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Ideological, Dystopic, and Antimythopoeic Formations of Masculinity in the Vietnam War Film

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IDEOLOGICAL, DYSTOPIC, AND ANTIMYTHOPOEIC FORMATIONS
OF MASCULINITY IN THE VIETNAM WAR FILM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that representations of masculinity in the Hollywood war/combat films of the Vietnam film cycle reflect the changing and changed mores of the era in which they were made, and that these representations are so prevalent as to suggest a culture-wide shift in notions of masculinity since the Vietnam War. I demonstrate that the majority of the representations of masculinity in the Vietnam War film cycle (an expression that includes all films on the Vietnam War but particularly those produced in Hollywood) have achieved mythic status—accepted truths—but are often exaggerated and/or are erroneous to the point of affecting how historical events are understood by subsequent generations. Such is the power of cinema. This dissertation, then, adopts a cultural-political-historical perspective to investigate Hollywood’s virtual re-creation of the Vietnam War and its combat participants as dystopic, anti-mythopoeic figures whose allegiance to patriotism, God, and duty are shown to be tragically betrayed by a changing paradigm of masculinity and has thus created a new mythos of the American male which abides in the American consciousness to this day. All of which is to ask, why was there such a significant change from admirable cinematic representations of America as a nation that represents the ideology of freedom and liberty for all and U.S. soldiers as the hallmark of strength and goodness in the WW II movies to the mostly wretched representations of both in the Vietnam War cycle? While each chapter of my dissertation will attempt to identify plausible answers to these questions, I will also seek to explore why and how these alterations from the regnant traditions of American values—honoring the military, respecting the government and other traditions, such as the nuclear family, marriage as a sacred institution, monogamy as the respected norm, children as inviolable, gender roles as fixed, separation of the races, etc.—came to such a tumultuous head in the 1960s and resulted in the significantly altered constructs of values and masculinity that have become the norm in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In order to investigate historical cinematic representations effectively, it is necessary to consider the actual events of the times and challenge the subsequent various mythopoeic formations of the Hollywood Vietnam veteran. This dissertation approaches these numerous and related questions via close cinematic readings of two films from the Vietnam War film cycle: The Green Berets (1968), directed by John Wayne, and The Boys in Company C. (1977), directed by Sidney Furie, with commentary on scores of others, in particular, Hamburger
Hill (1987), directed by John Irvin, and We Were Soldiers (2002), directed by Randall Wallace. These films are selected because, with the exception of The Green Berets, they are somewhat lesser known films of the Vietnam War film cycle; thus, there is less scholarship devoted to them and therefore greater opportunity for original analysis. I devote one chapter each to a close reading of each film and investigate the ideologies of each film, its representations of masculinity, and note formalistic characteristics where relevant. Intrinsically relevant is the fact that these films represent the significant cultural development of the Vietnam War film cycle over a period of nearly twenty-five years.
CHAPTER ONE

VIETNAM MOVIES, A NEW MYTHOS OF THE MASCULINE

They are murdering all the young men.
For half a century now, every day,
They have hunted them down and killed them.
They are killing them now.
At this minute, all over the world,
They are killing the young men.
They know ten thousand ways to kill them.
Every year they invent new ones.
Kenneth Rexroth, “Thou Shalt Not Kill” 1953

Kenneth Rexroth’s reading of his 1953 poem “Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Memorial for Dylan Thomas” influenced Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” published in 1956. Rexroth says in his preface that “The poem is directed against the twentieth, the Century of Horror” (*The Portable Beat Reader*, 305-6). I hope to be neither trite nor poetic in making this claim: every war is built upon the horrors of the previous war. Rexroth’s poem, written during the height of the Cold War and the Korean War, reflects the horror that was WWII. It also clearly foreshadows the coming war in Vietnam. It also begs the question, who is this mysterious “they?” The simple answer is, men. The poets of the 20th century are by no means the first to rail against the tragedy that is war. But few have waxed poetic in recognizing that the tragedy that is war is concomitant with the construction of that which is man himself.

