussion as to *why* these chemicals were destructive and how they affected those who were exposed.<sup>149</sup> More specially, agent orange and the other “rainbow herbicides” were a clustering of chemicals meant to defoliate the jungle, damage enemy covering, and destroy the crops of the North Vietnamese troops. This chemical effort ultimately deployed “seven pounds of herbicide for every man, woman, and child in Vietnam.”<sup>150</sup> Though the original intent of agent orange was cutting off the food supply of Vietcong soldiers, the sprays more often affected the crops of small villages and Vietcong-neighboring towns. Even when the Vietcong felt the effects of the rainbow herbicides on their food supply, the most common result was raiding of South Vietnamese Citizens’ crops and food storage.<sup>151</sup> In short, the chemicals did more initial damage to those the U.S. were trying to aid than the soldiers that were the target of the attack, and indiscriminate lasting damage to all parties under the toxic umbrella of agent orange.<sup>152</sup>

In the years since Vietnam, the deployment of agent orange continues to demonstrate drastic health effects for the people of Vietnam. The links between agent orange and birth defects have been as horrifying as they are plentiful in the research of recent years, as cases of spinal malformation, heart defects, intellectual disabilities and other diseases have consistently been linked to generations of Vietnamese children birthed since the War.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>149</sup> John Faragher, “Out of Many: *A History of The American People. Penitence Hall*, 652

<sup>150</sup> Patricia Hynes, “The Legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam,” *Peace Review* 28, no. 1 (2016): 117, Taylor and Francis Online.

<sup>151</sup> Patricia Hynes, “The Legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam,” 119

<sup>152</sup> Patricia Hynes, “The Legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam,” 120.

<sup>153</sup> Black, George. “The Victims of Agent Orange the US Has Never Acknowledged.” *The New York Times* (2021); Nham Tuyet, Le Thi, and Annika Johansson. “Impact of chemical warfare with agent orange on women’s

In addition to the lack of substance and emphasis concerning both countries' accounts of suffering due to the war there is also little to no discussion of the lasting Vietnam syndrome within textbooks. In rhetorical scholarship, the Vietnam syndrome is noted as the lingering feeling of defeat and uncertainty surrounding the American people in the decades after the war. The syndrome began to affect U.S. morale and standards for American military engagement during the Nixon presidency and continues to influence cultural and foreign policy decisions today.<sup>154</sup> Within textbook narratives, the story of Vietnam usually ends with one of three events: 1) Johnson's departure, 2) the election of Reagan, 3) the discovery of the Pentagon Papers. Therefore, no discussion of the *after* of Vietnam is present. These events work to transition the timeline of U.S. history from the confusion and turmoil of the 60s to a discussion on how Nixon and Reagan's conservative "response" lead the country forward.<sup>155</sup> In this rush to conservative revolution, there is no time to wait on the soldier, there is no room to describe the consequences of Vietnam.

Consequently, a naming of the Vietnam syndrome is found in only two occasions throughout the textbooks, each only a brief reference to American life after the Vietnam War. In *A People and a Nation*, for example, the Vietnam Syndrome is used to provide an overall summary of the 60s and the Vietnam War.<sup>156</sup> The mention here states that the nation felt unsure of its next step and that a heavy cloud of American doubt hung over the

---

reproductive lives in Vietnam: a pilot study." *Reproductive health matters* 9, no. 18 (2001): 158, Taylor and Francis Online

<sup>154</sup> Andrew Priest "From Saigon to Baghdad: The Vietnam Syndrome, the Iraq War and American Foreign Policy." *Intelligence and National Security* 24, no. 1 (2009): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520902757018>.

