REIMAGINING HISTORY: HOLLYWOOD, REVISIONISM, AND THE

VIETNAM WAR

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ABSTRACT

REIMAGINING HISTORY: HOLLYWOOD, REVISIONISM, AND THE VIETNAM

WAR

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This dissertation examines the Vietnam War through the lens of Hollywood. Particularly, the research focuses on the ways in which filmic narratives intersect with historical events, highlighting identity and ideology in place of historical memorialization. This interdisciplinary project considers how viewers are informed by film, how film manipulates the lived experience, and how creators of cultural artifacts interact with various forces in society. Chiefly, this dissertation is about the power of film and how it sways cultural memory.

The Vietnam War, and the broader 1960s, remains one of the most contentious periods of American history. Today, the public still lacks a cohesive narrative regarding the Vietnam War. This is in part due to the political infighting between "hawks" and "doves," but it is further complicated by narratives pushed forward by creators of popular culture. The goal of this project was to understand *why* the Vietnam War remains a contested topic in American history when scholars have, at least mostly, reached a consensus regarding the War and its legacy. In total, this project assesses 175 films from 1958 to 1988. Each of these films are evaluated by their depiction of the War, the narrative's ideological intention, and audience reception. Each film is then placed into its broader historical context.

Primarily, this project asserts that Hollywood's versions of the Vietnam War have ingrained themes and tropes into collective memory, creating enduring myths that continue to cloud the public's understanding of the War and broader era. But this project also asserts a secondary claim – the Vietnam War, which has long been held responsible for fracturing Cold War national identity, was actually the medium through which the failure of the Cold War mission in the U.S. could be seen. The cultural obsession with the Vietnam War, then, was not primarily to come to a definitive conclusion on the history of the War, but rather an attempt to reassert a shared belief in traditional American mythos.

DEDICATION

To my parents, who instilled in me the confidence to believe I could do anything,

and to Jeff, whose endless patience and support ensured that I could.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM WITH THE WAR – FILM, IDEOLOGY, AND HISTORY

> The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it, and history is literally present in all that we do. – James Baldwin.

> He who controls the past, controls the future. – George Orwell, *1984*.

On October 22, 1982, *First Blood* starring Sylvester Stallone was released to nine-hundred-one theaters in North America. Over the next eight weeks, that number grew to over a thousand theaters, grossing nearly fifty million dollars. Its worldwide release went on to earn nearly three times that.[1] Based on David Morrell's 1972 novel by the same name, *First Blood* and iconic front man Rambo became household names, spawning an entire media franchise – including a television series, a comic book spinoff, seven video games, a collection of action figures, and specialized weaponry.[2] Its namesake character became synonymous with "a strong and aggressive man," so much so that even the Oxford English Dictionary later accepted and integrated that definition as official

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[1] Box office information was obtained from "First Blood: Box Office," IMBD Pro, Box Office Mojo, accessed November 9, 2020, https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0083944/boxoffice.

[2] The action figures were created by Coleco Industries. A spokesperson for the company remarked "We believe the character is emerging as a new American hero, a hero that has a high degree of excitement and patriotism and a third for justice associated with him." Todd S. Purdum, "Coleco Smitten by *Rambo*," *The New York Times*, 1 August, 1985.

terminology.[3] Today, Morrell's website claims *Rambo* as one of the top five internationally recognized thriller-action icons alongside classic literary characters such as Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, James Bond, and Harry Potter.[4]

The success of the Rambo trilogy presents a number of questions about audience reception and the socio-political climate of the United States in 1982.[5] Fourteen years prior, John Wayne released a strikingly similar film titled *The Green Berets*. Though Wayne was a highly celebrated movie star, his pro-war/pro-American film failed to reach the same kind of iconography – in fact, it received quite the opposite reaction. Marines who watched *The Green Berets* at a special viewing on base in Vietnam called it the "funniest movie they had seen in a long time."[6] *The Green Berets* received similar condemnations from American audiences, who in 1968 were, in large numbers, rejecting the ideological perspectives embodied in John Wayne's version of the Vietnam War. This poses the question – what had changed from *The Green Berets* to *First Blood*? Why were audiences resistant to Wayne's portrayal of Vietnam but open to Stallone's?

My initial analysis of films produced on the Vietnam War shows very specific trends over the course of the War's history and in the years that followed. In the earliest

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[3] "Rambo," Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, accessed November 9, 2020, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/rambo.

[4] "Rambo," David Morrell, AuthorBytes, accessed November 9, 2020, https://davidmorrell.net/rambo/.

[5] A fascination noted by contemporaries. One such example exists with Richard Zoglin's "An Outbreak of Rambomania," *Time*, 24 June 1985, https://time.com/archive/6704286/an-outbreak-of-rambomania/.

[6] Rick Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," in From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 54.

years of the war, when there was little public reaction to intervention in southeast Asia, films that incorporated southeast Asia, Vietnam, or any conflict there did so through a vague Cold War lens, offering little insight on the events there or few details on the purpose of American intervention. As the War garnered more media attention, and the public began to react to the war in Vietnam, John Wayne's overt attempt at propaganda was rejected. In the years after, films produced on Vietnam once again returned to vague references and focused more on symbolism – highlighting the shifting social and political views that emerged out of activist groups in the mid to late sixties. The influence of anti-war demonstrators and political progressives in films post 1968 becomes more and more evident each year – until the early 1980s when anti-war and New Left perspectives began to wane. In 1982, *First Blood* managed to completely capture American audiences while promoting a revisionist history of the Vietnam War – a "what could have been" story about redemption and returning honor. *First Blood* was a pivotal moment in American filmic history, encouraging numerous films that broadly portrayed revisionist narratives of the war. The radical shift of political perspectives in popular film raises similar questions about the staying power of historical narratives and the socio-political shift across the nation during the 1970s, and begs historians to consider the national refusal to accept defeat in Vietnam. It is this impetus that drives the literature on the Vietnam War. As made evident by a number of films which seek to "win" what was lost in Vietnam – historians must seek to understand not only the fascination with the Vietnam War, but what that fascination *means* to the American people.

Hundreds of academic works exist on the history of the Vietnam War and its influence. Orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist histories struggle for authority over

the war.[7] Similarly, hundreds of films have been produced on the subject – these productions share the same ideological divisions. The constant stream of information and varying viewpoints overloaded the populace, leading to a lack of consensus among the masses. As a direct consequence of academic and cultural infighting, the public's understanding of the War was muddled. This realization has drawn academics to the topic of Vietnam's meaning and lasting impact, its memorialization and its legacy. This national struggle over the Vietnam crisis compelled citizens to either defend or reconsider their faith in America as a champion of democracy, human rights, and justice.[8]

This contestation came down to those for or against the war. Supporters defended the War through the rhetoric of patriotism and national pride. They blamed liberal America and the media for losing the war. Confirming their worst fears, it was a youth-led movement, made up of what they saw as "fanatical" followers that gravely misunderstood or underestimated the dangers of communism. Critics, meanwhile, argued the War was unjustified, unwinnable, and dishonorable. They claimed the deceitful nature of America's attempted military domination over southeast Asia was evidence of imperialism and American Exceptionalism as core values of U.S. doctrine.[9] As historians, pundits, and policymakers continued to grapple with the history of the Vietnam War, so too did the American public. As one might suspect, revisionism found its way in the

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[7] This is not to imply that the orthodox perspective is not the broadly accepted consensus among historians and academics, but that the continued existence of outside perspectives illuminates the continued struggle for authority over the historical era.

[8] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (Penguin Books, 2015), xii.

[9] For more on this see Christian G. Appy's *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity,* George C. Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, and *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* by Gary R. Hess.

artistic expressions of famous filmmakers, artists, musicians, and literary authors of the U.S. (and beyond). Varying realities, versions, or tropes made their way into popular culture, ensuring viewers would continue to grapple with their position on the Vietnam crisis well into modernity.

As such, rewriting the history of the Vietnam War – and understanding those attempts – is not unique; instead, doing so joined perennial attempts to reckon with the epoch. Influenced by and subjected to the rapidly changing cultural values and interpretations of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, the cultural preoccupation ravaged the nation not just as an attempt to deal with the history but as part of a broader, more complex debate over morality and national identity. The battle for understanding and coming to terms with the Vietnam War (and America's role in it) extends far past the reach of historians and academic study. This project seeks to deal with a tiny facet of that clash by exploring the national cultural fascination with the War. To do so, this project will place emphasis on the role popular film has had on America's contentious and divisive relationship with the broader era. This project asserts that Hollywood's versions of the Vietnam War have ingrained themes and tropes into collective memory, creating enduring myths that continue to cloud America's understanding. Further, this study argues that the cultural obsession with the Vietnam War was not, primarily, to come to a conclusionary viewpoint on the history of war, but rather, to reassert a shared belief in a traditional American mythos. The hyper-fascination with reflections of the era in film was not an attempt to resolve the issues of the War in Vietnam, but rather, to ameliorate the consequences of the War at home.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

In the last five decades, Vietnam War films made, knowingly or unknowingly, an essential contribution to cultural historic studies. Due to the expansive catalogue of movies produced on the Vietnam War, this project limited analysis to films produced by US-based Hollywood studios from 1958 to 1988. The geographic scope was selected as films produced in the continental US on the Vietnam War were likely to be most influential to American audiences and therefore, in this context, the most important films to address.[10] The temporal scope of the project was influenced by the complexity of the filmography available for survey. The two most complete filmography records on movies produced on the Vietnam War are from Appendix B in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud. I supplemented their filmography to include works not originally listed in their catalogue, many of which came from Appendix II from *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second* by Jeremy M. Devine.

Today, hundreds of films on the Vietnam War exist. These include studio productions, made-for-TV films, and documentaries. As such, productions must be understood through several lenses and consequentially, require careful categorization. The first American produced films on war in Vietnam were not centered on the American War in Vietnam, but on the French Indochina War.[11] To support the intentions of the project, it was imperative to limit films to those produced on the American War in

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[10] This is not to claim that films produced outside the U.S. have not had significant impacts on American collective consciousness or contributed to the political, social, and cultural landscapes in the U.S. during given timeframes – but rather to limit the expansive catalogue and prioritize films that were most readily available to American audiences.

[11] Films include *Rogue's Regiment* (1948), *Saigon* (1948), *A Yank in Indochina* (1952), *Jump Into Hell* (1955), and *China's Gate* (1957).

Vietnam – not just films produced in the United States. Further, it was necessary to sub-divide films by their production context. As a result, documentaries were not included in this study, though several of the more notable documentaries are referenced in footnotes.[12]

Additionally, because only narrative films were included, I further subdivided films by their overarching theme. Many films that utilize the American War in Vietnam as backstory, narrative, or character arc are not centered on the actual war – instead, the War is used as supporting or background information for audiences. Therefore, this project uses the categorization method devised in the filmography of *From Hanoi to Hollywood*. Films are separated by their overall use of the War and subdivided into the following categories:

> (VV) films in which at least one major character is purposefully identified as a Vietnam veteran.
> (H) films of the American homefront that make specific allusions to the Vietnam War.
> (A) films that contain images of the anti-war movement.
> (P) films that contain images of American prisoners of war.

Other categorizations that I considered in *From Hanoi to Hollywood* were excluded from this particular project; however, some are referenced in appropriate footnotes as supporting evidence. These categorizations include films that contain images of the French Vietnam War, images of Southeast Asia other than Vietnam, images of Southeast Asian refugees, and images of Vietnam after American military involvement. *Vietnam at*

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[12] While documentaries would have enhanced the overall analysis, the number of documentaries produced on the Vietnam War would have greatly broadened the scope of the project and complicated the methods of analysis. Because Hollywood films are produced to reach the largest audiences and generate the most revenue, their choices in narrative, symbolism, and style were of most interest to me and are most likely to have reached large audiences. With the exception of a few notable documentaries, most of the works produced in this category would have reached significantly smaller audiences and therefore, would have generated less reception and held less influence.

24 Frames a Second and *From Hanoi to Hollywood* also included modes of analysis I did not carry over – these included imagery analysis, literary criticism, and discussions on gender theory or sexuality. My goal in excluding these modes of analysis was to limit the information in order to best support the arguments made in this project, but that is not to say that these were not useful categorizations that could have expanded on arguments made in the following chapters.

Lastly, the films highlighted in this project are supported by remarkable socio-political changes of the late 1960s into the late 1980s, which left powerful impressions on the American public that have already been measured by historians and other academics. Though films on the American Vietnam War were produced well after 1988 (and continue to be produced today), the goal of the project was to illuminate the connection between films produced on the War and the broader historiographical debates most prominent during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. The 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s continued to experience debate over the Vietnam War and the consequences of the war on the home front, but as foreign policy interests in the Middle East dominated media coverage and academics (at least partially) settled on a consensus of the war, the impactful relationship between these two entities is less apparent as it is complicated by facets that could not reasonably be included in this project.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

This research was inspired in great part by an article written by Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser titled, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War." In this article, Studlar and Desser discuss the "will to myth," which asserts that the repeated attempts to rewrite history through visual and narrative

symbolism is an attempt to fulfill an ideological mission. In the case of Vietnam, this mission is "healing the wounds" of Vietnam.[13] What is being rewritten, though, is not the actual history. Rather it is the perception of history and the cultural struggle to maintain authority over that history in the post-war era. The attempt to "deal" with Vietnam is not to deal with the actuality of the era, Studlar and Desser argue, but with the collective psychological trauma of the Vietnam War.[14] Equally as important in influencing this study is Linda Dittmar's and Gene Michaud's introductory essay to the anthology *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, in which they serve as co-editors. In their introductory essay, "America's Vietnam War Films: Marching toward Denial," Dittmar and Michaud posit that the power of Vietnam War films within American society is due to unresolved tensions over the War that continue to drive an obsessive relationship with the broader era. Though none of the aforementioned academics are historians, these two works and their authors were instrumental in developing the framework for this project. Their navigation of narrative examination in conjunction with historic analysis was paramount in the formulation of my own research, where I have attempted to invert their analyses emphasizing the role of the selected filmography within the historical epoch.

The historiography of the Vietnam War in film is unusually small compared to the seas of literature that exist regarding the more traditional histories of the Vietnam War. Though few cultural historians are dedicating their time to this particular facet of

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[13] Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: *Rambo's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 101.

[14] Ibid., 102.

American history, I believe that reflects the novelty of this specific topic and not its insignificance. The three most influential books on this topic are, in no particular order, Michael Anderegg's *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television,* Jeremy M. Devine's *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, and the aforementioned *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film.* All three of these works are edited volumes with a number of articles from prominent scholars ranging across interdisciplinary fields.

Despite best efforts, I have yet to uncover a monograph written by a historian that deals specifically with the representation of the Vietnam War or the soldier in film, let alone its relationship to contested memory. However, a number of historians have published works related to the topic. Some of the most valuable to this project, in no particular order, include Christian Appy's *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, Edwin A. Martini's *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, and James Oliver Robertson's *American Myth American Reality*. These works were integral to this project for the frameworks they presented. Appy's analysis of the War interweaves both reality and manufactured myth and the ways in which they worked together (or against one another) to influence national self-perception. Martini's analysis of the War is reinforced through the "cultural front," manufactured cultural elements which he argues held power of America's cultural memory of the war. Robertson's work quantifies the lived American experience through a series of myths and imaginative credos that, he argues, directly correlate to the national sense of self. There are, of course, a substantial accounting of articles and op-eds from historians that further supported the development of this project.

Though the scholarly literature on this topic is limited in some ways, the films themselves are directly embedded in the historiography of the Vietnam War. Productions from 1958-1988 directly correlate to the major historiographical debates evident in scholarly publications, political debates, and social rhetoric. For instance, the initial literature on the Vietnam War reflected the cultural moment of the long 1960s, echoing the sentiments of the anti-war youth movements and the New Left. Departing from the Cold War consensus, a significant number of early writers published highly critical reflections on US intervention in Southeast Asia. These political "doves," openly questioned the viability of containment in Southeast Asia and the motivations of the U.S. government and military. They were opposed by "hawks," supporters of intervention, who saw the War as a necessary measure to maintain US national security, prevent the spread of communism, and protect liberty and freedom in the cold war world. As these monikers became more culturally embedded in the highly politicized climate of the 1960s, "hawks" were morally condemned by anti-war critics for excusing war crimes and turning a blind eye to neo-imperialism. In return, the "hawks" condemned "doves" as squeamish liberals who lacked the stomach or wherewithal to protect national security. This black-and-white a-historical binary has become somewhat representative of the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War, forcing scholars of the field into a highly divisive and overtly political debate about right or wrong, necessary or unnecessary, and justified or unjustified.[15] Films of the entire period broadly grapple with these issues and political divisions.

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[15] For more on the partisan divide between doves and hawks, see Jeffrey P. Kimball's 1995 essay in *Peace & Change* titled "How Wars End: The Vietnam War."

In response to overwhelming criticism of the War within academic circles, a group of revisionists emerged in the late 1970s. Like the "hawks" of the 1960s, revisionists supported American ambition in Southeast Asia but were forced to contend with the ultimate diplomatic and military failure. Most early revisionists were retired military career-men, who focused on what they saw as a flawed application of military strategy to explain the loss in Vietnam. They maintained, like the hawks, that the War was winnable, but they shifted away from defending Johnson administration policies as their predecessors had once done.[16] These revisionist perspectives directly influenced the films of the late 70s and 1980s. Films often reference the "stabbed-in-the-back" thesis, the "noble cause" myth, and the "retroactive victory."[17] All of which are prominent frameworks for revisionist authors.

Because analyzing films as primary sources is a relatively new development in both cultural, social, and military history, few of the interpretations presented in this project have been challenged. However, there is a central debate regarding the analysis of films in regards to the history of the Vietnam War. Throughout the project, I refer to films of varying perspectives. These films were selected specifically due to their inclusion of the American war in Vietnam, yet, a large number of the movies included in this project are not about the American War in Vietnam. Rather, they are about the

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[16] For additional readings on the early hawkish defense, see Chester Bain's *Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* (1967) or Robert Scigliano's *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress* (1978).

[17] The stabbed-in-the-back thesis references revisionist belief that the War could have been won. The argument builds off original interpretations of a retrospective victory posited in the years following the Civil War. The stabbed-in-the-back thesis posits that the military effort in Vietnam was undermined on the home front – specifically through biased media coverage which emphasized anti-war speaking points. The revisionist perspective, which includes other key arguments that highlight the War as necessary and defends US military action in southeast Asia, has been used to propel the post-war argument that the War was a noble cause – a point defended by President Ronald Reagan during his tenure.

communal experience of Americans during or as a result of the war in Vietnam. I categorize these films as the Vietnam War genre, but acknowledge that a true genre does not exist. Films included in the following chapters belong to a broad range of true filmic genres; war, romance, comedy, drama, bio-pic, coming of age, sport, etc. I use the term Vietnam War genre to categorize broadly that these films utilize the Vietnam War, in their many capacities, as an attempt to *deal* with the War – to reckon with it.

It is important to note many scholars argue this categorization does not exist. Instead, they assert that these films borrow from previously established cinematic codes or genres and are subsets of them. I argue, regardless of implicit or explicit portrayals, all movies dealing with Vietnam do so in a way that is attempting to reimagine and rewrite national identity and, therefore, have created and constitute their own cinematic categorization.[18] Though to credit the historians and scholars before me who have written great lengths on this topic, it is essential to note that films that deal with Vietnam do not have a universal set of tenets. There are, of course, reoccurring motifs, themes, and visuals – but movies of this genre ascribe to no standard arrangement of settings, narratives, or perspectives.

These films are instead connected by their attempts to navigate through the intensely conflicted and complex era. *Coming Home* (1978), for instance, explores masculinity through the physically and mentally broken; it addresses intimacy, personal relationships, and the fragile nature of the human psyche. In contrast, *Full Metal Jacket*

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[18] Linda Dittmar, Gene Michaud, Michael Klein, David Whillock, Julian Smith, and Lawrence Suid, to name a few, are in opposition to this claim. Instead, they argue that these films are intrinsically part of existing genres because they rely heavily on established narratives and cinematic codes, such as the western or coming-of-age films, or because Vietnam films fail to have a cohesive set of visuals, motifs, or styles.

(1987) satirically attacks masculinity and exposes the dehumanization of recruits and soldiers through removing intimacy and personal relationships. *Platoon* (1986) places the entire narrative in Vietnam, while *Taxi Driver* (1976) erases the region entirely. Though these films all share some similarities, none of them approach the Vietnam War from the same direction. Because of this, films cannot be categorized by the traditional methods. Instead, they must be considered by what they are *trying* to do. Each of these films, and the many more that exist at the time of this writing, are attempting to legitimize *their* versions of Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

In their many forms, Vietnam War films tap into the fears, the desires, the hopes, and the imaginations of what really "happened" in Vietnam. Because of the plethora of films that deal with the Vietnam era, some four-hundred at the time of this writing, there is no shortage of imagined realities from which to choose. And while at first glance, it might appear that these films do nothing more than entertain, a closer look exposes something else. Vietnam films are attempting to manufacture consensus, a goal at odds with that of earlier war films. The triumphalist and patriotic World War II era films did not require reckoning; they did not need to convince audiences of their national identity or collective experience. The shift in how Vietnam War films were written exposes how deeply integrated the battle for understanding was in the American psyche. To navigate that, this project adopts several frameworks for categorization and analysis.

Vietnam War films can first be divided into four chronological categories, beginning with the late 1950s and leading into the late 1980s. Though films of this genre have continued into the modern era, this paper will focus on the period from 1958 to

1988, as films beyond the late 1980s have additional qualifiers outside the scope of this research. In the late 1950s and the early 1970s, films, with the exception of *The Green Berets*, deal with Vietnam implicitly through the veteran as integrated back into American society. This period can be categorized as society's attempt to move past Vietnam and move forward. These films emphasize the law-and-order rhetoric of the Nixon era and can be symbolically seen as trying to move past feelings of embarrassment and guilt regarding the events of Vietnam. In the mid to late 1970s, Vietnam War films begin to deal more explicitly with Vietnam but do so through a damaged and "lost" veteran. In the final years of the 1970s, movies begin to resituate narratives within the actual conflict but do so purely through a "war is hell" trope. These films grapple with the guilt and embarrassment of the previous era by loudly asking, "what have we done?" In the early 1980s, no doubt a consequence of the right-wing revisionism of the era, popular films return to America, but to reckon with society's ill-treatment of the veteran. These films emphasize victimization and resurrect individualism, triumphalism, and manhood into the soldier – and more broadly, the American public. The early 1980s treat Vietnam like a symptom of a larger disease, accusing society at large of failing the G.I. and ultimately losing the war. In the final period, the late 1980s call for a complete rewriting of Vietnam. In these films, Vietnam can be won and do so by recasting America and the G.I. in ultra-romanticized wartime narratives that incite sympathy for the military and nationalistic fervor within audiences.

  The films selected for this project were categorized into larger sub-fields and this project argues that together, these sub-fields reinforced collective (and historically

inaccurate) group memories. Robert McMahon, a leading historian of American foreign relations, asserts,

> As individuals and polities choose to remember certain aspects of the past, they foreclose – or seek to foreclose – other aspects. In the end, alternative memories come to be silenced. The stakes are extraordinarily high in this struggle over public memory since, as so many scholars have demonstrated, our reconstructions of the past prove as, or even more, important than the *actual* past.[19]

But what makes people choose to remember certain aspects of the past? Memory is the result of lived experiences, and yet the narratives these films create are often so detached from reality there is no way that any of the viewers could have lived them. What is most interesting about the power of film is that it has the power to create shared memories, particularly among audiences with no direct experience or involvement in the events of the war. For some, these memories are shaped by tangible experiences like having served in Vietnam and understanding the emotional aspect of a particular narrative.

For others, these collective memories result from influential moments in history, popular culture, or personal but everyday experiences like "draft dodging," which appeal to authority and present the viewer with a viable alternative to the lived experience. No matter how they exist, these collective memories create their own accounts about Vietnam. In turn, these believed, albeit incorrect, interpretations have spun themselves into webs of myths, misnomers, misconceptions, and outright falsities, all manufactured by a multi-billion-dollar entertainment industry. As Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud note in their chapter "America's Vietnam War Films,"

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[19] Robert McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001," *Diplomatic History 26*, no. 2 (April 2002): 162.

In film after film, careful attention to realism in the soundtrack, costuming, billboards, candy wrappers, peace symbols, slang, and a myriad of other visual and aural details specific to the Vietnam era provide validation. For veteran audiences, particularly, such props have been serving the vital function of authenticating the experience. Their nightmares and memories have been made public and "proven" fact, not madness. For home-front audiences, the authenticating role of the "war is hell" and "this is how it was" formulas works differently. For them, it is a vehicle for mourning, for empathy, for guilt, and perhaps for a measure of relief at having not been to 'Nam, after all. Either way, as memory shades into horror-driven nostalgia, the props of authenticity displace specificity. Either way, history has at once been recorded and denied.[20]

In a cyclical pattern, Hollywood versions of history either sell a story the public is comfortable with or one that is, in some way, shocking or disruptive. In both cases, these versions often reinforce or further build upon myths and clichés. These imagined histories present a number of issues within historical studies and societal functioning as a whole. As historian Patrick Hagopian argues, oral narratives and other forms of narrative that are perceived as coming from ordinary people, rather than political administrations, were given an unforeseen level of power with audiences.[21]

 As such, the methodology for this project revolves around the direct analysis of films for their social, cultural, and political implications – considering them individually and as part of a broader subset. It also requires the consideration of actual social, cultural, and political realities taking place in the U.S. across the mid and latter portion of the twentieth century. The framework for analysis for films is based off those presented

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[20] Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, "America's Vietnam War Films." in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 9.

[21] Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 79-111.

within the writings of Linda Dittmar, Gene Michaud, Jeremy M. Devine, and Michael Anderegg, but was broadened to include the national assessments presented in Christian Appy's *American Reckoning* and James Oliver Robertson's *American Myth, American Reality*. To support the claims made in this project, I have limited films that were produced in Hollywood by American production companies. This project relies not just on the existence of these films but the ways in which their storylines, characters, and symbolism interact with the real world. The collection of sources gathered for this project illuminate the ways in which art is in conversation with reality, and how both are impacted by that relationship.

In total, 175 films were analyzed for this project and several more were brought in to provide supporting examples of how trends and tropes ingrained themselves in films outside the genre/scope of this project. Additionally, a large number of interviews, reports, reviews, and critical examinations of the films included in the study were also used. These supporting pieces of evidence were consulted to showcase the ways in which films were received, either critically or popularly. It was also meant to serve as historical evaluation for how films are understood today or within film studies, versus how they were received by audiences actually watching them in the contemporary moment. It was difficult to define the success of all films – whether applying box office numbers was enough to showcase the power of a film over audience members, so op-eds and reviews were included to highlight the potential influence of a film. It was important to include participant driven narratives alongside the motifs and themes of the film to enhance the analysis presented. And of course, secondary sources were consulted to enhance the readers perception of how these films have been analyzed before.

<u>CHAPTER OVERVIEW</u>

Chapter Two broadly explores the rise and fall of an American consensus and argues that the War was not responsible for fracturing the Cold War consensus, but instead, served as an amplifier for the ways in which the consensus was already fractured. Chapter Two addresses several facets of the early Cold War era, emphasizing the ways in which anti-communist sentiment shaped public opinion and altered national ideology. The chapter comments on the role of cultural institutions in their mission to craft a national ideological perspective and cultural hegemony. Chapter Two carries forward chronologically, exploring US foreign policy and eventual US intervention in Vietnam, ultimately showcasing how the social and political reactions in the U.S. were driven by the events of the actual war, but more so influenced by the results the War had on the social and political climates in the United States – calling into question the established values of the Cold War.

In this chapter, I use three terms to broadly describe the ways in which actions, values, and beliefs were at odds with one another. First, I use national purpose to describe the foreign policy initiatives during the Cold War. Broadly, these initiatives are rooted in hegemonic interests. Containment, surveillance programs, and military and technological advancements to ensure the continued success and superiority of the United States are among the broad initiatives to ensure economic and ideological expansion. Second, I use Cold War culture to describe how the national purpose initiatives permeated the social and cultural spheres of the United States. In some cases, cultural threads are consequential – a result of trickle-down ideological positions, such as political rhetoric imbued in national consciousness. In other cases, these are more direct, like fears of nuclear war. Though, sometimes, they are more complicated responses to the general

state of the anxieties and paranoia of the Cold War, like domestic conformity. Lastly, I use national identity to express how the initiatives of the Cold War and the culture of the Cold War meshed in the national psyche to create a generally accepted belief about who Americans are based on the role of the nation at large.

The chapter ultimately refers to film to highlight the growing distance between the public and state sponsored rhetoric regarding the War and national values. Only fourteen films that met the parameters for the study were available in the collected filmography, and so this chapter is enhanced with an accompanying analysis on prominent World War II and Cold War films. I also include a film that reflects on refugees in Southeast Asia, to enhance the understanding of films that are discussed. The movies selected for this chapter were included to serve two purposes. First, to illustrate the juxtaposition between World War II films, which scholars do agree are of the true "war genre" and second, to show how "containment culture" of the Cold War encouraged productions that reinforced state-accepted ideological beliefs and narratives. It is in this chapter that the American mythos is introduced.

World War II and the Cold War are two national events that individually hold a great deal of societal power in the United States. Individually, the power they have held has been recognized by scholars broadly as one that encapsulated feelings of national pride and global anxieties. World War II ushered in a great sense of patriotism for most Americans, serving as evidence of the U.S. as a great world superpower and highlighted foundational credos of the nation. Some of these foundational credos included beliefs in American Exceptionalism, the nation's endowed purpose as a revolutionary state based on individualism. The Cold War reinforced a systemic development of national purpose

and identity by expounding on fears and anxieties that the American "way of life" and credos was under threat by a foreign enemy. Together, the sentiments of World War II and the Cold War crafted a strong socio-political consensus that was exampled in the cultural experience of the United States. But the emergence of the Vietnam War tested the staying power of that socio-political consensus, forcing Americans to grapple with their perceived communal identity and their nation's actual actions.

In Chapter Three, the methodologies and techniques introduced in Chapter Two are more closely inspected. Chapter Three provides brief historic overview of the wars impact on American society, emphasizing the long-lasting consequences of the events of 1968. It addresses the shifting political landscape of the United States from 1969 to 1978 and places 84 films in the accompanying historical context. In this section, each film will correlate to existing social and political events, national beliefs, and prominent ideologies. This section examines the films and their ideological viewpoints to showcase the heightening of a fractured national identity, which was explored in Chapter Two. The films assessed in Chapter Three exemplify the struggle for influence between government institutions and creators of political ephemera and identify the ways in which participants of the era increasingly questioned the hypocrisy of the credos and mythos of American national purpose and identity that they had been raised on in light of the events of the broad 1960s.

In Chapter Four, the analysis continues, chronicling films from 1979-1988. In total, 66 films are brought in for analysis. This section revisits reactionary revisionist frameworks of the previous decade, highlighting the myths crafted by pro-war scholars, politicians, and institutions and connects them to filmic narratives. The early section of

this chapter continues to complicate the historical timeline, showcasing how films participated in the power struggle between the "dovish Left" and "hawkish Right." Ultimately, the chapter highlights how films and creators of cultural ephemera gave way to a clear ideological winner and argues that the Rambo trilogy, beginning in 1982, was a transitional moment in American reckoning with Vietnam, effectively rewriting the War in favor of a right-wing narrative that recast the American G.I. and replaced feelings of guilt and embarrassment for triumphalism and patriotism. In the latter sections of the final chapter, Reagan's America and its effects on national identity is more deeply analyzed, connecting it to a new wave of Hollywood filmmaking and ideological tenets. Here, various myths are assessed and their implications on national collective consciousness.

By analyzing these films in a straightforward timeline and subdividing them into three timeframes, the study highlights definitive shifts in cultural and social temperature of each periodization. In Chapter Two, filmic narratives are largely in line with Cold War ideology. Vietnam is a backstory, one that mimics the World War II war films. But as public opinion of the War shifts in the mid to late 1960s, film relies more heavily on the "containment culture" crafted by institutions with the reach and authority to influence national perspective. This ultimately fails. Edward P. Morgan has noted that three distinct socio-political perspectives emerged from the 1960s; (1) a period of intense activism in response to the cultural intolerance towards institutional practice that had long separated from fundamental American ideals of equal rights, free speech, and foreign policy that was no longer centered on universal human rights, (2) liberal policies and activism that were exhausted by youth revolutionaries who were apolitical and egotistical, and (3) a

momentous period of hard lessons and experience that taught painful lessons regarding

long respected institutions and the socio-political reality for most Americans.[22] These

three themes are explored in the following chapters, but most exampled in Chapters

Three and Four.

Chapter Three primarily reflects on the ways in which films and audiences reacted

to state-sponsored ideological manipulation by enhancing their own cultural reflections of

the period – reflections that were largely anti-establishment and anti-war as a direct result

of the political activism that defined the 1960s. However, Chapter Four is ultimately

dominated by the revisionist revivalism of Reagan's America, and the overwhelming

staying power of more complicated and ideologically pressured narratives is made

evident. This chapter seeks to explain how film holds power, both socially and politically.

This section emphasizes the ways in which creators of cultural ephemera and those

within positions of political authority have the power to alter, manipulate, and convince

audiences. Attempts which often showcased that the two institutions of power were often

engaged in a struggle against one another for the utmost dominance.

SIGNIFICANCE

What further connects films in the Vietnam War genre is the consistent evidence

of ideological polarization. Because of this, the relationship between belief and

knowledge is visibly at odds in these films. While all historically representative films

have inherent biases, there is something more powerful happening in this particular

filmography. Prominent political ideologies are driven or challenged within their

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[22] Edward P. Morgan, *The Sixtiean Experience: Hard Lessons About Modern America* (Temple University Press, 1991), 6-8.

narratives, forcing viewers to embrace or reject them based on existing belief systems. The filmic category is split and fractured repeatedly, appealing to one side of the political spectrum or the other. Like the social fracturing of the actual era, the genre is rooted in *right* or *wrong*. Were we right to go, were we right to stay, were we defending freedom or destroying it? These are central questions asked throughout the wider genre. And these films are communicating with both one another and the larger puzzle. From the ultra-patriotic gung-ho representations of *The Green Berets* (1968) to the delineation of the American community in *The Deer Hunter* (1978)*,* Vietnam War films offer the viewer a black and white solution to the Vietnam crisis – it was right, or it was wrong, just or unjust, necessary or immoral. These films are competing with each other and the hard histories of scholars and politicians who sought to establish an authoritative control over Vietnam. It is the competition between the imagined and the real that makes this particular genre so unique.

The genres' morally driven narratives are further corroborated with ideological referencing, but they alone are not what convinces the audience. Alongside inclusions of morality and ideology, Vietnam War films integrate prominent social issues within their storylines. In *Taxi Driver* (1976), genuine fears of sociopathic veterans running rampant in society were reinforced with Travis Bickle. In *Missing in Action* (1984)*,* new life is given to the very real POW/MIA anxieties of the late 1970s and 1980s. In *First Blood Part II*, we're reminded of the prominent conservative myth – the U.S. wasn't *allowed* to win the war. In *Platoon* (1986), Taylor's volunteer service reminds the audience that we *chose* this.

As a whole, this study asserts that film and the cinematic experience holds power over national collective consciousness, reinforcing or altering accepted societal views, ideological perspectives, and political consensus. Though films and other forms of cultural ephemera are not traditional modes of historical analysis, they do not exist in a vacuum – they are consequential results of a timeframes social, political, and cultural experiences. And while movies are individually crafted and are more akin to an artform, analyzing large samples of filmic productions provide researchers with large scale temperature readings on the communal experiences and belief systems that can be more difficult to extract from more standards methods. Historians can therefore utilize film and other forms of cultural ephemera to leverage greater understanding of specific events and/or broader periods of time in any given place as well as use cultural productions to better understand the impact of historiographical debates on collective ideology and social functioning.

Competition for the nation's collective attention is often rooted in ideological polarization, which places pressure on intellectuals and scholars to compete against not only each other but also popularized fabrications of historical events. This is not unique to the Vietnam War, though it is the focus of this project. The power struggle for socio-political influence in cultural realms continues to be evident in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where screenwriters regularly ransack the historical timeline for compelling storylines and depict them in purposeful and engaging ways. For example, in 2015 critics accused the filmmakers of *The Intimidation Game* of intentionally misinterpreting history to perpetuate a more dramatic narrative. In response, screenwriter Graham Moore accused the critics of "fact-checking art." Moore offered a simple

analogy, "fact check Monet's Water Lilies. That's not what water lilies look like. That's what the sensation of experiencing water lilies feels like." The same year *Selma* found itself responding to similar condemnations. Director Ava DuVernay responded simply, "Everyone sees history through their own lens, and that should be valid."[23] But what power do these reinterpretations have, if any? What connection is there between what is shown on the big screen and what becomes ingrained in viewers' collective memory? Are films that portray historical moments simply creative expressions, or do they hold power to rewrite the past?

I argue that popular films *do* hold power.[24] They do so through dramatic and exciting narratives and the utilization of ideological symbols that depict social and cultural trends. Colin McGinn argues that films' power is manifested both demographically and individually through experience.[25] Children, for instance, view movies with anticipation and excitement. Films communicate with both the conscious and subconscious, gripping audience members with technological sophistication and "extraordinary potency."[26] Narratives become more complex and engaging for adult viewers to replicate the same enthusiasm experienced during childhood. Carl Plantinga, professor of film and media, argues that this experience is directly related to the film's

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[23] Fintan O'Toole, "Culture Shock: Social Rights and Hollywood Wrongs – Why Rambo Has a lot to Answer For," *The Irish Times, Film Reviews* (March 2015), https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/culture-shock-social-rights-and-hollywood-wrongs-why-rambo-has-a-lot-to-answer-for-1.2152858.

[24] In *The Power of Film*, Howard Suber argues that American feature films can be separated into two bodies – the popular and the memorably popular. These categories must meet the following criteria: They were popular in their day and remained popular for at least a decade.

[25] Colin McGinn, *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact* (Random House, 2005), 5.

[26] Ibid.

ability to elicit an emotional response, which is paramount to its success.[27] Mainstream

American films are carefully scripted to provide an engaging and thrilling emotional

experience. Here, we could think of *The Deer Hunter's* (1978) Russian Roulette scene, or

perhaps Elias's untimely and unjust death in *Platoon* (1986) or its depiction of fragging, a

greatly dramatized event of the Vietnam War.

This process is a deliberate result of what Plantinga calls the "affectively pre-

focused," meaning designed in a particular way in which the events and characters are

placed in a specific order to elicit a concern-based construal.[28] Concern-based construals,

or the way people interpret the world, communicate stories we wish to tell ourselves

about our own lived experiences.[29] Under this presumption, Ava Duvernay's response

becomes misleading. It is not the interpretation that is valid; it is the desire to reinterpret

that becomes validated. As Plantinga puts it, "Hollywood stories, then, do not simply

report a series of events; movies elicit desires, aversions, concerns, and sometimes

judgments, all rooted in variations on the most basic paradigm scenarios."[30] Because

popular films intend on persuasive storytelling, they abide by their own principles,

patterns, and structures.[31] They are dictated from start to finish by the psychology of

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[27] Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectators Experience* (University of California Press, 2009), 5.

[28] Ibid., 79.

[29] Ibid., 80.

[30] Plantinga reiterates that films' remarkable realism allows the viewer to experience the characters visually. This is not to suggest that the big screen guiles its audience. Instead, their subconscious accepts the realistic nature of the dialogue and the actors' affectual portrayal, resulting in an emotional relationship with the narrative, reinforcing the belief in the film as an authority over reality.

[31] Suber, *The Power of Film*, Introduction.

storytelling.[32] Films allow the audience to experience, or rather, re-experience historical events that substantiate their own inclinations, as *The Green Berets* did for John Wayne (though unsuccessfully) and how Stallone would later do with Rambo. And as this paper argues, those viewings, more desirable than the histories that precede them, become embedded in the audience's cultural memory, and hold significant power of the collective identity of a nation.

The significance of this project is in its potential applications. The attempt to reckon with Vietnam in popular culture created powerful, long-lasting impressions on the national consciousness. Particularly in Hollywood films, these rewritings had the power to capture the social and cultural temperatures of the tumultuous era and create new ones. Consequently, these narratives created what we call "cultural prosthetic memories," in which the *created* merged with the *actual*, inadvertently perpetuating myths about the epoch through reoccurring tropes, narratives, and visuals.[33] The following chapters analyze the prominent films of the mid 1950s to the late 1980s to explore the ways in which films attempted to deal with the reactions, influences, and legacy of the Vietnam War. This project also places these films within their appropriate historical context to examine the methods these filmic rewritings used to permeate national consciousness, creating a cultural cloak worn by each new generation. This analysis builds upon the work of numerous scholars and critics who recognized the power of film. As a continuation of their work, this analysis intends to bridge how seemingly opposite forces

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[32] Ibid.

[33] This process is examined thoroughly in Alison Landsberg's publication, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2004).

of art and history merge to create cultural memories and long-lasting mythos, which

effectively rewrote the story of Vietnam and significantly impacted national

understandings of the American "self."

CHAPTER TWO

THE RISE AND FALL OF AN AMERICAN CONSENSUS, 1958-1968

> We had come late to Viet Nam, but we had come.
> And we brought not bombs and guns, but help and
> love. – Thomas A. Dooley
>
> I've been to Vietnam, and I've talked to the men
> there, and I don't have the slightest doubt about the
> correctness of what we are doing. – John Wayne

The Vietnam War has demanded the nation's attention for decades. The war's

social, political, and diplomatic repercussions have preoccupied academics whilst

fascinating politicians and the general public. Nearly five decades after the fall of Saigon,

scholars continue to debate the war *in* Vietnam just as much as they continue to debate

the war *over* Vietnam. In 2002, diplomatic historian Robert McMahon delivered the

annual address for the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations in the Spring

edition of *Diplomatic History*, where he considered how the legacy of Vietnam has

become more significant than the actual history. For McMahon, the Vietnam War, like

the Civil War, had become a "zone of contested meaning."[1]

But the War has always been a contested space. The anti-war movement of the

1960s and the accompanying political rhetoric of the era illuminate that, as do the highly

emotive blockbuster films of the following two decades. Today, the cultural legacy of

Vietnam remains disputed, imbued with mythos born in the academic literature and

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[1] Robert J. McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (2002): 159-184, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7709.00306.

political infighting of the subsequent generations. And while the orthodox perspective has maintained dominance within academia, it is far less influential among laymen. As a result, the legacy of the war *in* Vietnam is understood through the highly politicized war *over* Vietnam.

When considering the various ways in which historiographical debates have taken shape in regard to Vietnam, arguments are typically centered on *why* the Vietnam War happened. The initial literature on the war reflected the cultural moment of the long 1960s, echoing the sentiments of the anti-war youth movements and the New Left. Fracturing from the Cold War consensus, a significant number of early writers published critical reflections on US intervention. These political "doves" openly questioned the viability of containment in Southeast Asia and the motivations of the U.S. government and military. They were opposed by "hawks," supporters of intervention, who saw the war as a necessary measure to maintain US national security, prevent the spread of communism, and protect liberty and freedom in the Cold War world.

As these monikers became more culturally embedded in the politicized climate of the 1960s, "hawks" were morally condemned by anti-war critics for excusing war crimes and turning a blind eye to neo-imperialism. In return, the "hawks" condemned "doves" as squeamish liberals who lacked the stomach or wherewithal to protect national security. This black-and-white interpretation has become somewhat representative of the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War, forcing scholars of the field into a highly divisive and overtly political debate about right or wrong, necessary or unnecessary, and justified or

unjustified.[2] All of which speaks to a broader contestation regarding the national past. Perhaps the debate is not at all about what *actually* happened in Vietnam, but rather, how what happened in Vietnam fractured the perception of American identity.

TESTING THE STAYING POWER OF VICTORY CULTURE

The first contingent of American combat troops landed in Vietnam in March, 1965. However, by then, the United States had channeled financial support, military advisors, weaponry, and other resources for well over a decade.[3] Originally, US intervention was a response to calls from the French, who sought assistance to suppress a nationalist revolution led by Ho Chi Minh. Shockingly, in 1954 at a small outpost in Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh defeated the French, thus ending the First Indo-China War. In response, the U.S. unilaterally extended containment in southeast Asia. Over the following decade, the U.S. remained a committed "defender" in southeast Asia, actively working to create an anti-Communist state in the southern portion of the nation. This commitment, rooted in Cold War ideology, meant a continuation of funding to provide necessary resources and political oversight to the southern Vietnamese regime.[4]

Initially, the presence of military advisors and the extension of aid in Vietnam evoked little response from the American public, for or against. The years after World War II solidified ideals of patriotism, nationalism, and triumphalism in the national

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[2] For more on the partisan divide between doves and hawks, see Jeffrey P. Kimball's 1995 essay in *Peace & Change* titled "How Wars End: The Vietnam War."

[3] For more on the development of a nation-state in southern Vietnam and the role the United States played in helping construct such a place, see James M. Carter's 2008 publication *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968*.

[4] One implanted in Saigon by American forces.

lexicon. Americans took pride in the might and power of the U.S. government and military. Unquestioned beliefs in America's role as a superpower prevailed in the post-war era, with many viewing their nation as one set out to grant gifts of freedom to the rest of the world.[5] But over the next few years, massive anti-war demonstrations dominated college campuses, media reels, and print news. By October 1969, 58% of Americans believed that the Vietnam War was a mistake.[6] Comparatively, when the question was first presented in August of 1965, only 24% of those polled answered in the affirmative.[7] The Vietnam War had, in only three years of public attention, produced one of the most contentious public reactions to military endeavors in American history.

In consideration of this massive socio-political shift, scholars have repeatedly pointed to the ways in which America's intervention in Vietnam has served as a scar on the national past. Many have pointed to the tumultuous events of 1968 and the broader anti-war movement that challenged US military presence in Vietnam until the ultimate withdrawal of forces in 1973. Citing the highly visible wave of dissenters offers some explanations on the War's immortalization in history books and cultural spheres, but it does not explain *why* Vietnam was such a highly contentious topic for the American public. Highlighting the anti-war movement also does little to explain why Vietnam continues to be understood through such a contentious lens – or why decades later, the Vietnam War remains a central tenet of American filmic productions. The answer lies

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[5] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 78.