An analysis of war with this premise in mind—and in the case of this dissertation, an analysis of how war is (re)presented in cinema—can succumb to infinite regress, given how the history of mankind is equivalent to the record of mankind’s *un*-kindness, i.e., warfare. Thus, I will limit my analysis to the films centering on the Vietnam War, two combat films in detail, both Hollywood productions of the Vietnam War film cycle, with only occasional and anecdotal reference to films on earlier wars and to historical records of those wars as a means to demonstrate the main premise of this dissertation: representations of masculinity in Hollywood war/combat films reflect the changing and changed mores of the era in which they were made, and that these representations are so prevalent as to suggest a culture-wide shift in notions of masculinity since the Vietnam War (American participation in combat, beginning with air
bombing of targets in North Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin incident is roughly the period from 1964 to 1975). I will demonstrate that the majority of the representations of masculinity in the Vietnam War film cycle (an expression that includes all films about the Vietnam War but particularly those produced in Hollywood) have achieved mythic status—accepted truths—but are often exaggerated and/or are erroneous to the point of affecting how historical events are understood by subsequent generations. Such is the power of cinema that Hollywood virtually created the regnant image of the Vietnam War and its combat participants as victims and perpetrators of a dystopic vision for the world and its anti-mythopoeic figures whose allegiance to patriotism, God, and duty are shown to be tragically betrayed by a changing paradigm of masculinity. In other words, Hollywood, primarily in its resistance to the Vietnam War, created a new mythos of the American male, one much in conflict with that of the previous generation and one that abides in the American consciousness to this day. The particulars of this new mythos are enumerated further below.

The term sociocultural here is employed in a generic manner (as opposed to being specific to a field of study, as in, say, psychology) to include the opportunity to analyze the films of the Vietnam War film cycle by a combination of social and cultural factors, society here being defined, perhaps simplistically, as the people of a particular shared region and history, in this case, specifically the people of the United States and their/its regnant value system. Culture, here, is defined, perhaps also simplistically, as the totality of transmitted behavior patterns, arts, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought (American Heritage Dictionary). I include the word “political” to allow for an examination of ideology, another term fraught with meaning. I do not limit the terms to a single perspective, as in, for example, Marxism, where ideology is often conflated with the concept of hegemony, i.e., those who have power, and as with Marxism, can reduce the complexities of society and culture to mere economics. I subscribe to and will employ a more varied definition of ideology, one that allows for the term to express a broader worldview within a particular society that recognizes multiple ideologies including those of gender, nationality, race, and class that frequently elide economic status as the singular defining feature of class. Examples include the notion that girls should/should not wear pink, or the belief that the military is an honorable/dishonorable profession, or in the validity or not of the notion of American exceptionalism. These sociocultural artifacts transcend class as defined by
economic status. The poor and rich alike subscribe to these and innumerable other cultural artifacts.

Notions of American masculinity—that which defines the American male and that which is excluded—also transcend economic class and constructs of masculinity that have been the norm for thousands of years, and, as with so many other norms, experienced radical transformations during the counterculture movements of the 1960s. Those transformations are expressed as a positive ideology in virtually all Hollywood films of the Vietnam War film cycle. These transformations include challenges to but are not limited to the following regnant beliefs of the times: (1) masculinity is defined by aggression and competitiveness, and these qualities are most positively and honorably displayed in military service, particularly in combat, and conversely, a man who is unwilling to engage in warfare is a coward. (2) masculinity is defined by an almost superhuman stoicism regarding pain and loss, and conversely, a man who is incapable of controlling his emotions is either homosexual or expressing characteristics associated with a woman. (3) masculinity is defined by allegiance to one’s country/nation-state and/or god and that to die for one’s country/nation-state and/or god is the highest honor a man can earn in his life. (4) and most recent historically, masculinity is associated with the American soldier as defender of the weak, defeater of the oppressor, and savior of the world. My dissertation locates and investigates the changes in these hoary constructs of masculinity in the Vietnam War film cycle, which is roughly divided by various film scholars and commentators into three periods:

**First Wave**: American Vietnam War films of the 1970s where the war is portrayed virtually exclusively in negative terms. According to Auster and Quart (1979), “The first wave of Vietnam War films is grouped to suggest a lack of political insight and a grasp of complexities. If there is an anti-war message, it is often abstract, ambiguous, or idiosyncratic. In fact, these films may not be about Vietnam at all, but about something more problematic in the postwar American soul and psyche, as in *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*” ("Hollywood and Vietnam: The Triumph of the Will" 4-6). Additionally, scholars proclaim that “Chronological analysis of the first wave of American Vietnam War films in the 1960s and 1970s, with emphasis on *The Green Berets* and *Apocalypse Now*... notes Hollywood's self-censorship, use of other genres, and the reversal of chronology in covering the war. The subject was too complex to be confined in
closed plot structures. Even coverage of the youth culture tended to reveal contradictions rather than substance” (Gilbert Adair, *Hollywood's Vietnam: From the Green Berets to Apocalypse Now*, 1981). In other words, the so-called first wave of Hollywood films about the Vietnam War (with *The Green Berets* as the obvious exception), tended to concentrate on the confused and horrific elements of the war, suggesting an existential nightmare for those involved.