<sup>155</sup> Robert Divine, *America, Past and Present*. 736.; Norton et al., *A People and a Nation*. 905; Brinkley, Alan. *Unfinished Nation*. 733

<sup>156</sup> Mary Beth Norton et al., *America's History: 10<sup>th</sup> Edition*. 919.

country after Vietnam. Contrarily, another mention in *America's History* is occurs a few chapters removed from a discussion of Vietnam and the sixties.<sup>157</sup> In this instance, President George H.W. Bush. is quoted for his hope that the country had finally “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” Even still, no explanation of what the term Vietnam syndrome entails is offered alongside this quote, and there is no focus on what the syndrome or its apparent end meant for the American people. Rather, the focus is on the U. S’s likelihood that it would move on from the war and the previous decades.

Ultimately, these narrative decisions concerning Vietnam’s legacy of suffering more fully allow the reader to confront partial realities of the war without dwelling on its lasting impact. If the Vietnam War caused U.S. soldiers moments of shock, confusion, and grief only as they struggled through unfamiliar terrain, then students can understand Vietnam as another instance of the general hardship of war. Students are not asked to widely consider the questions of veterans, the reason for their service, or the degree of honor attached to their enlistment.<sup>158</sup> Consequently, students are not tasked with an in-depth consideration of My Lai, the brutality visited upon its citizens, or the lasting consequences of agent orange. Such omissions of consideration increase the likelihood that students will deem the Vietnam War as a unique conflict, but one that we nonetheless moved on from. Thus, they will deem its impact as short lived, and easily flip to the next chapter in their text.

Though the texts exercise due diligence in confronting some realities of the Vietnam War, they still salvage a notion of American exceptionalism by deciding the

---

<sup>157</sup> Rebecca Edwards et al., *America 's History, 10th Edition*. 917

<sup>158</sup> Robin Wagner-Pacifici, and Barry Schwartz. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past." *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 2 (1991): 379, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2781381>.

*length and significance of the American misstep represented by the conflict. The framing of the war's suffering and impact here constitutes the consequences of the conflict as only reaching to the corners of the mid-70's. If the effects of the Vietnam War have not reached past a wholly tumultuous decade, the conflict stands to be remembered as an American anomaly among an exceptional history. The texts ensure that the commonly told American story of victory and resilience resumes properly after Reagan's election and the rise of a new conservatism.<sup>159</sup> Thus, students will gather that lessons of Vietnam have already been learned, the impact already felt, and the aftershocks far from American feeling today.*

### **Scholarship and The Vietnam Syndrome**

In discussing a divide between textbook narratives concerning Vietnam's legacy of suffering and public memory scholarship, I note the lasting existence of the Vietnam syndrome as the most glaring exemption of scholarly contributions within the textbook narratives. The texts' lack of detail in presenting the consequences of the Vietnam War's *after* contribute to the memory of Vietnam as a war without notable impact, a decision aided by the exclusion of the Vietnam syndrome

In terms of inception, Herzog notes that the Vietnam syndrome owes its inception to John Wayne and conceptions of American certainty in warfare. Initially, the pre-Vietnam John Wayne syndrome (the notion that traditional masculinity and trust in the American military would guide young men through war) ensnared the heart of many

---

<sup>159</sup> Robert Divine, *America: Past and Present*. 736

young men who were either drafted or self-enlisted to the conflict.<sup>160</sup> Through the smiling visage and unquestioned fortitude of John Wayne as seen in the film *The Green Berets* the fighting men of America were made ready to fight a war with a clear right and a clear wrong.<sup>161</sup> After the war, then, the Vietnam syndrome began to sink its teeth into the country's morale, afflicting citizens and soldiers with the reality of a war that was far from ideal. To suffer from the Vietnam syndrome, as George Herring has said, was to be aware of an unfamiliar sense of military and ideological impotence that had befallen America after the Vietnam War. Furthermore, Herring notes that the efforts of President Ronald Reagan and then-Secretary of State Alexander C. Haig Jr to reconceptualize the Vietnam War as a "noble" conflict caused lasting ripples in American foreign policy. Ultimately, these efforts sparked a still-ongoing debate between the duty of the U.S. to engage in the affairs of smaller countries.<sup>162</sup>

More specifically, the Reagan administration's belief that the loss in Vietnam was a self-inflicted injury encouraged a new generation of aggressive U.S. Military belief. After all, if the wounds inflicted to the American psyche in Vietnam were due to the military being stopped short of success, then the answer was to run *toward* trust in the government's military engagements, not away from such country-tied faith.<sup>163</sup> Despite Reagan's tactical narrative of a country held back by pacifist constraints, the lingering

---

<sup>160</sup> Tobey Herzog, "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness: The American Soldier in Vietnam," *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War* (1988): 16, books.google.com.