[6] Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: Is War a Mistake?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1970): 134–50, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747894.

[7] This particular question appeared in seventeen Gallup Poll questionnaires from August 1965 to October 1969. Erskine, "The Polls: Is War a Mistake?" 134–50.

elsewhere. Some explanation is found in understanding the impact of the War on Cold War values. Anti-war voices have arisen in every instance of military conflict in US history. Rarely though, have those voices been awarded such historical significance in the years following a military engagement's end.[8] To explain the importance of the War and its impact in the grander national history, this project argues that the War must be understood as a cataclysmic event of the long 1960s. One that exposed a much larger, systemic splintering within the socio-political system and tested the staying power of victory culture.[9]

COLD WAR NATIONAL PURPOSE

The Cold War defined the 1950s. A constant threat emerged out of World War II, in response the U.S. adopted the ambitious mission of containing the reach and influence of perceived enemies. The Truman Doctrine and subsequent Marshall Plan established precedent for continued engagement around the world, committing the U.S. to providing allies with financial and military support. These policies provided some safeguards for struggling US allies in the post war era and they provided some security for American interests in the de-colonizing world as the U.S. and USSR competed for geo-political

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[8] The only war in American history with overwhelming public support was World War II. In 1944, 31% of respondents believed that the War would be viewed as a mistake, in following surveys, respondents believing the War would be considered a mistake never reached over 26%. However, in January of 1937, 64% of respondents believed it was a mistake for the United States to enter World War I. In the following years respondents believing entering World War I was a mistake did not drop below 35% until December of 1941, when it dipped to 21%, likely influenced by the attack on Pearl Harbor. Pollers surveyed on the Korean War had the opposite reactions. In August of 1950, only 20% of responders believed entering a war in Korea was a mistake. By February of 1951, that number had doubled. Poller responses believing the war in Korea was a mistake did not dip below 50% until September of 1956, when it dropped to 41%. Erskine, "The Polls: Is War a Mistake?" 134–50.

[9] For more on victory culture in America, see Tom Engelhardt's book *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*.

influence and economic superiority. However, these policies also created an indefinite threat that required continuous US attention.

To maintain support for a geopolitical clash with no foreseeable end, governmental leaders increasingly invoked ideologically charged narratives and reductionist explanations. The language of the Cold War encouraged citizens to consider their unique and grandiose position, asserting that the fate of the world hinged on America's "way of life" prevailing against communist threats. Prominent Cold War theories, such as the Domino Theory, amplified the fears of internal infiltration.[10] As a result, a consensus emerged, one that by the mid 1950's had unified Americans against a single looming threat.

The bi-partisan nature of the consensus was an important element of Cold War culture. Sustaining long-term military intervention and foreign spending required Americans to believe that the threats of the Cold War – communist infiltration, nuclear war, and internal subversion – were imminent. Paradoxically, when the nation and its constituents should have been enjoying a period of global peace, the end of World War II intensified America's military presence all over the world and heightened fears domestically. As historian James Oliver Robertson notes,

> The cessation of warfare did not automatically bring peace in an unstable, insecure, abnormal world. Instead, it brought the necessity to create peace, to crusade for it – the necessity to seek security and stability aggressively, and the

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[10] President Eisenhower first introduced the Domino Theory on April 7, 1954 in a short news conference. Commenting on the strategic importance of continued U.S. presence in the region then known as French Indochina, the Domino Theory proposed a simple and direct analogy for a notoriously complex global struggle – the threat of communism in Southeast Asia was a direct assault on the economic prosperity and livelihood of the free world. The "fall" of one region meant the continued collapse of surrounding territories – one that was not likely to stop at the border of the South China Sea – and would lead to a crumbling of freedom and democracy that would spread to Australia and New Zealand. The implication was clear.

necessity to defend constantly what one has against the nameless forces of chaos. Peace became crisis, an emergency that grew out of the fears of Americans.[11]

Americans were compelled by political discourse and pop culture images that authenticated the validity of these threats. This was translated to the populace through a number of means – ideological rhetoric that reinforced long-held exceptionalist ideals about America's history and purpose fueled public support for these endeavors. Americans were driven toward sociopolitical extremism through political speech, government action, and international crisis. This zealotry reached its dramatic climax during the Second Red Scare, which began in 1947 and ended ten years later in 1957.[12]

The sensationalism of the Second Red Scare crafted a state-sponsored, but simultaneously self-imposed "domestic containment" that cascaded from government leadership down to ordinary Americans. Pressure from government actors and institutions such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and Senator Joseph McCarthy on private yet public-facing institutions like Hollywood production companies and writer and actor guilds encouraged "domestic containment." State monitoring led to the production of state-sponsored materials and self-censorship, ultimately taking on the role of vanguard during the Cold War. State approved films, television shows, radio programs, novels, and comics transmitted to the masses prompted citizens to actions of

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[11] James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (Hill and Wang, 1980), 335.

[12] Like the First Red Scare, the Second erupted in the immediate postwar years and was defined by national abuses of federal power and constitutional rights, and social discrimination against perceived political threats – namely radicals, anarchists, subversives, and other perceived extremists like communists and socialists. Americans were repeatedly lectured on the oppressive and tyrannical nature of the Kremlin, a state that had just recently been their ally. The Soviet Union was reduced in American political speech to a "godless" state that threatened to eradicate religious virtue, individuality, and personal freedom worldwide. This overly simplistic speech greatly decomplicated the actual power struggle between the U.S. and USSR. When the Kremlin acquired the ability to develop an atomic arsenal, fears of atomic war and nuclear fallout created widespread panic.

communal self-policing. Together, this dynamic (state influenced media influencing actions of citizens) established and maintained a pervasive political and cultural consensus, one that extended far beyond state and federal governmental reach. Externally, this national consensus bolstered public support for ever-increasing methods of containment, deploying military forces and funds well beyond the shores of the continental United States. Anti-communist views permeated social, cultural, political, and diplomatic spheres with equal intensity. Americans faced constant reminders of their national and individual responsibilities and the danger posed should they neglect it.

U.S. governmental institutions strategically employed religious rhetoric to further enhance public support of Cold War policies. Political leaders characterized Soviet communists as not merely atheists but as "godless" and therefore morally bankrupt, portraying them as an existential threat to religious freedoms worldwide. To avoid criticism, politicians distanced themselves from leftist ideologies and incorporated increasingly pro-Christian language into their campaign slogans and speeches. They joined local churches and made religious values a visible element of their platform.[13] In turn, supporters responded in kind – integrating their religious views as a foundational element of their patriotic identity. This dynamic drove a dramatic increase in religious participation across the nation from 1950 to 1965.[14]

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[13] There had long been a history of religious anti-communism in the United States. In 1919, fundamentalists met at a conference in the U.S. to address fears of communist infiltration – in the 1930s, fundamentalists continued to speak out against communist influence. "Atheists, modernists and communists have formed a deadline alliance against God, Christ, the Church, and the Bible." In 1937, the Church League of America was formed as a politically conservative committee to collect files on suspected communists. Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 18-21.

[14] In 1940, about 50% of the country (some 64.5 million) held religious membership. By 1965, the nation's population had grown significantly, and so had the number of Americans with religious membership at various institutions. Some 63% of the nation, or 114.5 million people participated regularly

Religious figures like Billy Graham achieved unprecedented national influence, conducting massive revivals and dominating broadcast media. Graham's infusion of Christianity with American ideals earned him widespread acclaim. In 1958, Graham was fourth on a list of "America's most admired man."[15] Graham was not alone. Dozens of other Protestant preachers followed Graham in creating national Evangelical networks – building churches, setting up political organizations, and developing televised broadcasts to be aired on existing or entirely new networks. Throughout the 1950s, Evangelicals worked to mobilize Christian voters, believing, like Graham, that it was their Christian duty to take up earthly politics.[16] This movement spawned organizations like the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade and Billy James Hargis's Christian Crusade radio ministry which established anti-communism as a central principle of American Christian faith.[17]

Right-wing movements, drawing primarily from Protestant and Catholic constituencies, reached massive audiences by emphasizing the threat of atheistic politics.[18] President Eisenhower exemplified this connection in 1953 when he characterized the Cold War as a "war of light against darkness, freedom against slavery,

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at churches or synagogues. For more on this, see Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), 29.

[15] Williams, *God's Own* Party, 21-24.

[16] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (Macmillan, 2012), 339-340.

[17] Paul Boyer, "The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism," in *Rightward Bound: Making American Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Harvard University Press, 2008), 33.

[18] Williams, *God's Own Party*, 59.

Godliness against Atheism."[19] His administration institutionalized religion in governance.

In 1954, Eisenhower signed legislation supported widely by Congress to add the words

"under God" to the pledge of allegiance to highlight religious freedom in the United

States.[20] The same year, he signed additional legislation to have "In God We Trust"

printed on all paper and coin currency in the United States.[21] In 1955, Eisenhower made

the phrase a national motto.[22] The institutionalized religious rhetoric reinforced a

fundamental anxiety: the ideological struggle between the "free and democratic" US and

"authoritarian" and "communist" Soviet Union threatened not just political freedom and

economic liberalism, but religious liberty itself.[23]

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[19] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Inaugural Address," (Washington, D.C., January 20, 1953) 83rd Congress, 1st Session, https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/research/online-documents/inauguration-1953/1953-01-20-inaugural-address.pdf

[20] "H.J.Res.243 - 83rd Congress (1953-1954): Joint resolution to amend the pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America." June 14, 1954. https://www.congress.gov/bill/83rd-congress/house-joint-resolution/243/text.

[21] "H.R.619 - 84th Congress (1955-1956): An Act to provide that all United States currency shall bear the inscription 'In God We Trust.'" July 11, 1955. https://www.congress.gov/bill/84th-congress/house-bill/619.

[22] The Eisenhower administration's religious endeavors were largely due to the influence of Billy Graham, who met with the President regularly to discuss religious revivalism in the United States. For both men, and the other wide-ranging public figures of political and religious institutions, the use of Christian values in the domestic fight against communism strengthened American unity and protected society from the influence of socialist ideology. Though Eisenhower supported all denominations and religious views in the United States, his relationship with Graham secured him the majority Evangelical vote in 1952 and 1956, inextricably linking the Republican Party to the Christian Evangelicals. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 26-28.

[23] In 1948, churches in the United States were inspired – both through governmental agency encouragement and private interest groups – to participate in anti-communist efforts worldwide. As the 1948 elections in Italy appeared that they may democratically elect a Communist Party, Catholic churches in the United States began encouraging parishioners to write letters to their friends and family in Italy to encourage them to vote for democratic leaders.[23] Other important Catholic interventionists in the developing Cold War included Cardinal Francis Spellman, who called communism "un-American." Other prominent Catholics like Phyllis Schlafly and William F. Buckley made anti-communism a forward effort of the Catholic network, encouraging parishioners to make combating the communist mission a part of their religious purpose. David T. Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 30.

Primary and secondary education across the nation further reinforced Cold War narratives through ideologically charged content that emphasized American exceptionalism. Journalist Frances FitzGerald observed that textbooks of the 1950s presented an idealized version of America as "the greatest nation in the world… the embodiment of democracy, freedom, and technological progress."[24] These texts portrayed American values and institutions as unchanging, creating a self-contained orthodoxy that left no room for interpretation. The significance of this ideological crafting cannot be overstated.[25] Efforts to portray a unified and exceptionalist history were not accidental, but rather a consistent effort within the United States.[26] By the 1950s, textbooks placed the American story in collective terms, often using "we" and "our," connecting students personally to the historical past.

Previously specific terminology became increasingly abstract – "democracy," defined in 1930s texts as the "call to social activity," was transformed by the 1950s into simply the opposite of "Fascism and Communism."[27] Similarly, "capitalism" became an undefined overarching concept, while US foreign policy history was recast as purely philanthropic. Historian Stephen J. Whitfield notes in *The Culture of the Cold War*,

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[24] Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Vintage Books, 1979), 10.

[25] Stephen J. Whitfield. *The Culture of the Cold War,* 2nd ed. (The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 56.

[26] In the 1930s, a popular series of textbooks were condemned by the Advertising Federation for America, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the American Legion for advocating socialism and Communism. Most of these textbooks did not actually advocate socialism or Communism, but the result nonetheless was the weeding out of texts that identified socialism or commented on economic policies within the U.S. For more on this, see Chapter Three of Stephen J. Whitfield's *The Culture of the Cold War*.

[27] Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 56-57.

America was portrayed as uniquely altruistic, waging "war against disease, poverty, and ignorance; and except for a brief period of isolationism, the United States in the twentieth century helped save other continents from the scourges of Fascism, Communism, and militarism."[28]

Textbooks of the 1950s were not just hyper-patriotic retellings of the American past, they were also ominous warnings of the vague but looming threats students may come to face. Textbooks impressed upon students that their own individual liberties were at stake and it was up to them to protect their "way of life." This mentality permeated the educational system to the highest levels of academia. In 1949, Conyers Read, president of the American Historical Association, announced, "We must clearly assume a militant attitude if we are to survive. The antidote to bad doctrine is better doctrine, not neutralized intelligence… The liberal neutral attitude will no longer suffice… Total war, whether it be hot or cold, enlists everyone and calls upon everyone to assume his part."[29] The same year, a Gallup poll reported that 68% of Americans believed communism should be banned in the United States.[30]

Simultaneously, beliefs regarding the domestic economy reinforced ideals of the Cold War national purpose. The American "way of life" and its perceived superiority was evident not just through its political and religious freedoms, but also through its technological and military superiority. Vice President Richard Nixon's 1959 "Kitchen Debate" exemplified the domestic focus on the global stage. Economic superiority

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 57-58.

[30] M.J. Heale, *American Anti-Communism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830-1970* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 147.

rhetoric suggested that American consumer luxuries improved daily life – evidence that capitalism surpassed communist policies prohibiting private wealth and ownership – core American values. 1950s consumer culture further highlighted the tenets of "American identity" through the visual demonstration of individual success.[31]

As the second Red Scare continued to garner political attention and the consensus strengthened, the various forms of surveillance (state-sponsored or citizen run) focused on arenas believed to be responsible for shaping public opinion. Various industries responsible for information and entertainment were viewed with rising suspicions. Film, television, radio, and print publications became highly scrutinized pieces of American culture whose creators felt similarly compelled to remove themselves as far as possible from transmitting leftist political ideologies. The resulting outcome was state-sponsored domestic conformity.[32] The presence of an imminent geo-political threat, coupled with religious values and American exceptionalist teachings, encouraged self-enforcement. Americans were taught to speak, behave, participate, and shop like patriotic Americans. No aspect of American culture remained untouched by anti-communist fervor.

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[31] This focus on materialism, and specifically American made products, was not unique to the Cold War. The 1939 and 1940 World Fair, hosted in New York, portrayed to millions of visitors the wonders of the future, conveniently sponsored by American brands like General Motors and General Electric. From lifestyle gadgets to large household appliances, these machines of convenience provided a sense of wonder for viewers, especially in contrast to the realities of the Great Depression. Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 332.

[32] Domestic conformity can be understood as a subset of a national surveillance system that enforced attempts prevent dissenting ideologues from permeating the American social landscape. Consumers lived in communities policed by one another; they shopped for consumer goods that were centered around national ideals, reminding the populace of their superiority against the threat of communism and other Third World politics. In this system, Americans participated in social spheres that were embedded with symbolic gestures towards being a good citizen.

AMERICAN IDENTITY IN FILM

To safeguard Cold War values and "American identity," the state empowered various institutions to root out and dispel threats. Cultural productions have long been subjected to political scrutiny in the United States. Films like *Bolshevism on Trial* (1919), *The Right to Happiness* (1919), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) emphasized Hollywood's early commitment to producing anti-communist films. In some ways, the willingness of Hollywood executives to abide by state sponsored narratives enhanced the authority of political witch hunts. Government organizations targeted producers, writers, and actors.[33] In 1930 major Hollywood production companies agreed to self-censorship to avoid further government regulation of the industry. They adopted a set of guidelines known as the Motion Pictures Production Code (or the Hays Code), which by 1934 was enforced industry-wide.[34]

The result was a government mandated anti-communism, which wielded such influence in the years leading up to World War II that Hollywood was discouraged from

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[33] In 1922, the Federal Bureau of Investigation opened a file on Charlie Chaplin after he hosted a leader of the American Communist Party in his home – the agency maintained that file for thirty years until Chaplin left the country. Paul Robeson was similarly targeted by the agency. Unlike Chaplin, Robeson was harassed, blacklisted, and persecuted at the highest levels of the federal government, who ultimately revoked his passport. John Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture*, 5th ed. (McGraw Hill Education, 2018), 283-284.

[34] Richard W. Steele, "The Great Debate: Roosevelt, the Media, and the Coming of the War, 1940-1941." *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 1 (1984): 69–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/1899834; "WAVE OF CRITICISM STIRS HOLLYWOOD; Federal Censorship is Feared as Aftermath of Attacks on Indecent Pictures," *The New York Times*, June 11, 1934; "FEDERAL COUNCIL JOINS MOVIE FIGHT; Committee Meeting Here Votes Cooperation in Catholic Clean Film Campaign," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1934; "HOLLYWOOD CENSOR READY; Film Clean-Up Campaign Will Be Started Next Sunday," *The New York Times*, July 8, 1934.

producing anti-fascist films lest they encourage sympathy for leftist causes.[35] Instead,

studios were encouraged to create films like *Ninotchka* (1939), *Comrade X* (1940), and

The Grapes of Wrath (1940) which promoted capitalism over communism and free-

enterprise over government-controlled labor. As fascism spread across Europe,

Hollywood faced increasing pressure to align with the national agenda. In 1938, Martin

Dies, the first House Un-American Activities Committee chair, vilified members of

Hollywood who joined the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, labeling them "communist

dupes." Two years later Dies oversaw the first investigative hearings against alleged

Hollywood "Reds," actors Fredric March, Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, and

screenwriter Philip Dunne. Though all four were cleared, the proceedings established

precedent for government enforced anti-communism in Hollywood.[36]

The House Un-American Activities Committee continued pressuring Hollywood

to produce pro-American content, though accusations that condemned anti-fascist as pro-

communist were temporarily derailed by US involvement in World War II. In February

1944, the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals emerged from

the right-wing anti-communist witch-hunt initiated by the Dies Committee. Members

included Walt Disney, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, John Wayne, and Ayn Rand, who

sought to root out communists and radicals.[37] The Alliance called for combating

"totalitarian-minded groups working within the industry for the dissemination of un-

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[35] Pressure from the Roosevelt administration forced United Artists to alter the script for *Blockade* (1938), a Spanish Civil War film that denounced Franco and warned of the dangers of a fascist Europe. Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture*, 287.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 287-288.

American ideas and beliefs." Partly in response to the publicity generated by the

Alliance, HUAC was made permanent.[38]

Though the U.S. had allied itself with Russia, the end of World War II intensified

US-Soviet tensions. In February of 1946, less than six months after Japan's formal

surrender, Stalin addressed a post-election event in Moscow, warning his constituents

that the Russian people must remain prepared for war – an inevitability, he argued, given

the existence of capitalist countries.[39] The next day, the front page of *The New York*

Times read, "Premier Joseph Stalin announced tonight a new Five-Year Plan for the

Soviet Union with huge production boosts 'to guarantee our country against any

eventuality,' and asserted that the present capitalistic world economy sets the stage for

war."[40] A month later, Winston Churchill delivered the landmark "Sinews for Peace"

speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, where he famously declared that an

"iron curtain" was descending across Europe.[41]

As international tensions between Western nations and the Kremlin increased, so

too did the social climate in the United States. Widespread labor strikes across the nation

drew the attention of anti-Left politicians and institutions, like media mogul William

Randolph Hearst Jr. and the United States Chamber of Commerce, who characterized the

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[38] Ibid., 286-290.

[39] Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 10th ed. (McGraw Hill Education, 2006), 44

[40] "Stalin Sets a Huge Output Near Ours in 5-Year Plan; Expects to Lead in Science," *The New York Times*, Feb 10, 1946, https://www.nytimes.com/1946/02/10/archives/stalin-sets-a-huge-output-near-ours-in-5year-plan-expects-to-lead.html

[41] Winston S. Churchill, "The Sinews for Peace," March 5, 1946, NATO Online Library, Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, transcript, https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1946/s460305a_e.htm.

work stoppages as evidence of Soviet influence. To combat what they saw as communist infiltration, these groups organized massive political campaigns against strikers and suspected radicals.[42] These very real socio-political events further curtailed any cultural outlets from deviating from the state sponsored Cold War propaganda.

In March of the following year, President Harry S. Truman delivered what would come to be known simply as the Truman Doctrine – the first of many official federal Cold War initiatives. Containment emerged as the primary policy objective of the United States both at home and abroad. The Truman Doctrine called for the U.S. to assume a broader role in world affairs and emphasized the nations responsibility as a world leader.[43] Truman argued, only eighteen months after Japan's surrender, that post-war peace could not be maintained if tyranny was allowed to spread unchecked across Europe.[44] He noted,

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[42] In 1946 alone, the Chamber of Commerce circulated 200,000 pamphlets titled "Communist Infiltration in the United States." Hearst Press, an organization that had taken similar actions during the First Red Scare, published sensationalized coverage on communist infiltration, ran smear campaigns on labor unions and politicians who supported them, and attacked progressive institutions and public figures. Fears of Soviet influence in the U.S. were exacerbated when a spy ring was uncovered in neighboring Canada. Even if the public initially met the Chamber of Commerce and Hearst Press with skepticism, the threat of communist infiltration appeared to be approaching American borders. Heale, *American Anti-Communism*, 126-138.

[43] As Walter LaFeber has noted, the Truman Doctrine's significance was not just in the Congressional request for economic aid but in how that request for aid was made. Truman did not request funds to fight directly against Russia, nor did he request funds for any geo-specific location – the brilliancy of the Truman Doctrine was in its request to push back against communism anywhere in the world. Not only was it the first time Truman used American fear of communism against Americans, but it gave Truman the power to engage in the Cold War in a way that was not previously possible. Not only did he justify intervention in Greece and Turkey, he justified intervention anywhere in the world against any Communist force.

[44] Truman's emphasis on the urgency of acting against tyranny in the years after World War II was greatly influential, and though his reflections of the geo-political tensions were ideologically charged, they were not completely unfounded. In the immediate post-war years, the U.S.S.R. gradually developed control in Eastern Europe. By 1948, Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia joined the Soviet zone of Germany as Kremlin-controlled regions. The Berlin Blockade further exacerbated the conflict, giving Americans a more clearly defined threat of the power Soviet Russia held. When the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb in 1949, the threat of nuclear war escalated the tensions between both superpowers. Increasingly sensationalized claims of communist infiltration and tales of high-level

The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive. The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world -- and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation. Great responsibilities have been placed upon us by the swift movement of events.[45]

The language was effective. A White House adviser noted that the speech was "the opening gun in a campaign to bring people up to [the] realization that the war isn't over by any means."[46] Not only did Congress grant Truman the funding he sought to intervene in Greece and Turkey, but the same month Congress adopted a government loyalty program, Executive Order 9835, to investigate and root out communists within the federal government.[47]

Escalating US-Soviet tensions and growing internal divisions prompted renewed investigations into the film industry. In 1947, following closed-door hearings with the Motion Picture Alliance Committee, the House Un-American Activities Committee announced that Hollywood filmmakers had "employed subtle techniques in pictures in glorifying the communist system and degrading our own system of Government and

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espionage further drew in American support for action against the U.S.S.R. globally. Glenn Blackburn, *The West and the World Since 1945* (St. Martin's Press, 1996), 6-7.

[45] Harry S. Truman, "Message to Congress," March 12, 1947, *National Archives*, transcript, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine.

[46] LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 60.

[47] Though Truman was not a part of the Republican majority that took on a hard stance against communism, he found himself in a unique position to appease their anti-communist sentiments. In an effort to align Congress with the proposed "Truman Doctrine," he had to protect himself from claims that he was "soft" on communists. A year later, President Truman signed the Economic Recovery Act of 1948, more commonly known as the Marshall Plan. This effectively extended the initiatives proposed the year prior in the Truman Plan, dedicating more economic assistance to post-war Europe. Part of Truman's success in the earliest years of the Cold War came from the clear ideological rhetoric used to position the United States against the Soviet Union. Heale, *American Anti-Communism*, 137-138.

Institutions." Later that year, HUAC conducted public hearings in Washington D.C. In total, forty-two members of the film industry across various roles had been called for questioning. Twenty-four were deemed "friendly" to US national interests, while eleven were marked "unfriendly," primarily for opposing the inquiries and asserting that the investigation violated their constitutional rights.[48]

"Friendly" witnesses included actors Ronald Reagan and Gary Cooper, director Sam Wood, and producer Walt Disney, three of whom had served on the Motion Picture Alliance Committee. In their testimonies, they championed the mission of HUAC, identified alleged subversive activities within the film industry, and accused numerous colleagues of communist affiliation.[49] The eleven "unfriendly" witnesses comprised of German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, who fled the country after his testimony. The remaining ten became known simply as "The Hollywood Ten."[50] Each attempted to use the highly politicized trials as a platform to expose anti-communist extremism, but only one was allowed to read their prepared statement. Repeatedly committee members asked, "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the communist party." All ten refused to answer and were cited for contempt of Congress, resulting in jail sentences ranging from six month to one year.[51]

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[48] Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture*, 288-291.

[49] Ibid., 290.

[50] The Hollywood Ten included writers Alvah Bessie, Lester Cole, Ring Lardner Jr., Sam Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo, directors Herbert Biberman, Edward Dmytryk, and founder and president of the Screen Writers Guild, John Howard Lawson. Lewis Wood, "Federal Jury Indicts 10 Film Men on Contempt of Congress Charge; 10 HOLLYWOOD MEN UNDER INDICTMENT." *The New York Times*, December 6, 1947.

[51] Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture*, 290.

In a direct response to the HUAC investigation of the Hollywood Ten, fifty studio executives met in secret in New York City. Threatened with boycotts by anti-communist organizations like the Hearst-owned newspapers and the American Legion, executives feared further fallout. To prevent public backlash, they adopted additional policies of self-regulation, building on the self-censorship guidelines they established in the 1930s under the Hays Office. Further, executives agreed to suspend the Hollywood Ten without pay, deny employment to anyone who did not cooperate with HUAC, and refused to hire communists. These self-imposed restrictions reinforced HUAC's authority and other state sponsored institutions' influence over cultural productions. By the mid-1950s, some two-hundred suspected communists were blacklisted.[52]

Alongside alleged communists, HUAC targeted pro-Soviet films like *Songs of Russia* (1943), *Mission in Moscow* (1943), *North Star* (1943), and *Days of Glory* (1943). These films, partially commissioned by the U.S. government to garner support for its unpopular ally, later emboldened HUAC's claims that Soviet influence had long penetrated American institutions. To appease HUAC and prevent public backlash, studio executives funded overtly anti-communist films. Few turned a profit, but they demonstrated Hollywood's commitment to promoting American ideals and Cold War values. As Stephen J. Whitfield notes in *The Culture of the Cold War*,

> The movie industry was conscripted into the Cold War in 1947 when HUAC was invited to Los Angeles. The committee's host was the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, an organization that struck a typical postwar stance in asserting that "co-existence is a myth and neutrality is impossible… anyone who is not fighting Communism is helping Communism."[53]

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[52] Ibid., 291.

[53] Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 127.

Movies like *The Iron Curtain* (1948), *The Red Menace* (1949), *The Woman on the Pier* or *I Married a Communist* (1949), *The Red Danube* (1949), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), *The Whip Hand* (1951), *Walk East on Beacon* (1952), *Big Jim McLain* (1952), *Red Snow* (1952), and *The Steel Fist* (1952), emulated Hollywood's commitment to "America First" plots.[54]

As the Cold War extended into the 1950s, Hollywood was forced to navigate a challenging position: producing strident anti-communist narratives without providing legitimacy to leftist ideology. Movies like *My Son John* (1952) portrayed familial failures as a direct pathway for communist infiltration, but offered no explanation on how family dynamics connected to Marxist theory. Other films like *Pickup on South Street* (1953) depicted communists as violent, amoral thugs but provided no explanation on the political views the antagonists supposedly embraced. Cold War films evolved rapidly to address shifting national needs. During the Korean War films like *The Steel Helmet* (1951), and *Fixed Bayonets!* (1951) reduced the conflict to simplistic "them versus us" anti-communist plots. *Battle Taxi* (1955) celebrates the heroism of a U.S. helicopter crew set off on rescue missions during the Korean War. Movies like *The Thing* (1951) *Invaders from Mars* (1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) translated genuine Cold War anxieties into imaginary worlds that captivated audiences. Even biblical epics like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) incorporated subtle anti-communist themes.[55] These films, alongside the geo-political realities during the Cold War, worked

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[54] Ibid., 133; Walter Goodman, "Film View: Hollywood's Spotty Record on Foreign Affairs," *The New York Times*, August 31, 1986.

[55] Though Hollywood produced a large number of anti-communist films in line with HUAC's directive on pro-American ideology, there was resistance. Blacklisted screenwriters produced films that subtly reacted to HUAC, government censorship, oppressive state influence, and the perils of domestic conformity. Some notable pictures include *Broken Arrow* (1950), *High Noon* (1952), *The Robe* (1953),

to emphasize the continued risk the Cold War posed to the average American. Dissenters were portrayed as threats, deviants from social norms were portrayed as weak links that would cause the breakdown of the very institutions that kept America safe. So, it is of little surprise that films addressing Vietnam in the war's early years did so with few controversial elements.

ENTER STAGE LEFT, THE VIETNAM WAR

The period of 1958-1968 only produced 15 films that dealt with the American War in Vietnam. These include *The Quiet American* (1958), *Brushfire* (1961), *The Ugly American* (1963), *A Yank in Vietnam* (1964), *Operation C.I.A* (1965), *To the Shores of Hell* (1965), *The Final War of Olly Wi*nter (1967), *The Born Losers* (1967), *Head* (1968), *The Edge* (1968), *Targets* (1968), *Angels from Hell* (1968), *The Green Berets* (1968), *Greetings* (1968), and *The Angry Breed* (1968). Of these films, few deviated from the Cold War national purpose and HUAC's control, but as the 1960s reshaped national perspectives about Cold War values, films too began to change. The largest breakaway from conventional war film narratives emerged in 1968 – the height of the war, but prior to that, Hollywood was careful not to make the same mistakes that it landed its actors and authors in front of Senate hearings in the decades prior.

The Quiet American pioneered depictions of Americans in Vietnam on screen. Previously, filmmakers portrayed Southeast Asia or Indochina primarily through a

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Prince Valiant (1954), and *Johnny Guitar* (1954). Several of which were written in secret by blacklisted screenwriters. These writers did not just produce films targeting HUAC's witch hunt – they also commented on other issues like the plight of perceived enemies and labor rights. Some films include *Salt of the Earth* (1954), *On the Waterfront* (1954), *The Brave One* (1956), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). For more on this, see Chapter 13 of John Belton's *American Culture American Cinema*.

French perspective, choosing to focus on the Indo-China War rather than U.S. presence there. *Jump Into Hell* (1955), *Bloody Alley* (1955), and *China Gate* (1957) exemplify this approach by presenting safe narratives that depicted the United States as either a neutral bystander or an unexpected but heroic secondary character.[56] These films reaffirmed existing audience knowledge without explaining broader conflicts or geopolitical contexts, teaching audiences only through vague references to jungle peoples and communist threats spreading across Asia – which protected Hollywood from potential political backlash.

Similarly, the Korean War and broader Cold War, served as foundational knowledge tools for audiences. By the late 1950s, national identity remained deeply rooted in American exceptionalism and hyper patriotism, making filmic reflections of American troops in southeast Asia safe for Hollywood to present. Continuous reinforcements of these ideals functioned as propaganda, assuring citizens that government and military actions served their best interests. In short, the French War in Indochina and the Korean War affirmed Cold War values and protected US identity on-screen. Little needed to be explained, even if it was a new conflict in a completely different place.[57]

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[56] For instance, *Jump Into Hell* follows four French Army officers volunteering to serve at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, site of the actual the famous French defeat. *Bloody Alley*, a Cold War adventure film, depicts Americans aiding Vietnamese villagers escaping the communist China's tyrannical government. *China Gate* depicted a group of mercenaries under French command setting out to destroy an ammunition depot in communist North Vietnam.

[57] These beliefs were reiterated in the staunchly anti-communist semi-biographical account of Thomas A. Dooley, who served as a medical doctor in northern Vietnam assisting displaced refugee children from the Second Indochina War. *Deliver Us from Evil* (1956) originally appeared as a condensed version in *Reader's Digest* in 1955. A year later, it was released as a full-length work, quickly becoming a widely acclaimed best-seller. Dooley blamed the Vietnamese for their nation's destruction, arguing their actions, not French colonialism, devastated the country and endangered lives. He presented this destruction as the cost of communist ideology and argued America had a moral obligation to intervene. *Reader's Digest*, one of the widest-circulating magazines in the 1950s, reached at least five million. When Dooley's

The 1958 filmic adaptation of *The Quiet American* marked a pivot in cinematic representation of American involvement in Vietnam by introducing the U.S. as a central figure. The departure from previous reflections offered audiences a more nuanced view of American engagement, albeit not a critical one. The notable value of *The Quiet American* is not in its portrayal of US engagement in Vietnam, as it endorsed the same HUAC approved claims of previous Cold War films, but in the lengths that the filmic adaptation went to alter the novel's original commentary. Based on Graham Greene's original novel of the same name, which was decidedly anti-American, the original work follows British reporter Thomas Fowler, who must decide whether or not to aid an American O.S.S. agent, Alden Pyle, who dreams of "transforming" Vietnam. Pyle's vision for Vietnam derives from the ideals of his intellectual hero, York Harding, a diplomatic correspondent who laughably spent only "one week" in Vietnam.

Harding believes that the socio-political fracturing in Vietnam cannot be resolved by the communists in the North or the French colonists. Instead, he advocates for a "Third Force" to establish a national democracy and address the lingering tensions from the French-Indochina War. While clearly engaging with political themes and functioning as a parable for American intervention in Vietnam in the 1950s, Greene advances the narrative primarily through philosophical and ideological exploration, distinguishing it from the more common reductionist methods.

Greene portrays Pyle as a young and idealistic American who is easily influenced and lacks long-term critical thinking skills. The American influence in Vietnam is

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full-length work was published one year later, it sold 3 million copies in the first year. For more on Dooley's *Deliver Us from Evil*, see Christian Appy's *American Reckoning* Chapter 1.

depicted as overly commercialized, with little regard for the Vietnamese people or the

sanctity of their livelihood or culture. Fowler, the main character, accuses the Americans

of "selfish opportunism, of letting the French do the dying while they clean up

commercially."[58] Ultimately, in Greene's version, Fowler is pushed (politically,

philosophically, and also by the love triangle between himself, Pyle, and a young

Vietnamese woman) to side with the Vietnamese Communists in an attack that kills Pyle.

The symbolism here is overt; Vietnam is the love interest, and the old colonizers and the

new are bound in conflict for her. American readers did not miss the message. In 1956,

Robert G. Smith, an English Professor and literary critic, published a review of the work

in *The New York Times*. He wrote,

> As the title suggests, America is the principal concern. The thesis is quite simply
> that America is a crassly materialistic and "innocent" nation with no
> understanding of other peoples. When her representatives intervene in other
> countries' affairs it causes only suffering. America should leave Asians to work
> out their own destinies, even when this means the victory of communism.[59]

However, the 1958 film adaptation took a wide departure of the original intentions of the

best-seller. When the acclaimed director, Joseph L. Mankiewicz purchased the film

option, he did so with the intent to re-write what he saw as two egregious errors: writing

America as the fool and portraying communism as anything other than the enemy.[60] Of

course, he made other changes, some encouraged directly by Hollywood's Production

Code Administration, which ultimately rewrote the film as pro-American, but did provide

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[58] Robert Gorham Davis, "In Our Time No Man is a Neutral," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1956, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/02/20/specials/greene-quiet.html?_r=1.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Kevin Lewis, "The Third Force: Graham Greene and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *The Quiet American*," *Film History* 10, no. 4 (1998): 477-91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815194.

some nuance and context to the geo-politics of the Cold War that other films had not attempted. Its release was expected to be promising. Shot partially in Vietnam and rewritten to take on a pro-American stance, the film featured Sir Michael Redgrave, an esteemed stage actor, and Audie Murphy, a highly decorated American soldier and World War II Medal of Honor recipient.[61] However, Mankiewicz revisions were not enough to recast the narrative in a pro-American light. As a result, the film received mixed reviews and underperformed at the box office.

Similarly, *The Ugly American* based on a 1958 novel of the same name, makes changes to the original intention of the novel in the light of real historical events. When the book was first published and the rights were purchased for the film, the script was critical of US intervention in Southeast Asia. But in 1961, the first American was killed in Vietnam and the narrative of the film shifts to present a more patriotic tale.[62] *The Ugly American* takes the audience to Sarkhan – a fictional southeast Asian nation (that suspiciously is divided in North and South and borders China). The U.S. hopes while there to develop a co-beneficial relationship with the state of Sarkhan and build a Freedom Highway. In the opening of the film, American Ambassador Harrison MacWhite (Played by Marlon Brando) pitches his sale of the highway to the Prime Minister of Sarkhan – which he argues will increase the economy and free them from Communist influence. The conversation goes like this,

> Prime Minister: "Will your government stand by its military commitment to Sarkhan in the event of trouble?"

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[61] Ibid.

[62] "First to Die in Vietnam is Recalled," *The New York Times*, April 20, 1975.

> MacWhite: "The United States stands by its military commitment everywhere in the world. But there is no reason to regard this as a military situation—it's purely a political maneuver."
> Prime Minister: "Before you go on, have I America's absolute commitment to stand behind us in
> the event of trouble?"
> MacWhite: "You have."

Here, *The Ugly American* subtly sets up the symbolic relationship between MacWhite's influence in Sarkhan and the American purpose in Vietnam – it of course is about Cold War liberalism and anti-communist sentiments. As the film progresses, the mission fails. It is not as cut and dry for MacWhite in Sarkhan as initially expected. His final piece of dialogue is directed at viewers. He states, "If the Cold War disappeared right now, the American people would still be in this fight against ignorance, hunger, disease – because it's right – it's right to be in it." Julian Smith, a film critic, recounts his reaction to the end of the film where he states,

> We've had almost two hours of blunders, blindness, and buffoonery – now a superstar risen out of the Midwest tries to turn it all around with one sane speech building to one appeal to every American. And click!, the script throws the responsibility into the American living room, self-righteously blaming Mr. Typical Citizen for not wanting to get involved in another fight.[63]

The few films that emerged in these early years made few, if any, critical examinations. While the War was still in its early years and the height of the anti-war movement would not emerge for another five years, Hollywood was careful (under HUAC's guidance) not to critically comment on US foreign policy.

In the early 1960s, movies like *Brushfire*, *A Yank in Viet-Nam*, *Operation C.I.A.*, and *To the Shores of Hell* attempted to deal with the American presence in Vietnam more directly, but continued to do so through the safety of accepted Cold War ideology and

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[63] Julian Smith, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 122.

World War II narratives.[64] These productions portrayed the United States as good, represented by brave and heroic American characters fighting against communism (the evil and direct cause of conflict in Vietnam). Films of this early period largely portrayed the Vietnamese as a divided people: the brutal, savage Vietcong driven by a communist agenda and controlled by the Kremlin against the good but helpless common folk who were suffering as a result. *Brushfire*, for example, opens with a salute to the military, immediately transitioning the opening scene where a decorated U.S. general informs a small group of soldiers that they will be "sent to the shores of Vietnam" to fight for their country.

These early reflections maintained overtly patriotic tones, reminiscent of World War II-era films. In 1975 Julian Smith published a book about reflections of the War in popular film. In regard to *Brushfire* he noted the film was,

> … a flimsy attempt to resurrect villains of twenty years past. 'The story came out of rumors about actions in SE Asia which were taking place before we got in to the extent of placing troops there,' the scenarist wrote me. 'It came out of a very stupid bit of advice given to the producer by [Warner Brothers] that he try for an exploitation film – one that might have some shock value at the box office.'[65]

The shocks the scenarist referenced were the narrative device that delivered a former Nazi as the main antagonist and guerilla leader in the SE Asian nation. In response Smith asks,

> Would such rebels need or want a white mercenary, much less a pure Aryan? Would a representative of the people who rewrote the book on conventional mechanized warfare make a good guerilla? And why is it that the American civilians, and not locals, are called upon to crush the rebels and restore order?

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[64] In fact, so little had changed that a review of *Operation C.I.A.* noted the only difference between this film and the films it evolved from – *Saigon* (1948) and *Rouge's Regiment* (1948), both post-World War II films that took the main character to southeast Asia – was that the characters now had air conditioning. Smith, *Looking Away*, 124.

[65] Ibid., 114.

> What does this all mean? That part of the psychological preparation for our actual involvement in Southeast Asia grew out of something as simple as casting practices dictated by studio wisdom which held that only those wars in which Americans lead the way are worthy of their print cost?[66]

Heavier films like *China Gate* leaned in even further to the post-World War II narratives, decrying the communism and godlessness of the Vietnamese enemies. And though the film is about the real story of Foreign Legionnaires who blew up a communist ammunition outpost called China Gate in 1954, the 1957 film rewrites the heroes as Americans. In *A Yank in Viet-Nam* the American is there accidentally but does not shy away from his duties. These films were poorly developed and poorly received. As Smith notes, one contemporary reviewer in *The New York Times* called them "strangely unconvincing types even though they are dedicated to a just and honorable cause."[67]

Similarly, the made for TV film *The Final War of Olly Winter* emphasized US presence in Vietnam through a World War II and Cold War lens. Olly, a Black Master Sergeant in Vietnam in 1963, walks through a jungle and reminisces on his life, his experiences and struggles.[68] He has flashbacks and narrates the rest of his recollections, as he walks with a young Vietnamese girl. Like the other films of the era, Olly narrates his purpose in Vietnam through carefully selected Cold War values. What does make this film interesting is the commentary on social issues in the homefront, chiefly racism and classism, an experience he uses to sympathize with what is happening to the Vietnamese.

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 104.

[68] Jack Gould, "TV: '*The Final War of Olly Winter*'; Poignant Drama Opens 'C.B.S. Playhouse' Ronald Ribman's Story is Set in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1967.

These early films kept in line with HUAC and the state sponsored treatment of leftist ideology, perceived or actual. They advanced pro-American, pro-military, exceptionalist narratives that defended Cold War policies and values. But as the Cold War persisted, the staying power of HUAC and other right-wing anti-communist organizations waned. By the 1960s, much of the control over Hollywood had lifted and films with more nuanced narratives were produced. Movies like *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) presented communism as political manipulation, but also condemned McCarthyite politicians as pawns for even larger geopolitical power struggles. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) leaned in to nuclear anxiety and presented anti-communism through the lens of black humor. These early films serve as evidence for shifting socio-political views across the country. A medium that was, only a few years prior, tightly controlled by HUAC and other historical actors, such as Senator McCarthy, were beginning to highlight critical viewpoints of the nation and national purpose.

Head for instance was a social commentary vignette film starring The Monkees, an American pop-rock band. Like films that would emerge in 1969 and the early 1970s, *Head* took on a decidedly anti-establishment tone, valuing identity and expressionism while acknowledging the hypocrisies and absurdism of the era. Though the film does not present a plot or script, and instead communicates through a montage of short, seemingly unrelated scenes, the film clearly communicates an anti-war tone as it navigates through renderings of California during the long 1960s with guest appearances from Hollywood stars like Frank Zappa, Jack Nicholson, and Dennis Hopper. *Head* is, in some ways, another example of how HUAC's grasp on the media industry waned in the late 1960s. In

others, it is an example of how media engagement was beginning to shift in the same historical moment. Absurdism, satire, and comedic relief attracted young audience members, as did iconic names in the music industry. The success of these films were driven by the youth who held the cultural wealth to understand what films meant without having to explicitly state anything.

In perhaps the most famous biker-media franchise series, *The Born Losers*, and the subsequent Billy Jack movies, Jack is both a Vietnam veteran and of Native-American descent, referencing an early version of the inverted super-capable savage.[69] *Born Losers* follows Jack (played by Tom Laughlin) on his mission to enact vigilante justice against a motorcycle gang wreaking havoc on a small town because the police force is too cowardly to do so.[70] Here we see some filmic inversion of the biker-gang outlaw trope. More heavily dictated by the western, with notes of anti-establishment, *Born Losers* borrows from the biker gang outlaw trope without absorbing it entirely. Instead of being the outlaw or anti-hero, Billy Jack becomes the conventional hero, who is ultimately let down by the established authorities. In a 1977 interview, Tom Laughlin was asked what nerve his character had struck to make the film series so successful. He answered,

> One is the hero. In all myths, the ego identifies with the hero, thereby growing in strength and stature. The hero is one who dares to take on the evil forces within or

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[69] The term refers to two separate filmic tropes; the super-soldier: a highly capable soldier with enhanced human abilities (sometimes further enhanced by science-fiction technology), and the savage: bloodthirsty, violent, war mongering enemies, who are often indigenous or minorities. Racial and paternalistic tones are typically evident. For more on the savage, noble-savage, and eventual transition into super-soldier/super capable soldier see Jeremy M. Devine's *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud's *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, and Michael Andregg's *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*.

[70] These themes will be revisited with increasing frequency in the 1980s.

without. You learn a lot about any culture by studying its heroes. Billy Jack represented the return of the hero. We had been through a period where the hero had been denigrated, especially by intellectuals. Stars would not play a hero because it was corny. The anti-hero influence had won the day; jaded cynicism was everywhere on the screen.[71]

No one wanted to buy the script according to Laughlin, and he left Hollywood to open a Montessori school. When he returned, he wasn't going to try to have Billy Jack produced but he began to hear stories – stories about a Marine veteran in Philadelphia who tried to stop a gang rape in broad daylight. The Marine called for the police but they never came, so he took it upon himself with only a rifle to intervene. He was later arrested and jailed for a year and a half. He struggled to verify the story, but not too long after his wife (Delores Taylor Laughlin) saw a documentary on the Hell's Angels that covered the Monterey rape case.[72] These two stories became the foundation for the revised version of Billy Jack and *The Born Losers*.