**Second Wave**: American Vietnam War films of the 1980s, which include both the revisionist “we get to win” films and, later, those of extreme realism that lay claim to greater authenticity: importantly, these two theories are entirely antithetical to one another, an exhortatory reminder that works of art and texts do not fall handily into the categories of presidential administrations. L.B.J., the most liberal president since F.D.R., virtually guaranteed that John Wayne receive full Pentagon support in the production of *The Green Berets*, the only Hollywood-produced pro-American film about the Vietnam War made during the war. No one has, however, suggested that the cinematic zeitgeist of the mid-to-late sixties be deemed “Johnsonian.” According to William Adams, however, in "Screen Wars: The Battle for Vietnam," “The second wave of Vietnam War films is not simply a manifestation of "Reaganism" (reaffirmation of "traditional" values, anti-communism, fetishes of the marketplace, and an attack on alternative lifestyles) but shows tangled impulses: self-criticism and reaffirmation, toughness and sentimentality.” Furthermore, Adam’s definition suggests that “the message of the second wave of Vietnam War films is profoundly mixed: criticism and nervous compensation, self-doubt and reaffirmation, cultural lucidity and self-preoccupation” (John K. McAskill, La Salle University). Pat Aufderheide’s essay, “Vietnam: Good Soldiers," in *Seeing Through Movies*, further notes that

alienation from those at home, and finally, the loss of all sensibility save the will to survive” (84) [which John Belton terms the “Vietnam Reversal”]. These films celebrate survival as a form of heroism and cynicism as a form of self-preservation. The noble-grunt films recast the war as a test of physical and psychological survival by people with no authority and too much responsibility [was any soldier ever otherwise?]. The enemy is not so much the Vietnamese as the abstract forces of bureaucracy and the incompetence of superiors. (McAskill)

**Third Wave:** American Vietnam War films of the 1990s and 2000s that revisit, perhaps nostalgically, perhaps with the improved vision of mature hindsight, the original goals of the war and the values inherent in the undertaking. By this time, “Understanding the ways in which media filter and transform experience is especially crucial as Vietnam—and, particularly, film and television representations of Vietnam—is more and more entering the curriculum of America’s high schools and universities” (Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 13). Reviewers of this period are often criticized as being "unarticulated" and "literary-criticism-derived" in their approach that teases implications out of narrative and dialogue. According to Pat Aufderheide in her article, "Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television,” "They mostly share an also unarticulated understanding of the relevant data, which is big-name, fictional industry productions with a centrist or liberal perspective from 1978-80 and 1985-89" (*Film Quarterly*, 46/1 (fall 1992), p. 42-3). She finds Thomas Slater's essay "Teaching Vietnam: The Politics of Documentary" invigorating, but believes that many such essays are hampered by "obscurantism" and "textual tunnel vision." In other words, *Academia*, with a capital “A” has entered the forest like “man” in the story of *Bambi* and has made commentary on the films of the Vietnam War abstruse. I suggest that the so-called third-wave of films about the Vietnam War are not yet particularly well-articulated, but that many, and most significantly, *We Were Soldiers* (2002), attempt to redress the real and imagined slights the soldiers of the Vietnam War suffered in life and media for thirty-plus years.

Film scholar Jonathan Rosenbaum writes of the Vietnam War and subsequently of films about the Vietnam War that “the mythical, heroic archetypes of American soldiers promulgated by [John] Wayne and others during World War II and Korea were no longer as viable or as believable in the late Sixties, even to right-wing patriots” (“Vietnam Dispatches.” June 14, 1981.
Among other questions, I am interested in pursuing the validity of such an argument. If indeed “mythical, heroic archetypes of American soldiers…were no longer viable or believable in the late Sixties,” the question becomes “why is that?” Is it that the Vietnam War was particularly loathsome? Warfare itself as “Hell” had not considerably changed since WWII, which made use of all manner of modern machinery of mass destruction: jets, bombs, tanks, helicopters, machine guns, fire, chemicals, etc. In fact, by the time of the Vietnam War, advances in medical procedures in the field kept casualty rates far below those of WWII and the Korean War. The Department of Defense reports that U.S. involvement in WWII lasted from 1941–1945, resulting in 291,557 combat deaths; 54,246 American service men and women lost their lives during the Korean War in a mere three years, 1950–1953; the Vietnam War, by contrast, which in most estimates of U.S. involvement lasted from 1955–1975, resulted in 47,424 combat deaths. In terms of the dreadful calculation that is casualties, the Vietnam War pales in comparison to its predecessors (there is painful irony is recognizing the dissonance of advances in militaristic mechanisms simultaneous with medical advances to preserve human life from wounds suffered in combat). Additionally, the fact that the Vietnam War seemed never to end had a profound effect on its place in the American consciousness. Americans had reason to expect an expedient conclusion: with the exception of The American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), all of America’s prior wars ended in four or fewer years. That this war seemed to go on forever is certainly concomitant with the psychic discord associated with it, but the anti-war movement began in earnest within a year or two of the war’s onset, suggesting that ideology played a larger role than war fatigue in defining the war in negative terms exclusively. One would be hard pressed indeed to identify something positive to say about the Vietnam War.