<sup>161</sup> Tobey Herzog, "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness: The American Soldier in Vietnam," 19.

<sup>162</sup> George Herring, "The 'Vietnam Syndrome' and American Foreign Policy." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 57, no. 4 (1981): 594-612, JSTOR.

<sup>163</sup> George Herring, "The 'Vietnam Syndrome' and American Foreign Policy." 612.

hurt of Vietnam remains.<sup>164</sup> One such example is especially pertinent in terms of textbooks themselves, where Brian Reid has discussed the impact of the Vietnam syndrome. Ultimately, Reid concludes that the American inability to cope with the loss in Vietnam works retroactively in terms of southerners writing perspectives of the Civil War.<sup>165</sup> The narrative of loss due to self-inflicted injury, then holds relevance for both southerners seeking solace from a centuries-old war as well as Americans still reckoning with their loss to a considerably smaller country in Vietnam.<sup>166</sup>

Despite past proclamations that we have kicked the disease, growing tendencies to label conflicts like the Iraq War as another Vietnam argue that the Vietnam syndrome is still very much alive. Iraq is often branded with the same emotional core and potential for foreign policy implications that Vietnam had, the same uncertainty in motivations and the same theme of U.S. intervention gone too far and for too long a period.<sup>167</sup> Overall, the Vietnam syndrome remains present in the decisions we make before engaging in conflict, and the fear of U.S citizens in our ability to win the potential war after a decision is made.<sup>168</sup> Though no conflict is without consequence, Vietnam altered the landscape of U.S. military support, allowing a sense of disillusionment with war to enter the American consciousness for the first time in the nation's modern history.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>164</sup> Charlotte Cahill, *Fighting the Vietnam syndrome: The Construction of a Conservative Veteran's Politics, 1966–1984*. Northwestern University, 2008.

<sup>165</sup> Brian Holden Reid, "The Influence of the Vietnam Syndrome on the Writing of Civil War History," *The RUSI Journal* 147, no. 1 (2002): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840208446740>.

<sup>166</sup> Brian Holden Reid, "The Influence of the Vietnam Syndrome on the Writing of Civil War History," 47.

<sup>167</sup> Wendy Smith, "War Weary: If Iraq is Not Another Vietnam, \Why do I find myself Rereading Dispatches?" (2007): 137, JSTOR; Marc J. Gilbert, "Is Iraq Another Vietnam?" *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no.1. (2009): 243, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2009.4.1.240>

<sup>168</sup> Andrew Priest, "From Saigon to Baghdad: The Vietnam Syndrome, the Iraq War and American Foreign Policy," 157

<sup>169</sup> George Herring, "America and Vietnam: The Unending War," 111

Ultimately, the textbooks' omission of the Vietnam syndrome contributes to the memory of Vietnam as a conflict to learn about, but not to remember. Though scholarship notes a proud nation still affected by the outcome of an uncertain war, the narrative frames within textbook rhetoric allow the Vietnam syndrome to be left behind as the American story moves forward. As time passes over both the presidencies of Johnson and Nixon, the rise of Reagan and the birth of a new conservatism assures students that the U.S has been back on the right track. The modern future that follows Vietnam-related chapters has no time for hanging clouds of defeat or for the lessons of Vietnam. Such a view accepts the civil rights movement and other cultural developments as part of the U.S's future, largely leaving the veterans and lessons of the Vietnam War behind.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the texts were found to espouse three dominant narrative themes, each contributing to the overall story and memory of Vietnam. Firstly, the texts frame the Vietnam War as being almost exclusively settled on the shoulders of President Lyndon B Johnson. In situating Vietnam as the blunder of a presidential regime and as a unique conflict with immediate effects, the textbooks create a memory of the war that asks readers to question Johnson rather than American exceptionalism. Secondly, the texts emphasize the role of the turbulent sixties in understanding the Vietnam War. More specifically, Vietnam is discussed as a *part* of a defining era rather than as the defining moment of the era itself. Using specific chapter titles and a cascading timeline of the 60's, the texts narrativize Vietnam as another wild card within the decade. Such a