And while *The Born Losers* did return for a second and third film, the first film was not widely received (and the third would bankrupt Laughlin). One film critic noted,

> Yesterday's losers, as opposed to *The Born Losers*, were the hapless people who trooped into the DeMille Theater to see a sickening little motorcycle melodrama from American International Pictures that is also a trailing catchall of most motorcycle film clichés to date. Once again we have a coastal community in California plagued by a gang of sadistic cyclist-hoodlums as the good citizens tremble and the police dawdle over technicalities. Meanwhile, from their hangout, a deserted church, the cyclists terrorize the whole town and rape four girls. Will

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[71] Tom Laughlin and Beverly Walker, "BILLY JACK VS. HOLLYWOOD." *Film Comment* 13, no. 4 (1977): 24–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43450874.

[72] The Monterey Rape case refers to the 1964 rape accusations levied a group of Hell's Angels members in Monterey, California. The case immediately gained notoriety, but the charges were quickly dropped for a lack of evidence. Though no evidence was provided for these accusations, then Senator Fred Farr took up the cause demanding investigations of all motorcycle clubs in the state. Over the next few days, dozens of major news publications across the country published inflammatory articles on the Hell's Angles. "California Takes Steps to Curb Terrorism of Ruffian Cyclists," *The New York Times,* March 16, 1965; "Hell's Angels Called Threat on Wheels," *Los Angeles Times* March 16, 1965; "The Wilder Ones," *Time,* March 26, 1965; "The Wild Ones," *Newsweek,* March 29, 1965.

the girls testify? The whole business is laboriously detailed in E. James Lloyd's screenplay, even as it piously pleads for personal courage. But it is difficult to have empathy for the victimized youngsters after seeing them half-naked in beach-wear, coyly edging up to the cyclists. Tom Laughlin stoically plays a war veteran recluse who almost single-handedly squelches the gang. Abetting him is Elizabeth James as a collegian and rape victim, who is given to throttling around on her own cycle in postage-stamp attire.[73]

Laughlin had taken a risk with *Born Losers*, as it is one of the earliest vet-exploitation films of the Vietnam War. These films, which inverted prominent World War II filmic narratives turned the honorable heroic veteran into the anti-hero. Luckily for Laughlin, the vet-exploitation and anti-hero would become major themes within the film industry. Other films followed in his footsteps only a year later. Releases included *Angels from Hell* and *The Angry Breed*.[74]

In *Angels from Hell*, the main character comes home from Vietnam as a war hero and hoping to rebuild his motorcycle club. He's forced to use his special military skills to push back against the local police who fear what he is capable of.[75] *The Angry Breed* similarly invokes the veteran but pits him against the biker-outlaws. Here, the veteran is the hero, capable of standing up to and pushing back against the domestic crime that has overtaken American communities. Both films were poorly received. When *Angels from Hell* hit theaters, multiple press reviews referred to the film as tired, celluloid, and devoid

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[73] Bosely Crowther, "Screen: A Melodrama About Hippies: 'The Love-Ins' Opens at Victoria Theater," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1967.

[74] Rick Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," In *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 57.

[75] Smith, *Looking Away*, 154, 161.

of originality.[76] *The Angry Breed* was not a particular popular movie. Few press releases

emerged following its July release – in part because the distribution company did not host

any pre-screenings for press. The first review for the film was published in *Variety*

magazine in December of 1968, which noted that it performed unfavorably compared to

other vet-exploitation films of the year, which notably, did not perform well at all.[77]

In *Greetings*, Robert De Niro played a filmmaker, accompanied by his two

friends, a draft dodger and a Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorist, who explore

New York City.[78] *Greetings* was one of the more successful films of the era and the first

to address the topic of draft resistance. It was praised by *Variety* for its anti-

establishmentarian tone and enthusiastic message of non-conformity, as well as

Newsweek who celebrated its filmic techniques and script writing as one of a new and

emerging comedy. Roger Ebert, film critic for the *Chicago-Sun Times*, noted that while it

was a successful low-budget comedy and enjoyable film, its presentation included a

number of scriptwriting and directorial errors.[79] Other reviewers made similar criticisms,

but *Greetings* did perform well at the box-office and would return for a sequel two years

later. However, it wasn't entirely popular. As the first true comedy about the Vietnam

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[76] *Daily Variety*, June 13, 1968, p. 3, *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 1968, p. 19, and *The New York Times*, October 24, 1968, p. 55.

[77] *Variety*, December 25, 1968, p. 18.

[78] Their lewd behavior, eroticism, and peeping tom tendencies set up the revival of De Niro's role in *Hi, Mom!* (1970) where Jon is now a returned veteran turned pornographic filmmaker.

[79] In 2015, Robert De Niro returned to *Variety* for an anniversary interview where he noted that he didn't remember the praise from the original film review, but he did remember seeing it and remembered that the film did well at the box office. "Film Reviews: *Greetings*," *Variety*, December 13, 1968. Roger Ebert, "*Greetings*," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 30, 1969; Maline Saval, "Robert De Niro Remembers the Film Business Nearly 50 Years Ago," *Variety*, November 6, 2015.

War, and told through the lens of an anti-war, a-political, young-person, it received some negative reactions. One such reviewer noted,

What we have here is a trio of hippie-talking pals adventurously prowling the streets of New York and New Jersey, linking up with a succession of enigmatic girls and aiming some splintery, incoherent monologues at each other and, occasionally, the camera. Some of it is amusing, as when one of the lads is coached in the technique of draft-dodging. Most of it is strained and unfunny, with some generous nudity for nudity's sake and a hip sprinkling of four-letter words. One subject of mockery is President Johnson, who is shown in a newsreel clip defending his position on Vietnam. And a smirking actor named Gerritt Graham prances through the picture trying to disprove the findings of the Warren Commission. A typical disgusting scene shows him using a nude girl to tape-measure a simulated bullet trajectory. Of his pals, Robert De Niro and Jonathan Warden, the latter gives at least some evidence of a little talent. There's no doubt that young Brian De Palma, who directed, and Charles Hirsch, his producer, are determined and camera-minded. Next time they might try for something that matters instead of the tired, tawdry and tattered.[80]

However, criticisms like these were few and far between. So much so that in a couple of years De Niro's character would reappear in a direct sequel. Several other comedic takes on the War would also hit the big screen over the next two decades. But the turn towards comedy for some scriptwriters and directors was not the overwhelming

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[80] Howard Thompson, "The Screen: *'Greetings'* on 34th Street: Issues of Day Treated in Comic-Strip Style," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1968.

trend Hollywood would take over the next decade. Instead, films generally gravitated towards the dark and disturbing.

The Edge for instance, follows a young anti-war activist who sets out to assassinate the president in retaliation for the Vietnam War. As Julian Smith notes, "With the country uneasy over what many saw as a threat from radical students in the late sixties, and given the way life often tends to imitate art, the major studios gathered the mantle of responsibility."[81] In *Targets USA* two parallel storylines play out in a New Cinema horror-thriller. One follows an aging horror movie actor who becomes embittered and wants to return, the other a crazed Vietnam veteran who plans to go on a killing spree in Los Angeles. The film is loosely based on the events of Charles Whitman, a Marine veteran who killed 14 people and wounded 32 others when he went on a rampage, killing his family and opening fire on fellow-students at the University of Texas, Austin.[82] Reviewers did not praise the film, Roger Ebert said it "wasn't a good film but it is an interesting one."[83] Little of the film has much to do with Vietnam except invoking the memory of Charles Whitman. In later years the dangerous and sociopathic Vietnam veteran will become a prominent theme in Vietnam War films, but in this case, Whitman's massacre was credited to a brain tumor and not his military service.[84]

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[81] Smith, *Looking Away*, 142.

[82] "Profile of a Sniper: Easygoing," *The Free Lance-Star*, August 2, 1966; Gary M. Lavergne, "The University of Texas Shooting: A Tragic Day in History," *Texas Historical Association*, June 29, 2017, https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/university-of-texas-tower-shooting-1966.

[83] Roger Ebert, "*Targets*," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 15, 1968.

[84] Martin Waldron, "Texas Sniper's Tumor Is Found 'Highly Malignant,'" *The New York Times*, September 9, 1966; "Mass Murderer's Letter Revealed," *United Press International*, July 8, 1986; K.A. Strube, *Traumatic Brain Injury Graphing: A case study of Charles*. Whitman. J Forensic Sci. 2025; 70: 1635–1644. https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.70071; Don Pannen, "Fifty Years Later: Brain Tumor Possible Cause," *The Daily Texan*, July 30, 2016.

Few of the films released from 1958-1968 attempted to deal or reckon with Vietnam, but they all did attempt to make a statement about the war. For the earliest films, these statements were carefully crafted and generally abided by HUAC's Cold War guidance on geo-political concerns, but as the 1960s carried forward, Hollywood moved away from the self-censorship of the previous era. More and more film commentary echoed that of the youth movements emerging across the nation. Films adopted absurdism, comedy, or dark "noir" tones to communicate film's perception on the War. But really these films communicated the socio-cultural temperature of the 1960s – one that was distancing itself from the assumed socio-cultural hegemony of the previous decade.

THE SIXTIES AS REVOLUTION

As the Cold War persisted, the national consensus began to visibly fracture. American military presence in Vietnam attracted increasing scrutiny, raising broader questions about US global interventions. However, Vietnam did not become a central focus of media coverage or public opinion until the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. Even then, most Americans possessed little understanding of the conflict's reality. Their knowledge derived from existing Cold War narratives – domestic anti-communism, exceptionalist rhetoric justifying worldwide intervention, and previous experiences with China and Korea. This led them to view southeast Asian involvement as simply another front in the global struggle against communism. Consequently, there was little public interest initially, certainly nothing resembling the massive nationwide anti-war demonstrations that would dominate media coverage by 1968.

The lack of public interest in Vietnam meant early films addressing the conflict offered minimal explanations, instead reinforcing HUAC directives and Cold War narratives that had dominated 1950s cultural productions. The Gulf of Tonkin incident amplified perceived dangers of communist expansion in southeast Asia, enabling US officials to escalate Vietnamese involvement. What had previously existed as a mere footnote in global politics compared to the more visible conflicts with the U.S.S.R. and China suddenly transformed into a tangible confrontation demanding increased media coverage and public attention.[85] A year later when American combat troops landed in Vietnam, less than a quarter of the nation objected. However, in only three short years over two-thirds of Americans objected to the war in Vietnam. While the War's unprecedented television coverage made visible the reality of warfare and government whistleblowers brought US foreign policy missions into question, understanding the dramatic shift in public opinion requires examination of other critical forces – primarily the emergence of the New Left and culmination of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Cold War consensus portrayed America as a bastion of freedom, economic stability, and unity, but many Americans experienced life as second-class citizens, who were denied equality, opportunity, and collective security. The Civil Rights Movement, with roots in the late 1940s and reaching its climax in the early 1960s, exposed this contradiction. Well before Vietnam footage dominated national media, Americans

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[85] Before the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the United States engaged in a massive nation-building project in southern Vietnam, focusing on land reform and quietly attempting to reshape the Vietnamese political system. This approach proved both disastrous and costly. Prior to Kennedy's election, Eisenhower maintained a strong stance of massive retaliation, believing that a strong military presence and violent attacks would most efficiently win the conflict and protect the development of an independent South Vietnam. However, this strategy proved ineffective in Vietnam's dense jungles and rural farmland, where nuclear weapons would have long-term effects but not yield results comparable to those in Japan. The potential for retaliation from the U.S.S.R. or China also led to the abandonment of nuclear weapon use in Vietnam.

witnessed shocking violence against Black citizens, undermining the nation's self-purported image as a symbol of righteousness at home and abroad.[86] By 1960, the movement had gained enough momentum to orchestrate multi-state demonstrations after four Black students were refused service at a North Carolina Woolworth's. Reactionary violence against sit-in participants encouraged more demonstrations nationwide. By the end of the year, thousands of Americans had participated in demonstrations across dozens of cities. In 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality, a northern-based racial advocacy group, organized "Freedom Rides" to draw attention to interstate segregation in the South. When Freedom Riders were attacked, the local police departments and federal agencies failed to intervene.

The continued perseverance of racial advocacy groups and the growing popularity of national Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. made the intense racial violence of the South a highly visible stain on the nation. In 1963, Americans and international observers watched in horror as Birmingham police assaulted peaceful protestors with dogs and high-pressure firehoses. Civil rights groups had long been condemned as communists, investigated by the federal government and discredited by politicians, but the media presence of the 1960s illuminated how treatment of civil rights organizations was determined on the basis of race, not leftist ideology.[87] The non-violent

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[86] In 1954, the NAACP challenged "separate but equal" in Brown v. Board of Education, forcing segregation into national dialogue. The following year, the Montgomery Bus Boycott brought Southern racial tensions into the spotlight. White segregationists employed violent fear tactics to repress the movement and intimidate activists – bombing churches, targeting leaders' homes, and attacking protestors. The widespread visibility of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the violent reactions to their calls for racial equality brought the case to the Supreme Court, which once again ruled in favor of the civil rights leaders.

[87] For more on the use of leftists ideology to delegitimize and discredit progressive political movements, see *Cointelpro: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom* (Monad Press, 1976) and Ward

mechanisms of many civil rights institutions clashed with the brutal tactics of police and segregationists. This dynamic expanded the movement beyond traditional hotspots into regions where the racial status quo had remained relatively unchallenged. The federal government, who had long ignored the Jim Crow laws of the South, faced a pivotal choice – allow more public embarrassments like Birmingham or intervene. Hundreds of demonstrations took place across Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas in 1963 alone. The following year, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee extended its reach to encourage more demonstrations to call for legislative change to protect Black Americans not just in the South but nationwide.

By 1965, violent reactions to the Civil Rights Movement finally prompted federal protection. Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965, building upon legislation from 1957, 1960, and 1964. These measures represented the government's belated acknowledgement of its responsibility to ensure racial equality. Though many activists and leaders worked tirelessly to orchestrate marches, sit-ins, protests, and rallies Martin Luther King Jr. rose to prominence as the face for the national struggle for racial equality. King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech seemed to secure the Civil Rights Movement in the national spotlight. King's prominence and commitment to nonviolence made it more difficult for authorities to write off activists as radical leftists.

The staying power of the New Left and Civil Rights Movement highlighted national criticisms and called into question the perception of American identity and the exceptionalist versions of history that had been championed during the Cold War.

Churchill and Jim Vander Wall's *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (South End Press, 1990).

Activist groups that had, in the prior two decades, been considered communists and leftists were now entering the mainstream. As these organizations and causes gained more traction across the nation, membership rose and organizational networks emerged that blended various voices from varying regions. Together, the New Left and the Civil Rights Movement encouraged a national network system to enhance and highlight the voices of the most educated, the most oppressed, the most experienced.

Other influential voices, like Malcolm X, urged Black Americans to actively resist oppression. In 1965, as Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, violence erupted in Los Angeles' predominately Black neighborhood, Watts. A local journalist noted, "In Los Angeles the Negro was going on record that he would no longer turn the other cheek."[88] Racial tensions remained highly visible throughout the mid 1960s. Despite the Johnson administration's dialogue with Civil Rights leaders and new federal protections, Black Americans' growing discontent continued. The networks Black institutions had built in the 1940s and 1950s proved essential for the 1960s movement. Mass participation encouraged leaders to challenge broader systemic issues like class division and ideology.

The Civil Rights Movement represented just one facet of the fracturing Cold War consensus. Johnson's Great Society marked a significant shift from previous administrations, prioritizing domestic issues like education, poverty, and racial injustice. While not explicitly rejecting anti-communism, these initiatives highlighted American's struggle to deliver economic freedom and social equity across class and racial lines. This critique contradicted the exceptionalist narratives championed in the 1940s and 1950s.

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[88] Robert Canot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (Bantam Press, 1967).

Additional evidence for a national fracturing of the Cold War consensus prior to the height of the Vietnam War exists in the emergence of the New Left. Exemplified by groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the New Left fundamentally reshaped public discourse on college campuses in the early 1960s. These organizations called into question traditional power structures, advocated for participatory democracy, establishing an intellectual framework for anti-war activism long before Vietnam protests reached their peak.

CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION

By the 1960s, the mythology of American exceptionalism had undergone irreversible transformation, fracturing the Cold War's domestic national purpose. Growing numbers of Americans questioned core Cold War narratives: Could genuine safety exist in a world if proliferating nuclear weapons? Could security be achieved while the U.S. maintained its interventionist global posturing? New Left scholars were the first to attempt to answer these questions. To do so, they incorporated race, class, and gender into their analytical frameworks. They examined structural power systems defined by economic relationships and ideology. They published works that challenged traditional diplomatic and international relations analyses. This shift created a visible cohort of public intellectuals who openly questioned and condemned US government actions. It is no surprise that an immediate socio-cultural response to the New Left was the visible rise of a "counterculture" that rejected established Cold War societal norms.

The 1962 Port Huron Statement, published by SDS, represents the clearest merger of these intellectual and cultural challenges. This influential proclamatory document articulated the ways in which America's professed domestic values contradicted its

actions. SDS criticized the "complicated and disturbing paradoxes" in American society –

racial bigotry, exploitative global power dynamics, and destructive manufacturing

practices. Further, SDS rejected the complacency of the previous decade, identifying the

growing discontent among a generation raised under the shadow of the Cold War. Its

opening preamble observes,

> We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world; the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and of the people – these American values we found good, principle by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.
>
> As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss. First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism. Second, the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the bomb, bought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract "others" we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time.[89]

Understanding the Cold War national purpose as one that comprised of both domestic

and foreign policies illuminates the paradoxes identified by SDS. The foreign dimension

encompassed policies designed to secure post-World War II hegemony, while the

domestic dimension consisted of propagandized beliefs supporting those policies. The

Port Huron Statement condemned how various political, social, and cultural institutions

had violated the Cold War values they claimed to uphold. But despite these explicit

condemnations, the document avoids radical extremes – instead calling for participatory

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[89] Tom Hayden, "The Port Huron Statement," *Students for a Democratic Society*, June 15, 1962, transcript; American Progress, https://images2.americanprogress.org/campus/email/PortHuronStatement.pdf.

democracy and non-violent action to create a more equal and just society. It does not reject the values of the Cold War, but instead demonstrates concerned citizens demand for a return of the perceived loss of those values. The authors of the Port Huron Statement simultaneously demonstrate the success and failure of Cold War national purpose – expressing how thoroughly these ideals embedded themselves in the consciousness of the younger generations – complicating the cultural and social staying power of the supposed consensus.

Alongside civil rights activists, politicians who acknowledged economic disparity and educational failings, an emerging New Left intellectual movement and burgeoning counterculture, others challenged the domestic social norms of the Cold War – perhaps none more than the women's liberation movement, which challenged established gender norms and advocated for equal rights among the sexes. As women increasingly entered the workforce and pursued higher education, they questioned their prescribed social roles and political status quo. When Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, it immediately became a bestseller. The dramatic expansion of college enrollment during the 1960s further accelerated these changed, transforming campuses into centers of political activism and intellectualism that provided both the ideological foundations and resources for diverse social movements.

It is within this socio-political climate that the Vietnam War emerged. When the U.S. announced heightened engagement, most Americans broadly supported their government. The previous decade had effectively channeled staunch anti-communism into the culture of its citizens, and the extension of the American military in Southeast Asia appeared to be another limited engagement that upheld the values of the Cold War

national purpose. Not until the mid-1960s was the cost of these policies truly realized, but even then, most Americans trusted their government. In 1965, 76% of polled Americans said they trust their government "most of the time or just about always." In subsequent years, that number declined significantly but did not fall below 53% until after American withdrawal from Saigon. By 1975, only 36% of Americans responded in the affirmative. Decline continued until 1981 when positive responses dropped to 25%. Clearly, polling for government trust, though perhaps influenced in part by the Vietnam War, was impacted by events outside US intervention in southeast Asia.[90]

Other US socio-political events – such as the government's handling of student protests, the release of the Pentagon Papers, and the Watergate Scandal – provide some explanation for decline in government trust. Post-Vietnam events like the energy crisis, stagflation, and the perceived ineffectiveness of Jimmy Carter's presidency also contributed. However, none of these events fully explain the initial decline from 1958, when the Cold War consensus dominated social and cultural life in the United States. It is evident that the various organizations and institutions that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s exposed a socio-political climate that was not as ironclad as the cultural ephemera and political rhetoric of the era may lead one to believe. The Civil Rights Movement sparked political activism across the U.S. in a number of arenas. Additionally, the counterculture, as they came to be called, challenged the status quo of the previous generation. Like the Port Huron statement so aptly recognized, the social and cultural

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[90] David C. King and Zachary Karabell, *The Generation of Trust: How the US Military Has Regained the Public's Confidence Since Vietnam* (AEI Press, 2003), 1-6.

conditions in the United States reflected political conditions that were antithetical to the world they grew up and believed in.

The consensus did exist, but by the 1960s, the social, cultural, and political costs of the Cold War cracked the façade of what the Cold War consensus portrayed the nation to be. Concerns of racial injustice, rampant consumerism, and inequitable distributions of wealth had finally overpowered the anti-communist paranoia that inspired domestic conformity and cultural Americanization. The policies that enabled the U.S. military to expand into a global police force had begun to extract too high a cost on the nation. Moreover, the visibility of political groups further illuminated injustices and paradoxes in the American political and social spheres.

As a result, maintaining public opinion became more challenging. The ineffectiveness of strategic hamlet programs, Diem's increasingly oppressive regime, and the steady increase in military advisors (reaching 16,500 by Kennedy's assassination) all contributed to growing public skepticism about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. By 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson fully committed the U.S. to military intervention in Vietnam. In 1966, the number of troops in Vietnam rose dramatically to 184,000. A year later, that number increased again to 485,000. At the height of the War in 1968, 536,000 American troops were stationed in Vietnam. Though the majority of Americans supported Johnson's cause, increased presence in Vietnam over the next few years was met with growing opposition.[91] Debates over the necessity, legality, and morality of the

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[91] Historian Gary Hess notes that by 1965, sixty percent of Americans surveyed believed the military commitment was necessary, but twenty-five percent thought it was a mistake. In another poll, only forty-eight percent thought the intervention was necessary, while the other thirty-one percent believed the American government should negotiate terms and leave Vietnam. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

effort in Vietnam sparked national discourse that pulled Americans from their unquestioning faith in America's role as a superpower.

Shortly after the first combat troops landed in Vietnam, oppositionist groups began organizing demonstrations across the nation. Small, unorganized protests grew from hundreds of supporters to thousands. In just a few short months, the anti-war movement found more stable homes in teach-ins, marches, and non-violent acts of resistance. These highly visual demonstrations aroused pro-war counter-demonstrations, which further ignited debates regarding the conflict in Vietnam and America's role in the world. By the end of 1967, public support for the War was disintegrating. The following year, the Tet Offensive brought the War into U.S. living rooms in an unprecedented and unavoidable way.[92]

Anti-communist paranoia was no longer enough to justify the intervention in Southeast Asia. The religious revivalism of the previous decade was no longer as influential in the rapidly shifting cultural world of the 1960s. American Exceptionalist ideals were beginning to wane – not entirely, but enough for the rise of political groups who openly criticized the government to begin questioning the long-held beliefs of the nation's purpose. Vietnam exposed the volatility of safety and security in the modern world. Together – the Civil Rights Movement, emergence of the New Left, rise of a visible national counterculture, and the events of war functioned as a challenging socio-

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[92] Arguably the most turbulent year in American history, 1968 also saw heightened tensions with North Korea, the fracturing of the Civil Rights movement and the Students for a Democratic Society, the Los Angeles high school walkouts, the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., leading to a heightened interest in political activism and involvement.

political force that eroded the public's trust in their government and fractured their beliefs in the collective American experience.

Martin Luther King Jr., who amassed an incredible public following, spoke out publicly against the War for the first time in 1967. In his April 4, speech at the Riverside Church in New York City, he proclaimed, "there comes a time when silence is betrayal." Both anti-war and pro-social-justice, the hour-long speech proclaimed in great detail seven major points from which he opposed the War, with five suggestions for the U.S. to end the war in Vietnam and four courses of action the U.S. should take after the occupation ended. King's stance transcended racial boundaries, further fracturing the Cold War consensus that had previously united Americans across demographic lines.[93]

How do they judge us when our officials know that their membership is less than twenty-five percent communist, and yet insist on giving them the blanket name? What must they be thinking when they know that we are aware of their control of major sections of Vietnam, and yet we appear ready to allow national elections in which this highly organized political parallel government will not have a part? They ask how we can speak of free elections when the Saigon press is censored and controlled by the military

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[93] An additional study later conducted on this can be found in Christian Appy's *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, which illuminates the inequity within the U.S. military from 1965 to 1973 by mapping both geographically and economically where the bulk of the military "came from." What he finds surprising is not *where* they are from but *who* they are from – working-class or low-income families scattered around the country. This is particularly interesting because the Vietnam War was held at a time where the largest draft-age population existed in the country. 70% of draft age men served in Korea, over 12 million served in World War II, but during Vietnam, where a whopping 25 million men were eligible to serve only 2.5 million were sent to Vietnam. Furthermore, while the draft seems random and irregular, in its pseudo-lottery style, Appy determines that the military was comprised of nearly 25% poor, 55% working class, 20% middle class – with about a percent and some change reserved for sons of affluent families. Appy's data also suggests an interesting geographic issue – less than 2% of the nation was comprised of towns with less than 1000 people, yet 8% of service members killed in Vietnam came from these towns. In a number of participant interviews, Appy finds that working-class suburbs in big cities had the most draftees called to serve, but the affluent neighborhoods directly next to them, with similar populations and draft-age men, had a fraction of draftees called to serve.

junta. And they are surely right to wonder what kind of new government we plan to help

form without them, the only party in real touch with the peasants. They question our

political goals and deny the reality of a peace settlement from which they will be

excluded. Their questions are frighteningly relevant. Is our nation planning to build on

political myth again, and then shore it up upon the power of a new violence?[94]

While it would be several more years before academics could access the reports

on class and race demographics in the draft lottery and units sent to the front lines, the

existence of inequity was notable to historic participants. Servicemembers discussed it, as

did protestors. King was not alone in this observation or his calls for action; other

prominent Black activists such as Muhammed Ali, Malcolm X, and John Lewis had come

to similar conclusions. The Civil Rights Movement gained significant legislative and

political momentum due to its national visibility, and when the movement turned to the

Vietnam War as a prominent issue, it encouraged even larger groups of participants from

across the country.

By July of 1968, more Americans were participating in conversations about

Vietnam, foreign policy, and national politics. The debate between pro-war hawks and

anti-war doves became intertwined with deeper questions about identity and morality,

and the same unfounded, vague defenses for intervention in Vietnam no longer served as

strong reinforcements for public support. The end of 1968 brought about increased troop

presence in Vietnam, a ramp-up of the draft calls in order to fulfill the need for more

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[94] Martin Luther King Jr., "Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break the Silence," April 4, 1967, Riverside Church, New York; transcript, American Rhetoric, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm.

soldiers, and a significant escalation of media coverage. When Senator Fulbright accused

McNamara of falsifying testimony on the Gulf of Tonkin incident that allowed for

escalation in the first place, further distrust was sown into the political landscape. Draft

deferments for graduate students were seriously curtailed, and occupational deferments

were totally eliminated, altering the socio-economic protections that had existed for more

affluent communities. As the anti-war movement continued to grow, attracting a

significant number of draft resisters, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

stepped forward and publicly announced that the organization would defend all who

faced charges.[95] The visibility of the anti-war movement grew significantly at the

Democratic National Convention in Chicago when nearly 100,000 protestors clashed

with police and National Guard members.

The anti-war movement in the United States initially emerged from returning

veterans and underground press organizations they created in collaboration with civilians

and active-duty troops. From there, the anti-war movement spread across college

campuses and intersected with civil rights activists. Championed by a number of public

intellectuals, politicians, and public figures, and viciously defended by leftists and

liberals, the War debate was broadcast in print, radio, and television by some of the most

iconic media organizations. Critics included a slew of popular artists and musicians. At

the height of the anti-war movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, dozens of other

political groups joined anti-war veterans. Though these groups disagreed on how to end

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[95] Barbara Campbell, "A.C.L.U. Comes Out Against the War," *The New York Times*, June 4, 1970, https://www.nytimes.com/1970/06/04/archives/aclu-comes-out-against-the-war-to-act-for-immediate-end-urges-draft.html.

the War, what to do in its place, or why they opposed the War, they organized remarkably powerful demonstrations.

Veterans in the driving seat of anti-war demonstrations provided sobering levels of authenticity to the anti-war movement. The Cold War purpose had emphasized national patriotism, reflecting on soldiers as honorable entities of American rule of law and national purpose. As the Gallup Poll results have emphasized, from 1965 to 1968 a massive public shift in regard to support for the War was taking place across the nation. This flip was largely due to the role of returning G.I.'s, who organized a massive nationwide coalition whose influence extended well into New Left student groups, civil rights organizations, and environmental activist communities. The first G.I. protest took place in 1965 – but by the end of the decade, the anti-war movement had thousands of participants. The growing visibility of G.I.'s and Vietnam veterans opposing the War steadily eroded Cold War beliefs in the military-industrial-complex and the technological superiority of the U.S.

This is not to imply that everyday Americans were persuaded simply by the rising visibility of dissenters. Rather, it is to demonstrate that the heightened visibility of issues and voices of support instilled a profound sense of crisis in America. As political scientist Daniel C. Hallin notes, "public confidence in government declined dramatically during these years, public attachment to both political parties weakened, and the political system began a twenty-year period during which not a single president would serve two full terms of office."[96] This erosion of institutional trust represents perhaps the most

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[96] Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

significant fracturing of Cold War consensus, as Americans increasingly questioned the moral authority and competence of the government institutions that had previously been viewed as guardians of American security and values. There have, in all of America's wars, been dissenters and oppositionists – but never before has there been such a volatile reaction to US military engagement and at no point in American history has the consequence of dissent reached so far across the socio-political spectrum or historical timeline – it is clear from events of the late 1950s and early 1960s that the epoch was intensely volatile and that the staying power of victory culture and the threats of the Cold War had reached their climax long before the height of the War.

JOHN WAYNE TO THE RESCUE

In response to unrest John Wayne, staunch anti-communist and self-proclaimed patriot, set out to respond directly to the rising tensions over the Vietnam War and American identity. Wayne had long been a prominent pro-military voice. His long-running acting career began in 1928 with small film roles under his birth name, Marion Robert Morrison. His first leading role as "John Wayne" came in *The Big Trail* in 1930. By 1939, Wayne was a well-known all-American lead actor in a large number of Western films. His role as "Ringo Kid" most notably earned him significant notoriety. Though Wayne never actually served in the military, the origins of Wayne's super-patriotism and pro-military stance have been the subject of much analysis.

During World War II he visited the War front via the United Services Organization. Though, unlike most Hollywood stars eligible for military service, Wayne did not volunteer to fight in World War II, and he took advantage of all possible deferments. But his lack of military service did not restrict him from portraying himself

as a seasoned soldier on the big-screen. His characterizations regularly embodied the same elements – stoic and without fear, "he wasted no words, resisted emotion, and expressed himself through action." As David Luhrssen notes, "Wayne continually played the officer who refused to stand on ceremony and was impatient with bureaucrats, red tape, and politicians. He was always the man with a job that had to get done. American depended on his success."[97] Wayne played this character so often on screen that it became an integral part of his personality off-screen.

Despite his established pro-military reputation, Wayne faced significant challenges producing a Vietnam War film in the late 1960s. Previous films like *The Quiet American*, *Brushfire*, *A Yank in Vietnam*, *Operation C.I.A.*, and *The Shores of Hell* had performed poorly, and Hollywood hesitated to finance another film on a war that was growing increasingly contentious. This resistance only strengthened Wayne's determination. Deeply influenced by Cold War anti-communism, Wayne visited Vietnam in 1966 and 1967 to research his script and boost troop morale. He secured production assistance from the Johnson administration, though officials stipulated that the narrative must portray American government and troops favorably. Wayne openly embraced the request for propaganda.[98]

Much like *The Quiet American*, *The Green Berets* was based on a best-selling novel of the same name. The original novel was a biographical account written by Green Beret Robin Moore. His plot follows a Special Forces officer at a remote outpost near the

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[97] David Luhrssen, *The Vietnam War on Film: Hollywood History* (ABC-CLIO, 2009), 8.

[98] Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second* (University of Texas Press, 1995), 28-39.

Cambodian border who conducts highly covert ambush missions. Though marketed as a novel, Moore specified in his foreword that very little of the account was fictionalized. The work was an immediate success, selling 3 million copies in its first year in print. Similarly to Greene's novel, Moore's reflection received some negative attention from the American government. Where Greene took an anti-American pro-communist approach to his novel, Moore had been too honest regarding confidential and controversial matters – specifically on covert operations crossing into Cambodia.[99]

Major studios immediately expressed interest in purchasing the film options. Several offers were made before John Wayne ultimately purchased the rights. The film generated significant anticipation, enhanced by Wayne's iconic status. *The Green Berets* was Wayne's attempt to present the War through his ideological lens, one he believed would set the American public back on the right path.[100] The film is set into motion with the introduction of antiwar journalist George Beckworth, sent to interview the Green Beret Special Unit. Beckworth is openly critical of the War and the soldiers who defend it, alluding to the anti-war sentiments of the late 1960s. Beckworth repeatedly mocks the team for their "blind patriotism," functioning as the counterculture's on-screen representative. In response, he is invited to "see for himself" by Colonel Mike Kirby (played by John Wayne) and report to the American people what is *really* happening.

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[99] Luhrssen, *The Vietnam War in Film*, 9-10.

[100] The Pentagon originally rejected Wayne's screenplay for its portrayal of the Cambodian border crossings relayed by Moore. Wayne made many changes from Moore's original work to get the Pentagon to sign off on the script so he could receive military support for the film. The process was lengthy and precarious, and ultimately, Universal Studios backed out of the original deal. Wayne used his extensive network and called in favors until Warner Brothers agreed to pick up the production contract.

This obvious jab at journalists contends with the real-life conflict between the mainstream media and the pro-war hawks, who argued mass media was promoting antiwar fervor by falsifying reports in their coverage. Beckworth obliges and, after his experience with Colonel Kirby and his unit of Green Berets, is inspired to report the "truth," insinuating that journalists were not doing this to begin with. Wayne's message is clear, "seeing for yourself" would turn even the staunchest antiwar liberal into an avid supporter. The film retains this message throughout. The liberal journalist moves from staunch oppositionist to reluctant skepticism to eventual support. At the end of the film, Beckworth and Colonel Mike Kirby drive the point home.

> Kirby: What are you gonna say in the newspaper of yours?
> Beckworth: If I say what I feel, I may be out of a job.
> Kirby: We'll always give you one.
> Beckworth: I could do you more good with a typewriter.

This dialogue embodies the films ideological paternalism. Beckworth, a stand-in for the liberal anti-war movement, hasn't "seen" what needs to be "seen." He can't possibly understand the task at hand until the ever-patient, all-knowing Kirby and his trusty team of Green Berets show him the truth he has been missing – it *is* dirty work, but someone *has* to do it. The symbolism extends to America's role in Vietnam, "showing" the Vietnamese people the "truth" through American military guidance. The film concludes with Kirby walking off into the sunset with the young Vietnamese boy his unit has unofficially adopted and sworn to protect. He remarks to the young boy, "You're what this war is all about."

The Green Berets reinforces three central Cold War narratives: communism threatens freedom, America represents moral good, and the domino theory justifies intervention to prevent global communist takeover. Wayne provides evidence of this

when his character shows Beckworth confiscated weapons allegedly supplied by communists (a claim Wayne frequently made in real life), bolstering the argument that American soldiers pursued a righteous mission in Vietnam. He deliberately employs World War II style valorization to evoke audience sympathy and pro-war sentiment. Strategically, Wayne uses the Green Berets as a symbol of elite military excellence.[101] After 1952, Green Berets had become synonymous with Special Forces – highly qualified soldiers conducting unconventional warfare, reconnaissance, and national defense.[102]

This symbolism aimed to emphasize American military capability while appealing to Kennedy-era consensus. The film is further reinforced with the use of Sergeant Barry Sadler's 1966 hit "Ballad of the Green Berets." The ballad featured reads, "Fighting soldiers from the sky, fearless men who jump and die, men who mean just what they say, the brave men of the Green Beret." Though Wayne later said the story, in a way, could be about any war, it is detailed enough that it is clear Wayne is looking backwards to the Kennedy era. He would comment,

> It's about this war, but it's also about this special kind of soldier… The average Green Beret is a little older, more experienced, more professional than the average soldier… He's a man who has made up his mind about things, and who takes a pride in doing what it looks like has to be done. A word like duty doesn't sound strange to him.[103]

The film's portrayal of American forces is not the only polarized presentation. The Vietnamese are depicted as "savage" and inept. By displaying Vietnamese guerilla tactics

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[101] The symbolism of the green beret is a critical aspect of Wayne's interpretation of the war and later in Stallone's.

[102] "Special Forces History," *United States Army*, accessed November 9, 2020 https://www.goarmy.com/special-forces/sf-history.html.

[103] Roger Ebert, "Interview with John Wayne," *Chicago-Sun Times*, December 14, 2012, https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/interview-with-john-wayne.

as violent and barbaric, Wayne attempted to make the War more palatable for American audiences. In 1967, when Wayne wrote to Lyndon B. Johnson to request military support for his pro-war film, advisor Jack Valenti remarked: "Wayne's politics are wrong, but if he makes this film, he will be helping us." Unfortunately for Wayne, Valenti, and Johnson, *The Green Berets* did nothing to sway public opinion. To the new generation of the late 1960s, the film reeked of propaganda. The Vietnam "crisis" was about far more than the conflict in Vietnam, and Wayne's tone-deaf response only further perpetuated reactions of opposition. In Wayne's Vietnam, the traditional Western is recast. The Americans are the "good guys," the Vietcong are the "bad guys," and the peasants are "frightened townsfolk" in need of protection.[104] Wayne's depiction of the "flexible response" initiatives and land reform programs of the Kennedy administration were, at that point, long-failed programs.[105]

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[104] Kennedy implemented major land reform through the development of strategic hamlets. These small villages with reinforced protective walls aimed to separate "good" civilians from "bad" threats and protect the "good" from negative influences. However, the strategic hamlet program proved expensive and ineffective, requiring more oversight and funding than provided. It also imposed labor-intensive work on peasants forced to live there, making them more susceptible to revolutionary influences. This was of course a problem that was further problematized by the use of the term Viet Cong, which lumps all Vietnamese together under one umbrella term that became defined by race and not ideology or practice and therefore made all Vietnamese peoples a threat to Americans.

[105] Kennedy sought greater flexibility in dealing with the problems such as those in Vietnam, influenced by Rostow's 1960 publication, "The Stages of Economic Growth." Kennedy believed it possible to quickly build a modern nation in Vietnam, subscribing to Western ideals, bypassing stages where communism or anti-American sentiments might take hold. Kennedy relied on two strategic shifts to achieve this rapid modernization: flexible response and land reform. Kennedy increased funding for the Green Beret program, sending highly trained soldiers to Vietnam to fight a guerilla war using specific counterinsurgency tactics. This 'flexible response' approach aimed to engage the non-traditional warfare carried out by insurgent forces in both North and South Vietnam, rather than forcing the enemy into conventional warfare as in the Korean War. James Carter's 2008 *publication Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* notes that Kennedy took "flexible response" seriously, studying revolutionary leaders' writings and attending Green Beret training demonstrations. The Kennedy administration struggled with South Vietnam's development and management under the Diem regime. Diem's government proved inept and corrupt, refusing to implement necessary changes while increasing military and financial demands. In 1962 alone, Kennedy increased military aid, sending an additional 10,000 troops to Saigon along with modern military technology. However, this constant influx of American aid did little to control South Vietnam's cities or rural areas, as Diem's closest associates filled important

His attempt to trade the nostalgic American West for Southeast Asia to reinvigorate beliefs in the American identity was lost on the younger generation who came to age in the late 1960s.[106] The film was ultimately released to a climate disentangling from its former, unquestioning patriotic self. [107] Film critic Roger Ebert criticized it as a "cowboys and Indians" interpretation, noting "perhaps we could have believed this film in 1962 or 1963, when most of us didn't care what was happening in Vietnam," but television had brought the reality of war to Americans and *The Green Berets* was far from reality.[108]

Despite initially performing well at the box office (becoming one of the top ten box-office hits of the year), it received negative ratings among the general public and critics alike.[109] Renata Adler of *The New York Times* called it vile and insane and said it "represented the end of the traditional war picture and a tremendous breakdown of the fantasy-making apparatus in this country."[110] The marines who watched the film at a special release on a base in Vietnam responded equally as negatively,

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government roles and misused their power and access for personal gain James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 119.

[106] Leo Cawley, "The War About the War: Vietnam Films and American Myth," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 75.

[107] It is worth noting that *The Quiet American* (1958), *A Yank in Viet-Nam* (1964), *Operation C.I.A.* (1965), and *To the Shores of Hell* (1966) were all released in the United States and centered on the conflict in Vietnam. However, none of these films performed well upon release or were considered memorable box office hits.

[108] Roger Ebert, "*The Green Berets*," *The Chicago-Sun Times*, June 26, 1968, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-green-berets-1968

[109] Luhrssen, *The Vietnam War on Film*, 1.

[110] Rick Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 54.

> The audience of the Marines roar with laughter. This is the funniest movie we have seen in a long time . . . At the end of the movie, John Wayne walks off into the sunset with a spunky little orphan. The grunts laugh and threaten to pee all over themselves. The sun is setting in the South China Sea – in the East – which makes the end of the movie as accurate as the rest of it is.[111]

Wayne's attempted to resurrect patriotic faith in military and government failed dramatically. Perhaps most damning was the abysmal timing of the release. Wayne chose July 4, 1968 for release, another attempt to invoke World War II-esque patriotism, without anticipating how the Tet Offensive had devastated public support for the War.

Tet was considered largely a military victory for U.S. troops, but the widespread televised reports of continued resistance forced the Johnson administration to admit that the War effort was not going as well as the public had been led to believe. Public support fell further in February when Walter Cronkite, World War II veteran and trusted public media figure, announced on national television that "the war effort is mired in stalemate."[112] In truth, Tet was an eventual American military win. However, it exposed an actuality of the War that had been limited to audiences prior.

Professor James C. Wilson notes in his book, *Vietnam in Prose and Film*, that the U.S. government, across a multitude of political administrations had purposely limited information available to public, skewing numbers and data sets in order to demonstrate military success. He argues,

> The war became a war of attrition, in which success was measured by the body count – the number of dead Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers. Likewise, the success of the social programs was measured by the number of refugees

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[111] Ibid.

[112] "The Year That Shattered America," *Smithsonian Magazine*, accessed November 9, 2020, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/timeline-seismic-180967503/.

relocated, the number of strategic hamlets, etc. Numbers and more numbers, until obsession became fetish.[113]

Further, the limitation of accurate information purported results that could not be trusted.

He continues,

> Instead of honesty, Americans were given numbers: body counts, tonnage counts, mission counts, truck counts, troop counts, weapons counts…. counts? … The word had become alien and meaningless in its repetitions. It was if the government believed numbers, through their inviolability, could sanctify and shore up [their] policy.[114]

The official policy of five separate administrations was to "minimize" American involvement in the War. The realization of this, coupled with the rampant political activism the swept the nation, created a volatile socio-political landscape.

John Wayne's crusade to regain popular support for the Vietnam War overlooked the complex social and political landscape of the 1960s. The decade witnessed a monumental buildup of tense social and political realities. It's tempting to attribute the fracturing of the national consensus solely to anti-war protests over Vietnam. However, the reality is far more nuanced. The Vietnam War served as the final catalyst, bringing to a head numerous social tensions that had long been simmering beneath the surface of American society. The anti-war movement did not create these tensions; it provided a focal point that united and amplified existing political organizations and institutions, offering unprecedented visibility and momentum to various causes. The Vietnam War has long been held responsible for the socio-cultural fracturing of the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is evident that the socio-cultural fracturing of the nation in terms of

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[113] James C. Wilson, *The Vietnam War in Prose and Film* (McFarland Press, 1982), 25.

[114] Ibid.

ideology, political beliefs, and collective identity was a phenomenon that predates the Vietnam War (or at least public reception of the Vietnam War). But it is also evident, that the Vietnam War was used as a vessel to express the various condemnations of the politically conscious activists of the long-sixties.

Wayne's belief that public distaste for the Vietnam War could be quelled by simply "showing" people that their viewpoint was misguided grossly underestimated the depth and complexity of the social changes underway. He failed to recognize that opposition to the War was not merely a matter of misinformation or lack of patriotism but a symptom of broader disillusionment with traditional American values and institutions. Pro-American Cold War warriors came in many forms. Some of them looked like John Wayne who emphasized the righteousness of military action – even if it wasn't "pretty." Others, like Dooley, saw nation-building and American support in de-stabilized regions through rose colored glasses. Most though, looked like the idealistic national beliefs emphasized in the Port Huron Statement.

But as the War waged on, and the reality of combat in Vietnam was made more visible to the nation, the world Dooley and Wayne believed in seemed more distant. The anti-war movement did not create this disillusionment but provided a platform for expressing various social and political grievances that had been building for years. It became a rallying point for diverse groups – civil rights activists, feminists, students, and others – who saw the Vietnam War as a symbol of everything they believed was wrong with American society and foreign policy. Wayne and others who sought to "correct" public opinion about the War addressed only the surface manifestation of much deeper societal shifts. The Vietnam War did not create these shifts, but it did accelerate them,

bringing long-simmering tensions to a boil and forever altering the American political and social landscape.

As a result of these boiling tensions and the failure of Wayne's Vietnam to sway the masses, Hollywood once again shied away from producing films on the Vietnam War. Though, the hesitancy of production and distribution companies did not halt the actual production of Vietnam War films. As made evident in the next chapter, numerous films dealing with the Vietnam War in some capacity were released from 1969-1978. These films, often removing the War as an on-screen development, chose to utilize the tones of the War, the impact of it, the consequence of it rather than the actuality of it. These films emphasized the era's overwhelmingly anti-war sentiments and depicted increasingly violent narratives. In the next chapter, the delineation of Cold War values that reinforced the nations purpose abroad and its identity at home is made more evident.