Commentators on the Vietnam War, hoping to explain the disastrous results of U.S. occupation in that never-before-heard-of-country, often note that jungle warfare was particularly difficult for the Western soldier, both physically and psychologically, as demonstrated in Francis Ford Coppola’s reimagining of Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), set in Vietnam rather than Africa. But the Pacific campaign of WWII, fought mainly by the Marines and Navy, took place predominantly in jungle environments and was atrocious in its brutal conditions yet was overwhelmingly successful. Furthermore, the French had entered Vietnam as early as the 17th century as traders and by 1884 had claimed Vietnam as French Indochina, certainly demonstrating the European’s ability to adapt to and dominate the
indigenous peoples of jungle climes. The notion that the Western man goes mad in a primitive, exotic Eastern country while engaged in empire building is among the most insidious conceits of literature, as noted in Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. The evidence otherwise is massive and manifold. Why, then, the sudden change in attitude regarding U.S. military engagements and within the soldier himself as represented in cinema? The answer, I believe, lies somewhere in the immense generational-ideological shifts taking place in the U.S. during the sixties and seventies, and my research and film analyses will identify and explore this shift.

Furthermore, Rosenbaum notes the lag in production of films from Hollywood that dealt with the long and ongoing war:

…a certain ambiguity in the filmmakers’ approaches [to films only covertly about the Vietnam War made in the 60s and early 70s] allowed them to address hawks and doves alike. But it was not until the late Seventies that the subject of Vietnam was finally tackled head-on—after a fashion—by the film industry. And even then, the chief response was to dodge central facts about the war for the sake of additional myths and allegories [emphasis mine], many of which seemed designed to reinterpret painful recent history in a more positive light—whether as therapy or as alibi, a rationalization or an avoidance of the immediate past. (“Vietnam Dispatches” 1981)

As explanation for this perceived delay in bringing filmic representations of recent historical events to the viewing public, film and social commentators frequently argue that the harrowing and dispiriting events of the Vietnam War were too fresh on the minds of Americans to deal with in the immediate aftermath, and besides, every American could watch the war unfold in surprisingly graphic detail on the nightly news on their television sets. Who would want to pay to see such a muddled event on the big screen? Not incidentally, the same dialectic took place following the events of 9/11. To date, there have been but two mainstream films to deal with that particular calamity which is responsible for over three thousand deaths (in a single day) and is the impetus for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which may be connected to the ongoing economic collapse of the U.S.: World Trade Center (2006), directed by the ubiquitous—in matters pertaining to war—Oliver Stone; and United 93 (2006), directed by Britain’s Paul Greengrass. In contrast, documentaries employing found footage from scores of witnesses with
video cameras in New York were compiled into sensible narratives with immediacy. One in particular, narrated by Robert De Niro, is the significantly titled 9/11 (2002), directed by French filmmakers Jules and Gédéon Naudet, who just happened to be shooting a documentary about a rookie New York firefighter on that fateful day. Economics also play an important role in studio decisions to produce major motion pictures; documentaries are significantly less expensive to produce.