decision allows the reader to blame a chaotic decade for more unfortunate and shocking details of the conflict, rather than the actions and ideals of the U.S. Finally, the texts narrativize Vietnam as having primarily immediate and mostly political impacts, leaving more detailed examples of suffering and the lasting impacts of the war out of the story. Such a decision allows details of occurrence and importance to sit side by side in opposition, and grants readers permission to exclude themselves and their great country from the enduring lessons of Vietnam.

Altogether, these narrative themes provoke a specific remembrance of the Vietnam War as a conflict contained within a chaotic decade, a speed bump in the American story that simply occurred in a decade of change. I assert that the texts selectively construct a memory which calls into question the *significance* of Vietnam's occurrence, while also ensuring the assignment of positive characteristics to the American story. Through these narratives, the conflict *is* defined as a war, and students may understand the Vietnam War as an event that afflicted two nations with violence and uncertainty for a time. Also present in these narratives, though is the idea that the conflict's reason for occurrence lies primarily within the era in which it took place and the leaders who oversaw its expansion. Public school students may yet remember the Vietnam War as a war waged by a president rather than by soldiers, as a conflict with an occurrence, but not a legacy. Such convenient recollections leave the stories of soldiers, the suffering of the Vietnamese, and the still-hanging cloud of the Vietnam syndrome behind in a victorious record of a country that was able to right its own ship.

In terms of the implications for the study of public memory and the field of rhetoric, I note the public-school textbook as a primary resource for the construction of



public memory. Especially imperative in the domain of public history education is a question of duty and purpose, the question of whether we are to teach the history of American events, or an *American* history of events. The narrative themes offered in these textbooks add strength to the assertion that we do err on the side of the latter, making sense of the past with the guiding light of exceptionalism. As the classroom and its accompanying rhetoric receive more attention in the field of public memory, textbook rhetoric should become more consequential artifacts in studies that center on discussion of other consequential U.S events. Such future research could allow us to ask questions of how American youth should remember events such as the Holocaust, the Korean War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and even the present pandemic in the years to come. These questions become even more consequential when coupled with queries concerning educational rhetoric's narrative ability to serve American Exceptionalism and our national mythology.

As noted by Edward Casey, public memory is never "fixed" or certain, meaning that collective and cultural understandings of events are not a stagnant image but an evolving picture.<sup>170</sup> Casey's insight tells us that the public memory of the Vietnam War is still being written, even as the last veterans of that conflict pass on, finally letting go of the things they carried.<sup>171</sup> The question of how we remember this war is not only consequential to the question of how we narrativize an exceptional America, but it is also a means by which we define the lives of those who fought in and experienced the conflict. As we reach into the past to discuss the current memory of the Vietnam War,

---

<sup>170</sup> Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," 26

<sup>171</sup> Tim O' Brien, "The Things They Carried." 1996

future implications of warfare recollection become especially pertinent as the long and costly Iraq war begins to settle in our national rear view. Given the frequent comparison of the two conflicts regarding effect and uncertainty, it can be said that how we remember Vietnam today will provide insight to the narratives we will offer of Iraq and other controversial conflicts in years to come.<sup>172</sup> How will we remember *that* war? How will we forget? Such questions may best be answered by the rhetoric that is meant to espouse the American story to the rising generation.