CHAPTER THREE

COMING HOME, 1969-1978

> We didn't know who we were till we got here. We
> thought we were something else. – Robert Stone.
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> I think we have all underestimated the seriousness
> of this situation. – George W. Ball

The 1960s marked a period of unprecedented turmoil in American history. The decade challenged the established order and fractured the post-World War II consensus. The Civil Rights Movement exposed systemic inequality that had long been masked by national mythology. The New Left challenged the status quo and applied pressure to the promise of liberalism, placing emphasis on the need for greater change. The counterculture exposed the many hypocrisies of the era. The failure of Johnson's Great Society programs further derailed the belief in American security. The long sixties witnessed the erosion of public trust in government institutions, disrupting beliefs in the American mythos and creating a deep divide between those who supported the status quo and those who sought radical change.[1] The Vietnam War has long been held responsible for this disruption of purpose abroad and cultural hegemony at home, but in truth, the Vietnam War served as the final affront of a long-growing schism in the American story.

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[1] The "long sixties" is a term invoked by historians to reference the broad nature of the era – one with roots in the mid 1950s that did not wane until the early 1970s. I would define this time frame as one that begins in 1954 and ends in 1973, though some flexibility in these dates could be considered. A number of scholars have written on this concept, referencing the various movements and organizations that dominated social, political, and cultural spheres of the 1960s. For a broader discussion on this see *Tom Hayden's The Long Sixties: From 1960 to Obama,* Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, and Edward P. Morgan's *The 60's Experience: Hard Lessons About Modern America*.

As the divide between anti-war activists and those in positions of authority grew, so too did the social violence surrounding them.[2] On-screen violence captured by newsreels and publications matched the social violence surrounding the actual conflict. The violence at home and abroad symbolized for many the detachment from Cold War values of safety and security and the abandonment from the promises of liberalism. Films, music, literature, comics, and other forms of cultural ephemera, alongside political rhetoric and social divides, hinged on growing and more direct forms of violence.[3] A result of this socio-political clash is evident broadly in the cultural productions of the era. Specifically, Vietnam War films from 1969-1978 demonstrate an increasing trend towards emotional disturbance, social violence, and political disillusionment, mirroring

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[2] Social violence is a term used to denote the various reactions and consequences that can be imposed upon a historical actor. Sometimes, these are traditional forms of physical violence – others, they are less obvious. More insidious forms of social violence include threat, harassment, condemnation, "othering," and damage or disruption to social structures, groups, or individuals. It is important in this case to consider positions of authority as opposed to specific actors. For instance, government organizations like the FBI orchestrated social violence through the COINTEL Program, the military and national guard orchestrated social violence to protestors and dissenters. These forms of social violence are more obvious, than say, the prisons that housed draft resisters, or the draft boards that condemned young men across the country to service in the War. Other forms of social violence might include prosecutors and judges in cases like the infamous trial of the Chicago Seven (Eight) or the Catonsville Nine. It may also include academic boards who punished students for their roles in publishing anti-war materials or participating in on-campus sit ins. It certainly can be extended to the economic consequences or legal persecution of those ostracized for their beliefs.

[3] There has been a long history of social and political violence in the United States, but in many ways, violence was often directed at perceived "others." Those enslaved and later freed, ethnic and racial minorities, political dissenters, outside and internal enemies, and those persecuted for religious views, sexual preference, and social disobedience have often been at the receiving end of this violence, but the long sixties saw the rise of violence towards visually similar groups. The consensus of the majority "white" Americans, suspected or perceived as middle class, who were educated to some degree and held communal beliefs regarding the vision of American purpose, were long considered a unit, held together by communal beliefs and social similarities. The Vietnam War exposed a great divide in this supposedly homogenous group, inciting violence internally, with no clear distinctions between who the majority was and who the "other" would be. For more on this topic, see Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* or *Regeneration Through Violence*. Other important commentaries include Richard Drinnon's *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, and Liam Downey's *The Violent Underpinnings of American Life: How Violence Maintains Social Order in the US*.

the existing socio-political struggles of the era. An analysis of 1969-1978 highlights a drastically different America than that of the previous generation which sought to memorialize the goodness of American forces, policy, and ideology.

EVOLUTION OF VIETNAM WAR FILMS, 1969-1978

Cold War fears and anxieties drove filmic narratives of the 1950s. These anxieties translated into a number of major themes or tropes, but most prominent were overt anti-communist and pro-American narratives. Productions emphasized the superiority of the democratic and capitalist processes, the moral obligation of carrying out good in the face of danger, and promoting the heroism of the U.S. and its allies in and after World War II.[4] They valued consumer products, self-made success, and individual actions against the threat of a collective norm. These trends continued well into the 1960s reflecting on the ideologies of the consensus and driven by the feel-good national story of World War II. Of the few films produced on the Vietnam War prior to 1968, even fewer commented on the actual issues of the conflict or provided explanations of American presence there. Instead, these films portrayed the United States in Vietnam as a heroic secondary actor rather than a primary force, layering in a new conflict to the accepted theme of World War II heroism and Cold War righteousness.[5]

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[4] Pro-American anti-communist films include *Iron Curtain* (1948), *Bells of Coronado* (1949), *Conspirator* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1949), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), *Atomic City* (1952), *The Hoaxters* (1952), *My Son John* (1953), *Trial* (1955), and *Rio Bravo* (1956). Films on US heroism and World War II include *Casablanca* (1942), *Flying Tigers* (1942), *Wake Island* (1942) *Air Force* (1943), *Destination Tokyo* (1943), *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944) *Battleground* (1949), *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Go for Broke!* (1951), *The Longest Day* (1962), *The Great Escape* (1963), *In Harm's Way* (1965) to name a few.

[5] This methodology of filmmaking and screenwriting had also adopted the Korean War with little to no public reaction or political backlash.

But as US involvement in Vietnam intensified and support for intervention in southeast Asia wavered, Hollywood attempted to move away from tales depicting US military force in southeast Asia. For the first time post-World War II, significant political backlash to military involvement abroad threatened views on containment. John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) sought to rectify that by redirecting public opinion, but his feel-good paternalistic narrative failed to capture the nuance of the complex social and political landscape of the late 1960s.[6]

The failure of *The Green Berets* emphasized the risk of invoking Vietnam as on-screen place at the height of the War. However, Hollywood did not remove the War entirely from films produced. Instead, they retained the conflict as an undertone and plot device, removing Vietnam only as an on-screen place and eliminating the conflict as a controversially visible element. Instead, they used the socio-political climate surrounding the War. This worked to depict its effects in the real world on the narrative, character, or setting of the imagined world without invoking the precarious reality of the conflict and potentially alienating viewers with explicit reference. As a result, films in the late 1960s into the mid to late 1970s that invoked Vietnam typically did so through the anti-war movement, effects on the home front, or the returned veteran.

Because producers and executives were so hesitant to take the audience to Vietnam through filmic narrative, some scholars argue that the Vietnam War film genre does not exist.[7] It is worth noting that regardless of the direct or implied portrayal of

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[6] *The Green Berets* has long been a focal point for scholars as it is the only film produced about the War while it was actively taking place and because the reception demonstrates a clear cultural shift across the nation.

[7] There are two central arguments in regard to whether or not Vietnam War films constitute a genre. Either they do not because there are too few films, and the small amount that reasonably exists lacks a cohesive formula and, therefore, cannot accurately be analyzed together. The other argument is that there

Vietnam, at least ninety Hollywood films were produced from 1969 to 1978 that invoked

some aspect of the War. We can analyze the films in this time period through four

distinct categories: films that primarily focus on the anti-war movement (AA), home

front (H), Vietnam veteran (VV), or the American War in Vietnam (AVW).[8]

    Anti-war movement films portrayed protestors or anti-war themes and were most

popular in the early period of 1969-1972. Films dealing with the home front reflected the

various ways that the Vietnam War irrevocably altered the social landscape in the United

States and were equally as popular in the early period of 1969-1972. Films that focused

on the anti-war movement or the home front tended to be crossover films that focused on

both, connecting these elements as two sides of one coin. Films that dealt with Vietnam

veterans as a primary mode of narrative storytelling were by far the most popular

throughout the entire period of 1969-1978. These films were produced in the most

significant quantity because the use of the war-affected veteran could expand into a

number of different storytelling techniques and filmic genres.[9] The smallest of the four

categorizations during this time frame were films that dealt directly with the American

are far too many films, so there are no distinctions that can be used to craft subcategories. However, broadly scholars accept that films that attempt to deal with Vietnam do so through four arenas – the veteran (VV), the war at home (H), revenge/POW or combat (AVW), and the anti-war movement (AA). These four categorizations are not traditional genres, so even the agreement stirs debate regarding the shared meaning and symbolism within films that fall into any given category. For further discussion see David Everett Whillock, "Defining the Fictive American Vietnam War Film: In Search of a Genre." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1988): 244–50. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797552.

[8] The United States was not the only nation producing films on the American War in Vietnam. For this project, only films produced in the United States by major production companies in Hollywood were considered, as those were the films that would have had the most impact and visibility in the nation at the time. A large number of other films produced independently in the U.S. or abroad by major production companies also had influence. A nearly complete list can be found in the Appendix.

[9] Looking at the early period of 1969-1972, at least twenty-eight films were produced. In the mid-period of 1973-1975, twelve films were produced, all of which were centered on the Vietnam veteran. In the late period of this era, from 1976-1978, another eighteen productions were released.

War in Vietnam. Only four were produced from 1969-1978, three of which were released

in 1978.[10] However, regardless of sub-categorization, analysis of productions across all

three timeframes from 1969-1978 depicts narratives, storylines, and characters that

express increasing levels of emotional disturbance, aggression, violence, and political

disillusionment, emphasizing a clear breakdown of traditional Cold War values.[11]

HIPPIES, YIPPES, BIKERS, AND VIGILANTE JUSTICE

Our contemporary cultural memory of the long sixties tends to center on the

counterculture, typically invoking images of young people with long hair and sandals

who indulged in drug culture and lived on communes.[12] Images of the era's rebellious

youth remain the poster children for radical change. The term "counterculture" has

become an amalgamation that broadly represents the various youth movements of the

period as anti-establishment "hippies" who rejected the social norms of their parents'

generation. They are remembered through terms like "free love," "flower power," and

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[10] *The Boys in Company C*, *Go Tell the Spartans*, and *The Deer Hunter* were all released in 1978. Prior to these releases, only one other film that depicted the American War in Vietnam was released by a major picture production company – *The Losers* in 1971. Because 1978 was the start of the transition of Hollywood films towards combat-centered filmic narratives, it was considered that perhaps 1978 be included in the next chapter, however, the intention, tone, and content of these three films more closely align with the themes, tropes, and symbolic elements of this particular sub-period. It is also worth noting that the production for these three films exceeded twelve months, reflecting a more significant relationship to the events of this particular chapter as opposed to the events of the next chapter.

[11] The three timeframes analyzed in this chapter are 1969-1972, 1973-1975, and 1976-1978. The early timeframe of 1969-1972 is best defined through films that highlight the anti-war movement and counterculture. In the mid-period, films highlight the deeply disturbed and emotionally damaged veteran. In the later period the time frame, Hollywood returns to Vietnam, bringing the War back to the big screen in the form of combat.

[12] Cultural or collective memory is the operative metaphor which translates the national or communal experience that often interlaps with study of mythology, ideology, and individual experience. Broadly, the study argues that culture is experienced independently and publicly. For more on the scholarship behind collective memory or the applications of cultural memory, see Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (DeGruyter, 2010).

"psychedelic rock," sporting bell bottoms and old Army jackets whilst rejecting modern consumerism and protesting the Vietnam War. Popular culture found representations of the counterculture alluring – whether in its comedic value or artistic representation, and so these images and mythologies of the various youth movements of the 1960s live on in collective memory.[13]

However, the counterculture was an incredibly broad and loosely tied social and cultural unit across the nation. True, hippies and their free love did exist. But so too did the yippies, civil rights organizations, New Left intellectuals, the independent philosophical and religious groups who rejected mainstream familial and spiritual beliefs, as well as the less organized but far greater numbers of rebellious youth who were often a-political but pushed back against the conservative restraints of Cold War ideology nonetheless. Counterculture, as an academic term, refers to the organizations and movements that rebelled against the social, cultural, and political norms of the previous era, and though these groups shared in that aspect, they often had little in common otherwise. What they did share was a general inclination towards anti-war sentiments. As a result, these independent organizations and groups operating on the margins of society found great power and visibility in demonstrating against the War.

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[13] The counterculture is a term that invites controversy among scholars – who exactly quantifies as part of the infamous "counterculture?" Broadly, anyone that was counter to the dominant culture should be included in this grouping, however, popular culture has created a mythology around this term and has perhaps over-exaggerated the unity of this group. For some more nuanced discussions on the counterculture see Michael Allen's article titled "'I Just Want to Be a Cosmic Cowboy': Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of the Counterculture," Stephen S. Mucher and Carrie E. Chobanian's "The Challenged of Overcoming Pop Culture Images of the Sixties," Simon Frith's "Rock and the Politics of Memory," and Arthur Marwick's "The Cultural Revolution of the Long Sixties: Voice of Reaction, Protest, and Permeation."

As such, films capitalized on the pairing. For some, the merger was an authenticator for audiences, mimicking reality. This is evident in films like Arlo Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant* (1969). Starring Guthrie as himself and based on his 1967 satirical folk song, "Alice's Restaurant Massacre," the film pulled the cultural context of the late sixties directly onto the big screen. A contemporary reviewer of *The New York Times* noted,

> On a more profound level, it's about the America of the nineteen-sixties, which is like a dog being wagged by a tail pronounced "VEETnam," about the continuity between generations (as well as the gap), about the mindlessness of authoritarian systems, which it treats with gentle satire, about the responsibilities of love, which can be terribly painful, about the ceremonies of death — about almost everything, in fact, except Alice's restaurant.[14]

This clash is overtly stressed in *Alice's Restaurant*. Directed by Arthur Penn and co-written by Penn, Guthrie, and Venable Herndon, the film follows Guthrie on his travels to visit his friend Alice for Thanksgiving.[15] Through a series of comedically absurd events, Arlo finds himself before a Vietnam draft board, barred from service for having once littered, an ultimately positive outcome for the anti-war demonstrator.[16] But the film does more than recount the events that inspired the original song, it hones in on the

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[14] Vincent Canby, "Movie of Arlo Guthrie's '*Alice's Restaurant'* Opens," *The New York Times*, August 25, 1969. https://www.nytimes.com/1969/08/25/archives/movie-of-arlo-guthries-alices-restaurant-opens.html

[15] Alice and her real-life husband are evidence that the counterculture wasn't just for the youth and that the "establishment" was not incapable of change but rather repudiatory of it.

[16] In 1967, Arlo really had been traveling to have Thanksgiving with his friend Alice Brock and her husband Ray, who really lived in a former church and operated a small restaurant in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Arlo really did offer to take the trash out with his friend, Rick Robbins, but when they got to the city dump it was closed – instead of returning to it another day, they dropped it at the ravine. Four days later on November 29, 1965, Arlo and Rick were charged with illegally disposing of rubbish, forced to pay a twenty-five dollar fine, and to go back to the ravine and clean up the mess they had left. David Sears, "A Brief History of 'Alice's Restaurant,'" *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 20, 2017, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/brief-history-alices-restaurant-180967276/

momentous drive of youth movements to reject the normative and question authority. The film romanticizes a better, nonmaterialistic, almost-utopian future that lives up to the ideals the Guthries were famous for – exploring the alienation of the sixties youth, exposing the hypocrisy and farce of the established and proposing new, meaningful alternatives to life. The final cut of *Alice's Restaurant* is an accessible, well packaged narrative that highlighted the ways in which the War leaned into the realm of absurdity, echoing the condemnations of previous films like Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), which had surprised audiences with its black humor only five years prior.

 Alice's Restaurant calls upon the actual participants from the events recounted in the film and joins other noir and controversial filmmakers in its attempt to ridicule and criticize social and political issues. The film features, for instance, the Stockbridge Chief of Police, who noted to *Newsweek* that if anyone was going to make him look like an idiot, he should be the one to do it.[17] *Alice's Restaurant* also features the actual judge who oversaw Guthrie's trial; the real Alice Brock made several cameo appearances, though she declined to play herself. Other famed folk singers such as Lee Hays and Pete Seeger made appearances that added to the cultural context of the film and the entertainment of audiences.[18]

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[17] Paul D. Zimmerman. "*Alice's Restaurant's* Children." *Newsweek*, September 29, 1969, 101–106.

[18] Its success indicates the monetary and ideological value of both the original song and those who agreed with its subversiveness. Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* listed *Alice's Restaurant* as the third best film in 1969. It was later nominated for Best Director at the 1969 Academy Awards, as well as for Best Drama Written Directly for Screenplay in 1970 at the Writers Guild of America Awards, and took third place at the Laurel Awards in the Golden Laurel for Comedy category. For those who were turning on and tuning in to the cultural realities of the 1960s, *Alice's Restaurant* was proof to the socially conscious fans of Guthrie, Hays, and Seeger that their views were beginning to enter the mainstream.

Other films like *Easy Rider* (1969) highlighted the visual aesthetic of the

counterculture and honed in on rising social tensions.[19] *Easy Rider*, like *Alice's*

Restaurant, spoke to the necessity of individual freedom and accentuated the

counterculture's belief that blindly accepting normative structures was a farce. And it too

was a massive commercial success.[20] Like *Alice's Restaurant*, *Easy Rider* brought in a

cast worthy of public discourse. Featuring well-known actors of the moment: Peter

Fonda, Dennis Hopper (who also served as co-writers alongside Terry Southern), and

Jack Nicholson, all of whom would go on to produce, star in, or co-write a number of

anti-war films.[21] The prominence of these big Hollywood names helped frame *Easy*

Rider's political tones for viewers the same way Guthrie's legacy as a social

commentator and anti-war demonstrator had. Fonda and Hopper were A-list stars, and

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[19] Though not necessarily intended to be a film about the Vietnam War, its iconic imagery and focus on the cultural divide of the moment has secured its legacy as a youth anthem film of the counterculture. *Easy Rider* is credited for the growing visibility of the counterculture in film and was praised for its focus on how violence was enacted against those who failed to conform to the norms of the mid-sixties. The film was produced by Pando Company in association with Raybert Productions, a company co-owned by Bert Schneider, who was behind the production of the anti-war documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971). The informative film, directed by Peter Davis, focuses on the Pentagon Papers trials and the promotional propaganda released by the Department of Defense.

[20] One that directly influenced an onslaught of similar films. However, as David Chasman (a once vice president of production at United Artists) noted in a 1983 interview, the films that followed were "the equivalent of bikini movies, made by a panic stricken set of studio managers who were doing what they thought teenagers wanted." This claim is mimicked in another article on Hollywood and US Foreign Affairs published in 1986, where the author notes that "anti-war films like *The Strawberry Statement* and *Getting Straight*… were flimsy youth-rebellion flicks that proved of little interest to the generation to which they pandered." Aljean Harmetz, "5 Films with Political Statements Due in Fall," *The New York Times*, September 10, 1983; Walter Goodman, "Film View: Hollywood's Spotty Record on Foreign Affairs," *The New York Times*, August 31, 1986.

[21] Peter Fonda would also star in *Two People* (1973) about an Army deserter who falls in love with a fashion model and travels the world with her and co-wrote *Enemy* (1990), an adventure drama about a CIA operative posing as a journalist during the Vietnam War in order to assassinate a North Vietnamese official. Dennis Hopper starred in *Tracks* (1976) which follows a soldier with PTSD accompanying the remains of his dead friend and fellow soldier to his funeral, *Apocalypse Now* (1979) the famed Francis Ford Coppola film depicting Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* retold through the Vietnam War, and *The American Way* (1986) a story about a group of Vietnam veterans highly trained in psychological warfare.

though Nicholson was still early in his career he had made a name for himself starring in several well-received films during the late sixties.[22] Southern was a well-known anti-war activist whose productions contained elements of his anti-establishment views. He had made a name for himself after co-writing *Dr. Strangelove* alongside famed director Stanley Kubrick.[23] He also co-wrote several other absurdist works that rejected the status quo, such as *Barbarella* (1968) and *Magic Christian* (1969).[24] These films highlighted the nonsensical, capturing the preposterous notion of normative social behaviors of the early and mid 1960s – and how the expected social behaviors of the Cold War were beginning to wane.

But what these films really highlight is how the supposed youth-led movements of the 1960s and anti-war organizations were actually led by established, well-known, long-

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[22] He co-wrote and produced several others like *Head* (1968), a social commentary vignette film starring The Monkees. *Head* like *Easy Rider* plugged a decidedly anti-establishment tone, valuing individuality and expressionism whilst acknowledging the hypocrisies and absurdism of the era. He also co-wrote and directed the social satire *Drive, He Said* (1971), which follows a college basketball player whose roommate is obsessed with dodging the draft. Like *Head* and *Easy Rider*, *Drive, He Said* was produced as social commentary to draw the audience into the political sub-text of the historical moment. He would also star in *The Last Detail* (1973), a comedy-drama commenting on the absurdist nature of military values.

[23] *Dr. Strangelove* is based on the 1958 novel *Red Alert*, written by RAF intelligence officer named Peter George, which follows an American commanding officer who is driven mad from Cold War anxieties and ultimately uses his authority to deceive his command.

[24] Southern's role as an intellectual post-Beat literary critic, "new journalist," and author (co-writing the novel *Candy* in 1968) defined his legacy. He was remembered in an article from *The New York Times* post-mortem as "a quintessential artist of the counterculture, using anarchic humor to strike out against sexual repression, militarism and political corruption." And his influence in *Easy Rider* is certainly notable through that description. His reputation as a provocative intellectual also worked to enhance the advertising for the film. As a satirical writer for *Esquire*, Southern attended the protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention Chicago. He would later be called back to testify at the infamous trail of the Chicago Seven (Eight). Mel Gussow, "Mocking Foe of the Status Quo; Terry Southern Literary Archives Go to New York Public Library," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2003. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/03/books/mocking-foe-status-quo-terry-southern-literary-archives-go-new-york-public.html Eric Been, "Terry Southern's Lucid Absurdities," in *Arts & Culture*, JSTOR Daily, November 25, 2020. https://daily.jstor.org/terry-southerns-lucid-absurdities/

standing individuals. Actors, editors, screenwriters, directors, musicians were among the first to take the reins for what would become cultural iconography best associated with the youth – perhaps because the ideals of the Beats, progressives, and absurdist's appealed most to young people who had not yet been convinced in the authority and validity of the world of their parents. Or perhaps, like within the Civil Rights Movement, it is because these idealists had the means and capabilities to organize and instruct before handing over the reins to the newer generation.

In either case, it was those who were well established with the platform to orchestrate change who pushed for the anti-war movement to enter the mainstream. And this push was not only evident in the types of films created or perspectives sung about. For instance, Southern signed the Writers and Editors War Tax Protest alongside some of the most visible public intellectuals of the moment: James Baldwin, Peter Davis, David Dellinger, Allen Ginsberg, Dr. Benjamin Spock, Kurt Vonnegut, and Howard Zinn, to list a few. The protest was published in *The New York Times* as a full three-page spread under the title, "If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year," alongside an excerpt of Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* and the message,

> We, the undersigned writers and editors, believing that American involvement in Vietnam is morally wrong, pledge: 1. None of us voluntarily will pay the proposed 10% income tax surcharge or any war designation tax increase. 2. Many of us will not pay that 23% of our current income tax, which is being used to finance the war in Vietnam.[25]

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[25] Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Memorandum: Writers and Editors War Tax Protest Information Concerning (IS)*, SAC New York (100-161242)(C). Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/WritersAndEditorWarTaxProtest/page/n3/mode/2up.

The newspaper spread was documented in a confidential FBI memorandum.[26] How successful the ad was remains to be discovered, but the performance of the action – running an ad in one of the most nationally recognized newspapers in the country with one of the highest readership levels – is certainly indicative of the growing power and visibility of conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War and their influence within the established social order. The Cold War constraints HUAC had on Hollywood were quickly losing their hold. Bold political actions (running advertisements in nationally recognized newspapers, writing songs, producing films) encouraged others to test the once rigid boundaries and increased overall participation.

What is often described as intergenerational disharmony during the Vietnam War was clearly not bound to generational lines. Though much of the counterculture as described in *Alice's Restaurant* (both the song and the film) and *Easy Rider* are significantly younger than the establishment authority figures who oppose them, the reality was that much of the New Left and anti-war activists were of the older generation. Their authority and status in their fields – as authors, icons, noted intellectuals or political activists afforded them the platform to lead various political actions. But broadly, the counterculture was comprised of young people who showed up in great numbers on college campuses, city marches, sit-ins, and other demonstrations. Anti-war movies reflected this as well. For instance, in *Hail, Hero!* (1969) a college student quits school to join the army, convinced he can end the War using love instead of bullets. The screenplay

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[26] The final page of the spread provides a cut-out mail in to support the Writers and Editors War Tax Protest as well as a note stating that "willful refusal to pay federal income taxes" carries a potential one-year prison sentence and or up to 10,000 dollars in fines.

was based on the 1968 novel of the same name by John Weston, who sought to narrate

the growing generational gap between young idealists and their ultra-patriotic parents.

The film's tagline, "The generation gap is more than just long hair, loud music, or a

misunderstanding of ideals between father and son. It is a void from which a new force

must emerge, a new hero!" speaks broadly to the effort of the film (and the book) – to not

only identify the socio-cultural gap between the two generations, but to bridge it.[27]

The rising fame and popularity of socially conscious playwrights, songwriters,

actors, authors, and other public icons only further enhanced the anti-war notes in films

of the era. In a cyclical nature, films were written and produced with these stars in mind;

they were advertised to current fans, and the success of the films (or simply the

prominence of them) influenced additional, more neutral audience members to "tune in"

to what was happening around them. This is not meant to imply that all audience

members walked out of theaters as radical revolutionaries but rather to insist that the

more visible the anti-war movement became, the more credibility it established,

normalizing critiques of the Cold War consensus. The result was increased participation

and influence. Youth movements believed the world could (and would) change if they

willed it, and the more mainstream this idea became, the easier it was to push back

against the social constraints that had long demanded unwavering obedience.

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[27] *Hail, Hero!* like *Alice's Restaurant* and *Easy Rider* capitalized on the culture of the moment, bringing in well-known anti-war participants. *Hail, Hero!* featured two songs from Gordon Lightfoot, an anti-war folk singer-songwriter, whose most successful songs were profound social criticisms regarding militarism, racism, and social inequality. *Hail, Hero!* was identified at the time of its release as an anti-war film, but was criticized for being mild in its approach compared to similar films. Vincent Canby, "Screen: '*Hail, Hero!*' Weaves a Parable of War: Symbolistic Tale Starts Run at Music Hall Pacifist Plot is Adapted from Weston Novel," *The New York Times*, October 24, 1969.

Films like *Homer* (1970), *Captain Milkshake* (1970), *Getting Straight* (1970), and *Summertree* (1971) forced audiences to grapple with the cultural, generational gap of the real world by forcing them to take sides in the imagined one. They featured narratives centered around young idealists who saw the inequity and injustice in the established traditions of the country, the class and race divisions that alienated some Americans in favor of others, and the destruction of the War and hyper-militarism on the family and community. Some films like *The Revolutionary* (1970) and *Ice* (1970) told the story of the anti-war movement through the radical Left – violent and willing to do whatever was necessary to ensure change emerged from their actions, but most were more realistic attempts to navigate the political activism of the anti-war movement.

These reflections were unique. Neither World War II or the Korean War inspired films about resisters or slackers. As Smith notes in *Looking Away*, earlier films that did include elements of resistance and laziness in terms of military participation did so as a reflection of the main character's low self-esteem which was then miraculously reversed when the main character realized his true value to the nation or his country's need of him. The purpose of these kinds of films in World War II and the Korean War were clearly motivational films meant to prepare civilians for the possibility of war. In Vietnam, the timeline is flipped. These films were produced after the War had already begun, after their call to service had already rung. These films did not motivate or encourage – they explained why men stayed home.[28]

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[28] For instance, *Homer* provides on example. A contemporary reviewer notes, "the patriotic farewell, an event that brings the town together early in the film, is balanced by a patriotic eulogy upon his return in a flag-covered casket, a scene handled with dignity and without the cheap ironies that flaw most of the other films critical of the war." Smith, *Looking Away*, 146-147.

Other movies like *The Activist* (1969), *Zabriskie Point* (1969), *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), and *R.P.M* (1970) highlighted the role of college campuses in the national anti-war movement, leveraging the knowledge of the historical moment.[29] In April of 1965, the March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam brought national attention to the anti-war movement, drawing in thousands of college students. Prior to this, demonstrations were smaller, less organized, and less effective. But as the draft called upon larger and larger numbers from underserved communities and escalation conscripted prestigious universities to increase war-related research, more and more college students mobilized campus side strikes, sit-ins, and mobilizations. In 1968, Columbia University had students forcibly removed from a campus sit in. Within hours, some 700 students were arrested, hundreds more were removed.[30] Ultimately, a university-wide strike forced the college to close its doors early for the spring semester.[31]

Much of the focus on college campuses surrounded the draft. Initially, college students could defer their draft as long as they were enrolled, but this policy was limited in 1971. Other ways to avoid the draft included medical waivers, criminal records (as *Alice's Restaurant* noted), enlisting in another branch of service (like the National

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[29] One some contemporary reviewers had also found tiring. In 1970 Stephen Farber, an editor and contributor of *Film Quarterly* asked in response to the onslaught of films that tackled the same theme "has there ever been a time when fewer movies have found a substantial audience?" Farber references the commercial failures of *Hi, Mom!*, *The Strawberry Statement*, *The Revolutionary*, and *Homer*. However, he did note that *Homer* effectively communications the reality of the War for Americans in the ways it hones in on relationships and communities affected by the warfront, even those furthest removed from the anti-war movement and demonstrations. Stephen Farber, "Why Do They Dig '*Easy Rider*' and Ignore *Homer*," *The New York Times*, December 6, 1970.

[30] This was the foundation for *The Strawberry Statement* (1970).

[31] Murray Schumach, "73 Are Suspended in Campus Sit-Ins; Mark Rudd is Among Those Disciplined by Columbia," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1968; Paul Starr, "Leniency Sought in Trespass Cases," *Columbia Spectator*, Wednesday, September 18, 1968.

Guard), or registering as a conscientious objector.[32] The draft was a focal point for many

activists on college campuses because college grounds served as a permanent space for

politically conscious participants. Some scholars have pointed to college campuses as the

greatest directing force of the culture wars that followed the sixties. As historian James

Livingston notes,

> In 1960, there were about 3.5 million students in all American colleges and universities. By 1970, however, their numbers had more than doubled to 7.5 million because, for the first time in the history of higher education, more than half of all high school graduates went to college of some kind. The number of faculty members increased proportionately by almost 70 percent.[33]

Higher education across the country transformed to meet the growing of the rapidly

expanding and growing workforce. Satellite campuses emerged, community colleges

were built, and universities and colleges became distinct qualifiers to meet the various

financial capabilities of students and their families. The majority of the increase

Livingston notes came in 1965, a time when faculty members were broadly informed by

the social and political movements of the early sixties.[34]

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[32] Early in the War, married men with children were exempt from the draft, but this changed in 1965. Conscientious objector status was not a common form of political resistance, but in 1967, active-duty soldiers submitted 829 applications. By 1971, that number had risen dramatically to 4,381. Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, (Penguin Books, 2015) 214.

[33] James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) 23.

[34] The hiring of socially conscious instructors was matched with the influx of students from more diverse backgrounds and experiences. The political climate on college campuses had traditionally been more progressive and more liberal, birthing intellectual movements such as the New Left, but the expansive nature of higher education in the early years of the decade further influenced the prevalence of progressive social commentary and action on campuses. As historian James M. Carter noted, the college as place was not itself responsible for the massive influx of political activism, and while the liberal nature of higher education can claim some responsibility, it was the culture of college campuses that encouraged the kinds of discussions that lead to action.

The culture of collegiate political activism was further influenced by returning veterans who enrolled in college under the GI Bill. The increase of veteran presence on campus added a new layer of political consciousness for students who had been at least partially protected from the draft. The presence of GI's enhanced the connection between student information networks and GI underground press networks. The rise of anti-war veteran organizations like Veterans for Peace (VFP) and Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) also enhanced the visibility and credibility of the anti-war movement. A story often referenced in anti-war literature is that of an attendee in Washington D.C. at Constitution Hall for the convention of the Daughters of the American Revolution who in walking past protesting VVAW members looked one in the eye and said "Son, I don't think what you're doing is good for the troops." He replied coolly, "Lady, we *are* the troops."[35]

The draft was a pressing issue for both student activists and anti-war veterans because it highlighted the inequity of the lottery system and deferment options, merging the Vietnam War with other prominent social issues of the Civil Rights movement. As Appy noted in *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, at the beginning of the War, black servicemen accounted for twenty percent of the U.S. troops in Vietnam – twice their proportion in the U.S. census. Though their service declined over the course of the War, they made up, on average, ten percent of the military. Nearly half of all soldiers in Vietnam had fathers who worked blue-collar jobs, and a NORC

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[35] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 215.

survey shows that during the escalation of the War, three-fourths of soldiers came from

poor or working-class families.[36]

Films, like historical participants, picked up on these inequalities. The draft was

highlighted as one of those inequalities. Films that dealt with the draft included *The*

Model Shop (1969), *Cowards* (1970), *Drive, He Said* to (1971), and *Two People* (1973).[37]

In *Gay Deceivers* (1969) the draft becomes the basis for comedy when two men pretend

to be gay to get disqualified from military service – only to be forced to prove their

homosexuality to a skeptical recruiting officer.[38] Others like *The Trial of the Catonsville*

Nine (1972) took the issue of the draft more seriously, reflecting on the true story of

Catholic activists who stole 378 draft files from a draft review board in Catonsville,

Maryland and burned them with homemade napalm.[39] *Prism* (1971) showcased a lawyer

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[36] A study commissioned by the VA in 1978 titled "Legacies of Vietnam" showed that two-thirds of Vietnam veterans were working class or poor, and 80% of men in Vietnam had no more than a high school education. Which again shows the disproportionate nature of the soldiers in the military. By 1965, 45% of Americans had a college education; by 1970, that number was over half.

[37] One contemporary reviewer noted after seeing *Cowards* at the Carnegie Hall Cinema that it, "is not so much a youth movie, as youth movies look and sound these days, as it is a kind of high-principled draft-resistance soap opera. It is also living proof, and proof is needed, that lacking much else, good intentions, good will, and very basic good sense may sometimes be enough to carry the day in the arts. I don't really know how else to explain why I liked "*Cowards*," which I must admit is one of the squarest, most unashamedly flat-footed films of the year. The cowards are youths who hate the Vietnam war, fear and despise the draft, and either enter the Army under duress, escape to Canada, or choose to stay and fight the system whatever the consequences… In "*Cowards*" you end up feeling sorry for everybody and hating nobody." Vincent Canby, "Screen: '*Darling* Lili' Sets the Stage for Pure Comedy of Roman Gestures. '*Cowards'* Gives War Views at the Carnegie Julie Andrews in Title Role at Music Hall," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1970.

[38] This film was released the same year as the infamous Stonewall Riots.

[39] The film did not receive stellar reviews from critics. As one reviewer for *The Christian Century* noted, the film was "a deep disappointment to those of us who know and love the nine… the memory and import of the actual Catonsville are still too close. Dramatization of our heroes without a distance wrong by time can come dangerously close to caricature." Vincent Canby also noted that while the film was not terribly moving, it did remind audiences of the power of the actual history behind the new film and recent play-adaptation. He wrote, "Although there never was any doubt about what the defendants had done (they helpfully waited around until the police arrived to arrest them), the trial allowed them to dramatize their anti-war position and, at the same time, to haunt all of the rest of us who might agree with their outrage but who never had the courage to act on it." A reader of *The New York Times* wrote in after reading 72Canby's

who dedicates himself to draft-resisters.[40] *Parades* (1972) exposed the abuses of military training for new recruits at the fictional Fort Nix (an awful similar sound to the very real Fort Knox).

Other films took the topic of "draft-dodging" and inverted the message. In *Explosion* (1970) the Evans family oldest son attempts to resist the draft by fleeing to Canada but is ultimately convinced to stay and do the "right thing" by his father.[41] He is killed shortly after arriving in Vietnam. The younger son, who is close to draft age, decides to flee to Canada to avoid the same fate. He links up with a hippie traveling to the border, and they steal a car together. But the hippie is not as calm and collected as he appears. He is mentally unstable, having been barred from the draft due to his psychotic tendencies. He is caught by two police officers stealing gas from a closed gas station and shoots them before fleeing – ultimately dragging the youngest brother on a race to cross the border before they are caught by police. Interestingly, this is the same exact narrative used in *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* (1971). *Outside In* (1972) tells the story of a draft resister who comes home for his father's funeral and meets up with a Vietnam veteran struggling to re-acclimate back into society. By the end of the film, the dodger is so overwhelmed with guilt for what he has done by avoiding the draft that he commits

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negative review to state, "As an ordinary mortal, not possessing a film critic's esoteric gifts, I must confess that I liked the movie, the play, and the book. "The Trial" held my interest, but far more, I was moved and disturbed by the sensitivity and courage of the nine people who dared to act against the monstrosity of the war in Indochina." Charles Austin, "The Trial of the Cantonsville Nine." *The Christian Century* 88, no. 13 (December 31, 1971): 412–13. Vincent Canby, "'*Cantonsville Nine*' Begins Run as Film," *The New York Times*, May 16, 1972. Raymond J. Pontier, "Movie Mailbag: The Cantonsville 9 'Dared to Act,'" *The New York Times*, June 25, 1972.

[40] Vincent Canby, "The Screen," *The New York Times*, December 3, 1971.

[41] *Explosion* was originally released in Canada and then later re-written and released in the United States.

suicide. In these films, we can clearly see the shift towards a more violent, more disillusioned social fabric. The films conclude that the draft is bad – but they also highlight the waning influence of Cold War obedience and unwavering faith in government institutions, in particular, sources of authority.

Perhaps no film of this early period sought to bring reality to the big screen quite like *Medium Cool* (1969).[42] Cited as the first "hybrid documentary" for its unique storytelling techniques, *Medium Cool* hones in on the growing distrust towards the media and government that was evident during 1968.[43] The film was initially released in the U.S. on October 22, 1969, just fourteen months after the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that brought televised combat (in the form of city-wide police riots) directly to the home font. The infamous Trial of the Chicago Seven (Eight) had started just one month earlier in September 1970, when defendants Rennie Davis, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Lee Weiner, John Froines (and initially Bobby Seale) were brought before a US District Court under conspiracy charges for the infamous clash between anti-war protestors and Chicago Police and the U.S. Army National Guard.

When Roger Ebert, famed film critic of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, reviewed the film in September of 1970, he noted, "*Medium Cool* has established itself as a movie about a

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[42] Though the aforementioned films certainly called upon the real world in many aspects of their narratives, there had not yet been a film so powerfully mirroring the social and political fracturing of the Vietnam era sixties until Haskell Wexler's politically charged pseudo-documentary.

[43] This is not to insinuate other films did not make similar suggestions or lend themselves to this particular theme, but rather to emphasize the noteworthy role of *Medium Cool* within the Vietnam War film collection. Annie Nocenti, "Reimagining Reality: Mockumentaries, 'factions,' and the new, new journalism." *Utne*, July-August 2006, http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/reimagining-reality/docview/217402403/se-2.

society on the brink of violence, about the counterculture bleeding into mainstream

consciousness, and how the whole world is watching it unfold."[44] And the world *was*

watching it unfold – in the mid-sixties anti-war protests erupted. The film follows John

Cassellis, a television news cameraman with hardline beliefs on social and moral issues.

When he finds out the news station has been handing over footage and tips collected by

journalists and cameramen to the FBI, he is enraged before ultimately getting fired. In the

aftermath, he takes a free-lancing job at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago,

where he is thrust into the socially oppressive realities of inner-city urban life, the anti-

war protest, and police brutality on unarmed civilians. Wexler highlighted socio-political

issues that were *actually* happening, showcasing real participants and footage, blending

them into a narrative that forced audiences to reckon with the reality of those events.

Wexler's attention to contemporary social issues plaguing the nation in 1968 was at the

center of what is called New Age Hollywood, a filmic form that highlighted the internal

perspectives of real-life people.[45] *Medium Cool* asked audience members to discern

which of the on-screen characters was most trustworthy, what role the media played in

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[44] Thomas Beard, "*Medium Cool*: Preserving Disorder", *Criterion*, May 21, 2013,
https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2773-medium-cool-preserving-disorder

[45] The New Age/Wave of Hollywood is an essential point of analysis because it reflects the ways in which audience and viewership shifted in the late sixties and 1970s. In 1967, 200 American colleges offered some 1,500 courses in film and television. The college-aged generation had grown up on films and television in more significant quantities than any other demographic, and they sought out innovative film styles with intelligent narratives. To add to the new knowledgeable movie-going, research data from the early 1970s indicates that 43 percent of audience members were between 12 and 20, and by the end of the decade, that number had jumped to 50 percent. An additional 30 percent of total audience members in the span of the 1970s were 21 to 29. The age and education of the majority of audience members dramatically altered the box-office records in favor of new, "smart" film narratives and experimental and technically sound cinematography. For more on the history of New Age/Wave Hollywood, see John Belton's *American Cinema, American Culture*, Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, and Richard Barsam's and David Monahan's *Looking at Movies: An Introduction to* Film.

educating and persuading, and the ways in which sensational journalism demands entertainment over information.[46]

In the years after *Medium Cool*, the media came under scrutiny from both sides of the intergenerational conflict – for either not being truthful enough, or bending the truth in ways that were politically biased. Later, the Watergate scandal further cemented distrust toward the media and the political establishment as another central historic element of the Vietnam War era. The made-for-TV drama *The Challenge* (1970) reinforced similar conclusions about an untrustworthy media and government. Starring Darren McGavin, Mako, Sam Elliott, and Broderick Crawford, *The Challenge* returns home audiences to a traditional Cold War narrative, in which the U.S. and an un-named Asian country each send one representative to fight to the death on an unnamed island in the Pacific to retrieve a highly sensitive satellite that has crash landed (presumably with ultra-confidential, tide shifting information). Like *The Green Berets*, *The Challenge* reinvokes the Vietnam War through the accepted Cold War themes of the previous generation. But its similarities to the John Wayne ultra-patriotic flick end there. *The Challenge* makes no attempt to portray the military-industrial complex in a positive light.

The American military (and establishment as a whole) is represented by General Meyers (played by Crawford) who must select a representative. He wants to select Bryant (played by Elliott), a decorated Marine with an on-record history for following orders and respecting the military hierarchy, but Meyers is overruled by the Secretary of State who opts instead for Jacob Gallery – a court-martialed disgraced Vietnam veteran and

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[46] An interesting position that will later be inverted by revisionists in order to rewrite the experience of the Vietnam War.

convicted war criminal. Gallery is violent and sadistic; he lacks honor and decorum. He's

driven by his own personal gain as opposed to the selfless honor motivating Bryant. In

short, Gallery represents the worst of the worst within the military apparatus – the

sadistic, selfish, sociopathic veteran. But halfway through the fight to the death – and

race to the satellite – against Yuro (the ambiguously Asian representative played by

American-Japanese icon Mako), General Meyers intervenes and sends Bryant as backup.

Gallery is so disgusted by the corruption in the action, that instead of killing Yuro and

winning the satellite, Gallery shoots Bryant and lets Yuro go. In the end, rather than

allow the U.S. military access to the satellite, Gallery succumbs to an infestation, dying

alone. The clear moral divide that illuminated within *The Challenge* is clear. On the

surface level, Gallery is the dishonorable veteran, but when a real ethical conundrum

arises, Gallery is the shining light – the individual anti-establishment anti-hero who does

the <u>right</u> thing, even in the face of death, even if it means turning his back on his country.

He is the noble savage and America is the primitive society.[47]

In *Clay Pigeon* (1971), the main character dives on a grenade in Vietnam to save

his unit, survives, is awarded, and is discharged with honor. Later, that medal (and his

special skills) is used against him by police when they force him to take down a narcotics

king pin. Emulating biker-outlaw films from the late 1960s like *Angels from Hell* (1968)

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[47] The noble-savage trope identifies the moral twist of another familiar trope, the savage. In this filmic surprise, the bloodthirsty and highly violent savage character (often Indigenous or of minority descent) is redeemed through an end action that is noble and, therefore, out of the nature of that particular character. In the primitive society trope, lands and civilizations are compared to Western civilization by their lack of technological progress, moral superiority, and Christian values. *The Challenge* invites audiences to see the corruption of the U.S. military complex as one of a backward civilization devoid of ethical or moral guidelines. For more on the savage, noble-savage, and eventual transition into super-soldier/super capable soldier see Jeremy M. Devine's *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud's *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, and Michael Andregg's *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*.

and *The Angry Breed* (1968), *Clay Pigeon* focused on the veteran at home but shifted the American GI from respected to outsider, honorable to dangerous. Sometimes, he was part of a unit; other times, he was a loner. He was almost always morally grey – standing up for what *he* thought was right, not what was expected of him. He was damaged, sometimes redeemable, but never willing to integrate back into society or conform to the expectations of his peers.[48] Reviewers described him as "disillusioned."[49] A new subgenre was born from these films, which merged the supposed sociopathic tendencies of returning GIs with modern Westerns.[50] These films popularized "motorcycle biker gang" law-and-order narratives, speaking broadly to the influence language Richard Nixon's administration had on national culture.[51]

More commonly referred to as "biker media," this filmic trope drew from real-life American southwest motorcycle organizations that emerged in the post-World War II era.[52] Films like *Satan's Sadists* (1969), *The Hard Ride* (1971), *Chrome and Hot Leather* (1971) combined the veteran with the biker, utilizing the Vietnam vet in an already established genre without making any fundamental substantiative changes. But the rising

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[48] Mimicking the advice of *Alice's Restaurant* and *Easy Rider*.