But again, as with the previous question of American military involvement in a jungle environment or sensitivity to recent national pains, theories fail to provide satisfactory answers for the peculiar shifts in attitudes in American filmmaking regarding the Vietnam War and how these shifts reflect challenges to traditional notions of masculinity. We can note, for example, that Hollywood produced literally hundreds of films about WWII while the war itself raged and with the complete support if not control of the Office of War Information, whose official mission was to “promote truth and accuracy” in the telling of the war. There is no need to belabor the obvious influence of a government organization devoted to propaganda in establishing what may be known and thus believed and what may not be known and thus not believed; it is obvious that the U.S. government would not support a film that negatively portrays the U.S. military or challenges the government’s justification for military action. In order for Hollywood studios to offset the tremendous costs associated with producing a war/combat film, which at the time were fantastically popular and produced big box office receipts, executives accepted the guidelines of the Office of War Information in return for complete access to the instruments of war which only the government owned, e.g., tanks, planes, weapons, uniforms, etc. Obvious, too, is the influence upon films of that time by the Hayes Production Code that severely curtailed narrative options. The point I will belabor, however, is twofold: one, the efforts of the Office of War Information were demonstrably effective in establishing the widespread belief in the rightness of U.S. involvement in two foreign wars and that the massive human sacrifices of WW II were justified in the cause of universal liberty (Hollywood did not address the singularly horrific events resulting from the atomic bombs deployed upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki until 1952 in Above and Beyond, directed and written by Melvin Frank and Norman Panama). In fact, there has never been a Hollywood film that humanizes the German government and military of WW II. Das Boot, directed by Wolfgang Petersen in 1981, is entirely a German production, and though nominated for six Academy Awards, won none; All Quiet on the Western Front, produced in
Hollywood and directed by Lewis Milestone in 1930 about German soldiers during WW I, significantly does humanize the Germans. The difference, however, is clear: WW I was a “gentleman’s war,” not about annihilating the Jews: WW II certainly was. To do so (humanize the Germans of WW II) is to invite virtually universal condemnation and charges of fascist sympathies. There simply is no and can be no humanization of Hitler or his minions; thus, he, and they, remains a specter of evil, banal, as Hannah Arendt defines it, or, if Hitler is made the subject of a film, he is portrayed as a raving lunatic. Additionally, profound demonization of the Japanese in Hollywood cinema during and after the war reached absurdly racist proportions. In 1944, Lewis Milestone (née Leib Milstein, who later in his prolific career is blacklisted under the suspicion that he was a Red sympathizer) this time directs *The Purple Heart*, a work of pure propaganda which dramatizes the true trial of eight US airmen who took part in the April 18, 1942, Doolittle Raid and were shot down by the Japanese. Three were executed and one died as a POW.¹ The irony of Milestone’s career, given that his work during WW II is overtly patriotic, only to see his career derailed for his allegiance to Marxist ideology, stands in stark contrast to the generation of filmmakers of the counterculture who have iconized those who refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee and demonized the members of Congress of whom that committee was comprised, especially Joseph McCarthy. One would again be hard pressed to find an admirable representation of McCarthy in a Hollywood production, despite extraordinary re-examinations of the senator’s legacy (see, *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America’s Most Hated Senator*, by Arthur Herman, 1999). According to Herman, “Joe McCarthy was and remains the single most despised man in American political memory—far more reviled than Aaron Burr or Richard Nixon or even George Wallace” (nytimes.com). The reason why is explicitly evident in the films of the Vietnam War cycle: substantial numbers of the Jewish artists of Hollywood—writers, directors, actors—then (with the notable and excruciatingly ironic exception of the studio chiefs themselves) and to this day, maintain a nostalgic allegiance to the ideology of Marx, best explained in the documentary, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (1998), based on Neil Gabler’s award-winning book of 1989, the title of which is taken from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s homage to Jewish artistry, industry, and romanticism in Hollywood in his last and posthumously published novel, *The Last Tycoon*, ostensibly about the legendary movie producer Irving Thalberg.

Allegiance to Marxist ideology in Hollywood films, insistently nostalgic, utterly neglects to dramatize the horrors of Stalin’s regime. The most astute observers of cinema would find it virtually impossible to name a single Hollywood film that records the subtle eradication of millions of Jews under the former Soviet Union. Historians have for years waged a battle of numbers regarding who was the more horrid, Hitler or Stalin? (*Hitler vs. Stalin: Who Killed More?*). The fact that Hollywood has not produced films that demonize Stalin or the Soviet Union is directly ideologically related to the treatment of the Vietnam War in Hollywood films.

Investigating norms of masculinity, allowing for such anomalies, cannot satisfy, if one is to arrive at a moral distinction between good and evil. In my analyses of combat films of the Vietnam War cycle, I will address these ethical dilemmas. This point—that Nazism and Japanese Imperialism were effectively demonized in cinema, but communism, despite the specter of the U.S.S.R. and China, was not—is not incidental to my dissertation. I investigate how and why it is that condemnation of communism failed to elicit a similarly successfully accepted ideology of which system/ideology is considered good, i.e. democratic capitalism, and which system/ideology is considered evil, i.e. totalitarian communism, a mere generation after that of those who fought in WW II when Nazism and Japanese Imperialism were so successfully demonized? The lack of any such organization as the Office of War Information during the Vietnam War era significantly affected public opinion. The enormity of the European and Pacific theaters of WW II dwarfed all war events up to that time in history and still remains the hallmark of disastrous international affairs and cultural failures—at least in the minds of Westerners ignorant of the genocides occurring in the Soviet Union and later China. Why did American society not develop an effective approach—including a government organization—to justify combating the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, or, stated otherwise, why were efforts to do so utterly resisted? The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which lasted from 1938–1975—ending, not incidentally when the Vietnam War ended—failed spectacularly in soliciting widespread patriotism and resistance to communism (though in the fifties, being called a Red or Commie was common enough; again, the cultural shift seems to have fomented in the fifties and come to fruition in the sixties as the Boomers reached young adulthood), particularly among those in the film business and related media. The influence of the media of the time as well as that of academia will be considered. Of course, the whirlwind of the
counterculture is significant in how the Vietnam War itself played out as well as how it was portrayed in film and will be addressed throughout the dissertation.