---

<sup>172</sup> Melvin Laird, Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam." *Foreign Affairs*. 84 (2005): 22, Heinonline.

## Bibliography

- Ahonen, Sirkka. "The Construction and Deconstruction of National Myths. A study of the Transformation of Finnish History Textbook Narratives after World War II." *European Politics and Society* 21, no. 3 (2020): 341-355, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1645427>.
- Allen, Michael J. *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2009, JSTOR.
- Anderson, Daniel L. "The Columbia History of the Vietnam War." *Columbia University Press* (2010)
- Assmann, Aleida. "Transformations Between History and Memory." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2008): 49-72, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2008.0038>.
- Bain, Robert. "Rounding up Unusual Suspects: Facing the Authority Hidden in the History Classroom." *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 10 (2006): 2080-2114, Sage Publishing.
- Barnett, Arnold, Timothy Stanley, and Michael Shore. "America's Vietnam Casualties: Victims of a Class War?" *Operations Research* 40, no. 5 (1992): 856-66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/171812>.
- Beck, Kent M. "The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58, no.1 (1974): 45-55, JSTOR.
- Bilton, Michael and Sim, Kevin. "Four Hours in My Lai". As quoted in <https://blogs.baylor.edu/mylaimassacre/234-2/>
- Black, George. "The Victims of Agent Orange the US Has Never Acknowledged." *The New York Times* (2021).
- Brinkley, Alan et al., "The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of The American People." *McGraw Hill Education* (2016)
- Cahill, Charlotte. *Fighting the Vietnam Syndrome: The Construction of a Conservative Veterans Politics, 1966-1984*. Northwestern University, 2008.
- Casey, Edward R. "Public Memory in Place and Time". *Framing Public Memory*. 68 (2004). 17-44.
- Cuddy, Edward. "Vietnam: Mr. Johnson's War—Or Mr. Eisenhower's?" *The Review of politics* 65, no. 4 (2003): 351-374, JSTOR.
- Davis, Fred. "Decade labeling: The Play of Collective Memory and Narrative Plot." *Symbolic Interaction* 7, no. 1 (1984): 15-24, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1984.7.1.15>.
- Dickinson, Greg, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, eds. *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*. University of Alabama Press, 2010.
- Divine, Robert M et al., *America: Past and Present*. Pearson Publishing. (2013).

Edwards, Rebecca, Eric Hinderaker, and James Henretta. *America's History: 10<sup>th</sup> Edition Bedford/St. Martins* (2021)

Ehrenhaus, Peter. "Commemorating the Unwon War: On Not Remembering Vietnam." *Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1 (1989): 96-107, Wiley Online Library.

Espiritu, Y en L e, and Diane Wolf. "The Appropriation of American War Memories: A Critical Juxtaposition of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War." *Social Identities* 19, no. 2 (2013): 188-203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2013.789213>.

Eyerman, Ron, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring. "Cultural trauma, Collective memory and the Vietnam War." *Croatian Political Science Review*, 54, no. 1-2 (2017): 11-31. JSTOR

Faragher, John. *Out of Many: A History of the American People*. Pentience Hall. (2016)

Fleming, Dan B. "A Review of Slave Life in Fourteen United States History Textbooks." *The Journal of Negro Education* 56, no. 4 (1987): 550-556, JSTOR.

Forest, Benjamin, Juliet Johnson, and Karen Till. "Post-Totalitarian National Identity: Public Memory in Germany and Russia." *Social & cultural geography* 5, no. 3 (2004): 357-380, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464936042000252778>.

Foss, Sonja K. "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial." *Communication Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1986): 326-340, Taylor and Francis Online.

Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Waveland Press, (2017).

Flood-Grady, Elizabeth, and Jody Koenig Kellas. "Sense-Making, Socialization, and Stigma: Exploring Narratives Told in Families about Mental Illness," *Health Communication* 34, no. 6 (2019): 607-617, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2018.1431016>.