[49] "'*Billy Jack'* Opens Next Week." *Chicago Defender,* November 5, 1974.

[50] John Hellmann describes the western as a central American myth defined through a symbolic landscape and lonely hero, emphasizing the escape from community to the wilderness.

[51] Earlier evidence of this trope can be found in films like *Motorpsycho* (1965), an obscure action-thriller that depicts a violent motorcycle gang led by a sadistic Vietnam veteran, but a heightened number of films depicting this kind of struggle between law and order emerged during Richard Nixon's campaign for presidency and during his administration. Nixon and his administration used loaded language in direct response to the socio-political unrest of the 1960s that discredited the social and political issues protestors were working to change.

[52] Large numbers of veterans joined these motorcycle chapters, organized nationally by the American Motorcyclist Association. The Hollister Riot in Los Angeles in 1947 gave notoriety to motorcycle gangs nationally, sensationalizing bikers as criminals. In 1953, Marlon Brando, an avid motorcycle enthusiast in real life, starred in *The Wild One*. Its success quickly immortalized the biker film as an established genre.

popularity of "biker media" encouraged more sensationalized, violent, destructive films

that moved beyond the standard filmic parameters. As films of this sub-genre crafted

more provocative storylines, the public responded with real fear about the dangers of

motorcycle gangs. To quell media hysteria, the American Motorcycle Association

claimed that 99% of its members were law-abiding citizens. In response, the remaining

"one-percenters," those who claimed the "outlaw" title became highly exaggerated

symbols in Hollywood productions.[53]

The Losers (1970) took the biker genre to the next level by sending a pack of

motorcycle-riding soldiers to Cambodia to rescue a government official, all of whom

were killed by the end (except the government official). Here, too, the biker gang turned

hero as super capable soldiers are let down by their government. Earlier renditions like

Angels from Hell and *The Angry Breed,* on the other hand, portrayed a more extreme

version of the veteran, painting him as a threat to society, often one involved in the drug

trade.[54] These reflections make sense from a historical viewpoint. By 1971, more than

half of Americans had taken an antiwar stance, believing the Vietnam War was not only a

mistake but also immoral.[55] And the idea that the War was immoral meant, by extension,

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[53] Hunter S. Thompson's 1967 book *Hell's Angels* memorialized the most notorious of these "one-percenters," a group famously named after an elite group of World War II fighters. The biker genre entered a period of exploitation in 1966 after 1964 rape case indicted real-world Hell's Angels biker gang members. As a result, these films took on darker tones. For a broad overview see Randy James, "The Hells Angels," *Time*, August 2, 2009, https://time.com/archive/6914933/the-hells-angels/. For more specific historic context see Hunter S. Thompson's article in *The Nation* titled "The Motorcycle Gangs: A portrait of an outsider underground," from May 17, 1965. An online re-print of the article can be found at https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/motorcycle-gangs/

[54] Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," 57.

[55] "61% in Poll Assert Entry into the War Was U.S. Mistake" *The New York Times*, June 6, 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/06/archives/61-in-poll-assert-entry-into-the-war-was-us-mistake.html

that the GI was either actively responsible or, at the very least, complicit in immoral acts.[56]

In *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs*, Jeremy Kuzmarov argues that Nixon's declaration on the "War on Drugs" in 1971 dramatized claims of the drug-addicted vet.[57] A number of movies across genres played on this trope, invoking the prominence of drug use within the counterculture or the dangers of the influx of drug presence in suburban and urban communities. Others focused on drug use within the military and drug addiction through the emotionally disturbed veteran. *Parades* (1972) tells the story of one such emotionally disturbed, drug-addicted veteran who is imprisoned in a military detention center. In *Clay Pigeon* (1971), an ex-soldier is recruited to find other ex-soldiers who are running a drug cartel in L.A. Cultural fears of vagrant GIs wreaking havoc on society were fabricated and reinforced through the political rhetoric of Nixon's "law-and-order," news stories, and imaginative film. Once heroes, veterans were now increasingly vilified in the American mythos. Following John Wayne's version of Vietnam, the 1970s rewrote the veteran to match contemporary understandings of the conflict abroad and at home. In *Jud* (1971), the main character is traumatized by the death of his child who is killed in Vietnam. He uses his remaining energy to pick fights and denounce society. The movie posters read "If You Thought Vietnam Was Hell, Jud, Just Wait Till You Get Home." These reflections are consistent with the perceived urban decay evident during Nixon's tenure.

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[56] As one contemporary reviewer noted, Billy Jack only carries out heroism on the homefront, "another sign of the extent to which America has become the enemy country in which it is easier to work out heroic fantasies without political controversy. Smith, *Looking Away*, 163.

[57] Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 1.

The eventual shift regarding the Vietnam War and its veterans had far-reaching consequences. Polls showed the public increasingly viewed the War as not just immoral; nor the government merely as untrustworthy, but the entire national purpose that had once seemed unbreakable came under scrutiny. Films like *The Big Bounce* (1969) condemned the Vietnam veteran as criminal and volatile, a sharp departure from the Cold War era films that portrayed veterans of the past as heroic and good. *Hi, Mom!* (1970), sequel to the 1968 film *Greetings*, further derailed the cultural perception of the veteran and showcased a rise of on-screen violence. Directed by Brian DePalma and starring Robert De Niro, these crude comedies reflected more broadly on the socio-political climates of the late 1960s and early 1970s and showcased an increase in on-screen violence Jon's eccentric personality and radical political beliefs further pull the veteran into what I call the "lost" myth, placing the veteran outside of society – damaged and incapable of integrating back into society (if he was even stable in the first place, and *Greetings* suggests he wasn't).

These films, and others like them, symbolized a national loss of innocence – utilizing the veteran as damaged and broken, returned to a fractured country, unable to find his place in the new world that rejected him. This point is driven home in *Welcome Home, Johnny Bristol* (1972) which follows a Vietnam veteran who is held as a prisoner of war. He is eventually released and sent to a VA hospital where he falls in love with a nurse. They get engaged and he takes her home to meet his family – only the town he is from no longer exists. He becomes increasingly more paranoid that the U.S. government is behind the mysterious disappearance of his hometown. And no one will take him seriously which pushes him further and further to the edge. Here, the veteran is

permanently damaged. Similarly, *The P.O.W.* (1973), follows a paralyzed veteran made prisoner in a wheelchair. Enduring and surviving are two different things.

Others took the concept to new extremes, merging the returned veteran with the rise of violent horror films in the early seventies. *The Ravager* (1970), unlike others, actually begins in Vietnam as an on-screen place. The main character, Joe Salkow, is a US Army demolitions expert. During his tenure in Vietnam, he witnesses the brutal rape and murder of a young Vietnamese woman by two Viet Cong soldiers (the savage trope). When he returns to the U.S., he undergoes intensive therapy for PTSD. His therapy ultimately fails, and Salkow devolves into a violent sociopath who kills anyone he happens to see engaging in sexual intercourse. He seeks out young couples in well-known "lover's lanes" to blow up their cars, utilizing his military training to become a sadistic serial killer. As his psychosis progresses, Salkow begins committing rape to carry out the violence he is so drawn to. *My Old Man's Place (Glory Boy)* (1971), *To Kill a Clown* (1972) and *The Visitors* (1972) also emphasized the violence a deranged vet was capable of and the danger he posed to society.[58]

However, many films also used the inverted interpretation that society as a whole was deranged and corrupt and that the veteran was the anti-hero with the capability of standing up to/changing the system. After Watergate, both liberals and conservatives came together, albeit briefly, under an anti-establishment platform. The publishing of the Pentagon Papers only further reinforced feelings of distrust. As the public support for Vietnam faded, so did belief in the Cold War values that had so long reinforced socio-cultural concepts of American identity and moral righteousness. Films like the Billy Jack

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[58] Both *My Old Man's Place* and *The Visitors* present a rape and revenge narrative.

series promoted righteousness through vigilante justice to protect the idealistic

counterculture students from the corrupt police force (representing the establishment).

Others, like *Slaughter* (1972), followed suit, using the veteran as an opposing force in a

corrupt society with the skills to fight against the authoritative institutions that abuse their

power. In *Black Gunn* (1972) a black Vietnam veteran leads activists against the white

mob who has taken over his community in L.A. In *Slaughter*, the black veteran is

encouraged by his handlers (an unnamed government agency) to use his skills to destroy

enemies on domestic soil, however in *Black Gunn* the same black veterans' actions are

interpreted as militant. In either case, anti-establishment won out, and the "state" couldn't

be trusted – the veteran had to take care of the problems on their own.

THE DEEPLY DISTURBED AND EMOTIONALLY DAMAGED

On January 27, 1973, representatives from the United States, South Vietnam, and

North Vietnam signed the "Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in

Vietnam," officially ending the War.[59] For many Americans, this was a welcome end to

the prolonged war. President Nixon repeatedly referred to it as "peace with honor," but in

reality, the peace accord was a "standstill cease-fire."[60] The agreement promised a

continuation of American support and allotted the American-backed government to

remain in Saigon, but North Vietnam was also permitted to keep 150,000 troops below

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[59] United Nations. *United States of America, Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet-Nam and Republic of Viet-Nam.* No. 13295, Paris, January 27, 1973, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20935/volume-935-I-13295-English.pdf

[60] Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (The Free Press, 2001) 3-6.

the 17th parallel as the last 20,000 American troops were sent back home.[61] Only a

handful of journalists stayed behind to cover what hundreds had reported on for the

previous nine years. As a result, Vietnam quickly became a footnote in the American

news circuit.

The absence of the War in media had a significant effect on the kinds of

narratives that were used in film. The War was no longer an immediate pressing issue,

but it was also not yet history. Because there were fewer realities for film to grapple with,

there were also fewer common threads in the narratives that Hollywood produced. As a

result, the taboo that had long withheld Hollywood from taking the audience *to* Vietnam

as a physical space diminished. Films in the mid-period were then allowed to navigate

through the wounds of Vietnam by actually returning to the War and its represented

physical landscape. Films like *Returning Home* (1975) attempted to do this by rewriting

the World War II classic *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Others like *The Desperate*

Miles (1975) chronicled the physical wounds as consequence of war on veterans. But in

these immediate years, the full depth of the trauma of war on the social and cultural

landscape had yet to be realized.[62] Instead, the general consensus of movies produced at

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[61] Ibid., 1-3.

[62] In 1981, *Psychology Today* published an article by Peter Marin titled "Living in Moral Pain."
Initially, Marin was approached by a magazine editor to publish an article on the onslaught of Vietnam War
films that were emerging in the mid and late 1970s. In order to contend with the films being produced on
the war, Marin sought out Vietnam War veterans – interviewing them to gain a better understanding on
whether or not Hollywood was presenting the War with authenticity or creative liberty. What followed the
interview was a provocative article on the deep psychological wounds veterans suffered from. His research
took him to VA hospitals where he posed similar questions to therapists and care-givers. The
overwhelming response was that of exhaustion. Veterans who acknowledged difficulties with killing or
refusal to kill were recorded as having "acute combat reaction," the effects of slaughter on the veterans
psyche noted as "stress." Doctors and therapists used the term "de-responsilizing" in care records to denote
the attempt to remove responsibility from the actions carried out by the veteran. From the veteran's
perspectives – terms like "guilt" and "survivor's guilt" were commonplace. The inability for the veteran's
actual feelings to be recognized by doctors responsible for their care alludes to similar issues regarding the
wars effect on a broader society. The actual experience and discussions around it were substituted with

this moment was one of exhaustion. As Marin noted in a Harper's article published a year

earlier,

> …what paralyzed us was not simply the guilt felt about Vietnam, but our inability to confront and comprehend that guilt: our refusal to face squarely what happened and why, and our unwillingness to determine, in the light of the past, our moral obligations for the future. In short, we spent a decade denying and evading guilt rather than using it to our advantage.[63]

It is in this socio-cultural reality that the mid period from 1973-1975 emerges. Films

continued to share similar tropes, themes, and symbols as their earlier counterparts, but

were reinvented in more vaguely antagonistic ways losing the direction and steam that

the anti-war movement provided.

Movies like *Electra Glide in Blue* (1973) and *The Stone Killer* (1973) capitalized

on the fascination with crime dramas and cop flicks.[64] *Gordon's War* (1973) and *Trained*

to Kill (No Mercy Man) (1973) use the veteran anti-hero to take down criminal gangs

who have destroyed local communities. *The Crazy World of Julius Vrooder* (1974) and

Two (1974) follow the psychologically disturbed veteran, following in the footsteps of

the early period. Others, like *Forced Entry* (1973), drove this point home. The

pornographic horror film follows a psychotic Vietnam veteran who rapes and murders

women who visit the gas station where he works. The film itself was not a success by any

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discussions of right and wrong, moral or immoral, justified or unjustified – all of which leave the actual experience untouched. Peter Marin, "Living in Moral Pain," *Psychology Today* (November 1981), 66-80, https://vfpuk.org/2013/07/03/living-in-moral-pain-by-peter-marin/

[63] Peter Marin, "Coming to Terms with Vietnam: Settling our moral debts," *Harper's* 261 (December 1980): 41. https://harpers.org/archive/1980/12/coming-to-terms-with-vietnam/

[64] It is worth noting that *The Stone Killer* was based on an English detective novel of the same name. The novel has no relationship to the Vietnam War whatsoever. The War's inclusion in the script was part of a broader vet exploitation taking place during the mid-70s.

means, but its existence represented the furthest breakdown of the military apparatus in

America.

Some explanation for this trajectory can be found in an analysis from Stephen

Farber, a film critic for *The New York Times*, in which he noted that Hollywood and other

forms of entertainment had found a receptive public in storylines that depicted elevating

levels of sadism, cruelty, and violence. He posits that entertainment has entered the trap

of attention grabbing, showing audiences the things they least expect, but further notes

that alone is not enough explanation for the "masochism and passivity of audiences" at

what he calls "the new cinema of cruelty." He offers an alternate explanation,

> They resemble packs of zombies twitching to life when the electricity is turned
> on. Are their feelings so deadened that they need shock treatment to make them
> respond? Maybe this inertia is the end result of all the national traumas of the last
> decade; by now Americans feel helpless to control their lives, powerless even to
> discover the truth about what is going on. In this mood of weariness and cynicism,
> audiences no longer expect a film to provide a meaningful experience; they just
> want their kicks, and any freak show satisfies them. I can only guess at the
> underlying reasons for the new wave of sensationalism, but these movies are signs
> of a profoundly disturbed society. Torture is entertainment, and only disaster
> seems real. Since the Supreme Court has discouraged honest sexual films,
> sadomasochism—violence with an erotic charge—is at a premium. Our priorities
> are outrageously distorted.[65]

However, not all films of the era took this direct approach. Others inverted it, responding

to the new cinema of cruelty with stories of violent heroes and vigilantes. For instance,

The Trial of Billy Jack (1974) and *The Bears and I* (1974) reinforced the veteran as anti-

hero who fights back against the establishment and normative authority figures that was

explored in great depth in the early period through the western reborn and biker-media

genre. Overall, films of the mid-period have very little in common, except that they

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[65] Stephen Farber, "Hollywood's New Sensationalism: The Power and Glory," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1974.

utilized the veteran as the primary mode of storytelling and that they showcased increasing trends in violence and emotional disturbance. Overall, very few films were produced during this middle period, and for a short while, it did seem that there was an attempt to move away from Vietnam, but that lapse of production was cut short in 1976.

HOLLYWOOD REMEMBERS THE WAR

The misadventure of the Vietnam War returned to American televisions and newspapers in 1975 when communist forces from the North advanced toward Saigon. Unsurprisingly to political actors like Henry Kissinger, communist forces held the majority of South Vietnam and had done so since the War's end. What was once referred to as "peace with honor" was actually a duplicitous and problematic arrangement to excuse the Nixon administration from responsibility as it walked away from the War. By April of 1975, the American-backed government was expected to fall. In the ensuring chaos, American helicopters transported thousands of US supporters out of Saigon but were forced to leave behind hundreds of thousands of others. On April 30, 1975, Saigon officially "fell," or at least, that is how it was presented to American audiences. The moment was captured on film and broadcast worldwide. It served as an upsetting reminder of the twenty-year failed effort to create a democratic and stable nation in southern Vietnam. The televised coverage was made worse by the actions of then-president Gerald Ford, who had granted Nixon a pardon, ending the possibility of trial and granting immunity to any crimes committed.[66] The intended effect was meant to assuage the tense political fracturing surrounding Watergate, but it only encouraged more

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[66] General Records of the United States Government. *Presidential Proclamation, Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon*. Gerald R. Ford, no. 4311, September 8, 1974, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299996

frantic political frustrations. Furthering the administration's embarrassment, a week

before Saigon fell, Ford gave a speech at Tulane University remarking,

> We, of course, are saddened indeed by events in Indochina. But these events, tragic as they are, portend neither the end of the world, nor of American's leadership in the world…. Today, America can regain the pride that once existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned.[67]

The Tulane speech, like the Nixon pardon, was meant to have a calming effect on the

legacy of the War. Ford had hoped that if the nation could move on from Vietnam

psychologically, then it could repair the damage that had been caused by it. But the fall of

Saigon only a few days later cemented his speech as yet another aspect of the Vietnam

mission that ended in failure (and yet another reminder of the government's disingenuous

actions). By the later period of the decade, the wounds of Vietnam had been realized.

America had lost not just a war, but its sense of nationhood.

When Carter took office in 1976, he made explicit his intention to heal the

nation's wounds by giving the public a government they could be proud of. His

administration promised to lead through guidance and faith, a stark contrast to the

cynicism and fear-mongering of the Nixon era.[68] He played on his southern roots and

tapped into the religious revival coming out of the Sunbelt.[69] One historian sarcastically

refers to his "Sunday school attitude," noting how he honed in on mistrust of big

government and promised to dismantle the establishment from within, which resonated

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[67] Gerald Ford, "Remarks of the President to the Tulane University Student Body," Speech, Tulane University, April 23, 1975. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pef_documents/library/document/0122/1252291.pdf

[68] Bruce Shulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (The Free Press, 2001) 121-122.

[69] Ibid., 121.

deeply with the American public.[70] But the Carter era was overshadowed by the rise of inflation, property taxes, unemployment, and social despair. By 1979, the nation found itself mired in and frustrated by "stagflation," the simultaneous rise in prices and unemployment. Though Carter believed in the good of the American people and the ability to rebuild as a single unified nation, his presidency would be marked by what historians call a "crisis of confidence."[71]

Americans had long been ready to forget Vietnam and return to a sense of normalcy in the aftermath of an exhausting period of social and political upheaval. While the themes and tropes of the previous era did not immediately dissolve, the dominant perspectives shifted to meet this new social phenomenon.[72] The late period of 1976-1978 thus attempted to deal with the "crisis of confidence" through hyper-sexualized narratives that emphasized the effects that Vietnam on the individual and community. Films from the later period depicted the veteran, still as deranged and damaged, but more so, as broken. They highlighted the ramifications and consequences of war directly on the broader community.

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[70] Ibid., 122.

[71] The term refers to a speech given on July 15, 1979 by President Jimmy Carter titled "Crisis of Confidence." The speech meant to encourage unity and common purpose in the face of the many worries Americans faced during the late 1970s (energy crisis, broad political disillusionment, burnout from the War). The speech, often referred to as the malaise speech, ultimately stained the Carter presidency for its seemingly willingness to admit American failure. Historians have since used the term "crisis of confidence" to refer to the context of the historic moment, where many Americans lost faith in their government.

[72] In *Manhood in America*, Michael Kimmel argues that the erosion of confidence in masculinity based on martial virtues that attended our involvement in Vietnam was only part of the problem for American men in the 1960s and 1970s. He further argues that men were besieged at home by the last two decades' social movements, which infringed on traditional masculinity and demanded inclusion and equality in the public arena.

One such example, *Taxi Driver* (1976), mimicked the "lost myth" that emerged with *Hi, Mom!*[73] But in *Taxi Driver* De Niro's radical political attitudes and voyeuristic tendencies become more dangerous as he succumbs to post-traumatic stress disorder, eventually evolving to home-grown terrorist. *Taxi Driver* follows Travis Bickle, a returned veteran who attempts to "start over" in New York City. Unable to free himself from his PTSD-induced insomnia, Bickle picks up work as a taxi driver navigating city streets in the late hours of the night. He frequents the city's less desirable areas, pitting himself against drug dealers, criminals, and prostitutes (following the layout of the veteran anti-hero). But Bickle's sociopathic tendencies enhance the deranged veteran trope. In Bickle's mind, he is the hero – in actuality he is the villain, an apt symbolic comparison for a nation experiencing a "crisis of confidence." Like with *Greetings* and *Hi, Mom!* Bickle's character does not need to prove whether or not he was mentally unstable before Vietnam, only that Vietnam happened.

T*axi Driver* approaches Vietnam through a darker, more intimate lens than previous films. It expands on the themes found in *Greetings* and *Hi, Mom!* but sacrifices the comedic element for more disturbing tones. *Taxi Driver* relies on the "us versus them" trope in which the veteran is pitted against the civilian. In earlier films like *The*

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[73] The lost myth is an interpretation I developed for films and revisionist reflections on the Vietnam War. It is a combination of themes, tropes, and myths that have been used to describe the veteran as an individual or the nation as a whole. A number of scholars have alluded to this terminology to give further consideration to the ways in which an element of American identity/national purpose has been "lost" and the attempt to recover that loss in the filmic narrative, literature, or scholarly investigation but do so more often through accepted terminology such as the stabbed-in-the-back myth or the first/second lost victory (see Gary R. Hess' *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, Chapter One). Those three terms are useful, but in film, are not general enough to consider the impact of loss on the veteran or society – whether that be the loss of the war, the ostracization of an individual from community, or the loss of direction a community feels in a grander social structure. The lost myth eliminates the boundaries of the three more accepted terms and allows for both the individual and community to be analyzed and understood through the reappearing tropes of hopelessness, withdrawal, seclusion, solitude, etc. It encapsulates the emotion of being alone or feeling alone as a result of loss rather than the actuality of losing a thing.

Angry Breed and the Billy Jack series, the vet is an outsider – it's still the "them against us" trope, but those earlier estranged veterans kept to themselves and lived on the outskirts of town limits. In *Taxi Driver*, Bickle is a guerilla fighter brought back to America. He, like the Vietcong, has infiltrated society, the savage returned. He is both dangerous and invisible, and like the very real fears and anxieties regarding "damaged" veterans, he could "snap" at any time. *Taxi Driver* represents a more profound struggle with the Vietnam War era, to accept the consequences of war – the cynicism, disillusionment, and despair left in its wake.

But *Taxi Driver* is not a movie about the Vietnam War. It's a semi-autobiographical account of the scriptwriter Paul Schrader, who struggled with manic depression after his extramarital affair was exposed and his wife filed for divorce. He developed insomnia, drank heavily, and spent the late evenings at pornography stores. In 1972 after a few months of living this lifestyle, he developed an ulcer that hospitalized him and the few days of sobriety opened his eyes to the metaphor of his life. In a 1976 interview he recalled the metaphor as, "the man who will take anybody any place for money; the man who moves through the city like a rat through the sewer; the man who is constantly surrounded by people, yet has no friends. The absolute symbol of urban loneliness." After he was released from the hospital, he wrote the script in just over two weeks, dropped it with his agent, and left Los Angeles to travel the country. For Schrader *Taxi Driver* was about pain and the inability to distinguish between what was real and what was not, an element that is certainly made clear in the film. Yet the film exchanges

Schrader's manic depression and alcoholism for Bickle's mental instability – one that can

be explained, supposedly, by his tenure in Vietnam, not his own mental illness.[74]

Others like *Tracks* (1976) and *Heroes* (1977) also called attention to the

prevalence of PTSD in Vietnam veterans. Perhaps none emphasized the "war is hell"

trope like *The Deer Hunter* (1978). As Michael Klein notes in his article "Historical

Memory and Film,"

> *The Deer Hunter* marks the beginning of a series of post-Vietnam films that
> negate the contradiction between doves and hawks using the era as a period and a
> setting to conduct parables that reinterpret the Vietnam experiences in the context
> of the concerns and developing climate of opinion of the late 1970s and the
> 1980s… Given the illusionist power of the cinema and the technical skill of
> special effects teams, these fiction films may indeed seem to be detailed
> reenactments of history. They are, however, highly encoded generic melodramas,
> and this should be evaluated with an eye to their ideology and the ways they
> interpret a recent period of American history that is part of our national
> experience.[75]

By invoking the melodrama to reinterpret Vietnam, Michael Cimino bridged the gap

between "hawks" and "doves" of the culture war by removing the intensity of polarizing

political rhetoric from the narrative. The goal of *The Deer Hunter* was to express how the

War affected average American communities, giving audiences a collective memory to

hold on to.[76] It didn't matter if you had served, *The Deer Hunter* argued; Vietnam

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[74] Paul Schrader and Richard Thompson, "SCREEN WRITER: TAXI DRIVER'S Paul Schrader." *Film Comment* 12, no. 2 (1976): 6–19. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43754462.

[75] Michael Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," In *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War on American Film*, edited by Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 22.

[76] Cimino's insinuation that the film was somewhat autobiographical and a representation of his own service in Vietnam was not only highly controversial (and false) but served as highly convincing to audiences. Cimino suggested in interviews and with colleagues and producers that he had joined the service immediately after the Tet Offensive and served as part of a medical unit attached to the Army Special Forces. While Cimino enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve and did spend six months training at both Fort Dix, New Jersey, and Fort Sam in Houston, Texas, his time of service was in 1962, and he never deployed

affected everyone. As Michael Herr noted in *Dispatches*, Vietnam became an inescapable

trauma for Americans. No groups of friends, families, or communities were spared. Rick

Berg continues this argument by asserting that *The Deer Hunter* was the first to look at

the traumatization of the soldier and the traumatization of the community as a whole.

> In *The Deer Hunter*, the vet is portrayed neither as a psychotic killer nor as some secret sharer doubling for someone else's vision of the V.C. nor as some moral killer needing to confess his crimes. He is not a marginal or a homeless transient, alienated because of some secret initiation rite called combat that separates him from others because of a higher plane of knowledge.[77]

The Deer Hunter follows a group of friends from a small-town Pennsylvania steel

community in their quest to grapple with *how* a community must try to move forward in

the aftermath of Vietnam. Its commercial success was astounding. *The Deer Hunter* won

five Oscar Awards, was nominated for another twenty-two awards, and won nineteen.[78]

Much of its success can be attributed to the tones it highlighted, returning

Americans at the beginning of the film to the beginning of the War, a time when they

believed in the cause of the American mission. There is a visual dichotomy between good

and evil, most prominent in the film's second act, but the film does not ask the audience

to choose a moral or political side. Instead, *The Deer Hunter* offers audience members an

"out" on Vietnam. It argues that the War was not carried out by bad soldiers committing

evil deeds, as the public perception at home once was, but instead, that corrupt leaders

and misguided military policies led to a ruthless war. One that individual soldiers had

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to Vietnam, nor was he attached to any special unit. Further, Cimino never referenced any Vietnam War veterans for making the film.

[77] Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," 61.

[78] IMBD Pro. "*The Deer Hunter*." *News*. Accessed November 9, 2020. https://pro.imbd.com/title/tt0077416/news

little power to impact. Like many movies after it, *The Deer Hunter* uses the cliché "war is hell" to bring the message home.

The Deer Hunter adds complexity to the myth of the damaged vet, unable to fully move on past the War or reemerge in society not because they have turned sinister in the face of conflict but because they've *lived* it. Kevin Bowen proposes in his article "'Strange Hells': Hollywood in Search of America's Lost War" that *The Deer Hunter* suggests content beyond the military subject matter.

> … Their true subject being the psychic conflicts that precipitated our involvement and remain after. Here, Vietnam is a background against which larger questions are projected. Vietnam is not much more than landscape against which the cultural myths that dictated our downfall played out.[79]

The Deer Hunter creates a paradox between society's unacceptance of veterans and their own dissent, a popular stereotype of returning soldiers.[80] Much like the filmic reinterpretations of *The Quiet American*, *The Deer Hunter* portrays the "myth of the American innocent, betrayed by both friends and enemies alike."[81]

Other films also took up the plight of the veteran but did so through their post-war experience. Jane Fonda's *Coming Home* (1978) is one example of such a film. Her film was well anticipated – as the daughter of Henry Fonda and a provocative anti-war

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[79] Kevin Bowen, "'Strange Hells': Hollywood in Search of America's Lost War" in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 231.

[80] Leonard Quart, "*The Deer Hunter*: The Superman in Vietnam," In *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 160-161.

[81] James C. Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (McFarland & Company, 1982), 80.

protestor, Fonda had established a prominent political platform.[82] In 1970 and 1971

Fonda traveled around the country raising funds for various causes, visiting coffee

houses, and performing with Fun, Travel, Adventure (an acronym for Fuck The Army).

The following year she was invited to North Vietnam, where she spent two weeks

traveling, interviewing American prisoners of war, visiting bomb sites, and speaking on

local radio stations – a feat few were able to accomplish during the War.[83] In 1973, she

married Tom Hayden, president of the Students for a Democratic Society and infamous

member of the Chicago Seven (Eight).[84]

Like earlier renditions of the anti-war movement and home front narratives,

Fonda's *Coming Home* was decidedly anti-war. And it was well received. *Coming Home*

was the first Vietnam War film to earn critical acclaim.[85] Initially, the Veterans

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[82] Jane Fonda participated in a number of anti-war protests, actively spoke out against the war effort, US government, and used her platform to highlight other activists.

[83] Only 200 others were invited to North Vietnam in the decade after the War's end. Others who were invited were typically affiliated with religious organizations, anti-nuclear groups, and other institutions set out to curb the global power struggle related to the Cold War, like Women Strike for Peace and the American Friends Service Committee. Notably, Harrison Salisbury, a well-known war correspondent for *The New York Times* was also invited during the War, but the American media did not react as harshly to the journalist as they did the actress. The highly public political stunt earned her the nickname "Hanoi Jane" and the controversy has followed her into the contemporary moment.

[84] The Chicago Eight has falsely been recorded in history as the Chicago Seven. This is the result of the removal of Bobby Seal from news headlines, who was originally indicted alongside Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, Abbie Hoffman, John Froines, and Lee Weiner. Bobby Seale was not present at the Democratic National Convention protests in Chicago with the rest of the group as an organizer. Instead, Bobby was there to give a speech and was only in the area for two speeches over a two-day period. He did not participate in the conflict that ended the demonstration. Bobby Seale, a significant figure in the Black Panther Party, was falsely accused of murder during the original trial and was repeatedly stripped of his rights as an American citizen. Bobby was removed from the grouping of eight when he was granted a mistrial for repeatedly being denied a lawyer, he was later exonerated of the murder charges he was facing in Connecticut.

[85] The Vietnam War ended three years before the release of the film and it was not easy for Fonda to obtain the funding or production support for the film. On a budget of only 3 million, the film pulled in 26 million in box office sales. John Voight received Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival in 1978, and the film received eight nominations at the 1979 Academy Awards and was awarded Best Original Screenplay, Best Actor for John Voight, and Best Actress for Jane Fonda.

Administration refused to cooperate with Fonda's production. Their refusal was not only

due to her role as an anti-war protestor that pitted her as the extremist, but also a

reflection of the film's narrative. *Coming Home* blatantly called out the failings of the

U.S. government and VA. The film was further discredited by government officials for

the inclusion of other anti-war demonstrators and McCarthy Era blacklisted scriptwriters

like Nancy Dowd, Bruce Gilbert, and Waldo Salt.[86] But the power the government held

on Hollywood had waned significantly in the 1960s and eventually, five years after

beginning the project, *Coming Home* moved into production.[87]

The success of the film is particularly unique considering the juxtaposition it

poses against *The Green Berets*, released to theaters only ten years prior. If John Wayne's

rendition of Vietnam was meant to be pro-war propaganda, then Fonda's was meant to be

the film of the anti-war movement. Fonda, like Wayne, had made a name for herself in

Hollywood as someone deeply committed to her political view, but where Wayne was the

cinematic soldier who represented the pro-military consensus (though he avoided ever

actually serving), Fonda was an iconic anti-war demonstrator, one who has been called

the "only filmmaker or actor responsible for a major Vietnam War movie who played a

significant role in that war's history."[88] Whereas Wayne was influenced to create his film

in honor of an injured veteran, Fonda was inspired by the early anti-war protests she saw

on television when she lived in France. Wayne's overt patriotism (and well-known

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[86] David Luhrssen, *The Vietnam War on Film: Hollywood History* (ABC-CLIO, 2019), 21.

[87] Kirk Honeycutt, "The Five-Year Struggle to Make '*Coming Home*,'" *The New York Times*, February 19, 1978, https://www.nytimes.com/1978/02/19/archives/the-five-year-struggle-to-make-coming-home.html

[88] Luhrssen, *The Vietnam War on Film: Hollywood History*, 21.

racism), as well as his highly vocal support for Nixon and his administration's focus on "law and order," cast him as either a "noble super-patriot or a neolithic ultraconservative." Fonda, alternatively, was seen as a treasonous commie or a true patriot. They came to represent the filmic interpretations of Vietnam's "right" and "left" political ideologies as well as the political ideologies of those who supported and condemned them. Much had changed in the ten years between the two films.

In the same way the Civil Rights Movement propelled the anti-war movement and the counterculture bridged the causes of a large number of political organizations, the women's liberation movement rose alongside Vietnam War demonstrations.[89] As a historical actor deeply connected with the movement, Fonda wanted to integrate the transformation of gender roles throughout the film. The film follows Sally, the wife of Captain Bob Hyde (played by Bruce Dern), who is deployed to Vietnam. During his deployment, the conservative military wife finds herself volunteering at the local VA and, as a result, slowly liberates herself from the unquestioning, hyper-patriotic role of military housewife. She meets Luke Martin (played by John Voight), an injured veteran at the VA hospital who is permanently paralyzed from the waist down. What is unique about the film (and, again, a direct opposite to *The Green Berets*) is that the film is centered around a politically charged romance that takes place *off* the battlefield. *Coming Home*, like *The Deer Hunter*, was meant to express the various ways in which the War had damaged the social fabric of America. The title itself is evocative. As one analysis notes,

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[89] Edward P. Morgan, *The Sixties Experience: Hard Lessons About Modern America* (Temple University Press, 1991).

> At one level it refers literally to return from Vietnam; at another to realization, both of the external reality of the War and the internal reality of the self; at yet another to the 'home' that liberal America, in 1978, was attempting to find for the Vietnam War in the American experience.[90]

The film showcases not just ideals of feminist liberation but also nuanced inner workings of masculinity.[91] Like Wayne, she set out to create a film that honored injured vets, but from a completely different perspective. And while Fonda's rendition of Vietnam was not without criticism, its widespread acclaim and heart wrenching narrative encouraged conversations about the experiences of veterans, the kinds of support systems and resources that were available to them, and the types of psychological scars the war's end demanded dealing with.

Perhaps the most notable thing about *Coming Home* is its historic setting. Outside of the themes of feminist liberation, political awakening, and nuanced understandings of masculinity, the film takes a heavy hit at the U.S. government's treatment of veterans and the Veteran Administration system. In truth, it was the effort of anti-war protestors who continued the political mobilization to ensure veteran access to healthcare for physical and psychological trauma, as well as job training and government disability payments.[92] Others attempted to do the same kind of political awakening through the veteran as a historical actor desperately in need of national support. *Just a Little Inconvenience* (1977), the made-for-TV drama, follows a veteran trying to help his friend who lost his

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[90] Michael Comber and Margaret O'Brien. "Evading the War: The Politics of the Hollywood Vietnam Film." *History* 73, no. 238 (1988): 248–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24413854.

[91] For more on this see Susan Jeffords "Reproducing Fathers: Gender and the Vietnam War in U.S. Culture," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 202-216.

[92] Luhrssen, *The Vietnam War on Film: Hollywood History*, 31.

leg in the War. *Rolling Thunder* (1977) emphasized more realistic outcomes of the War, still focusing on PTSD, psychosis, and other physical ailments, but trading in the feel-good drama for a more straightforward narrative revisiting tropes established in the early period.[93]

The late period continued to emphasize the influence and prevalence of the counterculture that dominated the early period, as well as the distrust of media and government that had dominated the mid-period, but it excelled explicitly in the ways in which it featured on-screen violence and political disillusionment. The sociopathic, disturbed veteran remained, but as *The Deer Hunter*, rather than diminish the role of Vietnam, films highlighted it. In *The Enforcer* (1976), Dirty Harry teams up with a young rookie to take down a terrorist cell of disgruntled Vietnam veterans. *Mean Johnny Barrows* (1976) follows a dishonorably discharged veteran with a penance for violence who takes up work post-war as a professional hitman. *Special Delivery* (1977) follows three Vietnam veterans as they rob a bank. *Black Sunday* (1977) takes the Vietnam veteran criminal to the next level, crafting him as a terrorist dead set on blowing up a Superbowl Stadium. *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978) features the disillusioned veteran smuggling heroin through his job as a journalist. In *Youngblood* (1978), the criminal veteran leads a drug ring gang in Los Angeles. In these films, the violent tendencies of Vietnam veterans are reinforced, but in *The Zebra Force* (1976), the opposite is true. Instead, a group of Vietnam veterans declares war on a Los Angeles crime group terrorizing the local neighborhoods. The back-and-forth flip is evident in a number of

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[93] *Welcome Home Soldier Boys* (1971), *Welcome Home Johnny Bristol* (1972), and *Limbo* (1972) also sought to "deal" with the physical and emotional trauma of veterans post-Vietnam.

films during this period, like it was in the mid-period. *The Vigilante Force* (1976) similarly inverts the criminal veteran back into an anti-hero vigilante who must protect his dying down when the local factory is shut down. The War's end had a profound effect on popular culture, as the television war was no longer being narrated on television, in the newspaper, or discussed on campaign trails.[94] Instead, filmmakers, screenwriters, and audiences were on their own again – able to decide for themselves in the aftermath what Vietnam meant.

CONCLUSION

The Vietnam War was the foremost story on American news circuits from 1964 to 1972. Information on the War was covered daily on various platforms – radio shows, magazine covers, newspapers, and television. The War was featured on the covers of *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* more than one hundred times in the eight-year span.[95] Hundreds of public demonstrations brought the War off front pages and television screens and into the daily lives of everyday people. The Vietnam War emerged as the nation experienced a radical shift in collective experience. The tensions highlighted by the anti-war movement spoke broadly to the various injustices that defined the ideology of the counterculture: ambiguity and more uncertainty, a loss of innocence, racial

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[94] The late 1970s also ushered in more profound reflections of the veteran. In *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1976), the third installment of the franchise, Billy Jack is used as a pawn to garner votes by corrupt career politicians. In *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977), a veteran goes off the deep end, escaping a military prison and threatening to start World War II unless confidential Vietnam War secrets are released to the public. In *The Boys in Company C* (1978), a corrupt and inept military institution leads to the destruction of American soldiers. *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) returns audiences to the early years of Vietnam to showcase the similarity of American advisors in Vietnam to French troops during the French Indochina War. The *Good Guys Wear Black* (1978) follows the story of several army buddies who are set up for failure on a mission in Vietnam. After their release, they are systematically hunted by a corrupt politician.

[95] Appy, American Reckoning, 221.

tensions, a breakdown of military values, and dissent from US leadership and policy became identifying markers of the youth activists and anti-war movement.

For the most part, from 1969-1978, Vietnam itself as a war and a location was still considered taboo and very few films touched upon it. The veteran however, served as an immediate compromise for the film industry's inability to actually go to Vietnam. In reaction to the various political and cultural shifts of 1968, the veteran became dangerous, changed, and corrupted by war – symbolic of the ways in which the U.S. government and military were changed and corrupted by the War. In the early 1970s, the veteran took on an even darker shape, more detached from the social pinnings that protect the American way of life. He is sociopathic, crude, and voyeuristic – looking back into America as *an other*, an outsider. In a mirror image, society is also looking back at itself, corrupted, broken, and damaged. As Walter LaFeber noted,

> The United States lost in Vietnam because Americans could not win the war without destroying what they were fighting to save – or alternatively, without fighting for decades while surrendering those values at home and in the Western alliance for which the Cold War was supposedly being waged.[96]

In response, films made political statements. They attempted to assess the realities of the War or to conjure new realities in their place, but films were in no place to make definitive statements about what had happened or why. Only that something had indeed *happened*. The moral ambiguity in these films conflates tropes of "good and evil," and as the period progresses there is a clear blurring of the two.

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[96] Walter LaFeber, "The Last War, the Next War, and the New Revisionists," *Democracy* 1, no. 1 (January 1981): 98, https://democracyjournalarchive.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/lafeber_the-last-war-the-next-war-and-the-new-revisionists-democracy-1-1_-jan-1981.pdf

This shapelessness regarding moral authority has broad-reaching implications regarding the fragmentation of a unified moral narrative. If the Cold War national purpose meant to assert a clear line between good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust, then the events of the Vietnam War had erased entirely that line. In the next chapter, the films of the 1980s will attempt to rectify that egregious error, solidifying a national story that offers forgiveness without apologizing and allows the nation to move on without looking too closely.

CHAPTER FOUR

GOING BACK, 1979-1988

> In the late 1960s we silenced Vietnam; in the 1970s
> we defended ourselves from it; and in the mid-
> 1980s we return to it, or it returns to us. – Rick Berg

> I don't have to explain myself to him or anybody
> else. After what I've been through, I have a right
> without explanation. – Rambo

The War has long been contested– the "hawks" and "doves" fought for authority over the growing conflict during the early and mid-1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the anti-war movement evolved into a national force, illuminating divisions between those who opposed the status quo and those who enforced it. Cultural productions of the era broadly matched countercultural sentiments in terms of ideology and narrative structure, reflecting the power of the anti-war movement. Film was not alone; music, art, and other forms of expression widely upheld and reinforced the views of the various youth-led activist movements. By the early 1970s, these groups had achieved incredible success. However, the widespread visibility of the peace movement and adjoining counterculture was not evidence of a consensus within the public, so when the anti-war movement waned, oppositional voices filled the space it once occupied, allowing mythology to replace history and interpretation to replace reality.

From 1969-1978, films produced on the War overwhelmingly expressed anti-war sentiments. For some time, it appeared that these pieces of cultural ephemera served as evidence of a national socio-political revolution that would have a long-lasting legacy, informing generations to come about American ideals. Though the bulk of films from 1969-1978 reflected dark, sinister narratives with corrupt governments and sadistic ex-soldiers, they also reflected a nation evolving, one moving past the doldrums of complacency and obedience into an era of motivated democratic participation. However, only a year after 1978, Hollywood representations of the War began shifting away from the progressive politics of the counterculture. By the mid-1980s, anti-war narratives nearly vanished from Hollywood. Films about the War continued to be produced in great numbers, but the critical approaches of the previous era were replaced by those that reimagined the conflict and its consequences through a revisionist lens, seeking to reframe the War and its legacy in less confrontational ways.

THE 1979 OSCARS: THE WAR OVER THE WAR

This ideological transition became particularly evident in 1978 with the release of two major Hollywood productions: Jane Fonda's *Coming Home* and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. Both were massive successes. *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home* ranked 9th and 15th in annual box office reports.[1] Each took home a number of accolades

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[1] *Coming Home* was released domestically on February 15, 1978. Box office reports for the year recorded 32,653,905 dollars in gross sales. *The Deer Hunter* was released on December 8, 1978, its gross sales came in at 48,979,328 dollars. The incredible financial success of these two films is enhanced by the year's filmic competition. *Grease*, *Superman*, and *National Lampoon's Animal House* were all released the same year. 1979 *Coming Home* was nominated for eight categories at the 1979 Academy Awards. It took home trophies for Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay Written Directly for Screen. *Coming Home* won another eight awards in 1979. *The Deer Hunter* was nominated for nine categories at the 1979 Academy Awards, taking home trophies for five categories – including one for Best Director. *The Deer Hunter* would win another four awards that year and ten more post-1979, including a 2016 induction into the Film Hall of Fame. Box Office Mojo, "Coming Home," *IMBD Pro*,

at the 1979 Academy Award ceremony, a particularly noteworthy event as one

contemporary journalist noted, because not only did the two have to compete with the

rest of films released that year, but also the "movie industry's fear that nobody would go

to see a movie about the Vietnam War."[2]

Obviously, many people had seen films about the Vietnam War in the years

leading up to 1978. The first film produced on the American war in Vietnam was *The

Quiet American* in 1958. Over the next twenty years, Hollywood produced twelve films

on the American War in Vietnam, fifty-four on the Vietnam veteran, and thirty-two that

highlighted the home front and/or anti-war movement.[3] But few of these achieved critical

acclaim or box office success and rarely did a film prior to 1978 achieve both. The

lessons learned from John Wayne's *Green Berets* were still fresh, and while it was true

that a film about the War may achieve some box office success, it may also cast

unwanted shadows on production teams. The risk had not been worth the reward, and as

film historian Peter Biskind noted, the war was unpopular and "Americans saw enough of

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https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0077362/?ref_=bo_se_r_1. Box Office Mojo, "The Deer Hunter," *IMBD Pro*, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl3276572161/.

[2] Aljean Harmetz, "2 Vietnam Films Cast Aside Ghosts on Way to Oscars," *The New York Times*, April 11, 1979 https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/11/archives/2-vietnam-film-cast-aside-ghosts-on-way-to-oscars-new-york.html

[3] A larger catalogue of films relating the Vietnam War during this timeframe does exist, however, this project only included films that met specific criteria – (1) Films must have been produced in the United States. (2) Content of the films needed to fall into one of the following four categories – depiction of the American War in Vietnam (AVW), narratives portraying the Vietnam War veteran (VV), narratives focused on the home front that address major concerns prevalent during the War (H), or reflected on the anti-war movement or the anti-war movements primary issues (A). This excludes films that only vaguely make reference to the Vietnam War, address the French War in Vietnam, or films that address other geographic regions in southeast Asia (or broader issues such as refugees). These constraints also leave out documentary works, a collection which would dramatically alter the scale and scope of this particular study.

it on the six o'clock news."[4] So instead, Hollywood opted for the War without the war –

alluding to it through the livelihood of the veteran, issues on the home front, the goals

and ambitions of the anti-war movement, or more loosely, through vague reimagings of

the War.