We cannot appropriately or accurately gauge the intensity of suffering on the part of the soldiers and the population back home between the two conflicts—WW II and the Vietnam War—as a means of measuring the nation’s tolerance for the subject in cinema, but we can make general distinctions: we know, for example, that the casualties of WWII were much higher than those suffered during the Vietnam War. We know also that there was a real chance that the allied forces of WWII could lose the war to the Axis powers and that the U.S. could be directly attacked, as was proved in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Conversely, we know that there was no legitimate military threat to the U.S. from the North Vietnamese, though there were concerns that nuclear-armed China—which provided significant human and technological support to Ho Chi Minh—and the Soviet Union, which had brought nuclear missiles to Cuba, a mere ninety miles from Florida, might bring more direct action upon U.S. soil. Both films selected for in-depth analysis can be classified as combat films, as opposed to films that address the issues of war but do not include scenes of warfare. Both can also be classified as anti-war films, in that each posits the theory that the cost of suffering does not justify the limited benefits of military action. Both are told from the perspective of the soldiers, which typically enhances the visceral experience for the viewer but also limits the scope of perspective. But each differs significantly in terms of their ideological perspectives and their representations of masculinities.

It behooves me to recognize that a deep analysis of representations of masculinity in war/combat films may seem superfluous, given the obvious fact that males are omnipresent in war as well as are virtually entirely responsible for war. I will make note of that genre of male who finds warfare the ultimate test of his manhood and therefore constructs warfare as a means to test himself, most often to the detriment of all humankind, but not always. The hero exists, and there are those who maintain a difference. I will also investigate the construct of soldiers who are cynical and/or find their duty odious and loathsome and not at all glorious. A few major analyses have applied feminist readings to various war films, including those regarding the Vietnam War (Susan Jeffords, for example, in her book, The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War, 1989), and bear some consideration. But most commentary from feminist writers concentrate on the war/peace dichotomy and/or specific gender theories and are beyond the
scope of this dissertation. My analysis recognizes the role of female characters and representations of the feminine, rare as they may be in some or all of the films discussed. In fact, that which is notably absent in story often carries real significance, and it is incumbent upon the reader-viewer to recognize the weight of that which is not explicitly stated. The role of women in war, combat in particular, is universally subordinate or absent altogether for reasons obvious and culturally prescribed: it is an historical given that women do not devise weapons or make plans for violence against some other tribe, village, city, or nation-state as a means of exerting their dominance upon other tribes or nations.² Historical records, for centuries literally all compiled by men, occasionally dramatize the influence women have had on men of war: Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great; Cleopatra; or Triệu Thị Trinh, a female Vietnamese warrior from the 3rd century who successfully resisted the occupying forces of the Wu Kingdom during their time in Vietnam. None, however, was afforded the opportunity to tell her own story. The portion of my analyses of the feminine will derive from their cinematic narrative function in the specific films chosen for analysis.

I earlier employed the phrase too often attributed to combat and thus sadly diminished of effective meaning, “war is hell.” The expression even became the title of a comic book series in the early 1970s while the Vietnam War raged; interestingly, the series is set primarily in WW II but was certainly read at the time as a commentary on the contemporary war. The statement is attributed to William Tecumseh Sherman, general of the Union forces of the U.S. Civil War and infamous for his allegiance to the theory of “total war,” an ancient method of warfare wherein no differentiation between combatants and civilians is affected. There is something fascinating, horrifying, and perhaps disingenuous about a man of war who at once recognizes the absolute monstrosity that is war and yet is a master of engaging with such celebrated gusto in the brute barbarity of war as was Sherman. This simple and obvious phrase “war is hell” appears in one of his many addresses to the young men of his time, who, like every generation before their own, believed that the ultimate expression of their manhood was to challenge other men in battle. On June 19, 1879, having had over a decade to ponder the events of the Civil War, Sherman addressed the graduating class of the Michigan Military Academy before a total of 10,000 people in which he spoke the now famous expression: “There is many a boy here today who looks on

² The so-called Dahomey Amazons of the 17th century are an historical aberrance and were fully under the leadership of a male king, see Alpern.
war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell.” As with the vagaries and transmutations of history as
told in textbooks as well as, perhaps especially, in cinema, there are a score of variations on this
phrase, but the point is made: everything horrible the concept of hell conjures in the imagination
is made real in war.