Gilbert, Marc Jason. "Is Iraq Another Vietnam?" *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 21, no.4 (2009): 240-247. <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2009.4.1.240>

Goldstein, Dana. "Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories." *The New York Times* 12 (2020).

Gruenwald, Hermann. "Military Logistics Efforts //during the Vietnam War: Supply Chain Management on Both Sides." *Journal of Social and Development Sciences* 6, no. 2 (2015): 57-66, <https://doi.org/10.22610/jsds.v6i2.843>.

Griffin, Charles JG. "Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21, no.2 (2011): 434-436, JSTOR.

Glassberg, David. "Public History and the Study of Memory." *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (1996): 7-23, JSTOR.

Glickman, Norman J., Laurence E. Lynn Jr, and Robert H. Wilson. "Fifty Years Later: Legacies and Lessons of LBJ's Domestic Policies." In *LBJ's Neglected Legacy*, pp. 427-450. University of Texas Press, 2021. *Lyndon Johnson Reshaped Domestic Policy and Government* edited by Robert H. Wilson, Norman J Glickman and Laurence E. Lynn, 427-450. New York, USA: University of Texas Press. (2021), JSTOR.

Guillaume, Marine. "Napalm in US Bombing Doctrine and Practice, 1942-1975." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 14 (2016):1-15, <https://apjjf.org/-Marine-Guillaume/4983/article.pdf>.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. "Schindler's List" Is Not "Shoah": The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory." *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 292-312, JSTOR.

Haskins, Ekaterina V., and Justin P. DeRose. "Memory, Visibility, and Public Space: Reflections on Commemoration (s) of 9/11." *Space and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2003): 377-393, DOI: 10.1177/1206331203258373.

Hastings, Max. *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975*. HarperCollins UK. (2018)  
Hatch, John B. (2003) p. 750 As cited in Houdek, Matthew, and Kendall R. Phillips. "Public memory." In *Oxford research encyclopedia of communication*. 2017.

Hellmann, John. "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in the Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now." *American Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1982): 418-439, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712690>.

Herring, George C. "America and Vietnam: The Unending War." *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 5 (1991): 104-119, Heinonline.

Herring, George C. "The Cold War and Vietnam." *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004): 18-21, JSTOR.

Herring, George C. "The 'Vietnam Syndrome' and American Foreign Policy." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 57, no. 4 (1981): 594-612, JSTOR.

Hess, Aaron. "'You Don't Play, You Volunteer': Narrative Public Memory Construction in Medal of Honor: Rising Sun." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 4 (2007): 339-356, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180701567729>.

Hess, Gary R. "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War." *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 2 (1994): 242, JSTOR.

Herzog, Tobey C. "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness: The American Soldier in Vietnam," *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War* (1988): 16, [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=UgM577CZm6cC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Herzog,+Tobey+C.+%22John+Wayne+in+a+Modern+Heart+of+Darkness:+The+American+Soldier+in+Vietnam.%22+Search+and+Clear:+Critical+Responses+to+Selected+Literature+and+Films+of+the+Vietnam+War+\(1988\):+16,18,+no.+2+\(1994\):+242.&ots=\\_ogA6DiQhY&sig=C4JYr3NgszmXhVL9ig88-F537KY#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=UgM577CZm6cC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Herzog,+Tobey+C.+%22John+Wayne+in+a+Modern+Heart+of+Darkness:+The+American+Soldier+in+Vietnam.%22+Search+and+Clear:+Critical+Responses+to+Selected+Literature+and+Films+of+the+Vietnam+War+(1988):+16,18,+no.+2+(1994):+242.&ots=_ogA6DiQhY&sig=C4JYr3NgszmXhVL9ig88-F537KY#v=onepage&q&f=false).

Hirschman, Charles, Samuel Preston, and Vu Manh Loi. "Vietnamese Casualties During the American War: A New Estimate." *Population and Development Review* 21, no. 4 (1995): 783-812, JSTOR.