However, when the War ended, and the non-stop media coverage that dubbed it

"the living room war" faded out, studios found the space to reconsider their positions on

the War. As Bruce Gilbert, associate producer of *Coming Home* noted, "The war may

have been over, but the war over the interpretation of the war was just beginning."[5] Of

the twelve films produced on the American War in Vietnam (AVW) from 1958-1978,

Hollywood only produced one following John Wayne's *Green Berets* – until 1978, when

four hit theaters.[6] In the years that followed, Hollywood produced some twenty-two

additional films on the American war in Vietnam. The sheer number of films released in

the U.S. on the War after its end further illuminates Gilbert's comment. Looking at films

produced in the United States from 1958 to 1973 when the Paris Peace Accord was

signed, fifty-eight films match the qualification for inclusion in this study. From 1973 to

1975 when Saigon fell, only fourteen films were produced. But following 1975, and only

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[4] Peter Biskind, "The Vietnam Oscars," *Vanity Fair*, February 19, 2008
https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/03/warmovies200803?srsltid=AfmBOoormkMNcfdSAyCPYy9Wr
oaBiT0Lq5F84amTEiMs0MH4OWToyQK6

[5] Ibid.

[6] The first six films ever produced on the Vietnam War, *The Quiet American* (1958), *Brushfire*
(1961), *A Yank in Viet-Nam* (1964), *Operation C.I.A.* (1965), *To the Shores of Hell* (1965), and *Final War
of Olly Winter* (1967), were centered on the American War in Vietnam. It is not until 1968 that the other
categorizations of veteran, home front, and anti-war are introduced. It is also the same year that John
Wayne releases *The Green Berets* (1968). The only other film to be produced on the Vietnam War during
the Vietnam War, is *The Losers* (1970) which is actually set in Cambodia, not Vietnam. This makes the
release of *The Boys in Company C*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Go Tell the Spartans*, and *Good Guys Wear Black* in
1978 a noteworthy event.

considering films until 1988, ninety-two films match the parameters of this study. Something had changed for Americans, and in turn, the position of filmmakers as well. The public's willingness to revisit Vietnam, to reinterpret it, opened up the floodgates for anyone willing to try their hand at retelling the War.

Coming Home and The Deer Hunter hit theaters ten months apart in the same calendar year. Though they shared certain features, they were remarkably different. Broadly, they both spoke to the various traumas associated with Vietnam: the ones earned abroad and the ones received at home, and both treated the War as a bad thing that happened to everyday people. However, they diverged significantly in their presentation of the War. Coming Home was an anti-war drama that sent men to war off-screen and returned them physically and mentally damaged. It presented a broad, sweeping narrative for feminist liberation, anti-imperialism, and anti-war activism. The Deer Hunter, also sent men to war and returned them physically and mentally damaged, but it did not do so off-screen. Instead, The Deer Hunter tracked three friends from a small, rural Pennsylvanian steel town from enlistment through deployment to Vietnam, to their eventual return home. Both emphasized the psychological toll on veterans, but only one of them asked audiences to experience what caused the toll. Where Coming Home emphasized the tragedy of veteran's plight, The Deer Hunter gave the audience and veteran a common enemy. Despite their similar themes and anti-war stance, the films couldn't have been further apart in their interpretations of what happened or why it mattered.

The root of their differences stems from their creators. Coming Home was conceived by anti-war activists and counterculture participants like activists Jane Fonda

and Bruce Gilbert, Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic, and McCarthy-era leftist Waldo Salt.[7] The film was meticulously researched by its writers, and aimed to place emphasis on the veteran's experiences, struggles, and the disabled community. For Fonda, a story about the Vietnam War needed to be authentic, it needed to be raw – but it also needed to be a commentary on everything wrong with war and toxic masculinity. It needed to be a tale about breaking free from physical and metaphorical restraints, about personal intimacy, a story of love and war and heartbreak. But Fonda's vision was not an easy one to produce, even during a time where anti-war films were well received.

In 1972, Fonda took a two-week trip to North Vietnam, where she visited bomb sites, gave public speeches to Vietnamese citizens, and broadcast on radio programs urging US military personnel to end bombing campaigns in the region. As a result, many branded her a traitor. The FBI compiled 7,000 pages of classified documents on her life, the Veterans of Foreign Wars demanded the government try her in court for her actions, Maryland's state legislature even considered banning her (and her films) from the state.[8] She was labeled, and oft still referred to as "Hanoi Jane." Theaters across the country boycotted all of her works. She was effectively grey-listed – not quite a pariah, but not a welcomed guest either. Few production studios were willing to take the risk on her. In the

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[7] Fonda and Gilbert had discussed making a movie about the war as early as 1972. A year later Fonda hashed out what that movie might look like after spending time with Kovic, a veteran who had been paralyzed in the War and made famous after publishing a memoir titled, *Born on the Fourth of July*. Mary Dowd was the original screenwriter, but Salt took over after the original script was shelved. "1978 (51st) Academy Awards," *Academy Awards Acceptance Speech Database*, recorded April 9, 1979, https://aaspeechesdb.oscars.org/link/051-21/

[8] "'70 Effort by Hoover to Discredit Jane Fonda Described in Memo," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1975, https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/16/archives/70-effort-by-hoover-to-discredit-jane-fonda-described-in-memo.html "Jane Fonda papers, Sophia Smith Collection," SSC-MS-00477, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Massachusetts. https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/165250 Accessed August 24, 2024.

words of Fonda's own agent Mike Medavoy, "you've got a paralyzed Vietnam veteran, and you've got a love scene no one wants to see. It is the worst, least-commercial idea I have ever heard of."[9] But Fonda and Gilbert remained dedicated. As did Salt, who worked the first two years for free, called in personal favors to bring on a director (John Schlesinger) and producer (Jerome Hellman), and worked to get a meeting with United Artists, a major production company with which he had a strong relationship. By some chance of luck, Fonda's agent had taken a position as head of production for United Artists and was convinced to fund the film, though with a very limited budget.

But even then, Fonda's vision struggled to take flight. The team lost their first director and scrambled to find a new one (Hal Ashby). Salt was slow to write, failing to produce pages. Seven weeks before filming was meant to begin, he had a heart attack. Once again, the team struggled to find a replacement, ultimately hiring a video editor (Robert C. Jones) with screenwriting aspirations. Eventually, the script became a group effort as they scrambled to finish writing before filming each day. When it was done, Hellman and Ashby took it to the head of marketing (Gabe Sumner) at United Artists, who called it "anti-American" and asked if they really expected him to try and sell it.[10] They did.

By the time the film was finally ready for release almost the entirety of executives at United Artists had left to start a new company. New management dropped *Coming Home* in theaters in February, one of the worst months for new releases, with little

[9] Peter Biskind, "The Vietnam Oscars," *Vanity Fair*, February 19, 2008, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/03/warmovies200803?srsltid=AfmBOooiJWTvr-VpJp6IFpVzxjwZcZ-uyu_rmEVDdLzkjb7col_hnkcV

[10] Ibid.

marketing efforts.[11] Against all odds it was successful anyway. Not only had Fonda's

vision come to light despite public opinion of her, the production issues and low budget

had not held them back. In hindsight, the success of *Coming Home* makes sense. The

vitriol towards Fonda was not enough to outshine her connections or skillset. The

research and politics of the writers ultimately produced a final product that matched the

public's disapproval of the War. The film was well timed.

However, it is exactly these conditions that paved the way for a film like *The

Deer Hunter*. In sharp contrast to Fonda, Cimino was a Hollywood enigma. He was not a

proud anti-war activist or the child of a Hollywood icon. No one knew much about him

and what people did know was contested – like his age, his height, how many siblings he

had, whether he had been accepted to a doctorate program at Yale, or what kind of

industry experience he had.[12] He marketed himself as a child prodigy and ex-Green

Beret. He insinuated that *The Deer Hunter* was a somewhat autobiographical account

drawing from his own service in Vietnam – a compelling element for audiences, as no

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[11] *The New York Times* quoted Medavoy who noted that taking the chance on *Coming Home* was a huge financial and public relations risk. United Artists was, at the same time, funding Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and held foreign distribution rights for Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. Medavoy later recounted how one executive said "Oh my god, we may be run out of the country!" Later, A *New York Times* article from April of 1973 complicates the claim that little marketing efforts were made. Perhaps the film had less marketing to audiences during its theater run, but after it performed on its own, United Artists put out a ton of money and resources to advertise for the upcoming Oscars. The six largest studios spent 1.8 million before nominations and another 700,000 dollars from the time nominations were announced to the time the polls closed. United Artists ran full page ads for *Coming Home* in all major trade papers every day starting with the day announcement for nominations were made. Similarly, Universal purchased the centerfold for *The Deer Hunter* advertisements in all major trade papers several days a week during the same timeframe to promote its box office numbers. Aljean Harmetz, "2 Vietnam Films Cast Aside Ghosts on Way to Oscars," *The New York Times*, April 11, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/11/archives/2-vietnam-films-cast-aside-ghosts-on-way-to-oscars-new-york.html Aljean Harmetz, "Hollywood, Hoopla Over, Now the Wait for the Oscars," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/03/archives/hollywood-hoopla-over-now-the-wait-for-oscars-studios-must-try.html

[12] Christopher Silvester, "Liar, Crook, and Hollywood Great," *The Critic*, February 2023, https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/february-2023/liar-crook-and-hollywood-great/

Vietnam veteran had yet written or directed a film about the War.[13] In actuality, little is known about Cimino for sure except that he was a pathological liar. He embellished where he could and opted for outright falsities when he wanted to. Cimino was never a Green Beret, had never been deployed to Vietnam, and the original script wasn't even about the War – it was about an underground Russian Roulette gambling ring in Las Vegas.[14]

Barry Spikings and Michael Deeley of EMI Films originally purchased the script. They didn't care much for it, but Cimino, who had made a name for himself about his first film *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, convinced them to undergo a re-write. According to Spikings, Cimino had argued that, "the Russian roulette is a metaphor for what America was doing with its young people, sending them to a war in a foreign place, when there was no justification for it. I know something about Vietnam, and I've always wanted to do a movie about it. Are you up for it?"[15] They were.

Shortly after, Cimino hired Deric Washburn, a writer he knew from a previous project.[16] According to Washburn, he met with Cimino over three days and they

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[13] In interviews with colleagues and producers, Cimino suggested that he had joined the service immediately after the Tet Offensive and served as part of a medical unit attached to the Army Special Forces.

[14] While Cimino was enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve and did spend six months training at both Fort Dix, New Jersey, and Fort Sam in Houston, Texas, his time of service was in 1962, and he was never deployed to Vietnam, nor was he attached to any special unit. Dave Itzkoff, "Michael Cimino, Directors of *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*, Dies at 77," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/movies/michael-cimino-director-of-the-deer-hunter-and-heavens-gate-dies-at-77.html

[15] Biskind, "The Vietnam Oscars."

[16] They previously worked as writers on the 1972 film *Silent Running*.

reconstructed the entire script. Later, Washburn would state that Cimino gave him one month to write the new script based off their edits from that three-day meeting. To get it done, he worked twenty-hour days, never interviewing a single veteran or active-duty soldier. Instead, he watched the news, taking all of his inspiration from the nightly specials. When he turned in the final draft, he was promptly fired. Cimino called it a mess, said he wrote it and stamped his own name on it. Later, a Writers Guild arbitration would award Washburn with sole credit for the entire screenplay and co-write credit for the film.[17] When the project finally made it to production, Cimino was over budget and past deadlines. The three acts he envisioned proved more timely and demanding than originally anticipated and poor planning in filming stages proved to be a logistical nightmare.

By the time Cimino made it to the war scenes, the project was already several weeks behind. Cimino pushed to film in Thailand to enhance authenticity, but there was little infrastructure for filming an American-made movie in the region – and not only was there little infrastructure designed for a speedy project, but the film called for weapons, military vehicles, and helicopters. In order to secure Cimino's demands, Spikings worked with then-General Kriangsak Chomanan, the supreme commander of the Thai military, who offered them on loan. Because the weapons and armored vehicles were real, active military supplies, their use was beholden to the General's need of them which was not always reliable. Halfway through filming the General recalled the loans in order to carry

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[17] Peter Biskind, "Peter Biskind on Michael Cimino's Twisted, Tortured Legacy: 'A Mystery in Death as He Was in Life.'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 13, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/peter-biskind-michael-ciminos-twisted-910101/

out a military coup. When the film was finally done, Cimino and Spikings brought it to Universal's parent company for a special screening – it was not well received. Studio heads thought it too violent, too long, and the end scene of "God Bless America" anti-American and downright offensive. Thom Mount, then-president of Universal said, "This was just a fucking continuing nightmare from the day Michael finished the picture to the day we released it. The movie was endless. It was *The Deer Hunter and the Hunter and the Hunter*." Cimino refused to cut anything and eventually his film was signed off for release.[18]

When *Coming Home* came to theaters in February of 1978, reviews were decent but mild.[19] It wasn't until Oscar nominations later that year that *Coming Home* began to earn some solid acclaim. But early on veterans were attracted to it, and Hellman was invited to Washington D.C. by Jimmy Carter's head of Veterans Affairs Max Cleland (who had lost three limbs in Vietnam) for a special showing with Congress. The film became a major speaking point for the disabled and attracted attention to the conditions and resources of VA hospitals. Though other films about the Vietnam War hit theaters that year, *Coming Home* dominated conversations in the industry until December, when

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[18] Biskind, "The Vietnam Oscars."

[19] On January 1, 1978 Roger Ebert called it "an extraordinarily moving film" in his review in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Several weeks later, Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* called it "soggy with good if unrealized intentions." Days later *Time Magazine* contributor Frank Rich said *Coming Home* was "a devastating vision of this country's recent social history…. One long, low howl of pain." Roger Ebert, "Coming Home," The Chicago-Sun Times, January 1, 1978,

https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/coming-home-1978. Vincent Canby, "Film: Post-Vietnam Romantic Triangle," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1978, https://www.nytimes.com/1978/02/16/archives/film-postvietnam-romantic-triangle-detritus-of-war.html. Frank Rich, "Cinema: The Dark at the End of the Tunnel," *Time Magazine*, February 20, 1978, https://time.com/archive/6881129/cinema-the-dark-at-the-end-off-the-tunnel/

The Deer Hunter hit theaters. Marketing pulled in huge swarms of audiences.[20] Almost

immediately, Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* called it, "a big, awkward, crazily

ambitious, sometimes breathtaking motion picture that comes as close to being a popular

epic as any movie about this country since *The Godfather* … its vision is that of an

original, major new filmmaker."[21] But the reviews weren't entirely positive. It was

criticized for being too long, too violent, too vague, echoing the fears of studio heads who

wanted to edit it down. Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker* wrote, "The Vietcong are treated

in the standard inscrutable-evil Oriental style of the Japanese in the Second World War

movies.… The impression a viewer gets is that if we did some bad things there we did

them ruthlessly but impersonally; the Vietcong were cruel and sadistic."[22]

The Russian Roulette scenes and depictions of the North Vietnamese sparked

even more controversial buzz. Frank Rich, writing for *Time Magazine*, noted "the roulette

game becomes a metaphor for a war that blurred the lines between bravery and cruelty,

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[20] In order to ensure the film would earn during its initial release, producers of *The Deer Hunter* consulted with outside film production magnate Allan Carr. After a private showing, Carr reportedly "sobbed," noting "I probably would never have gone to see *The Deer Hunter* - or any movie that was three hours long and about Vietnam. But, by the time it was half over, I was so emotionally undone. I was crying. I felt I was seeing a genuine masterpiece. It's not the kind of picture I could make, but I could appreciate it." He then volunteered to market the film free of charge. He later said, "Universal kept asking, 'Who will see this movie?' I said, 'If you sell it right, everybody! Intellectuals will go to see it, and so will the Clint Eastwood audience.'" Carr later enlisted the support of Lorraine Gary, the wife of Sid Sheinberg, then-president of Universal's parent company, who after seeing it couldn't speak for hours. Harmetz, "2 Vietnam Films Cast Aside Ghosts on Way to Oscars."

[21] Vincent Canby, "Blue Collar Epic," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1978, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/deer-re.html?scp=19&sq=%22John%20Cazale%22&st=cse

[22] Pauline Kael, "*The Deer Hunter* (1978): The 'God Bless America' Symphony," *The New Yorker*, December 18, 1978, https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/god-bless-america-symphony/#google_vignette

friends and enemies, sanity and madness."[23] Peter Arnett wrote in the *Los Angeles Times,* "In its 20 years of war, there was not a single recorded case of Russian roulette.… The central metaphor of the movie is simply a bloody lie."[24] *The New York Times* ran an op-ed piece by John Pilger under the headline "The Gook Hunter," where he wrote, "Hollywood sensed that a lot of money could be made with a movie that appealed directly to those racial instincts that cause wars and that allowed the Vietnam War to endure for so long.… *The Deer Hunter* and its apologists insult the memory of every American who died in Vietnam."[25]

In an interview with *Variety*, Cimino noted that *The Deer Hunter* is "an anti-war film but not a political film." How that could be possible he did not explain. In a later interview with *The New York Times*, Cimino gave himself a free hand to portray anything he wanted, regardless of its historical authenticity, arguing that in Vietnam "anything you could imagine happening probably happened." When asked by a reporter how he felt about audiences cheering when the movie's soldiers killed their North Vietnamese Army captors, he replied, "I think it testifies to the fact that there's a lot of pride in this country.… We've been defensive too long about feeling positive about this country."[26]

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[23] Frank Rich, "Cinema: In Hell Without a Map," *Time Magazine*, December 18, 1978, https://time.com/archive/6850308/cinema-in-hell-without-a-map/

[24] Peter Arnett, "*The Deer Hunter* is Good Drama, But Bad History," *The Los Angeles Times*, republished in *The Veteran: Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, vol. 9, no. 2, Spring 1979, https://www.vvaw.org/veteran/article/?id=1728

[25] John Pilger, "The Gook Hunter," *The New York Times*, April 26, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/26/archives/the-gookhunter.html

[26] Peter Biskind, "The Vietnam Oscars."

Cimino had not made an anti-war film without politics, but an anti-war film with loosely

veiled jingoism.

It was exactly this that made *The Deer Hunter* so provocative. Unlike *Coming*

Home which offered a morose view of the real-life consequences and pain of the Vietnam

War, *The Deer Hunter* offered an alternative. Yes, the War was bad, yes it caused

unbearable trauma, but no further reflection on the War, military agenda, or foreign

policy was necessary – not when the audience and veteran had a common enemy. *The*

Deer Hunter marked a subtle but crucial shift in Vietnam War narrative construction.

While maintaining anti-war sentiments, it differed from *Coming Home* and other late

1970s films by inviting passive viewership. This allowed viewers to observe the War as a

distant event – a story on screen – rather than a lived experience demanding response.

Cimino's inversion of the normative approach acknowledged the War as a tragedy but

de-emphasized questions of responsibility. Though subtle, this modification proved

powerful. For the first time, audiences watched a Hollywood film on the Vietnam War

without being asked to feel responsible or remorseful, nor were they called to political

action. Instead, it argued, yes, the War was a tragedy, but look at how evil and heartless

the Vietnamese were – of course the War would leave scars, look at what had been done.

It did not take long for what Cimino had done to dawn on viewers. The acclaim

quickly gave way to criticism. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Peter Arnett dismissed

The Deer Hunter, condemning the ways in which it deviated from historical accuracy and

moral responsibility in favor of Hollywood artifice.[27] Arnett wasn't alone. One journalist

attending the 1979 Academy Awards ceremony noted that, "Early on, we all thought the

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[27] Peter Arnett, "Vietnam's Last Atrocity," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1979, sec. 6.

film was, powerful but flawed," he says. "Now I think there have been a lot of second thoughts that emphasize the flawed. When the picture's name was read, it was as if you had proposed to a girl and were horrified she had accepted. I had the peculiar feeling that – if the ballots had gone out one week later – *The Deer Hunter* wouldn't have won."[28]

Journalists and critics were not alone. Activists organized protests and disseminated eight-page pamphlets to attendees outside the Awards ceremony. They denounced the film for its racist portrayal of the Vietnamese peoples. While *The Deer Hunter* won Oscars inside, thirteen members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War were arrested outside. That same night, members of the Hell No We Won't Go Away Committee offered newspaper and magazine clippings condemning the film to attendees stuck in traffic on their way to the ceremony.

Just over two weeks after the ceremony *The New York Times* published an article titled "Oscar Winning *Deer Hunter* Is Under Attack As 'Racist' Film." The author noted that in the month of April alone,

> articles in *Harper's Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Seven Days*, and *L.A. Weekly* have called the film "a lie," "a criminal violation of the truth" and a "horrific history" in which all the non-Americans are "sweaty, crazy, vicious and debauched." *Izvestia*, the Soviet Government newspaper; responded to the film's Academy Award by accusing it of portraying a war in which "the aggressors and the victims changed places." … [the film] telescopes the events of a 10-year war and that it portrays all yellow people as inhuman.[29]

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[28] Aljean Harmetz, "Oscar-Winning *Deer Hunter* Is Under Attack as 'Racist' Film," *The New York Times*, April 26, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/26/archives/oscarwinning-deer-hunter-is-under-attack-as-racist-film-among-the.html

[29] Ibid.

These reviewers were absolutely correct in their assertions, but the damage was done.

Audiences were drawn to the film's emotional intensity. One reader responded to John

Pilgers' *New York Times* article "Gook Hunter," which one such defense.

> *The Deer Hunter* is a mass-market contribution to America's consciousness of the Vietnam War. Without addressing myself to the film's historical inaccuracies and Hollywood slickness, I feel safe in stating that the film contributes to the raising of that consciousness. It is a classic tragedy – relentless and inevitable. Its anguished conclusion effectively impacts the audience with the surviving characters' debilitating sense of loss. Therein lies the success of the film. It is this enormous emotional impact that most viewers take home from the movie house to ponder, not the horrific scenes of violence. One cannot fault a film too severely that associates warfare with anguish, tragedy and loss.[30]

Another reader wrote in,

> To criticize *The Deer Hunter* as an unrealistic and racist portrayal of the Vietnam War is to misunderstand Michael Cimino's intentions in making the film. *The Deer Hunter* is not a war movie. It is a movie about simple, blue-collar young mem – ordinary men, the ones who went to Vietnam and how they react under extraordinary circumstances. The Russian-roulette scenes and the portrayal of un mitigated Vietnamese brutality are sensationalistic devices Cimino uses to create as extraordinary an environment as possible. While it is important that people like John Pilger point out the truth about events in Vietnam, we must not condemn an artist for fictionalizing in an effort to make his point.[31]

By the time critics and industry heads had realized what they had unleashed, what *Daily*

Mail so aptly referred to as "the film that could purge a nation's guilt," audiences, like the

readers above, had already attached themselves to it.[32]

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[30] Susan J. Schlienz, "Letter to the Editor," *The New York Times* April 29, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/05/13/archives/letters-what-if-a-strike-knocked-out-a-nuclear-plant-the-worth-of.html

[31] Alec Sirken, "Letter to the Editor," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/05/13/archives/letters-what-if-a-strike-knocked-out-a-nuclear-plant-the-worth-of.html

[32] As quoted by John Pilger in "Why the Oscars are a Con," *Johnpilger.com*, February 11, 2010, https://countercurrents.org/pilger110210.htm. Accessed July 9 2025.

The Deer Hunter is without question bad history. It reflects war-porn more than it does the experience of Vietnam for any soldier, but the film appealed to the masses nonetheless. Cimino's portrayal of the War realigned the experience to one of "them vs us," a narrative that revisionists championed to reunite the veteran and civilian, and in turn, the military action and the nation at large. This was a feat not accomplished by *Coming Home* where the veteran is humanized, but not quite united with society. As historian Robert D. Schulzinger noted, "*The Deer Hunter*, like much of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam, had very little to do with events in Southeast Asia and very much to do with Americans' view of themselves."[33] Cimino drove this point home in an interview with *The New York Times* when he argued, "My film has nothing to do with whether the war should or should not have been… The specific details of the war are unimportant."[34] Where Fonda highlighted real issues surrounding the effects of the War, Cimino offered a framework to restore national honor. The authenticity of that honor was for him, unimportant.

Restoring national honor post-Vietnam meant, at least in Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, re-characterizing the Vietnamese from previous portrayals. The aggressors and victims from the six o'clock news had to switch places. Sympathetic depictions of defenseless, agrarian peoples could not persist alongside new narrative aims, so they were replaced with brutal, savage, super-capable soldiers who tortured captured soldiers for

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[33] Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 157.

[34] Laticia Kent, "Ready for Vietnam? A Talk with Michael Cimino," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1978, https://www.nytimes.com/1978/12/10/archives/ready-for-vietnam-a-talk-with-michael-cimino-cimino.html

pleasure.[35] The weak, helpless Vietnamese of earlier films fade into the background, as does whatever reason for the U.S. being there in the first place – for Cimino, this too was unimportant.[36] The revival of racial stereotypes, reminiscent of Western film tropes, stripped enemy characters of their humanity. Cimino's representation of the Vietnamese devalued them as historical participants, sacrificing them for the unification of the community at home and the soldier abroad – the audience, the characters, and the actual soldiers were all *one* people, the enemy, though, was not.[37]

The melancholic patriotism of *The Deer Hunter* provided another outlet. The film concludes with "God Bless America," a symbol for the nation's resiliency – the ending of *The Deer Hunter* whispers to audiences "sure, the war was bad, but we're going to be okay." There is no attempt to resolve moral grievances towards the military or government, only to justify the actions of the soldier. In doing so, it removes responsibility and recasts the War as a sociological issue where soldiers and civilians are facets of a larger system, one that had wronged both parties equally. But that system – or at least the War – is over. What matters now, *The Deer Hunter* suggests, is how the two will move forward. Accountability is traded for quick collective healing. And this is more

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[35] Louis J. Kern will later note that *Rambo* also executes this inversion. See his article "MIA's, Myth, and Macho Magic: Post-Apocalyptic Cinematic Visions of Vietnam," in William J. Searle ed., *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*. Popular Press, 1988, pp. 37-54.

[36] Harmetz, "Oscar-Winning Deer Hunter Under Attack as 'Racist' Film."

[37] As Michael Klein notes, "The film is permeated with a bewildered sense of nativist pride, bruised innocence, and loss, a structure of feeling that is resolved in a vision of the beleaguered but unified America – standing together, standing tall – in a hostile, evil, and incomprehensible world of Asian and communist demons." Michael Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (Rutgers University Press, 1990), 23.

attractive to audiences who lived through the embarrassment and shame of nightly news specials, the Pentagon Papers, and the Church Committee.[38]

These subtle ideological transformations established narrative patterns that would dominate films produced in subsequent years. *The Deer Hunter* is not the only revisionist film, but it did lay the groundwork for films that followed. Analysis of Hollywood films from 1979-1988 reveals a fundamental shift in narrative approach, moving away from critical examinations of American culpability toward revisionist reimagining. Other films like *The Boys in Company C*, *Go Tell the Spartans*, and *Good Guys Wear Black* upheld the revisionist framework. Though these films did not achieve the same success as *The Deer Hunter*, their impact cannot be understated.

The success of *The Deer Hunter* and revisionist narratives did not exist in a vacuum. The struggle for authority over the Vietnam War's meaning paralleled broader socio-political transformations across the nation. By the early 1970s, economic decline, stagflation, Nixon's election on anti-counterculture "law and order," and the rising hostility towards perceived radical activism influenced and undermined the momentum of

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[38] The Pentagon Papers was a study by then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara documenting the history of US involvement in South East Asia. The 1967 report, which generated some 7,000 pages, was leaked by Daniel Ellsberg in 1971. The report revealed that government had misled the public on affairs in Southeast Asia and the war in Vietnam. The Church Committee was a 1975 US Senate committee to investigate government agency abuses which ultimately uncovered a number of widespread injustices, including the program known as COINTELPRO which monitored US citizens without warrants or legal cause as well as several operations that disseminated propaganda, encouraged assassination attempts of world leaders, and relationships with private institutions that orchestrated government coverups. U.S. Department of Defense. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*. 12 vols. Washington D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971; Neil Sheehan, "Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1971; Nicholas M. Horrock, "The Church Committee Must Address That, Among Other Questions," *The New York Times*, June 22 1975; Nicholas M. Horrock, "White House Pushes Effort to Keep Intelligence Inquiry Secret," *The New York Times*, October 29 1975.

the anti-war movement.[39] Characterized by a "crisis of confidence" and conservative

revivalism, the 1970s had taken a sharp departure from the youth-led leftist activism that

defined the previous decade. By the 1980s, the U.S. witnessed a massive mobilization of

the political Right, a movement scholars have traced to a 1960s counterrevolution, in

which religious traditionalists and right-wing politicians formed a coalition against

perceived social and cultural deteriorations.[40] Through an examination of religious and

political associations, academics have documented the growth, evolution, and

matriculation of a "moral right" across the country.[41] This socio-political phenomenon

informed producers of cultural ephemera and audience members, who were increasingly

more receptive to provocative ideological alterations in film, that returned viewers to

feelings of a bygone era – one of national honor and collective pride. Where films of the

previous era emphasized a clear breakdown of traditional Cold War values, this new era

of films sought to restore them. Attempts to reckon with the War's impact on national

purpose or identity, as politically conscious films of the earlier period had, were

abandoned. Instead, the primary concern of these films was repairing the nation through

rewriting self-inflicted wounds as external injuries. From 1979 onward, the War ceased to

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[39] "Law: Nixon Finally Gets the Crime Bill He Wanted," *The New York Times*, October 18, 1970, https://www.nytimes.com/1970/10/18/archives/law-nixon-finally-gets-the-crime-bill-he-wanted.html. John Darnton, "Antiwar Protests Erupt Across U.S.," *The New York Times*, March 10, 1972, https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/10/archives/antiwar-protests-erupt-across-us-columbia-rally-ends-again-in-clash.html. "Law and Order," *The New York Times*, April 20, 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/30/archives/law-and-order.html.

[40] For more on this, see Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer's edited anthology *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative* in the 1970s, Mathew Lassiter's *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, Kevin Kruse's *White Flight: Atlanta & The Making of Modern Conservatism*, and Daniel K. Williams *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*.

[41] While this understanding has earned a general acceptance from scholars, that does not necessarily mean that these authors see the rise of the Right as an inherent decline of the left. Instead, their primary focus is how this coalition altered the public and political sphere.

be a thing America *did* and became instead, a thing that *happened* to America. The war over the war was beginning to gain some ground.

Much of the shifts in audience reception can be explained by the cultural climate of the 1980s. The era of Reagan was one that represented American Exceptionalism and masculinity; he emerged as the unofficial spokesperson for a new cultural awakening in the aftermath of Carter's malaise. His administration rejected economic complacency, weakness, and leftist ideology. Unlike the previous decade, the 1980s did not attempt to reconcile with the War but instead sought to rewrite it. Reagan's presidency emphasized reestablishing America's former cultural authority as the champion for liberty, democracy, and equality whilst shunning subversive behavior that may challenge the status quo. His administration championed rewritings and reframing's centered on affirming a neo-Cold War view that depicted radical and liberal-minded peoples as weak or deviant.[42]

If the films of 1969-1978 represented the triumphant mainstream success of the politically conscious counterculture, then the films of 1979-1988 marked a resurgence of the political Right under Reagan's rule. Action packed flicks exuded masculinity and hinged on absurdist threads of "cool." Unlike the films of the previous era, these later productions focused on the War as an actual conflict, presenting Vietnam as an on-screen place and soldiers as direct participants. Examining the same film genre categories from the last chapter – anti-war (A), home front (H), Vietnam veteran (VV), and the American War in Vietnam (AVW) – reveals a dramatic shift from earlier periods. Of the seventy-one major Hollywood productions released from 1979-1988, only four of them concerned

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[42] Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," 20.

portrayals of the anti-war movement, and only five focused on the home front. Instead of applying the same politically forward, but war-removed storytelling methods of the previous era, films now focused predominantly on the active soldier, the recent veteran still engaged in combat, and the War itself. Of the total seventy-one films, thirty-five of them centered on the veteran and twenty-two on the War.[43]

'NAM, PRISONERS OF WAR, AND THE SMELL OF NAPALM

A year after *The Deer Hunter*, Francis Ford Coppola released *Apocalypse Now* (1979)*.* This psychological thriller, based on Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, follows Captain Willard, played by Martin Sheen, on a government-sanctioned mission through northern Vietnam to assassinate a Colonel who has reportedly gone insane. On the surface, *Apocalypse Now* mimicked the earlier era's critiques – the War was dangerous, its soldiers troubled, the mission in Vietnam absurd. But in the broader context of Vietnam War cinema, *Apocalypse Now*, like *The Deer Hunter,* subtly shifted the narrative tone.

Iconic one-liners like, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning," "Charlie don't surf," and "terminate with extreme prejudice" made *Apocalypse Now* an instant cult classic. These quick quips transformed the War into something darkly "cool," filtering trauma through an absurdist lens. This is particularly evident in the scene where Lieutenant Bill Kilgore, played by Robert Duvall, and his squadron of Huey helicopters descend on a Vietnamese village – shooting everyone and everything with missiles,

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[43] Of those, eleven featured narratives about prisoners of war, reflecting rising public concern regarding the status of war captives and those deemed missing in action. Another three commented on refugees elsewhere in southeast Asia, demonstrating growing awareness of the secret wars in Laos and Cambodia.

machine guns, and rifles. In the background of the vicious attack, Richard Wagner's

"Ride of the Valkyries" plays. The scene's triumphalist cinematic nature mirrors that of

Star Wars: A New Hope (1977).[44] Film critic Frank P. Tomasulo notes,

> *Apocalypse Now* turned the real-life specificity of US imperialism into an abstract and philosophical cinematic meditation on good and evil, light and dark. In the process, American society was treated to a film that represented not so much Vietnam-era America as American's idealized view of itself post-Vietnam, that is, from the enlightened perspective of historical hindsight that could subulate contradictions. As such, *Apocalypse Now* might be categorized as both a pro-war movie and an antiwar movie that the film's cinematic and political ambiguity both conceals and reveals a national ambivalence toward the Vietnam War.[45]

With Vietnam safely in the past, *Apocalypse Now* was able to take artistic liberty with its

representation.

Equally as false as *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now* completely reimagines

what Vietnam was about. Coppola's desire to portray the War as, what one contemporary

reviewer noted, a "literal and metaphysical journey into madness" certainly matched the

themes of films from the previous generation, but *Apocalypse Now* like *The Deer Hunter*,

repositioned the War into one that, as Frank Rich aptly noted, "is emotionally obtuse and

intellectually empty."[46] As a result, four key tropes emerged: (1) the abandoned

POW/MIA, (2) the noble warrior, (3) the healing nation, and (4) the savage enemy. Each

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[44] The similarity in scenes may result from George Lucas himself who joined the team for pre-production on *Apocalypse Now*, which was ultimately produced by American Zoetrope – a private production company founded by George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola. Drew Wardle, "How George Lucas Nearly Directed Francis Ford Coppola Film *Apocalypse Now*," *Far Out Magazine*, April 27, 2021, https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/george-lucas-francis-ford-coppola-film-apocalypse-now/.

[45] Frank P. Tomasulo, "The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Pro-war and Antiwar Film," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film,* ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 147.

[46] Frank Rich, "Cinema: The Making of a Quagmire," *Time Magazine*, August 27, 1979, https://time.com/archive/6854540/cinema-the-making-of-a-quagmire/

served to rewrite the war's meaning, transforming a national trauma into one of American resilience and honor.

The POW/MIA trope became perhaps the most powerful narrative device in post-war Vietnam films. While earlier films like *Limbo* (1972) and *Rolling Thunder* (1977) touched on prisoners of war, they kept their focus on the home front, following the families of captured soldiers or utilizing the experience as a character backstory.[47] *The Deer Hunter*'s graphic depiction of prisoner torture marked a crucial shift, bringing the POW experience directly to the big-screen.[48] This resonated with growing public anxiety regarding abandoned American soldiers, despite the claim lacking basis.

The urgency of the POW/MIA narrative emerged from post-war political maneuvering. The House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, along with Henry Kissinger and President Gerald Ford, used unaccounted-for soldiers as leverage, tying embargo restrictions, humanitarian aid, and reconciliation efforts to the release of supposedly hidden prisoners.[49] Though no evidence ever substantiated claims of long-held prisoners of war or nefarious play in those marked as missing in action, the discourse surrounding the issue took hold of American imagination. As H. Bruce Franklin notes in *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*, in 1992 2,273 Americans remained "unaccounted for" from Vietnam – a remarkably low number compared to World War II,

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[47] Later filmic interpretations of this perspective include *Some Kind of Hero* (1982).

[48] Though the POW/MIA issue is most notable post-1975, its inclusion in earlier films was not unheard of. As Franklin noted, large numbers of missing or imprisoned soldiers and civilians were held in World War II, and the Korean War. Prisoners of war were not unique to Vietnam; however, their legacy would be.

[49] Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam*, 1975-2000 (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007) 18-24.

with nearly 79,000 still unaccounted for and the Korean War where some 8,100

American whereabouts remain unknown. Many of the unaccounted-for soldiers in

Vietnam did have some information attached to their files – at least 1,101 were lost over

sea regions, dense jungle areas, or mountainous terrain where recovery was impossible.[50]

At the time of H. Bruce Franklin's publication, only one man remains officially listed as

either missing in action or a prisoner of war, and that man is known to be dead.[51] Yet the

trope persisted. It did so because it served a deeper psychological purpose, shifting

responsibility for American losses from the government that sent soldiers to war, to the

Vietnamese who allegedly held them there.

Films eagerly embraced this narrative. *When War Was in Session* (1979) broke

new ground as a made-for-TV production focused entirely on prisoner experiences in

Vietnam.[52] The theme gained mainstream traction with blockbusters like *First Blood*

(1982), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), and most notably the *Missing in Action* series (1984-

1985) starring Chuck Norris, *POW: The Escape* (1986), *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987), and *In

Love and War* (1987).[53] These films transformed the complex political and moral

questions of Vietnam into simple rescue narratives where heroic American warriors

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[50] H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America: How and Why Belief in Live POWs Has Possessed a Nation* (Rutgers University Press, 1992), 11.

[51] Ibid., 11-12.

[52] Though *The Deer Hunter* also portrays the prisoner experience, the film has three acts, only one of which focuses on the American War in Vietnam – the film is recognized as a home front, American War in Vietnam, and veteran film within the broader Vietnam War filmic genre.

[53] *Rambo* was criticized by reviewers for playing on the Vietnam POW/MIA politics. For more on this see, Ellen Farkley, "The U.S. Has Surrendered – Now *Rambo* is Taken the World by Storm," *Business Week*, August 26, 1985. Jonathon Karp, "How Real is *Rambo*: Vets Dubious but Approve of Fim's MIA Focus," *Washington Post*, July 8, 1985; and Mike Felkerm "*Rambo*: 'I remember It Differently,'" *Jump Cut* 31 (March 1986).

return to save abandoned comrades from perpetually villainous captors.[54] These imagined

distractions realigned perception and communal experience in the United States. As

Franklin notes, the POW/MIA issue as pseudohistory filled gaps in the American psyche,

crafting an imagined reality around Vietnam that absolved citizens from the shame and

embarrassment of reality.

While the films of 1969-1978 predominately portrayed veterans as damaged

victims or dangerous threats, the 1980s saw a dramatic reimagining of the mentally

unwell Vietnam soldier. Early post-war films like *Night-Flowers* (1979) and *The Stunt

Man* (1980) continued to portray the veteran as deranged and sociopathic, mimicking the

imagery of the latter 1970s. In *When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?* (1979) a veteran

holds patrons of a small diner hostage, upholding the traditional theme of the dangerous

ex-soldier. But a new archetype was emerging – "the noble warrior" whose trauma

stemmed not from the War's fundamental wrongness, but from society's failure to honor

his sacrifice. Many of these films portrayed the vet as emotionally disturbed, though not

dangerous. Movies like *Americana* (1981), where a veteran's obsession with restoring a

torn carousel becomes a metaphor for healing rather than instability. Even in films

depicting severe PTSD, like *The Ninth Configuration* (1980) and *Birdy* (1984), started

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[54] Stanley Kauffmann's review in the *New Republic* noted "*The Hanoi Hilton* is filth. It exploits the sufferings . . . of American POWs . . . in order to promote a distortion of history: that the peace movement in the United States . . . prolonged the imprisonment of those men by impeding American victory." George Szamuely, "Hollywood Goes to Vietnam," *Commentary*, January 1988, https://www.commentary.org/articles/george-szamuely/hollywood-goes-to-vietnam/

treating trauma as evidence of sensitivity rather than dysfunction.[55] The film poster for

Cease Fire (1985) reads, "He can't help but remember – you'll find it hard to forget,"

reframing the veteran's suffering as noble sacrifice rather than senseless damage.[56]

The "noble-warrior" often portrayed the veteran as a one-man army. Whereas the

previous era depicted ex-soldiers as unwilling draftees, afraid and unpatriotic, or as

crazed lunatics psychotically damaged by war, the new era witnessed the ex-soldier re-

emerged. This time around, he was individualistic, ultra-skilled, and morally grounded.

Still an outsider, but one who could singlehandedly restore justice, halt oppression, and

stop crime. Mimicking the crime-thriller tropes that exploded in the earlier period,

movies like *The Exterminator* (1980) and *Exterminator II* (1984) reinvent the veterans as

saviors waging war against crime in New York City. In *Night-Hawks* (1981), *Year of the*

Dragon (1985), *Steele Justice* (1987), *Above the Law* (1988), and *The Presidio* (1988),

the veterans are the cops – their jobs enhanced by their special military skills.[57] In

American Commandos (1985), "good" veterans are pitted against "bad" veterans in their

quest to end a massive drug ring in Southeast Asia, acknowledging that both exist, but

you can choose which one to root for.

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[55] Both films were praised for their filmmaking but neither invoked a response regarding the war. Roger Ebert called *Birdy* a loony but beautiful film. David Kerh, writing for the *Chicago Reader*, reflected on the cult-draw to *The Ninth Configuration* for its wacky perspective and bizarre intensity.

[56] Reviewers also reflected on the prevalence of PTSD, a major plot device throughout the film. A contemporary reviewer noted "at a time when movies are turning Vietnam into a fantasy of daredevil missions, *Cease Fire* brings home the reality of the war as a lingering nightmare for the men who fought it." Kevin Thomas, "*Cease Fire*," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-11-27-ca-4697-story.html

[57] *Year of the Dragon* mimics the claims of Rambo in all three series when the lead character remarks, "This is a fuckin' war, and I'm not gonna lose it, not this one, not over politics. This is Vietnam all over again. Nobody wants to win this thing, do you, just flat-out win?"

The Annihilators (1985) enhanced the archetype and utilizes the veteran as a super-soldier to confront domestic threats. These films inverted the veteran as one unable to reintegrate back into civilian life to one with the authority to do so – protecting innocent civilians from the evils at play. While less dramatically patriotic than World War II filmic reflections had been, these movies attempted to reinstitute the veteran as a respected member of American society.[58] As Jeremy M. Devine has noted, exploitation films like this used illness and mental instability as an excuse for violence as opposed to a cause for it. Like the focus on prisoners of war, reinstituting the veteran as an honorable symbol in the American consciousness was part of a socio-political effort to resolve the wounds of Vietnam. These tropes helped to further propel the revisionist narrative.

The "noble warrior" trope reached its apex with Rambo in the *First Blood* series, which transformed the troubled veteran into a superhuman defender of American values. This evolution reflected broader cultural shifts under Reagan, who actively worked to reframe the veteran as an unappreciated hero. Films increasingly suggested that veteran's struggles stemmed not from their experiences of war but from their treatment upon return – shifting the blame from military policy to anti-war activists and an ungrateful public. Reagan had long held firm on his anti-communism, proud patriotism, and staunch beliefs in American Exceptionalism. In private letters to Master Sergeant Michael T. Henry in 1982 he noted, "I'm convinced our fellow Americans have left or are leaving behind the tragic Vietnam syndrome that haunted our land for so long. They are at last aware of your

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[58] However, *The Annihilators* was poorly received. One reviewer ended his account of the film with "We can hope that the next one of these from Hollywood will be *The Procrastinator*. They'll never get around to releasing it." Ryan Desmond, "*The Annihilators* Joins Outpouring of Revenge Movies," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 25, 1985.

sacrifice and are beginning to realize how worthwhile the case truly was."[59] The same

year, he spoke at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial proclaiming, "We're beginning to

understand how much we were led astray."[60] Reagan visited the National Cathedral later

that day and remarked, "The tragedy was that they were asked to fight and die for a cause

that their country was unwilling to win."[61] Reagan's emphasis on "us" and the mythical,

pejorative "them" is the same ideological shifting that Hollywood was imparting on the

War in films. And it was effective. Sylvester Stallone himself remarked in a 1985

interview, "President Reagan has provided this country with a lot of incentives to feel

better. When you think about what it was coming off of with the last three presidents,

Reagan has been a godsend."[62]

This kind of rhetoric served as foundation for the third prominent interpretation

that emerged in this time period: the idea that national healing required unity not

responsibility. Even films that highlighted the anti-war movement or the home front

emphasized national unity and ostracized the counterculture and activism of the earlier

era. For instance, films like *Running on Empty* (1988) made the anti-war effort futile as it

follows a family of former anti-war activists, presenting their continued resistance and

struggle as increasingly futile and uncomfortably morose. Films like these shifted the

guilt and embarrassment away from the War and towards its vocal opponents. *Cutter's*

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[59] Ronald Reagan, *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 390.

[60] Francis X. Clines, "Tribute to Vietnam Dead: Words, A Wall." *The New York Times*, November 11, 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/11/us/tribute-to-vietnam-dead-words-a-wall.html

[61] Ibid.

[62] Nancy Collins, "The *Rolling Stone* Interview: Sylvester Stallone," *Rolling Stone*, December 19, 1985.

Way (1981), a neo-noir crime thriller emphasizes a similar point – the main characters are the burnt-out alcoholic survivors of the idealism of the long sixties.[63] Even *Streamers* (1983) which explored racial tensions and homophobia in the barracks as soldiers await orders highlighted the need for national healing and unity, not accountability and responsibility.