Despite such warnings, war continued, as men continue, at least a great many worldwide,
perhaps genetically predisposed, to desire the ultimate challenge of their manhood. Art in
reaction flourishes, seemingly in direct proportion to the horrors having occurred. Homer’s epics
are admired at least as much for their sadness as for their heroic similes of men in battle.
Primarily modern literature is littered with moving, anti-war poetry, in express reaction to the
art’s predecessors, to express the horrific effects of such a drive. Wilfred Owen, for example,
serving under the British banner in WW I in 1917, warned in his famous poem and speaks
directly to the jingoistic mindset of the gruesome reality of war:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori.

The passionate and troubling final line is derived from the Roman poet Horace, more than two
millennia ago, generally translated to English as "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country,"
though it is clear that the word for country, patria, is from the same root as father, thus,
fatherland is more evocative than the gender neutral English word, country. Missing in modern
English translations of this certainly un-ironic entry to Horace’s “Odes” is the clear linguistic
expression of masculinity defined by courage in warfare, in projecting horror upon women, and in its association with nationhood to the Romans in Ode III.2:

    ….To suffer hardness with good cheer,
    In sternest school of warfare bred,
    Our youth should learn; let steed and spear
    Make him one day the Parthian's dread;
    Cold skies, keen perils, brace his life.
    Methinks I see from rampired town
    Some battling tyrant's matron wife,
    Some maiden, look in terror down, —
    “Ah, my dear lord, untrain'd in war!
    O tempt not the infuriate mood
    Of that fell lion I see! from far
    He plunges through a tide of blood!”

    What joy, for fatherland to die!
    Death's darts e'en flying feet o'ertake,
    Nor spare a recreant chivalry,
    A back that cowers, or loins that quake.

Horace lived until nearly his sixties, despite the extraordinarily violent times in which he lived (the fall of Julius Caesar and the rise of Augustus); he even served in the military, though not well; he admittedly fled the battle and left his shield behind, a grave disgrace (“Horace: Life and Chronology”). Eras of students of literature and history later, poet Jessie Pope, best known for her patriotic motivational poems published during World War I and whose bright exultations for Britain’s young men to “get in the game” or receive a white feather for cowardice and to whom Owen directs his poem, lived to the age of seventy-three. Not atypical of her time and perhaps quite heroic in her nationalistic fervor, Pope employed her talent in “Who’s For the Game?” (1916) to encourage her countrymen to be brave in war, as Britains had always been.
Who’s for the game, the biggest that’s played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who’ll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he’d rather sit tight?

(Women's Poetry of the First World War)

It would be utterly unfair to criticize a female poet of her time (or, dare I argue, of any time) for encouraging the men of her country, her sons, her brothers, her fathers, her husbands to win “the game, the biggest that’s played,” meaning war, of course. The “red crashing game of a fight” can refer only to blood. Pope unabashedly challenges the men of her country—which she too must defend in the only way she can—to “grip and tackle the job unafraid” or otherwise, he is utterly emasculated and chooses to “sit tight.” As history records, the British prevailed over the Germans, their own relatives—it could well be argued that WWI was the most heinous family feud in history. Wilfred Owen, poignantly, was killed in action, a mere week before WW I ended, at the age of twenty-five. His bold denunciation of war as glorious manhood-defining adventure began the long, slow process—at least as recognized in literature—of the changing definitions of Western masculinity that exploded in the 1960s. Any scholarly commentary on the contribution of literature on the subject of war cannot avoid stating clearly, especially when the topic of masculinity is evoked, that Owen most certainly was homosexual, as was his idol and lover, British poet Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (Jewish father, Catholic mother—these details are profoundly significant if we wish to understand the causes and complexities of sturm und drang), who lived to the astonishing age of eighty-one, despite having been shot in the head by the Germans.

It should be noted, however, that as far back as 1854, Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade,” though honoring the courage of the British horsemen in battle during the Crimean War, is perhaps more clearly read as a lament to the monstrous waste of life amidst futile notions of heroics, with the condemnatory observation: ”Not tho' the soldier knew / Someone had blunder'd.” Not incidentally, it was during this war in Crimea in which Florence Nightingale gained fame for her exceptional devotion to nursing the wounded soldiers, though recent scholarship has shown to be, sadly to those who prefer their history romanticized, not at all true: Florence Nightingale apparently did not attend to the wounded and dying while traipsing across the night battlefield where many a man lay dying, a lamp in her hand to illuminate the
majesty of her concern. That story is apparently pure myth, according to the scholars of BBC History. Be not dismayed, however: she did, and much more importantly than the romantic myth, devise many improvements in hospital care, for which she is properly respected to this day. Though not well remembered, Hollywood did, in fact, devote to screen several films about the experiences of nurses. Despite the antiquated, melodramatic performances, *War Nurse* (1930), for example, set during WW I, is surprisingly graphic and affecting (being made just prior to the infamous Motion Picture Production Code, which lasted from 1930—though not effectively enforced until 1934—to 1968), concentrating almost exclusively on the sacrifices of women during war. Of course, the role of nurse relegates women to that of subordinate to man’s hegemonic status as heroic destroyer. Nevertheless, the role of caregiver is equally heroic, though less dramatized in cinema. Though a common trope, studies have strongly argued that when young men die in agony on the battlefield, the word they cry out most often is “mother.”