Hunter, Edna J. "The Vietnam Prisoner of War Experience." In *International handbook of traumatic stress syndromes*, pp. 297-303. Springer, Boston, MA, 1993.

Hurka, Thomas. "The Justification of National Partiality." *The morality of nationalism* 139 (1997):140-153, JSTOR.

Jasinski, James. "The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism." *Western Journal of Communication (includes Communication Reports)* 65, no. 3 (2001): 249-270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374705>.

Jordan, B. Kathleen, Charles R. Marmar, John A. Fairbank, William E. Schlenger, Richard A. Kulka, Richard L. Hough, and Daniel S. Weiss. "Problems in families of male Vietnam veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder." *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology* 60, no. 6 (1992): 916, Ebscohost.

- Jorgensen-Earp, Cheryl R., and Lori A. Lanzilotti. "Public memory and private grief: The construction of shrines at the sites of public tragedy." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 2 (1998): 150-170, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639809384211>.
- Kaes, Anton. "History and Film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination." *History and Memory* 2, no. 1 (1990): 111-129, JSTOR.
- Kartman, Charles "POW/MIA Accounting Efforts in Asia," US Department of State Dispatch 9, no. No. 6 - July 1998 (July 1998): 18-22, Heinonline.
- Kennedy, David M., and Elizabeth Cohen. *The American Pageant*. Cengage Advantage. (2015).
- Kieran, David (2014). *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory*. Massachusetts. Cited by Iden, Michelle Catherine. "Lasting Legacy: Public Memory of the Vietnam War." (2015): 718-722.
- Kössler, Reinhart. "Public Memory, Reconciliation and the Aftermath of War." *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia* (2003): 99.
- Kolchin, Peter. "Slavery in United States History Textbooks," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998): 1425-1438, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2568089>
- Kuznick, Peter. "The United States of Amnesia: the Dangers of Forgetting or Sanitizing the U.S. Invasion of Vietnam." *Nanzan review of American studies* 36 (2014): 123-128, file:///C:/Users/DONNI/Downloads/nras36\_10\_kuznick\_peter\_j%20(3).pdf.
- Laird, Melvin R. "Iraq: Learning the lessons of Vietnam." *Foreign Affairs*. 84 (2005): 22-43, Heinonline.
- Levesque, Christopher J. "The Truth Behind My Lai." *The New York Times*. 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/opinion/the-truth-behind-my-lai.html>
- Lindsay, Marshall. "Teaching Us to Forget: United States History Textbooks, the Plains Wars, and Public Memory." *University of Oklahoma Press*. (2019)
- Logevall, Fredrik. *Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam*. Routledge, 2017.110
- Macnamara, Robert. "President Johnson Announces More Troops to Vietnam." *This Day in History*. (2022) <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/johnson-announces-more-troops-to-vietnam>
- Murphy, John M. "Crafting the Kennedy legacy." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2000): 579, Project Muse.
- Nham Tuyet, Le Thi, and Annika Johansson. "Impact of Chemical Warfare with Agent Orange on Women's Reproductive Lives in Vietnam: a pilot study," *Reproductive health matters* 9, no. 18 (2001): 156-164, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080\(01\)90102-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(01)90102-8).
- Norton, Mary Beth. *A People and a Nation :10<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Cengage Learning. (2015)
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. London: Flamingo, 1990.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Vietnam in me*. New York Times, 1994.
- Oliver, Kendrick. *The My Lai Massacre in American history and Memory*. Manchester University Press, 2006.

Onuf, Peter S. "American Exceptionalism and National Identity." *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 77-100. Heinonline.

Paez, D. & James H. Liu. "Collective Memory of Conflicts." *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution: A social Psychological Perspective*.

Peers, William Raymond. *Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations Into the My Lai Incident: Volume I, The Report of the Investigation*. Vol. 1. The Department of the Army, 1974.

Priest, Andrew. "From Saigon to Baghdad: The Vietnam Syndrome, the Iraq War and American Foreign Policy." *Intelligence and National Security* 24, no. 1 (2009): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520902757018>.