Other films about the anti-war movement and homefront focused on the traditional themes of the previous era, like the peace movement, anxieties on college campuses, or emotional scars on characters and communities as a result of the War, but transformed. Where earlier films like *Getting Straight* (1970) celebrated student activism, later works such as *Purple Haze* (1982) and *Back to School* (1986) treated campus protest as naïve relics of an immature era.[64] Others that centered on college reunions and showcased former activists who had abandoned their beliefs for comfortable middle-class lives. The most notable is *The Big Chill* (1983), which centers on a group of college-friends from the University of Michigan (now graduated and grown up) after their close friend commits suicide. Over the course of a weekend, the friends reminisce on who they were, who they've become, and whether their radical political beliefs have changed. For producer Michael Shamberg, the film is about the darkness of growing up and growing

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[63] *Cutter's Way* received high marks for its storytelling. One critic said, it "grabs you by the throat and pulls you, kicking and screaming, into an America gone mad." *Running on Empty* was received less emphatically, but still positively. *Streamers* however was discarded by critics, one condemning it as neither film or theater, but something less entirely. Michael Blowen, "A Dark Image of America," *Boston Globe*, July 22, 1981. Jay Boylar, "*Running on Empty* is Filling Film Far," *Orlando Sentinel*, October 15, 1988. Vincent Canby, "*Streamers* Adapted by Altman," *The New York Times*, October 9, 1983.

[64] Though it is worth noting that Roger Ebert of the *Chicago-Sun Times* noted *Purple Haze* was a remarkable film and account of the 1960s. The film was the grand-prize winner of the feature category at the Chicago International Film Festival. Winners in previous years included independent films like *Hearts and Minds* and *The Secaucus Seven*, both anti-war films. Roger Ebert, "Screening the Small, the Unusual," *Chicago-Sun Times*, January 31, 1983.

out of the age of idealism, but it is also about reconciliation. For co-writer Barbara

Benedek, the film was quite literally about the 1960s youth becoming "chilled."[65] This is

not to suggest that all films that took up the anti-war movement or the homefront were

negative depictions. *The Big Chill* was intended to be a quietly sad film that reflected on

the effectiveness and longevity of the independent actors within the movement, but it was

lauded by reviewers and audiences for its fun and hopeful sentiments.[66]

Others emphasized the continued desire for films that captured anti-war and

homefront themes. *Friendly Fire* (1979), a made-for-TV movie, followed a couple in

rural America become embittered after the government's indifference to the death of their

son. In *Hair* (1979), another rural-America depiction of the anti-war movement, a young

farm boy enlists in the War and discovers the New York City hippie movement. *More*

American Graffiti (1979), the sequel to George Lucas' 1973 coming-of-age comedy-

drama, followed original characters over four New Year's Eve celebrations as they

grapple with the reality of the War, the peace movement, and their intrapersonal

relationships against the backdrop of 1960s countercultural America. Another made-for-

TV film, *The Promise of Love* (1980), approached the War through a home-front-focused

narrative. The film follows Kathy in her journey to readjust to life as a military widow.

The Return of the Secaucus 7 (1980) tells the story of seven friends arrested on their way

to an anti-war protest. Continuing his directorial commentary from films like *Alice's*

Restaurant (1969) and *Little Big Man* (1970), Arthur Penn used *Four Friends* (1981) as a

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[65] Dan Brown, "The Dark Side of a Yuppie Classic: A New Generation May Not Look So Kindly Upon the Boomer Characters of The Big Chill," *National Post*, November 6, 1998.

[66] Bruce Bailey, "*The Big Chill*: This Week's Best Film Bet Sure to Delight Flower-Power Generation," *The Gazette*, February 15, 1986. Ken Tucker, "Chill Still Big After 15 Years; Pivotal Film Invites Boomers to Self-Obsess Once More," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1998.

parable for US involvement in Vietnam. So, while anti-war films existed, they were greatly outnumbered. Many films discredited the counterculture and anti-war activists as druggies, self-indulgent hippies, or naïve kids who neither understood the world nor its complexities, who would later mature out of their radical choices.

The fourth key trope involved the systemic dehumanization of Vietnamese characters, transforming them from victims of American military action into savage antagonists. While some films like *The Children of An Lac* (1980) and *Don't Cry It's Only Thunder* (1982) maintained humanitarian concerns, focusing on displaced children, the dominant trend stripped Vietnamese characters of agency and humanity. This dehumanization served a crucial purpose in the healing nation narrative – it's easier to move past guilt when the supposed victims are reimagined as deserving enemies. *The Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983) attempted to challenge this dehumanization by casting a bigot back in time as a Vietnamese man who struggles to protect two small children from American forces. However, such perspectives became increasingly rare. Instead, films frequently portrayed Vietnamese characters as either mute adversaries or sadistic torturers, especially in POW-themed films like *The Deer Hunter*. This helped transform Vietnam from a complex political conflict into a simpler good-versus-evil narrative that better suited America's renewed sense of moral certainty under Reagan.

The POW/MIA narrative further perpetuated the dehumanization of Vietnamese peoples, building upon the racially charged imagery established in films like *The Deer Hunter*. These recharacterizations created increasingly politicized portrayals, which subsequent films adopted. The Vietnamese became savage, brutal antagonists, stripped of voice, agency, and humanity – reduced to fictional characters – others who are human

only in biological appearance. This cinematic representation consistently portrayed the Vietnamese a monolithic communist threat, using pejorative terms and racial stereotypes that reflected and reinforced contemporary prejudices. This systematic dehumanization served a dual purpose; it simplified complex geopolitical realities while creating a narrative space for the rehabilitation of the American soldier, and in turn, the image of the veteran in popular culture.

This narrative is exemplified in films like *Missing in Action*, where Braddock, played by action-flick hero Chuck Norris, is held by a Communist Vietnamese and a Liberal Senator, both symbolic enemies of the discarded veteran. He is accused of egregious war crimes like killing innocent civilians and using chemical weapons to destroy the peasant farmlands – actual crimes the U.S. was accused of repeatedly during the War. In a damningly dramatic scene, Braddock refutes these claims, confronting his accusers. Afterward, they hang their heads in shame; one elderly man goes as far as to apologize to Braddock. The message to audiences is clear. The soldier, and in turn, the veteran, had been abandoned and othered by American society, but they were innocent of these charges and if left to Hollywood, the truth of it would be the climax of the American story. Howard Suber argues in "The Power of Film" that "sacrifice" of the root "sacred," implies a reciprocal relationship between the two conceptually. What people hold sacred often demands a sacrifice; conversely, when someone makes a sacrifice, those actions tend to take on an aura of the sacred, but it is not the hero that benefits; it is the rest of the community. In this theme of sacrifice and communal responsibility, *Missing in Action* vindicates the veteran, transforming the accused to accuser.

Of course, these filmic reinterpretations of the War erase massive chunks of the actual history. Widespread reports of massacres, torture, the killing of women and children, the use of chemical defoliate and other weapons such as CS gas and the Rainbow Agents, as well as the overwhelming number of images that depicted the poor treatment of Vietnamese civilians, are instantly expunged from the collective historical memory.[67] These four interconnected tropes – the abandoned POW, the noble warrior, the healing nation, and the savage enemy – worked together to fundamentally reshape America's understanding of the Vietnam War. In the imagined history, Braddock, like Rambo, is a falsely accused scapegoat, assuaging national guilt for a failed war. Through film, the veteran is redeemed and his sacrifice becomes sacred again – an attempt mimicked in actual US politics and socio-cultural spheres during the 1980s. While films of 1969-1978 had demanded that audiences confront uncomfortable truths about American power and purpose, the films of 1979-1988 offered a different bargain: collective healing through selective remembering.

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[67] Rainbow Agents refers to the widespread use of herbicides in Vietnam which, according to the U.S. military, were deployed as chemical warfare to clear away foliage. A great deal of Vietnam was triple canopy jungle, which was utilized as both a refuge for combatants and holding areas for supplies. Widespread arial spraying of these herbicides removed or limited the density of the jungles, allowing for US military to scan areas for combatants and destroy supply routes or holding areas. The most commonly used herbicide was Agent Orange. However, other herbicides included Agent blue, pink, white, purple, and green. These were identified by color coded labels on the drums that held the herbicides. These herbicides were not only effective in removing the dense triple canopy jungle but also in destroying the natural ecosystem, preventing or severely limiting farming in regions sprayed. These herbicides, also known carcinogens, had severe consequences on the populace during and after spraying. John C. Hansen, "The Vietnam Veteran vs. Agent Orange: The War That Lingers," U.S. Government Accountability Office, Spring 1981, https://www.gao.gov/assets/Agent_Orange.pdf; "U.S. Panel Asking A Broad Student of Toxic Agents of Vietnam War," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1981; David Burnham, "DOW Says U.S. Knew Dioxin Peril of Agent Orange," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1983; James B. Jacobs and Dennis McNamara, "Vietnam Veterans and the Agent Orange Controversy," *Armed Forced and Society*, vol. 13 no. 1, Fall 1986, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45305756.

Apocalypse Now makes this transition in a particularly telling way. As Professor Rick Berg argues, the film deals with fundamental questions that had animated the anti-war movement like, "why are we here," "what are we doing here," "where is this war supposed to go?" But *Apocalypse Now* transformed these questions from calls for political action into philosophical musings, allowing audiences to contemplate the War's absurdity without confronting its implication. While anti-war activists had condemned the conflict as unethical, imperialist, and racist, *Apocalypse Now* turned these critiques into a darkly compelling spectacle.

The success of this reframing becomes clear in the evolution of how films portrayed responsibility for the War's devastation. Early post-war films had placed blame squarely on American political and military leadership. By the mid-1980s, responsibility diffused into vaguer sense of tragic circumstance, or shifted entirely onto Vietnamese antagonists. Even films that maintained critical perspectives, like *Purple Hearts* (1984), increasingly warped their critiques into conventional heroic narratives. This transformation was not merely aesthetic. It reflected a profound change in how Americans understood their nation's role in the world. The movies of 1969-1978 had suggested that the experience of Vietnam required a fundamental rethinking of American power and purpose. The films of 1979-1988 responded with a different lesson: healing required not critical self-evaluation but renewed faith in American Exceptionalism. The four most prominent tropes of the era are good evidence of the public's desire for this retelling, but are not the only ones. We can also look at the various myths that emerged in the post-war moment.

The Vietnam War is not the first instance of mythology intersecting with historical interpretation, nor is it the first-time revisionists have reimagined reality in pursuit of some retroactive victory. According to historian James Oliver Robertson, mythology of war in America can be understood through three suppositions; (1) war is progress which brings unity, efficiency, prosperity, security, prestige, and fulfills the unique destiny of the American mission, (2) war is chaotic and destructive in that war destroys American ideals of freedom and democracy and ushers in imperialism and militarism, (3) war is a parenthetical experience outside of and removed from normal American life.[68] The conflated and contradicting implication of the meaning of war in the American consciousness results, in part, from the narrative surrounding the country's experiences.

> War is always violent, bloody, and destructive. But American wars fought for great and good ends, and they result in good for America. The Revolution created freedom, independence, and democracy. The Civil War resulted in the expansion of freedom, the destruction of slavery, the growth of industrial might and wealth, and the formation of a unified, powerful nation. Both were, therefore, necessary wars – and good wars.[69]

This same interpretation followed World Wars I and II – good wars, fought for good reasons, with good results. These wars, as history texts claim, reinforced national unity, united generational belief in an America where good would always prevail, and they ultimately led to long periods of economic expansion and stability.[70]

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[68] James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1981), 325.

[69] Ibid., 324.

[70] Economic expansion and stability more so relates to World War II as World War I was followed by a major economic depression.

Memorialization of wars in this way emphasize a unified nation that rose to meet the demands of a moment. They are periods of great sacrifice, but also, ones that were ultimately rewarded for their loyalty and communal bravery.

Memory of wartime thus praises those who best represent war – veterans. These historical participants, celebrated in parades, community celebrations, military ceremonies, and national holidays, become the symbolic representation of Robertson's mythology framework. Patriotism became at once action and identity – emphasizing loyalty and American-ness. In turn, veterans were the evidence for the goodness of war – deserving of services, benefits, and status.[71] But at the same time, war *is* hell – chaotic, evil, destructive. Separating the two allows for both to exist simultaneously. The actors can be good and the action can be bad. Veterans and soldiers can be celebrated while war is denounced, feared, and avoided. But this only works when the two are distinctly separate entities.

But the Cold War failed as a parenthetical experience and delineated lines between actors and action. Instead, the Cold War attempted to superimpose the entire American mission in place of the actual veteran. Freedom, democracy, liberty, justice, equality; these things which were understood to be inherently American opposed the evil, god-less, oppressive, Communist model – the chaotic and destructive replacement for actual combat. Though there were actual conflicts during the Cold War, they were limited manifestations that failed to truly mobilize long term public support. The Cold War became the new normal, thereby limiting the ability to return to a sense of "normalcy" as granted to historic actors in World War I and World War II. The mission of the Cold War

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[71] Ibid., 329.

was permanent and its measures too costly. By the mid-1960's the staying power of the

War mythos in America was in crisis. Robertson comments further,

> By the late 1960's, many were convinced that the war was being fought for domestic, American reasons – to increase defense spending to bolster political, military, or industrial establishments, to support the power of the federal government and the ability of the President to direct the economic and political destinies of the people of the United States. It had become difficult to believe that the war in Vietnam was being fought to defend the United States to, preserve American leadership in the world, or to contain the "force" of Communism… Americans began to see war, once again, as damaging to their ideals and potentially destructive to the fabric of society.[72]

Historians have repeatedly revisited this concept in analyses of the Vietnam War.

Christian Appy's *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*

argues that the War shattered the central tenet of American national identity – the broad

faith in American Exceptionalism.[73] In order to restore that broad faith, new beliefs about

the War would need to be championed – chiefly, two major myths emerge. First, that the

War failed as a result of weak government, which was forced to "fight with one hand tied

behind their back" as a result of waning public support – an issue that stemmed directly

from the second myth which argued that the media's unfair coverage of the War unfairly

turned Americans on their government and military.

Revisionists thus championed several key speaking points. Apologists like

General Westmoreland and Guenter Lewy sought a return to the Cold War consensus by

providing an alternate explanation for the catastrophe of the War – a justification. It goes

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[72] Ibid., 341.

[73] Appy defines this belief as "the United States is a unique force for good in the world, superior not only in its military and economic power, but in the quality of its government and institutions, the character and morality of its people, and its way of life."

without emphasis that these authors adhere to the stories of the War purpose – defending a free and democratic South Vietnam against the influence of the Kremlin. Films like *Firefox* (1982), *White Nights* (1985), and *Rambo III* (1988) adhere to this mythical narrative.[74]

The ways in which Reagan made it his presidential mission to resolve this particular issue cannot be understated. He repeatedly referenced the "lessons of Vietnam" in speeches and statements, but these lessons were markedly different than those of his predecessor, Jimmy Carter. Reagan and his followers maintained that the core lesson from Vietnam was the need for a stronger military, that pulling out and withholding troops and military capability had made the U.S. weak. He further argued that if the U.S. did not recover from the looming "Vietnam syndrome," other powers would be emboldened to take advantage of the U.S. and other nations around the world.[75] On April 18, 1985 Reagan took this analysis one step further remarking, "We continue to talk about losing that war… We didn't lose that war. We won virtually every engagement."[76] Films like *First Blood* (1982), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), the *Missing in Action* series (1984, 1985, and 1988), and *First Blood Part II* (1985) followed suit, asserting that the U.S. had in fact, won the battle in Vietnam, but were denied the war.[77] The idea that the War <u>could</u> have been won is dealt with on a smaller scale in movies like *Gordon's War*

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[74] For a examples of revisionist perspectives see Guenter Lewy's *American in Vietnam*, Lewis B. Sorely's *A Better War*, and Mark Moyar's *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*.

[75] Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War*, 183-193.

[76] "The U.S. Didn't Lose Viet War: Reagan," *The Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 1985, https://www.chicagotribune.com/1985/04/19/us-didnt-lose-viet-war-reagan/

[77] Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," 23.

(1973), *Slaughter* (1976), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *Good Guys Wear Black* (1978), *A Force of One* (1979), *Forced Vengeance* (1982), and *Eye of the Tiger* (1986).

Others focused on the War through the individual soldier or elite unit, who had superman-like skills. This is a mythic inversion H. Bruce Franklin has referred to as the "damaged Superman trope," where the victim becomes the hero by utilizing the experiences that traumatized him the most. Rambo is an excellent example of this trope, but its roots are found in much earlier films. The sociopathic veteran from the late 1960s certainly emphasized this, but as the trope matured, films like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* helped solidified new, more redeeming beliefs about the American hero that Vietnam films had long since abandoned – the solitary hero. In this version, American individualism is recast and reemphasized through a super-capable, ultra-masculine loner that both represents the military at large and separates him from it.[78] But warfare is arguably one of the most social activities in which man can partake.

Leo Cawley, a Vietnam Veteran and author, argues in "The War About the War," the power of this narrative is rooted in deep imagination that has never been realistic.[79] He notes, "There is something appalling in the relentless depiction of the importance of individual bravery when every general staff in the world since 1914 has known that the bravery of an individual soldier in modern war is about as essential as whether they are

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[78] Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, "America's Vietnam War Films: Marching Toward Denial," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film,* ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 4.

[79] Cawley served as a Marine in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966. He was exposed to Agent Orange during his tenure and was later diagnosed with bone cancer. He died in 1991 from complications after a bone marrow transplant. "Leo Cawley Economist, 47," *The New York Times*, August 3, 1991.

handsome."[80] The mythos of the individual soldier also perpetuates a mythic narrative

that emphasizes the role of Special Force units, similar to what *The Green Berets* was

attempting to do. This myth relies on the belief that Special Forces are inherently more

skillful and masterful in the combat setting, fetishizing the warrior. In these films, the

super-troop myth further derails the Vietnam genre from reality.

A substantial portion of these films dedicate themselves to explaining and

emphasizing the impressive nature of the combatant, both as a stand-alone and as part of

an elite unit. For Leo Cawley, this is an important part of the "make-believe."

> The John Wayne super-trooper stereotype is an object of contempt among troops
> in combat for good reasons. Everyone learns very soon in combat that modern
> warn kills very, very tough guys in much the same way that it kills everybody
> else. Mortar rounds in the sky, fired by people miles away, do not know and do
> not care how fast your reflexes are or how good your marksmanship is, or
> whether you are brave. Grunts in combat believe that being savvy and alert can
> improve their chances, but everyone agrees it is a lot better to be lucky than to be
> smart of tough. In every unit, tough, capable guys get killed all the time and
> everybody knows it.[81]

The myth of the capable soldier has two purposes. First, it reinvigorates masculinity and

triumphalism into the American identity. By giving audiences an ultra-capable soldier,

the viewer is relieved from the "crisis of confidence," in which films of the previous era

asserted the "savage" and "backwards" ill-equipped Vietnamese guerilla was the better

soldier. Second, it remedies the contradictions that emerge when one acknowledges that

America, obviously the more capable and equipped army, lost the War. As Reagan

argued, the U.S. had won virtually every engagement – if the military had won every

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[80] Leo Cawley, "The War About the War: Vietnam Films and American Myth," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film,* ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 71.

[81] Ibid., 72.

engagement, then surely the fault lay with those who held their reigns. As a result, by the end of the Regan Era, the dominant narrative of Vietnam had shifted from tragic mistake that demanded accountability to noble cause betrayed by insufficient resolve.[82]

RAMBO AS REDEMPTION

No film accomplished cinematic revisionism as much as *First Blood* (1982) starring Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, an elite Green Beret soldier and Medal of Honor recipient. The film, based on David Morrell's novel (1972) of the same name, emphasized the cultural tensions in the U.S. over the veteran. Orion Pictures bought the movie rights before its official publication, and the novel earned glowing reviews nationwide in various newspapers and magazines.[83] The novel was an immediate bestseller, was taught in high schools and colleges, and referred to as the "father of the modern action novel."[84] Famously, Stephen King used it as a foundational text for his course on creative writing at the University of Maine, and it has remained in print for the last forty-eight years.[85] Since 1972, the book has been translated into thirty languages.

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[82] This is not meant to insinuate that true cultural hegemony was reached regarding national beliefs about the Vietnam War or that cultural perception had even dominantly shifted. A number of scholars and historical participants identified the shift taking place in film and analyzed its purpose. Some of these include John Hellmann's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, Columbia University Press, 1986. Mary L. Bellhouse and Lawrence Litchfield's "Vietnam and Loss of Innocence: An Analysis of the Political Implication of the Popular Literature of the Vietnam War." *Journal of Popular Culture* 16.3 (1982): 158-159, and Harvey R. Greenburg's "Dangerous Recuperations: Red Dawn, Rambo, and the New Decaturism," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 15 (1987): 65-66.

[83] Steve Shackleford, "First Blood," *Blade Magazine*, January 2018, https://davidmorrell.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Man-Who-Created-Rambo.pdf

[84] David Morrell, "Rambo," *AuthorBytes*, accessed November 9, 2020, https://davidmorrell.net/rambo/

[85] David Morrell, "Morrell on Rambo," *AuthorBytes*, accessed November 9, 2020, https://davidmorrell.net/rambo/

Growing up in Ontario, Canada, Morrell had little knowledge of the Vietnam War. Inspiration for the book came to him after traveling to the U.S. to study American Literature at Penn State in the mid-1960s where he met student-veterans on campus. In 1968, Morrell taught a first-year writing course to a class that included many Vietnam veterans. He became more aware and interested in the classic (unknown at the time) symptoms of returning soldiers, now known as post-traumatic stress disorder.[86] After becoming interested in the veteran's plight of adjusting to civilian life in the turbulent counterculture era, he was inspired to write a story that emphasized common issues he encountered with his students, such as nightmares, insomnia, depression, and struggles with personal relationships.[87] Further inspiration came in 1968 when he witnessed the riots and protests that broke out after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy and the student demonstrations against the war. In an interview, Morrell reflects, "I got to thinking that the images of the war and the images of the riots weren't much different. Eventually, I decided to write a novel about a returning Vietnam veteran who brings the war to the United States."[88]

Morrell's story represented two sides of American culture as he saw it in the late 1960s, a story that alternated between John Rambo and Sheriff Teasle as an allegorical understanding of the Vietnam War.[89] Morrell attempted to avoid imposition of a political

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[86] Shackleford, "First Blood."

[87] Morrel, "Morrell on Rambo."

[88] Ibid.

[89] David Morrell, "Steve Berry Essay, *First Blood,*" *AuthorBytes*, accessed November 9, 2020 https://davidmorrell.net/rambo/

statement or force the reader to a conclusion of his own device; instead, he wanted the novel to capture America's philosophical and cultural divisions through the embittered haunting of the War. Much like America's political and cultural climate for Morrell, he wanted the reader to be ambivalent as to which character deserved empathy. Rambo, an angry, soul-searching, vagabond/Vietnam veteran, juxtaposes Sheriff Wilfred Teasle, a decorated Korean War veteran and chief of police in rural Madison, Kentucky, driven by his troubled past. The intentional dichotomy of the two characters was meant to serve as the polarity and contradictions that separated the American public in the late 1960s. Like the popular films of the 1970s, Morrell's version of the vet deals with trauma, anger, destruction, and abandonment.

However, the filmic reinterpretation took a sharp turn from the intention of the original novel. Critical aspects Morrell's story change to rewrite Rambo as a victim of both the Vietnam War and America's cultural redefining. The idealized and progressive Pacific Northwestern (no doubt a symbolic nod to liberal America) replaces Morrell's original rural town in Kentucky, though, the caverns, woods, and hillsides remain as important geographic features. Other significant changes include Rambo's handy weapon – a hollow handled survival knife, no doubt meant to provide more authenticity to his role as a super-capable soldier hero.[90] Sheriff Teasle is also revised in the film from equal force to brutish antagonist, purposed solely with challenging the very essence of Rambo. The film's rewrite also extinguishes Teasles' experience as a Korean War veteran. In the movie, Rambo's recast as the victim rather than a hostile force in his own right.

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[90] In fact, the film went as far to acknowledge the craftsman responsible for the knife in the films credit. Janet Maslin, "First Blood," *The New York Times*, October 22, 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/22/movies/first-blood.html?searchResultPosition=1

The most striking difference between novel and film is Morrell's ending, in which

Rambo's mentor, Colonel Samuel Trautman, kills him with a shotgun, symbolizing the

"Uncle Sam" system that both created and ended Rambo and, in turn, the Vietnam

veteran.[91] The first version of the film changed the ending to Rambo committing suicide.

However, test audiences responded so negatively that producers reshot the scene,

allowing Rambo to live on for at least one sequel.[92] But this ending and the other

character changes dramatically alter the original intention. What was supposed to serve as

a reckoning of the American juxtaposition was intentionally rewritten to recast the

veteran as a political device for the New Right of the late 70s and early 80s.[93] Bestselling

author Steve Berry writes,

> A novel that questioned war and its devastating aftermath, a story that brought to
> life lingering cultural wounds left by the Vietnam debacle, became a shorthand
> political metaphor – a rallying cry for even more violence. Morrell himself
> commented on the irony that a 1970s novel about America's political polarization
> (for or against the Vietnam War) became the film's basis. In the 1980s, that
> resulted in a similar polarization (for or against Ronald Reagan).[94]

The transformation of Morrell's *First Blood* from novel to film provides evidence of a

crucial shift in American representation and understanding of the Vietnam War and

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[91] "Uncle Sam" is a common personification of the U.S. government and military that arose in pop cultural during World War I. It has since been used to describe nationalistic and patriotic tones in cultural ephemera.

[92] Morrell, "Morrell on Rambo."

[93] The New Right is being used to describe the political response to liberalism, coined by Barry Goldwater in 1964, which evolved into social and cultural phenomena closely related to the "Religious Right."

[94] Morrell, "Steve Berry Essay, *First Blood*."

highlights how the four major tropes and two key myths served revisionist intentions in the Reagan Era.[95]

First Blood reframed the conventional Vietnam formula, allowing audience members to look once again at the G.I. as a hero, something that had been taboo in Hollywood since The Green Berets. More so, Rambo (and the 1980s action star) gave the audience something to root for.[96] First Blood was not alone in this endeavor, nor was it the only film to embed myths and revisionist reimaginings into its narrative foundation.[97] The novelty of First Blood is in the ways it so clearly demonstrated a massive deviation from previously accepted cultural rhetoric while continuing to comment on the very same issues that dominated progressive countercultural activism.[98] Though the Rambo formula

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[95] Two major influences helped shape the filmic reinterpretation from the original publication. First, the early 1980s witnessed growing political backlash against the counterculture, anti-war movement, and liberal ideology. Second, Americans increasingly demanded reintegration of masculinity back into cultural productions. The New Right, which emerged in 1964 and gained momentum well into the mid-seventies, evolved rapidly concerning social and cultural facets. The movement sought to address what it perceived as political threats in society – chiefly, the ways that the "crisis of confidence" threatened US national identity. The New Right championed efforts to rectify the crisis by restoring traditional conservative values like patriotism and masculinity. This socio-cultural trend lent itself to film and other forms of media representation.

[96] Audiences in the 1980s sought out the self-reliant man, one who rejected government, military organization, and even technology. The enemies in the 80s became the weak, the bureaucrats, the liberals, and anyone else who stood in the way of reinvigorating American triumphalism. For more on this, see Paul Budra''s article titled "Rambo in the Garden: The P.O.W. Film as Pastoral," Literature-Film Quarterly 18 (1990). For a discussion on perceived weakness and negative role models of 1980s action films see Michael Kimmel's Manhood in America: A Cultural History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For more information on masculinity in the U.S. from 1950-1990, see John Bly's Iron John: A Book About Men (Da Capo, 1992) and Susan Jeffords' Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era (Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[97] The 1980s were the golden age of action films, producing blockbuster hits like Raiders of the Lost Arc (1981), The Terminator (1984), Top Gun (1986), Predator (1987), and Die Hard (1988). These films share a foundational formula incorporating virility into hero stories through big explosions, grim odds, campy one-liners, and the ultra-masculine action star. Chris Chase, "At the Movies: 'Staying Alive' with a Couple of Tough Guys," The New York Times, December 31, 1982.

[98] Filmmakers were conscious of these cultural and societal frustrations, and the Vietnam calamity was still a sore in the proverbial palms of America. It was not only necessary to integrate an updated understanding of the Vietnam War era in the production of First Blood; it was highly sought after. Americans had grappled repeatedly with the War as an embarrassment, a mistake, and an unworthy

centers on replacing the fault of Vietnam outside of the veterans' scope, allowing viewers to rewrite the conflict as one lost by "liberal imposition," there are additional themes that place the Rambo franchise in a category of its own. Never the antagonist, Rambo, is always a defensive player, victimized by tyrannical and unrelenting establishment figures. Even when his actions are villainous, Rambo is still *righteous*.[99] The Rambo formula ensures that no matter how violent and destructive his actions are, they are always warranted. This formula gets tested repeatedly in *First Blood*.[100]

Because Rambo serves as such a complex character, his victimization is especially novel. This works for two reasons. First, Rambo speaks very little, yet when he does, he speaks through robust, politically charged, "right and wrong" dialogue. Interestingly, the dialogue chosen for Rambo mimics the antiwar rhetoric of the counterculture. If Rambo is allowed to speak too much, he sends the opposite message. But because he only delivers his political statements in the third act of each installment, the viewer can impress their own inclinations on him. He becomes a vessel for the

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sacrifice. *Taxi Driver* perpetuates the G.I.'s as unstable, *The Deer Hunter* focuses on the tragedy of war both for the service members and the small-town communities who carry long-lasting burdens of war. *Apocalypse Now* dramatically emphasized the inconsistent nature of America's role in Vietnam. However, in *First Blood*, these motifs are rectified. In many films, veterans were cast through a lens of social disgust. This reflection had become universally accepted, though often challenged. However, it was not until *First Blood* that this theme was inverted – society was disgusting, the veteran honorable. Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second* (University of Texas Press, 1995), 215.

[99] While the scope of the research does not permit me to elaborate on this particular point, further arguments can be made here regarding Reagan's emphasis on "new militarism" and restoring America's position as part of the world order.

[100] First, there was the initial conflict between Teasle and then the subsequent altercation with the deputies. When Sergeant Galt confronts Rambo on the mountainside, the formula is tested again. Though Rambo throws the rock that knocks the pilot and ultimately causes Galt's death, it feels as though justice is served. Like the Billy Jack narrative, Rambo must fight both the corrupt and the cowardly to bring justice and order to the world. When Colonel Trautman attempts to convince Rambo to turn himself in, he replies coolly, "They drew first blood, not me." The film's dialogue significantly contributes to the viewers' reassessment of the veteran. Through powerful and dramatic rhetoric, Rambo sincerely insists, through his actions and words, that *he* is the victim.

audience, a reflection of the cultural moment. Secondly, the victimization works within the Rambo formula because he is never at fault. His role as a righteous, morally absolute, silent character allows him to be the victim without being the wimp. Similarly, his overarching character theme as a superhero soldier is also constructed in a way that delicately applies masculinity and super capability without being villainous. The subtle application of these complexities allows Rambo to be a conductor for "new militarism" without acting as propaganda (even if that is precisely what it does). Being a victim means never having to say you're sorry.[101] And Rambo effectively utilizes victimization in a way easy for the audience to swallow.

Rambo's capabilities and skillsets are also a novel and transitional point in American pop culture. Whereas previous films, literature, and art portrayed Vietnamese soldiers as having superior combat abilities such as hand-to-hand combat, extreme survival skills, superhuman strength, and a highly romanticized knowledge of their surroundings and enemies, the Rambo franchise flips the mythos of the guerilla fighter. It utilizes it to resuscitate masculinity back into the veteran. With only his signature knife, Rambo fastens the characteristic weapons of the Vietcong, such as punji sticks and bait traps. He moves effortlessly around hundreds of men at once and survives extreme challenges like severe cold, heat, hunger, and pain. During Colonel Trautman's introduction in the film, he memorably says, "I don't think you understand. I didn't come here to rescue Rambo from you. I came here to rescue you from him." Rambo becomes

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[101] Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (Rutgers University Press, 1990).

the epitome of American militaristic masculinity by utilizing the exact representations of

the stereotypical primitive and bloodthirsty Vietnamese enemy soldiers.[102] Viewers can

then determine the loss of the War was not due to American soldiers' inadequacy, but

instead, they can look to nefarious liberals and cowardly politicians as the scapegoat.[103]

Further, Rambo embodies pride and honor in his demeanor. Though the Rambo films do

not visually mimic *The Green Berets* or the *Billy Jack* franchise on the big screen, much

of his storyline is directly descended from theirs.

In December of 1985, *Newsweek* published an article articulating the success of

the Rambo and Rocky characters, crediting Stallone with bringing the "hero back to the

forefront of American mythology."[104] He is not just the "noble-warrior," he is the

"warrior-hero" and the "noble savage."[105] And Stallone, much like John Wayne,

embodies his own cultural iconography. Stallone's reputation as a self-made star,

embodying masculinity and prominently playing "winners," undoubtedly influences the

audience's understanding of Rambo. An evident focus of the advertising campaign for

the Rambo franchise was to draw as much attention to Stallone as possible – adding to

the viewers' reassessment of the veteran based on their previous understanding of

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[102] Brian J. Woodman, "A Hollywood War of Wills: Cinematic Representation of Vietnamese Super-Soldiers and America's Defeat in the War." *Journal of Film and Video* Vol. 55 (2003)

[103] Paul Budra argues in his article, "Rambo in the Garden," that the Rambo franchise further cements in the collective memory that the loss of the conflict in Vietnam was not a lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture or history or a misunderstanding of how to conduct warfare, or the inability of the American G.I., but rather the War was lost because of a lurking conspiracy at home.

[104] Gregory A. Waller, "Rambo: Getting to Win This Time," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 118.

[105] Ibid., 119.

Stallone as a cultural icon.[106] Stallone's *First Blood* rectifies Wayne's failure to regale the

G.I. as an American hero. This theme is carried into the second and third installment of

the series, so much so that in 1985, Ronald Reagan jokingly noted after seeing *First

Blood: Part II* that he'll "know what to do the next time this happens."[107]

Other films made similar comments on masculinity. Braddock in *Missing in

Action* embodies the same kinds of action-hero visual appeals that Stallone did as Rambo,

this new hyper-masculinity hinged on the brutal strength and power of the male lead.[108]

As does Lieutenant Colonel Iceal Hambleton in *Bat 21* (1988), played by Gene Hackman,

who is shot down behind enemy lines and saved by the dedication of Captain

Bartholomew's "Bird-Dog," played by Danny Glover. *Steele Justice* (1987) and *Off

Limits* (1988) similarly featured male leads who were willing to take on massive

corruption rings in the uppermost echelons of the U.S. government and military. In

Fighting Back (1980), the true story of Ricky Blair – a Vietnam veteran and American

Football star – emphasizes the connection between masculinity and heroism. But other

films used masculinity in more traditional modes, universally portraying all-important

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[106] One might think to his role in the Rocky franchise, where he rises from the streets of Philadelphia and subsequently defeats Dolf Lundgren – a stand in for the Soviet Union.

[107] "Reagan Gets Idea from *Rambo* for Next Time," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-07-01-mn-10009-story.html

[108] Critics did not seriously consider the *Missing in Action* series. After the third film, one reviewer noted, "in the world of Rambo clones, the outre comic book adventures of James Braddock (Chuck Norris) in the *Missing in Action* series boost the Stallone films into the realm of legitimate literature by comparison. Apart from better than competent production values and pyrotechnics, the Norris gung-ho forays are cheap imitations of more serious explorations on the scars of war." However, the first movie was popular enough to warrant two additional films, illuminating the power of audience desires in the action-packed 1980s. Leonard Klady, "Braddock: Missing in Action III is a By-the-Numbers Action Film," *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1988.

military positions as ones held by men who were unafraid, honorable, and willing to sacrifice. They needed little to get by, like in *Hamburger Hill*. In others, paternalistic authority figures, like Staff Sergeant Barnes and Sergeant Elias in *Platoon* or Sergeant Thomas Highway in *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986), emphasized masculinity. Or actual fathers, like Sergeant Clell Hazard in *Gardens of Stone* (1987), Mark Lambert in *Distant Thunder* (1988), and Braddock in *Braddock: Missing in Action III* (1988).[109]

The hyper-masculinity of the 1980s served as a positive plot-building technique. Unlike the sadistic ex-soldiers of the previous era, these men were dangerous but righteous, like with Rambo. The re-emergence of paternalism was also seen as another extension of the positive influence of masculinity in war, action, and drama films, emphasized by Colonel Trautman. The return of paternalistic characters also worked to challenge the anti-establishment tendencies that films had adopted in the decade prior. The "establishment" became a constant threat, reoccurring in various forms throughout Vietnam War films in the 1980s. Mimicking the outcry for corrupt government action in the long sixties, films of the 1980s continued to express a lack of trust for establishment figures. Some could be redeemed, but most were part of a mechanical system that cared little for the people their influence affected.

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[109] It is interesting in these films that the narrative's reliance on paternalism is only used an emotional device with no concern for the actual issues discussed in the film. For instance, *Distant Thunder* was criticized by the VA for passing out fact sheets at the Washington D.C. Veteran Day screening that claimed nearly double the number of soldiers who died in combat killed themselves after service and that anywhere from 35,000 to 45,000 veterans abandoned society to live in isolation as "brush vets." At other screenings, those statistics were not passed out on fact sheets but instead included as an epilogue to the film. Officials from the VA contacted Paramount about the false statistics and they pulled the epilogue from future showings. Nina J. Easton, "Still Shuddering at Distant Thunder Vietnam Bush Vets Helped Shape Film About Soldiers Trauma," *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1988.

One such example of the establishment as a villain emerges in each of the three Rambo films, first with Sheriff Teasle and the National Guard, then again in the sequel with Marshall Murdock, and in the third film, the world as a whole exists as an "establishment" opposing the individualism and freedom of Rambo. But the role of the establishment depends on the shape the "Uncle Sam" narrative takes in each film. Colonel Trautman, introduced in *First Blood* during the second act, proclaims "God didn't make Rambo, I did." He follows that with the line, "I've come to get my boy." In the first installment, Rambo is a product of the American military. Trautman emphasizes that several times throughout the film, but as America's relationship with the military shifts during the mid-eighties from decisively anti-establishment to one more susceptible to reuniting with their patriotic roots, Trautman's role evolves to one of paternalistic intimacy.[110]

In *First Blood*, Trautman's relationship with Rambo strains, the establishment is definitively represented as singular and collective characters: Sheriff Teasle, the Sheriff's Department, and, of course, the "weekend warriors" of the National Guard. Even the media comes under fire during the second act when the news reporter gives false information protecting the "establishment" figures and condemning Rambo as a villain.

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[110] In the second film, Trautman's portrayed as Rambo's only friend and as a father figure, continuing to drive home intimacy and paternalism. There are still hints of the "Uncle Sam" narrative, which created (and has the power to destroy Rambo), but the relationship becomes more personal. It is evident that Trautman deeply cares for Rambo. As for where Trautman regularly totes Rambo as a Frankenstein-like killing machine of his own creation in *First Blood*, *Part II* shows a softer, more prideful focus on Rambo's capabilities. Trautman retorts to the villainous Murdock in defense of Rambo, "What you call hell – he calls home." Come *Rambo III*, this relationship shifts dramatically. Rambo is no longer just a byproduct of the military; he is its savior – rescuing Trautman and destroying the enemy. As the relationship between Rambo and Trautman develops, so too does the portrayal of the establishment.

In *Part II*, the establishment merges with the military, separating the organization into those worthy of trust and respect – the patriots – and the nefarious "bureaucrats." Murdock reiterates the lesson from the late 60s and early 70s. The establishment is still a dangerous entity, threatening the freedom and liberty of anyone foolish enough to trust the government after Vietnam and Watergate.

Rambo's prior knowledge and the real-life possibility of this convince the audience that this makes Rambo, and therefore the premise, morally correct. The anti-establishment theme is really a vessel for weakness, symbolic for the "weakness" of political administrations that failed the U.S. in Vietnam, the "weakness" of the liberal counterculture that failed the veteran, and the "weakness" of society at large that failed the American identity. His appearance and his masculinity, both in physical and mental attributes, are significant themes that oppose the weakness in body and mind of his challengers – Sheriff Teasle, Marshall Murdock, or, in the last film, the Mujahideen fighters who he assists in his pursuit to save Colonel Trautman from the ever-looming Soviet enemies.

In *First Blood*, deputies strip Rambo to cleanse him. During this scene, his scars from being a P.O.W. in a Vietnamese prison camp are revealed. In this scene, Deputy Mitch exclaims, "Holy shit, look at this. What the hell has he been into?" Deputy Sergeant Galt responds, "Who gives a shit." Later, Deputy Mitch exclaims again, "How blind are you? Can't you see this guy's crazy?!" Galt responds, "Can't you see? I don't give a shit." The scene meant to emphasize America's ambivalence to the plight of the veteran.

Rambo as a redeemer served as effective merging of the four major tropes and highlights the effectiveness of the major myths of revisionists. His POW/MIA backstory and exceptional military training allowed him to achieve success against the evil establishment in the first film and ultimately prepared him for the POW/MIA rescue in the second. Rambo as the noble warrior transcends him from soldier to judgement maker – in both films it is Rambo who assesses those of the establishment who are worthy and those who are not. This reminds audiences that they can trust his judgement – and that he will not abandon them, the way America has abandoned him.[111]

Like many post-war films, the repeated otherment of Rambo serves as a major narrative within the plot. Rambo's otherment is achieved through his continuous abandonment. In *First Blood*, this is evident from the opening scene. Rambo is introduced to the audience, traveling on foot down a dirt road with a service pack over his

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[111] In 1986, a reader submitted an op-ed to *The Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper. The reader submitted the piece anonymously and titled it "Rambo vs. Vets," in which the reader recounts walking back to Widener Library through the rain when they encountered a crowd of about sixty people, a SWAT team, and three television vans. The crowd was protesting Sylvester Stallone who was accepting the Hasty Pudding Man of the Year Award, a ceremony honoring an actors lasting contribution to the world of entertainment. Stallone was a contentious choice in 1986. The President of the Award Ceremony said that Stallone was chosen not for his opinions, or the opinions of the film which was criticized for being jingoistic, but simply because he was the biggest name in entertainment that year. As the author of the op-ed watched the protest, three students opened a window above them and chanted "Rocky" – referring to one of Stallone's biggest roles. The author remarked, "It occurred to me that these students were choosing fiction over life, a well-muscled Rocky-Rambo as hero, instead of the motley reality of the Vietnam experience that was parading below their windows. Rambo was a hero--tough, honorable, simple, yet sensitive, devoted to a cause, and a cause that was *right.* You could root for Rambo. How could these students *not* prefer him over real Vietnam vets--all-too-real reminders of the ambiguous nature not only of the Vietnam War, but of human beings in general. These vets were real people, and real people tend to be too complicated to be described as tough, honorable, simple, yet sensitive, devoted to a cause, and a cause that is *right.* That is why fictional characters make better heroes than real people." This op-ed is noteworthy, not just for its unique insight to the way First Blood was perceived on Harvard's campus, or how its values were at odds with the award ceremonies that promoted it, but also because it serves an as excellent example of those willing to choose fiction over reality, of those willing to choose Rambo over the actual veterans. Here, Rambo is the hero. He's a stand in for the vet, but he's also the only one receiving credit for what he is standing in for. "Rambo vs. Vets," *The Crimson*, February 24, 1986, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1986/2/24/rambo-vs-vets-pbto-the-editors/. Shari Rudavesky, "Stallone, Field Win Hasty Pudding Pots," *The Crimson*, January 29, 1986, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1986/1/29/stallone-field-win-hasty-pudding-pots/.

shoulder. His hair long and unkempt, wearing a slight five o'clock shadow and dons the quintessential military jacket. He searches for a member of his old unit, Delmar Barry. The melody playing quietly in the background changes from somber to peaceful as he approaches a house on the edge of a lake in the rural Pacific Northwest. Rambo jogs down a hill, his body relaxed. The sound of children can be heard in the background. As Rambo approaches a woman hanging laundry, he is visibly excited yet weary – he remains soft-spoken, and his posture remains gentle and un-intruding. The scenes tone cuts abruptly when the woman, Delmar's mother, callously informs Rambo of her son's untimely death—taken from cancer due to the tactical herbicide Agent Orange, used by troops in Vietnam. The worn smile on Rambo disappears, his body tightens, the music returns as sorrowful. He hands her the photo he has kept of Delmar and the rest of his unit and turns to walk away. The children can once again be heard and seen playing in the distance.

The audience is left to grapple with both the explicit and implicit storylines that are being developed. Rambo's cast as an outsider; the children represent the world that goes on without him; like the actual Vietnam veteran, Rambo's effectively "othered." It will later be revealed that Delmar was the last member of Rambo's unit. The inclusion of Agent Orange as a catalyst for Delmar's death does not mean to emphasize the American G.I.'s atrocities. Instead, it represents the price paid for serving. The scene is set for the Vietnam veteran in America – discarded and forgotten. The rugged, silent, and disheveled Rambo sets out again alone on foot.[112]

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[112] When the scene breaks, Rambo is pictured walking down a moderately busy highway. You can see his breath in the air. He pulls his jacket up to his ears as cars wiz by. Though short, the scenes importance is in reemphasizing Rambo as an outsider. This builds the common mythos surrounding Vietnam veterans as vagrants, either incapable of reintegrating back into civilian life or forcefully

His otherment was not unique. The same alienation, abuse, and mockery are common elements in films before the victim hero is redeemed. This narrative reflects upon the stabbed-in-the-back thesis, the belief that the U.S. military was betrayed by its own populace – who understood neither the costs nor the consequences of failure in the Cold War world.[113] As the revisionist literature grew, authors mimicked the era's political rhetoric, quoting Reagan in calling the Vietnam War a "noble cause." Like the "Lost Cause" narrative that emerged in the South after the Civil War, this narrative preserved the honor of American soldiers in Vietnam – they had not lost; they had been stabbed in the back. Ultimately, the stabbed-in-the-back thesis was about revenge.[114] John Hellmann, Professor of English, argues,

> *First Blood* also seeks to reveal to the hero in his confrontation with the savage Other in Vietnam a meaning about America itself. But where *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* seek to purge the culture of a central compulsion figured in its ideal hero, *First Blood* absolves the ideal hero of any wrong and shows him to be an innocent victim of a faithless society. Thus the "cross" symbolism is a device for asserting that in its actual practice the larger American society (the deputies) seeks scapegoats for its own evils, but that the cultural ideal (the hero) remains innocent, captured and tormented in Vietnam by the Other, but more profoundly wronged by his own society's betrayal of its cultural ideals of tolerance and equality.[115]

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unaccepted by society. The hyper-focus on salvaging the reputation of the veteran was not just meant to restore honor to the military or repair patriotism for audiences. It was a very real response to the perceived ways in which the exaggerations of the representations from the previous era had unfairly damaged the veteran. Primarily, veterans were relayed in films from 1969-1978 as sadistic, damaged, psychotic, and broken. They were emasculated and feminized, their bodies and minds broken. These cultural representations were meant to serve as commentary for how the War damaged the United States as a whole – sons, brothers, husbands, and uncles who went off to war and did not come back the same if they came back at all.

[113] Historians of this perspective focused on "the lost victory" after the Tet Offensive, where militarily, the victory belonged to the United States. However, media coverage of the event had shifted public opinion against the War, causing a symbolic loss. For more on the historiography of revisionism, see Gary R. Hess' *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*.

[114] Vincent Canby, "*Rambo* Delivers a Revenge Fantasy," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1985.

[115] John Hellmann, "*Rambo's* Vietnam and Kennedy's New Frontier," in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg (Temple University Press, 1991), 146.

This quickly entered the mainstream. The populace accepted this narrative and further

perpetuated the belief that the anti-war movement and broad counterculture instigated

resistance, which was exasperated by media coverage that negatively portrayed the

military effort in Vietnam, which forced Congress to fold to public pressure and

withdraw troops and resources when they were needed most – the two major myths of

revisionism.

As Trautman tells Teasle in *First Blood*, "You're a civilian. You are under no

pressure to figure this out," one cannot help but conjure an image of Ronald Reagan and

the revisionists speaking to the American public. This film arguably handles more

themes, clichés, and tropes than any other popular Vietnam film. His initial pain of losing

his last unit member, his alienation from human interaction, the unwillingness of society

to accept him, the traumatization of the soldier, and the savagery of the Vietnamese,

which is flipped to make him a super-soldier are all major foundations within the film.[116]

A facet which actual veterans of the War responded to with sincerity. In an op-ed, one

veteran expresses his frustration,

> This is the fourth movie to be released about 40-year-old Vietnam vets returning
> to find MIA's alive; it is grossing millions and is probably almost as profitable as
> the war itself – to some people. If these movies were merely the dream of some
> REMF* about what combat was about they would be harmless. After all, middle-
> aged men running around the jungle (and I do mean running) without getting heat
> stroke, drinking paddy water without getting dysentery, surviving in the jungle
> without losing weight, and able to leap tall buildings at a single bound all of this
> is ridiculous to most vets who have seen real combat. But unfortunately, these
> movies carry a very subtle message to the younger generation, which does not

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[116] Veterans protested all three films, which were perceived by them as jingoistic revisionist reimagings about the War. In the Summer of 1985 *The Veteran* ran an article advertising the protests for any others interested in joining. "Nam Vets Picket Rambo," *The Veteran*, vol. 15, no. 3, Spring 1985.

remember the Vietnam War. Killing is fun again! Like the John Wayne movies of our youth, death and killing have been cleared up as the nation looks forward to another Vietnam in Central America. Nowhere do men have their legs blown off and live; no one is confined to a wheel chair; no one has children born handicapped because of chemical defoliants. In fact, for the most part the "good guys" don't even die, just thousands of nameless, faceless "gooks" who don't respect life anyway. There is an interesting twist to all these movies. In order for Americans to be the "good guys," and in order for them to win, they become guerillas. There is a grand role reversal in which the American fights with his hands (instead of with B-52's) and the "bad guys" have the helicopter gunships. Pardon me if my CIB* is showing, but I seem to remember the VC making grenades out of C-ration cans and facing the overwhelming power of battleships, gunships, Puff and all the rest.[117]

This veteran, like many others, noted the hypocrisy of what Rambo and the *First Blood* series were doing to the veteran, to the Vietnamese, and the historical memory of the War. *First Blood* appeals to the audience through victimization – an inverted victimization. Powerful dialogue like when Rambo confesses, "It wasn't my war! You asked me, I didn't ask you! And all I had to do was win! But somebody wouldn't let us! And I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport protesting me, spitting, calling me baby killer, and all kinds of crap" emphasizes this inversion.[118] Here, and throughout the entire trilogy, Rambo argues that the soldier didn't choose the War, it was chosen for him. He was told all he needed to do was fulfill his obligation to the United States, and he could go home, but the antiwar protestors wouldn't let the soldiers

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[117] REMF means rear-echelon motherfucker. Puff is short for "Puff the Magic Dragon" which refers to the AC-47 gunship commonly used for close air support and fitted with machine guns. CIB means Combat Infantryman's Badge. Barry Romo, "Rambo or How I Won the Vietnam War Ten Years After the Politicians Lost It!" *The Veteran*, vol. 15, no. 3, Summer 1985.

[118] This same ideological reimagining is mimicked by the actual Sylvester Stallone who proclaimed in a 1985 interview, "The men who fought for us in Vietnam got a raw deal. Their country told them to fight. They did their best! They come home and they're scorned. People spit at them. Men who fight for their country deserve respect. And if you don't give it to them you're in a bad situation, because they're going to demand it. It left scars, that period, and I'm glad we've come out of it." Richard Grenier, "Stallone on Patriotism and *Rambo*," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1985.

do what they needed to do to win, and now he's vilified for doing what was *asked* of him. Here, the audience sees who *really* lost the War. It was not the soldier or the military at large. It certainly was not the government – and do not worry, it was not the civilians either. Instead, Rambo and *First Blood* give us another option – one we have seen before. It was the counterculture doves, the liberal media, the anti-war cowards who lost the War and villainized the veteran in the process. This is a pointed attempt to drive home the rhetoric of the era – one at odds with the experiences of those who actually went to Vietnam.

Regardless of the responsibility of the average citizen to "figure out" the War, viewers desired the opportunity to come to terms with the War era. Hollywood representations of Vietnam (and other historical moments) are not simply just entertainment, they are reckoning. As Howard Suber argues,

> To study such movies is, therefore, to study ourselves, not as we are, but as we wish we could be. Memorable popular movies do not show us just the world, they show us a *just world* – one in which the people we identify with not only stand for the things we would like to stand for, they *stand up* for what we would like to believe are the most important values of individuals and societies.[119]

As Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser argue in their essay, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War," the reoccurring attempt to cope with "Vietnam" is not about a physical trauma, but rather a psychological one. The central question in coming to terms is how the U.S. can deal with its defeat in Vietnam and understand that it had no business being there in the first place. Doing this, though, would mean confronting the painful guilt the U.S. carries. By utilizing popular films as a device

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[119] Howard Suber, *The Power of Film* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2006), Introduction.

for which memories can be reconstructed without grappling with the trauma or guilt of

participation, history can be continuously rewritten and relived until a suitable outcome is

produced. This same approach, used in *The Deer Hunter*, circumnavigated the morally

challenging aspects of the actual Vietnam War for audiences. But *First Blood*, like

Missing in Action, did not just carefully invert actual history in favor for a more tolerable

imagined, it invoked powerful mythologies that restructured audiences emotional

responses to key issues regarding the War – imperialism, the treatment of the soldier, the

consequence on the veteran and the militarism and jingoism so famously protested

against in the historical moment.[120] By utilizing victimization as powerful rhetoric to

support dismissing guilt, remorse, and regret over the War, these films could replace what

the War had *meant*.

POST-REVISIONISM

      Other attempts were less emphatic in their politically driven nature and opted

instead for nuance or pointed criticisms of war and military aggression. If we consider the

films of the last chapter to broadly align with the orthodox perspective and films of this

chapter to primarily meet the revisionist, then a third group emerges in the latter 1980s

and extends into the 1990s and 2000s, which we can call post-revisionist attempts. These

films sought to impose balance. They argued that War was wrong, it was hell, and its

consequences were tragic, but it was also presented as an event without an orchestrator,

or if there had been a man behind the curtain, he was long gone now. These films

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[120] In fact, Rambo's reimaging of Vietnam was condemned by reviewers for its fascist or Neo-Nazi values. See Paul Attanasio's "*Rambo*: New Blood, Old Moves," *Washington Post*, May 22 1985 and David Danby's "Blood Simple," *New York*, June 3, 1985.

acknowledged calamity without accepting responsibility – or imposing it, a valuable tool

for filmmakers and an easier viewing for audience members who remembered the

blowback of Vietnam. But these films were not a-political or a-historical, and they often

materialized from the visions of the scriptwriters and directors who wanted to provide

response to the war-porn action flicks that dominated films of the early and mid 1980s.

The first of these emerged in 1986 with Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. It was an

immediate success, receiving widespread acclaim for directing, screenplay,

performances, and cinematography, earning over 138 million at the box office and

winning four Oscars at the 1987 Academy Awards.[121] Like *Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse*

Now, Platoon invites viewers to question the War, the motives behind intervention, its

consequences on the soldier; but whereas *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* take an

ambiguous stance on right or wrong, *Platoon* emphasizes the moral inequity of war. It

reiterates to the audience that there is no cohesion in war and there is certainly no

kinship.[122]

Platoon was so attractive to audiences because it felt real for the first time.

Marketing for the film stressed *Platoon's* authenticity by advertising Stone's own

military service.[123] Stone enlisted in the army in 1967. He requested combat duty, hoping

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[121] Aljean Harmetz, "*Platoon* Wins Oscar as the Best Movie of 1986," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/31/movies/platoon-wins-oscar-as-the-best-movie-of-1986.html

[122] Michael Norman, "*Platoon* Grapples with Vietnam," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1986, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/21/movies/platoon-grapples-with-vietnam.html?searchResultPosition=2

[123] Marketing was also made easier for platoon by the sudden onslaught of published materials that emerged in the early 1980s. A sales manager for Presidio Press noted that in 1978, booksellers wouldn't buy any books on Vietnam. Vice-President of *Time-Life* books believed that the Vietnam War Memorial in D.C. was responsible for this shift. By 1987, over half a million people showed interest in the first volume of *Time-Life's* "Vietnam Experience," and over 400,000 copies of the *Platoon* novelization were printed. Berkley Publishing Group had solid millions of copies of nonfiction Vietnam War books over the previous few years. Aljean Harmetz, "Unwanted *Platoon* Finds Success as U.S. Examines the Vietnam War," Th*e*

to emulate the experiences of his father and grandfather who had served in the previous

world wars.[124] He spent a year in Vietnam, first near the Cambodian border with an

infantry unit where he was wounded in combat.[125] After his recovery, Stone transferred

into a long-range reconnaissance platoon where he once again saw active combat.[126]

Stone, awarded both a Bronze Star with Valor and Purple Heart, was honorably

discharged in November of 1968.[127] When he returned to the U.S. he attended New York

University through the G.I. Bill to study filmmaking under Martin Scorsese. He began

working on the script for *Platoon* in 1976, hoping to "make a document of a time and

place" to recreate the reality so those who weren't there would know "what it was

like."[128] But Stone's script was rejected by every major Hollywood studio. It was not

until a British film production company, Helmdale, picked the script up ten years later

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New York Times, February 9, 1987,
https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/platoon-ar3.html?scp=1&sq=tom%20price&st=cse.

[124] In a 1987 interview with David Sterritt of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Stone explained how influential his father and grandfather's military service was to him. He told Sterritt "I just knew the war was something I didn't want to miss." His tenure in Vietnam altered his perception of war and combat quickly. As *Platoon* reveals, the romanticism of war and military service extinguished quickly – "it took about a day" he noted. David Sterritt, "Oliver Stone: Why *Platoon* Was Made So Harsh," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 9, 1987, https://www.csmonitor.com/1987/0109/lfl09-f.html

[125] Stone was initially deployed with the 2nd Platoon, Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 25th Infantry unit. He arrived on September 16, 1967 and was stationed near the Cambodian border. During an ambush, Stone (who was formally recognized for his actions in combat) was wounded. He took a bullet/shrapnel to his neck and to his legs and buttocks.

[126] Specifically, Stone was transferred to the 1st Calvary Division. His unit was attacked on January 1, 1968.

[127] Stone would later be awarded the Bronze Star Medal for valor, a distinction awarded to members of the U.S. armed forced for heroic actions of bravery in an active combat zone. It is the fourth highest military award and the ninth highest by order of precedence across the U.S. military. He was also awarded a Purple Heart, a US military decoration awarded to service members wounded or killed in action.

[128] Norman, "Platoon Grapples with Vietnam."

that Stone had a meager budget of a little more than six million dollars and was set to begin filming in the Philippines.

The film follows Chris Taylor, played by Charlie Sheen, who leaves university and enlists for combat duty in Vietnam. Like Stone, who also left university and volunteered for combat duty, Taylor arrives in Vietnam full of idealism – and like Stone, Taylor's idealism is smothered by the reality of war.[129] *Platoon* follows Taylor as he ships out with his unit, their struggle to stay alive, and the relationships he must navigate with his Platoon Sargent (Barnes) and Squad Leader (Elias) who represent two ends of the moral spectrum. Barnes, as Roger Ebert noted, is "the veteran sergeant with a scarred face," a "survivor of so many hits that his men believe he cannot be killed." Whereas, Elias is a good soldier, but one who does not revel in the violence of war.[130]

These two characters, representing the moral poles of the Vietnam War and, broadly, of human nature, vie for influence over Taylor – will he, like Barnes, give in to his baser instincts of violence and retribution, or will he, like Elias, maintain some sense of humanity? The allegory has been criticized for being overly dramatic and portraying the War through the lens of a Greek tragedy, but Taylor's struggle to maintain his own identity through these two opposite perspectives is a suitable vessel for understanding the experience of the soldier. As famed war-correspondent David Halberstam wrote "If they are not who we are, they are certainly who we can become."[131] But unlike the absurdity

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[129] Vincent Canby, "Film: The Vietnam War in Stone's *Platoon*," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1986, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/19/movies/film-the-vietnam-war-in-stone-s-platoon.html?searchResultPosition=1

[130] Roger Ebert, "*Platoon*," *The Chicago-Sun Tribune*, December 20, 1986, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/platoon-1986

[131] Ibid.

and scattered hellscapes of *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* trades

psychological interpretation for a historical realism.

Platoon is the first film to provide accurate visual representations of Vietnam –

Stone shot entirely in the Philippines to match the jungle terrain as closely as possible. As

the film follows Taylor and his unit in their push through the physically demanding and

dangerously dense jungle, the scenes are further enhanced by real-life Vietnamese

refugees Stone recruited as background actors. The authenticity was so intense that Dale

Dye, a retired Marine Captain who played Army Captain Harris, Commander of

Company B in the film and worked as the film's technical advisor said,

> … when we brought them onto that village set in the Philippines they began to
> babble in Vietnamese. That sound, those voices, in that place and in that setting
> just froze Oliver and I absolutely solid. I remember looking at him and he looking
> at me and we just wordlessly walked off the set. We went and sat down on a rice
> paddy dyke. I put my arm around him, nothing was said, nothing needed to be
> said. It was a connected moment that is forever etched in my mind.[132]

Like Stone, Dye was an active combat veteran who served in Vietnam. Dye survived 31

major combat operations during his tenure in the Marines and was awarded three Purple

Hearts. Dye and Stone led the actors through an intensive two-week long bootcamp that

intentionally deprived them of sleep so that their on-screen attitudes would mimic the

real-life experiences of worn-out combat soldiers.[133] The scenes were enhanced with

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[132] He later served as the military advisor on such movies as *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), *JFK* (1991), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and the TV epic *Band of Brothers* (2001). Almar Hafildason, "Part 3: Confronting Demons in *Platoon*," *BBC*, October 15, 2001, https://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2001/10/15/dale_dye_2001_3_interview.shtml.

[133] Charlie Sheen, the actor who plays main character Chris Taylor, later recalled in an interview with CBS "I think we got a real sense of, save for the actual life and death aspect of being in a combat zone, that we were in a real conflict." David Germain, "Stone: *Platoon's* Message Forgotten," *CBS News*, May 22, 2006, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/stone-platoons-message-forgotten/

military equipment, provided by the Philippine government, realistic makeup and tons of dirt to accentuate the aesthetic of a combat soldier in a jungle terrain.[134]

Because Stone's script appeals to authenticity not political polarization or military supremacy *Platoon* complicates the soldier's experience and memory of Vietnam.[135] Exploring themes of lost innocence, violence, morality, and authority *Platoon* offers a more nuanced view of the War.[136] Stone himself commented on his political view of the War in an interview where he stated, "I felt that the war had been a tragic mistake – a misguided mistake – made by politicians and military people." He continued to explain that though the film reads as allegory, its characters and dialogues are authentic to his experience as well.

> All of the characters in the film are based on real people that I knew. The sergeants are two people who will stay with me for the rest of my life. Many of the incidents in the film are real. There is a scene in the film when Charlie Sheen almost shoots a retarded Vietnamese civilian with one leg. That actually occurred. I went nuts one day and I wanted to kill this guy because he didn't understand me and he wouldn't come out of the hole he was hiding in. Some guy said to me, "He's scared, man!" In the movie, Sheen says, "He's scared? What about me? I'm scared!" I'm glad I didn't kill him, but I went right to the edge – and that edge could easily be crossed. And that was the point of the scene. In *Platoon*, I wanted to remember what it was like in a place and time. I felt that if I didn't make the picture then those kids would have died for nothing.[137]

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[134] Norman, "*Platoon* Grapples with Vietnam."

[135] Sterritt, "Oliver Stone: Why *Platoon* Was Made So Harsh."

[136] Though the film did receive criticism. In the far-right *Washington Times' Insight* magazine, John Podhoretz called the film "one of the most repellent movies ever made in this country," and one that "belittles the sacrifice of every man and woman who served…" Alternatively, former Senator Gary Hart urged "every teenager in America" to see the film. Richard Corliss, "*Platoon*: Viet Nam, the way it really was, on film," *Time Magazine*, January 26, 1987, https://time.com/3834671/platoon-oliver-stone-charlie-sheen-movie-review/

[137] Kevin Courrier, "Talking Out of Turn: Oliver Stone," *Critics At Large*, March 13, 2012, https://www.criticsatlarge.ca/2012/03/talking-out-of-turn-28-oliver-stone.html.

Stone's take was well received. Vincent Canby, a film critic for *The New York Times* and

a World War II veteran, noted in his review of the film that,

> It shares with its soldiers the pervasive physical discomforts of heat, damp, insects and exhaustion that, somehow, are made bearable by (because they seem less important than) their fear. Never before, I think, have I seen in a war movie such a harrowing evocation of fear, which functions like adrenaline but feels like a headache, the kind that rises and falls but never quite disappears. As much as anything that actually happens in combat, it's day-to-day fear – the will to survive, attached to the awareness that there's no earthly reason one has to – that alters the psyche.[138]

The film, designed to be as realistic as possible, even down to the scene formulation,

highlights the day-to-day activities of base camp where soldiers eat, write letters, interact

with one another, in between doing their best to survive. Vietnam Veteran and Professor

of Communication, Dr. Harry Haines notes,

> These scenes provide Platoon with an element of authenticity missing in films like *Rambo*, which rely solely on action. And they draw upon an already established familiarity with the "look" of Vietnam developed over the years by television news stories and documentaries. Indeed, one scene originates in the famous C.B.S. news story about the burning of Vietnamese hootches by American soldiers using Zippo lighters. These scenes are detailed reminders of what we've already experienced in a variety of mass-mediated settings during the last twenty years.[139]

Unlike previous films, conjuring realistic images of the war was not meant to serve as

war porn, but as a view into the experiences of the director.[140] There were no abandoned

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[138] Canby also compared *Platoon* to other films, stating, "It must say something about the American public's feelings toward the entire Vietnam experience that it's taken this long for the producers of a commercial film to attempt to make such a movie. As fine as they were, both *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* more or less floated above the concerns of the American foot soldiers and saw the war in terms of mythology. Rambo and Chuck Norris's two *Missing in Action* films jumped the gun, giving us revisionist views of a war, whose sad end had scarcely been admitted by movies – with the exception of *The Deer Hunter* – in the first place."

[139] Harry W. Haines, "They Were Called and They Went: The Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 92.

[140] One contemporary reviewer noted, "*Platoon* is rated R for good reasons: profuse gore and strong language. For the sake of the Rambo generation, it ought to be PG-13." From "Platoon Meets

POW/MIA, no noble-warriors or savage enemies, and certainly no healing nation. But

Stone notes *Platoon* was not meant to be an academic film, only one that reflected his

experiences, "I wasn't trying to call up My Lai…We did shoot livestock. We burned

hooches. One of my comrades did kill a woman. I did save two girls from being raped

and killed. It was madness."[141] And that madness is brought to life on-screen in *Platoon*.

One of the more controversial aspects of the film is in its reference to "fragging," the act

of murdering (or attempting to murder) an officer or non-commissioned officer by an

enlisted soldier.[142]

In 1987, Bernard E. Trainor, a retired Marine Corps lieutenant general and

military correspondent for *The New York Times* wrote an article in which he recalled how

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Rambo," *The New York Times*, January 22, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/22/opinion/platoon-meets-rambo.html

[141] Norman, "*Platoon* Grapples with Vietnam."

[142] Fragging is slang, derived from fragmented grenade – a weapon of choice in most instances since the grenade's explosion leaves little evidence behind. In the Spring 1987 edition of *The Veteran* by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, a reader writes in after seeing *Platoon* to comment on both the realism of the film, the inclusion of fragging, and the readers frustrations with the political climate in the post-war moment. He says, "I just got back from seeing *Platoon* and you wouldn't believe the crap that Oliver Stone put in that movie. I'm afraid that if too many teenage boys see it, there won't be much of a market left for your next, fine *Rambo* flick, and America might have trouble finding cannon fodder for a Nicaraguan adventure. You see… *Platoon* has the nerve to show Vietnam as a really unpleasant place to be during the war. It also suggests that we lost that body-count driven conflict for reasons other than a lily-livered congress and a left-leaning press. *Platoon* showed that you couldn't win a war when one side was there until they won, fighting against a bunch of guys who knew from the day they go there exactly when they were leaving—if they could just stay alive that long. Worse yet, it actually leaves the impression that some of our boys didn't really believe in the war, and that some did drugs to try and forget what they were doing there. Can you believe that? … even has the audacity to show that Americans also killed other Americans in Vietnam. In fact, in 1972 the Department of Defense confirmed that 551 "fraggings," resulting in 86 deaths, occurred between 1968-1972. While I'm quite aware that this happened, I'm afraid that too much realism about the war may turn people off, then where would the Contras and the companies that make war toys be? … It seems that the one thing that "Rambo" and *Platoon* have in common is that they both upset Vietnam veterans. The difference is that *Platoon* upset them because it was so realistic while *Rambo* pisses them off because ...well, who cares what they think. Everyone knows that those vets are chronic complainers anyway." The article, obviously written in a satirical tone, calls out Hollywood and the Rambo-esque films of the earlier years. It also highlights fragging as a real event that complicates the narratives of patriotic films about the War. Ross S. Yosnow, "An Open Letter to Rambo," *The Veteran*, vol. 17 no. 2, Spring 1987.

viewing *Platoon* matched with his own military service in Vietnam. Trainor was first

deployed to Vietnam in 1965, where he believed in then-President John F. Kennedy's

pledge to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship… to assure the survival and

success of liberty." When he returned to Vietnam in 1970 the attitude had changed

drastically to one where "frustration had replaced eagerness." Trainor took command of

infantry battalion, where his regimental commander was fond of saying to his officers:

"Gentlemen, we are not fighting a war; we are campaigning." Trainor reflected that by

1970, and likely earlier, that there was no long-term goal of winning, only of surviving.

He remembers his second tour in Vietnam as one of a brutal war, and that while no film

can replicate the experiences of those who were there, *Platoon* makes an honest attempt

to do so.[143]

Trainor's review of *Platoon* also comments on the views of other veterans who

watched the film. For some, the film was too negative.

> They are particularly offended by the village atrocity sequence, which they say
> could be misinterpreted as a routine occurrence. They rightly point out that those
> who served in Vietnam tried hard to help, not hurt, the people of that tortured
> land. Countless acts of kindness did take place. Orphanages were built, friendly
> villages were protected, medical assistance dispensed, wells dug, money given.
> All true, and true from the beginning to the very end of the tragic adventure. But
> that is irrelevant. We went to war to kill Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldiers,
> and that is precisely what we did for eight long and wearying years.[144]

When the film ended, Trainor said he wasn't terribly shaken up. He had watched the

movie with his daughters and while he thought it was honest and it made him reflect, he

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[143] Bernard E. Trainor, "Two Who Were There View *Platoon*: The Marine Officer," *The New York Times*, March 8, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/08/movies/two-who-were-there-view-platoon-the-marine-officer.html

[144] Ibid.

did not have an emotional reaction to it – until he went to leave. When the credits began

to role, he noted the single line "Dedicated to those who fought and died in Vietnam." He

had to take a walk alone to compose himself while his daughters went to the car. He

wrote,

> That one line hit me hard. I couldn't speak, and my stomach knotted… I didn't
> realize that I had seen so many familiar faces in the film. Neither did I realize,
> until then, that for 15 years I have been keeping an anguished genie bottled up
> inside of me. He nearly escaped. I quickly put the cork back in the bottle that
> afternoon, but he's still there trying to get out."[145]

Another contemporary reviewer commented on authenticity of the film in comparison to

previous attempts calling it "a welcome counterpoint to the comic and grotesque

characterizations offered by the authors of *Rambo* and other cardboard heroes… much

closer to the moral truth of Vietnam than the chest-thumping of modern revisionists." [146]

When Stone accepted the Oscar for Best Picture, he reflected, "Through the award you

are really acknowledging the Vietnam veteran, and I think what you are saying is that for

the first time you really understand what happened over there, and I think what you are

saying is that it should never, ever in our lifetimes, happen again."[147]

Others like *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) reemphasized that the War lacked

organization and purpose. *Full Metal Jacket* criticized major elements associated with the

war, like the military-industrial complex, as both as a powerful entity and an institution

devoid of traditional American values. The first act of *Full Metal Jacket* places recruits at

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[145] Ibid.

[146] Norman, "*Platoon* Grapples with Vietnam."

[147] Gregg Kilday, "AFM Flashback: *Platoon* Was a Big Win for Oliver Stone – and the Market," *Hollywood Reporter*, November 2, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/afm-flashback-platoon-oliver-stone-1235253188/

Parris Island, South Carolina for boot camp training, where recruits are brutally whipped into shape through sadistic means. But the film does far more than just a critique of the dehumanizing intentions of basic training, it also serves as commentary on the destructive tendencies of the military at large. The second act follows those recruits from Parris Island to the jungle of Vietnam, where they have been indoctrinated with ideas of racial superiority. Michael Klein notes,

> This strategy necessitated the production of a special kind of soldier, one who would not relate to potential objects of genocide (male or female) as fellow human beings. This in turn required the production of soldiers inculcated with conceptions of national and racial superiority and the inferiority of the Third World peoples and with a warriorlike conception of masculine misogyny committed to rooting out the other-directed – that is "female" – aspects of their personality. Kubrick illustrates that these qualities are not inherent in the dark side of human nature (the perspective of *Platoon*) but are instead socially produced.[148]

Racial otherness, hyper-masculinity, and American militarism are exposed in *Full Metal Jacket* through crude humor. As the marine commanding officer says: "We are here to help the Vietnamese because inside every gook there is an American." Kubrick's Vietnam is an exploration of the military's remaking of teenagers into "killing machines," and the film does a good job bringing it to life.[149] Klein continues,

> Critics tend to like the first section of film (Kubrick's savage parody of the brutality of boot camp military indoctrination) but feel uneasy about the second half of the film (his portrait of the disintegration of the American war machine in combat). In the first section of the film our sympathies are directed against a brutal, middle-aged, and extremely unattractive right-wing drill sergeant, a figure few in the audience would identify with. But in the second section of the film the war machine that the sergeant molded in the confines of a training camp at home in America is demystified: when tested in battle in Vietnam, the recruits are panic-stricken, ill-disciplined, and decidedly unheroic. The emotional distance of

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[148] Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," 29-30.

[149] Cawley, "The War About the War: Vietnam Films and American Myth," 77.

the film and its departures from naturalistic presentation of the war enhance the film's critique.[150]

Like *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket* entered the realm of absurdity. Kubrick's social commentary as parody was jarring and powerfully political and it aimed to condemn the revisionist narratives of the 1980s. As historian Marilyn Young noted, the institutions and aggressive militarism that orchestrated the War had not changed in the years leading up to and covering the experience in Vietnam. Instead, what had changed was public reception of those institutions and military aggression.[151] Revisionists sought to restore credibility in the national purpose and government – Kubrick, like others critical of these attempts, sought to condemn it.

Hamburger Hill (1987) continued the wave of post-revisionism in the late 1980s in a unique way – by allowing the actors *in* Vietnam to reflect on the socio-cultural climate of the U.S. from the battlefield. Directed by John Irvin, *Hamburger Hill* follows the Platoon of the 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division beginning on May 10, 1969, as they engage with the enemy in A Shau Valley. Much like *Platoon*, this movie starts the viewer off by promising to be an authentic and historically sound reflection. The film explores soldiers' experience through the War, placing emphasis on their backstories, their humanness – the good and the bad. Films like these demonstrated a trend in the late 1980s to reflect on the tragedy of Vietnam in a more honest and nuanced way, shifting away from the influence of American Exceptionalism

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[150] Klein, "Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era," 29-30.

[151] Marilyn Young, "Revisionists Revised: The Case of Vietnam," *Newsletter of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations* (Summer, 1979): 1-10.

in the Reagan Era and the rewritings of revisionists, but the damaged caused by the most popular films of the earlier moment would leave stains on the American psyche. The tropes and myths of the revisionists unfortunately carry forward into modernity. Today, the tragedy of Vietnam is no closer to reckoning that it was in 1968.

CONCLUSION

The Vietnam War has taken various shapes in Hollywood films; the 1960s (spare *The Greet Berets*) told the story of Vietnam through the veteran back home. This veteran was dangerous, changed and corrupted by war. In the early 1970s, the veteran takes on an even darker shape, more detached from the social pinnings that protect the American way of life. He is sociopathic, crude, and voyeuristic – looking back into America as another, an outsider. In the latter portion of the decade, films return to Vietnam, but only to emphasize the War as hell on earth. The veteran is still lost, but his struggle through the jungles of Vietnam is not his alone. It is shared with the family and friends he left behind. For two decades, Hollywood told the story of Vietnam through a murky, guilt-ridden lens. These films attempted to bring the war home, but they did so through narratives that emphasized the wounds and scars of the War on the veteran and society. But in the 1980s, something profound happens. Films stopped accepting the defeat of Vietnam, they stop villainizing the War, and they stop tolerating the embarrassment and guilt associated with it. Instead, they rewrite it.

Film and other mediums began to reflect on the War in a way more akin to communal redemption and social unification.[152] The fantasy of redemption and

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[152] Contemporary authors noted this as well. Some examples include: Michael Clark, "Remembering Vietnam." *Cultural Critique*, no. 3 (1986): 46–78. https://doi.org/10.2307/1354165. Llyod B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives*, Greenwood Press, 1985.

unification requires the War to be rewritten, as no factual part of the history can be construed as communal, unifying, or redeeming. Unlike World War II, images of the Vietnam War do not demonstrate community, righteousness, or goodness. The widely recorded and catalogued images and reels of the War do not demonstrate a military power attempting to do good, they demonstrate the opposite – the attempt to win an unwinnable war, the use of military power to force a nation and people into submission, and the disregard for the national values that once defined the public's perception of American history and their resolve in times of war. As a response to the reality of the War and its consequences on the national psyche, creators and orators of the 1980s ushered in a new form of remembering. The opening of national memorials and books sold on the War recrafted the experiences of soldiers and veterans from one that was burdened by political animosities to ones of idealistic avengers and solemn utopian builders – good men <u>trying</u> to do *right*. This was an act of national self-preservation, one that effectively silenced veterans and other participants of the War and broader era.

This effort is repeated in the majority of films of the decade. Hollywood inverted accepted filmic themes and tropes or pushed back on the normative filmic markers. Movies invoked powerful myths regarding the War and developed ideological frameworks that sought to return patriotism, nationalism, and collectivism to post-war America. These films were not just simply entertainment, they were attempts – repeated attempts – to resolve a cultural tension and revive the nation's once-held value system. The devastation of the Vietnam War on the nation should not be disregarded. Scholars

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Harry W. Haines, "Disputing the Wreckage: Ideological Struggles at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," Vietnam Generation, no. 1 vol. 1 (1989). Thomas B. Morgan, "Reporters of the Lost War," *Esquire* (July 1984): 50, 60.

have written extensively on the ways in which the War altered and irrevocably fractured the American psyche and continued analyses of these films demonstrate the various attempts to restore specific beliefs to the American public. The popularity of these movies emphasizes the public's willingness to accept them.[153]

The early 1980s marks a shift in not just the films produced but the desires and expectations of a new generation of viewers, who sought out a more idealistic version of the Vietnam War. Gone were the days of apologizing for 'Nam. These films were here to win it, to restore what had been lost. The myths and prominent tropes of the abandoned POW/MIA, noble-warrior, healing nation, and savage enemy persist in American culture, continuing to shape how the nation remembers – and forgets – the Vietnam War. As do the speaking of points of Reagan's American Exceptionalism. While historical scholarship has thoroughly debunked narratives about weak government and biased media, a sense of cultural hegemony regarding the pain of Vietnam has emerged. This was an act of self-preservation, an effort to return to the perceived cultural hegemony and obedience of the Cold War. One that continues to influence national narratives about historic experience. Understanding how these falsities evolved through film helps explain their lasting influence on American political culture and foreign policy. The transformation of Vietnam War films between 1969-1978 and 1979-1988 represents not just a shift in entertainment but a fundamental reimagining of American identity and experience in the aftermath of the War's trauma.

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[153] See Robin Wood's "80s Hollywood: Dominant Tendencies," *CineAction!* 1 (Spring 1985): 2-5 and Andrew Britton's "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," *Movie* 31/32 (Winter 1986/87): 1-42.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE POWER OF FILM: HISTORY, IDEOLOGY, AND IMAGINATION

> The war in Vietnam left a wound on my generation that hasn't healed. It has closed with the infection still raging inside. The longer that we ignore it, the worse the infection grows. – Mark Baker, *Nam*.
>
> Conventional wisdom correctly tells us that many of our images and opinions of war are shaped by what we have seen on television or in film. – Jeremy Devine, *24 Frames a Second.*

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates tells the story of prisoners held captive in a cave. Their only relief from the oppressive darkness is vague, shadowy images on the wall before them – a result of their captors passing by a fire behind them. Unable to move, the prisoners accept the shadows as reality. When one prisoner escapes and discovers the truth, he returns to free the others, but they reject him. Their belief in the shadows is too powerful to change. *The Allegory of the Cave* is a commentary on the impressionability of humankind and the malleable nature of reality. The cave and the outside world represent the competing forces of belief. The chains represent the necessity for critical thinking and the path to freedom through knowledge.

I considered *The Allegory of the Cave* often during the initial research for this project. Applied to the modern movie-viewing experience, the Socratic principles become more salient. The images on the wall are, of course, moving images projected onto theater and television screens. The chains are the visual imagery and scripted dialogue that lock viewers in their seats. The captors are the creators of cultural ephemera. But

unlike vague, shadowy images on cave walls, the modern theater experience is exceptionally captivating. Movies evoke emotional responses, their imagery mimics reality. Though movie-goers *know* they are being entertained, they are often *unaware* of how they are being informed. The allegory, when reapplied, demonstrates how modern cinema can influence the way people perceive the world around them and their place in it.

This reveals film's extraordinary power – one that originates in emotional resonance, not factual accuracy. Movies, like all artforms, encapsulate beliefs in time, serving as gauges by which the political, cultural, and social temperatures of a moment can be measured. Unlike academic studies, popular culture need not be based on fact or peer-reviewed findings; as this project has demonstrated, it need only resonate with the collective. And since popular culture displays belief systems, films and other manifestations of mass culture that depict moments in history need only be engaging enough to viewers' emotional understanding for them to become popularized. In other words, it need not be true. It need only *feel* true.

This realization of perception and belief guided the central motive for this project: understanding the role that film has played in America's reckoning with the Vietnam War. In answering that, it was impossible to ignore the power film had over perception and understanding. Today, there are over four hundred films that relate to the War. The vast catalogue of films, coupled with the lack of unified storytelling within them, illuminates just how little the American public has reckoned with the wounds of Vietnam. Surely a nation that had come to terms with the experience of the War and its consequences would not need to produce several hundred films that recount the historical moment from varying perspectives, political viewpoints, or ideologies.

Vietnam continues to exist regardless of the ritual cleansing brought on with each new era of filmmaking. The fantasy of cinema cannot replace reality, and the cyclical, near-obsessive attempts to rectify, recover, and rewrite the experience of the Vietnam War showcase not only a cultural desire to reckon with Vietnam but the failure to do so. The perennial struggle to come to terms with the era embodies not just a desire to be rid of the conflict but a continued loss of Vietnam. Each renewed approach symbolizes another defeat, another fracturing of national identity.

To better understand this fracturing, it was important to break down what kinds of stories these films were telling. To do so, and to make the project more manageable, I focused exclusively on entertainment films produced by US Hollywood studios. This meant eliminating foreign productions, documentaries, TV shows, and mini-series from the filmography, which no doubt would have enhanced the analysis if there was space to include them. As I narrowed the film catalogue, a pattern emerged: overwhelmingly, these movies were not concerned with the Vietnam War as a standalone issue. Instead, they used the War as a means to explore broader social, cultural, and political tensions. Many of the films differed wildly in presentation, tone, and style yet all focused on the War's impact on American society.

This realization led directly to my assertion in Chapter One; Hollywood films about the Vietnam War created enduring myths that continue to shape American collective memory and national identity. Rather than reckoning accurately with the War's history, these films primarily sought to reassert traditional American mythos and ameliorate the War's consequences at home, not resolve the issues of the War itself. The questions that drove the first chapter were: what gives film power over collective

memory, if at all? How do Hollywood narratives convince audiences and embed themselves in national consciousness despite being historically inaccurate? How do films participate in ideological battles? And are films creative expression, simply art that is meant to be interpreted personally, or do they hold genuine power to alter how societies understand their past?

To answer these questions, I considered a wide range of resources and interpretations. First, I analyzed the films and uncovered three definitive chronological periods tied together by thematic similarities: 1958-1968, 1969-1978, and 1979-1988. These periods correspond with the subsequent chapters, where greater analysis was conducted on the various themes and tropes found within productions, and the historic context that contributed to the thematic similarities. Next, I considered the ideologies most prevalent within the films. It was clear that many were split across political lines – forcing viewers to either embrace or reject positions based on their existing belief systems. Initially, films offered black and white positions on the War, but as filmmaking progressed, the ideological positioning of narratives became far more nuanced. Throughout my research, it became evident that the driving factors for ideological positionings were rooted in Cold War values – their initial existence, apparent loss, and the attempt to return to them.

This raised another question: How did the iron-clad Cold War consensus of the 1950s, characterized by victory culture and American Exceptionalism, devolve into a period of widespread controversy and ideological fracturing? Chapter Two addresses this by examining national identity as opposed to film. The importance of this chapter was to provide foundational background information that expressed just how drastically the

shifts of filmic narratives in the 60s, 70s, and 80s truly were. In Chapter Two, I further assert that the Vietnam War, which has long been held responsible for fracturing the Cold War consensus, was not responsible at all. Instead, the War amplified and exposed a splintering that was well underway in American society long before the contentious eruption of anti-war protests in the late 1960s. By considering national purpose, identity, and culture of the earlier Cold War era – and its intersection with major political shifts that emerged pre-Vietnam, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of the New Left, it became evident that the Cold War consensus was collapsing under its own weight well before the height of the War.

This led me to the next big question for the project: what did the War actually mean to those who experienced it, and how did film portray this, if at all? Chapter Three and Four build upon this historical context using film as the primary analytical tool. Chapter Three examines films from 1969-1978, which demonstrate: the complete collapse of the Cold War consensus on American social and political institutions, the transformation of the veteran from honored hero to feared outsider, rising distrust toward all governmental institutions, escalating violence, and a loss of the shared moral framework. These films, largely anti-war in nature, rejected victory culture and focused on the War's psychological toll at home, serving as mirrors reflecting trauma back onto the audience.

However, Chapter Four reveals a complete inversion. Films from 1979-1988 shift from critical examinations of American culpability to revisionist reimagining. Many remained anti-war in rhetoric, but attempted to re-mold the facts and return public perception back to an earlier set of Cold War values. The veteran became hyper-capable,

his actions morally justified. The villains became the media, the Left, American complacency, and corrupt officials. Belief in a healing nation and the noble warrior restored collective unity. The abandoned POW/MIA narrative ensured renewed military support. The savage enemy dehumanized outsiders and made enemy threats feel real again.

So why did audience reception shift so dramatically? This is where the greatest significance of this project comes into play – the power of utilizing film as a historical artifact is not just in the narratives and imagery presented in film, but in understanding the historic context these films lived in. By utilizing hard history, film reviews, interviews, box office data, and critical examinations, the socio-political and cultural climates of a given era can be more accurately understood. Why did John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) fail where earlier Cold War films succeeded? And why would Stallone's *Rambo* in *First Blood* (1982) come to be one of the most successful movie characters of all time only fourteen years later? Because the climate of the American psyche had shifted. The War remained but the narratives changed, encouraging shifting audience perception. Again, it didn't have to be true; it only had to *feel* true.

The 1980s mark a new era in American history – the rise of the New Right, the resurgence of masculine American heroism, and the communal desire to move away from the perceived weakness of the aforementioned eras. In *First Blood* and the ensuing franchise, it is evident how influential these new narratives can be. They do more than simply entertain or attempt to document the past; they have the power to shape the way viewers understand reality. Films of the 1980s do little to reconcile the lingering divisions of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and they do little to enrich or enhance our

understanding of the political, economic, or ideological factors that paved the way for the War in the first place, but they do provide deep insight into the political, cultural, and social issues that existed from the late sixties to the late 1980s. By recovering and deconstructing Hollywood imagery, narrative, and myth, Americans can better understand social memory, national identity, and ideological structures of a given era.

The influence of film becomes quantifiable when examining shifting public opinion. In August of 1965, participants of the Gallup poll were first posed the question: "In the view of the development since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" Only 24% responded in the affirmative. By February of 1968, that number had more than doubled (46%). The number of participants responding in the affirmative continued to grow over the next twenty-two years. In 1990, on the 15th anniversary of the end of the War, an overwhelming 74% of Gallup respondents selected the affirmative. However, in 2000, that number began to drop. Still over two-thirds of participants selected the affirmative, but in the same survey, nearly one-third under 30 believed the U.S. had fought on behalf of North Vietnam – not against it. This grave misunderstanding of the War's history cannot be traced to film – but it can be explained by acknowledging how little of the War's history is at the forefront of cultural memory.

In 2025, for the 50th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, Nexstar Media and Emerson College conducted a poll to better understand how the War is perceived so many decades later. They sampled a large pool of civilians and an oversample of Vietnam veterans to compare results. When asked if the War was justified, 46% of Vietnam veterans responded it was not – 41% responded it was; when looking at civilian

populations, a majority of 62% continue to believe that getting involved in the Vietnam War was a mistake – but when looking at individual age groups, those under forty years of age are almost evenly split between right and wrong. These results highlight the impact of filmmaking from the 1980s. Those under forty would be most likely to be influenced by the emotive, pastiche filmmaking of the 1980s.[1]

Two of the most fundamental challenges I came across in this research were navigating through the foreign theoretical concepts of film studies and filling in gaps where recorded data did not yet exist. It was not only necessary to analyze the film and situate it within its historical context, but also to understand the filmmakers' goals, the messages they intended to deliver, the audience's reception, the role of cinema in society at any given period, and the techniques of the film itself. The absence of box office data and national ranking systems for earlier films also limited the scale this project was capable of achieving. But as this project has showcased, despite these limitations, popular culture as a primary mode of analysis for historical research provides a wealth of material to navigate. Hollywood producers, and other creators of cultural ephemera, do not merely produce entertainment or manufacture distraction, they create, enforce, and maintain identity. As Howard Suber argues,

> To study such movies is, therefore, to study ourselves, not as we are, but as we wish we could be. Memorable popular movies do not show us just the world, they show us a *just world* – one in which the people we identify with not only stand for the things we would like to stand for, they *stand up* for what we would like to believe are the most important values of individuals and societies.[2]

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[1] Emerson College. "50 Years Later, Majority of Vietnam Veterans and Adults Think the U.S. Should Have Stayed Out of Vietnam," Polling, April 28, 2025. https://emersoncollegepolling.com/vietnam-survey/.

[2] Howard Suber, *The Power of Film* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2006), Introduction.

These rewritings express more than just amusement. They explore society's relationship with itself. The repeated financial success and notoriety of these films tell us that film means something *more* than simply serving as entertainment. In the continued effort to find the truth of Vietnam in film, Hollywood is creating a history of its own. Undoubtedly, more scholars will find the value in this specific approach in the coming years. Movies cannot tell us what really happened in Vietnam, but they can reveal how the War was perceived, received, analyzed, and how it is remembered.

Though film analysis and popular culture studies are often undervalued in historic research, they provide a vital opportunity to conduct more thorough research on cultural and memory studies. The value of incorporating interdisciplinary studies into historical investigation is amplified by the reality of the contemporary moment. Today is an age of unprecedented social, cultural, and political events. At a time where disinformation and manipulation are even more insidious, it is imperative that historians challenge themselves to incorporate popular culture into their analyses. Some of the challenges I came across during this project were a lack of recorded information – but today, the challenge of cross-examining hard historical investigation alongside popular culture studies will not be a lack of information but a landslide of it.

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