Pusey, Allen. "The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution begins a war." *ABAJ* 102 (2016): Heinonline.

Pytell, Timothy E. "Redeeming the Unredeemable: Auschwitz and Man's Search for Meaning." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 89-113, Heinonline.

Range, Peter Ross. "Only One Man Was Charged for the Massacre of My Lai: This Is What it Was Like to Cover His Trial." *Time Magazine*. 2018.

Reid, Brian Holden. "The Influence of the Vietnam syndrome on the Writing of Civil War History," *The RUSI Journal* 147, no. 1 (2002): 44-52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840208446740>.

Rodden, John. "How do Stories Convince us? Notes Towards a Rhetoric of Narrative." *College Literature* (2008): 148-173, JSTOR.

Rollins, Peter C. "The Vietnam War: Perceptions Through Literature, Film, and Television." *American Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1984): 419-432, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712741>.

Romanowski, Michael H. "Excluding Ethical Issues from US history Textbooks: 911 and the War on Terror." *American Secondary Education* (2009): 26-48, JSTOR.

Rowling, Charles M., Jason Gilmore, and Penelope Sheets. "When Threats Come from Within: National Identity, Cascading Frames, and the US War in Afghanistan." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 20, no. 4 (2015): 478-497, [journals.sagepub.org](https://journals.sagepub.org).

Schudson, M. (1997). "Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative Versus Non-commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory," *Communication Review (The)*, 2(1), 3-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714429709368547>.

Schrader, V. L. (2019). "Who Tells Your Story?": Narrative Theory, Public Memory, and the Hamilton Phenomenon. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 35(3), 261-274, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714429709368547>.

Shi, David Emory. *America: A Narrative History: Volume Two*. Norton Education. (2019)

Smith, Wendy. "War Weary: If Iraq is Not Another Vietnam, Why do I find Myself Rereading Dispatches?" (2007): 135-140, JSTOR.

Zelizer, Barbie. "Competing memories: Reading the past against the grain: The shape of memory studies." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. (1995): 213-239, Richmond.edu.

Sterner, Kenneth L. "President Kennedy and the Escalation of the Vietnam War." (2015). 16, Cedarville.edu.

Sturken, Marita. "The wall, the Screen, and the Image: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." *Representations* 35 (1991): 118-142, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928719>.

Sutton, David. "The Rhetoric of the Vietnam War: An annotated bibliography." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 24, no. 3-4 (1994): 131-147, JSTOR.

The American Textbook Council "About Us." <https://www.historytextbooks.net/about.htm>. Accessed 3.19.22

The New York Times. "U.S. General Charged in the Massacre of My Lai Died at 86." 2006 <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/11/world/americas/us-general-charged-in-my-lai-massacre-dies-at-86.html>

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Research. "Origins of the Vietnam War." <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/americanhistory/abstract/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-353?rskey=ipisL4&result=7>. Accessed 02/09/2022

Turse, Nick. "Was Mai Lai Just One of Many Massacres of the Vietnam War." *BBC* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23427726>

Tyrrell, Ian. "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *The American Historical Review* (1991): 1031-1055, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2164993>.

Ursano, Robert J., and James R. Rundell. "The Prisoner of War." *War psychiatry. Falls Church, Virginia: Office of the Surgeon General Army* (1995): 431-455.

Vaughan, David K., and William A. Schum. "Motivation in U.S. Narrative Accounts of the Ground War in Vietnam." *Armed Forces & Society* 28, no. 1 (2001): 7-31, JSTOR

Wagner-Pacifici, Robin, and Barry Schwartz. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: commemorating a Difficult Past." *American journal of Sociology* 97, no. 2 (1991): 376-420, JSTOR.

Wells, Nikki. "American Exceptionalism Throughout United States History." PhD diss., 2014. 40.

Wood, John A. *Veteran Narratives and The Collective Memory of the Vietnam War*. Ohio University Press, 2016.