Returning to Sherman, sources report that varying accounts of this speech have been published. One other suggests further warning:

I’ve been where you are now and I know just how you feel. It’s entirely natural that there should beat in the breast of every one of you a hope and desire that someday you can use the skill you have acquired here. Suppress it! You don’t know the horrible aspects of war. I’ve been through two wars and I know. I’ve seen cities and homes in ashes. I’ve seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, war is Hell!

Irony abounds. No boy attending a military academy could not help but be enthused by such faint praise. The male—well, a certain type of male—sees such condemnation of war as a challenge. To resist the call is to admit cowardice. Prescient for its time, either refrain remains painfully applicable, in multiple ways, to the U.S. efforts in Vietnam. His (Sherman’s) could be the voice of either Ho Chi Minh—a product of a fantastically multicultural education: he spent time in the U.S., the U.K, France, and China—or a warning from Robert McNamara, U.S. Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson, 1961 to 1968:

You people of the South don’t know what you are doing. This country will be drenched in blood, and God only knows how it will end. It is all folly, madness, a
crime against civilization! You people speak so lightly of war; you don't know what you're talking about. War is a terrible thing! You mistake, too, the people of the North. They are a peaceable people but an earnest people, and they will fight, too. They are not going to let this country be destroyed without a mighty effort to save it… Besides, where are your men and appliances of war to contend against them? The North can make a steam engine, locomotive, or railway car; hardly a yard of cloth or pair of shoes can you make. You are rushing into war with one of the most powerful, ingeniously mechanical, and determined people on Earth — right at your doors. You are bound to fail. Only in your spirit and determination are you prepared for war. In all else you are totally unprepared, with a bad cause to start with [Surely, Sherman is referring to slavery]. At first you will make headway, but as your limited resources begin to fail, shut out from the markets of Europe as you will be, your cause will begin to wane. If your people will but stop and think, they must see in the end that you will surely fail.

And in another expression of bravado, one of too many in history, Sherman proclaims to the wealthy Southerners seeking to defend their hegemonic status dependent upon slavery, unlike their Northern brethren, who with the advantage of technological achievement dispensed of and thereby conveniently forgot their two hundred years’ worth of profiting from slavery, said this:

All the powers of earth cannot restore to them their slaves, any more than their dead grandfathers. Next year their lands will be taken, for in war we can take them, and rightfully, too, and in another year they may beg in vain for their lives. A people who will persevere in war beyond a certain limit ought to know the consequences. Many, many peoples with less pertinacity have been wiped out of national existence. (W.T. Sherman)

What a frightening example of hubris, that most ancient and classic example of the male tragic flaw. Sherman was right, of course, confident in his moral and technological superiority. So too was Ho Chi Minh, who spoke these prophetic and now infamous words in 1946 to the French, not the Americans, though they too would soon hear the force of his words: "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, yet even at those odds, you will lose and I will win" (“Ho Chi Minh,” Stanley Karnow of Time magazine, 1998). Uncle Ho won his war of attrition,
something just short of a Pyrrhic victory, as North and South Vietnam together suffered over
three million deaths. Today, Vietnam lives in extreme poverty while South Korea has become
one of the world’s great success stories; their northern brethren are the frightful, laughing stock
of the world.

Another element of the Vietnam War film cycle I will analyze is the issue of authenticity.
While films based on eye-witness and/or autobiographical accounts, such as Oliver Stone’s
*Platoon* (1986), based on his own experiences serving in Vietnam or *Born on the Fourth of July*
(1989), also directed by Oliver Stone, based on the service in Vietnam of Ron Kovic, carry a
higher expectation of authenticity and reliability than films created from whole cloth as
entertainment, such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), directed and co-written by Michael Cimino, it
may be necessary at the outcome to dispense with the notion that there can be an objective
presentation of an historical event as represented in a Hollywood film. Thus, this paper adopts as
a given approach to analysis that all films dealing with an historical event must, even by
necessity, participate in selective subjectivity, especially in the arena of ideology. But the
ideology of the filmmaker matters to a great degree, given the extraordinary powers of cinema to
shape the accepted ideology of the viewing public, all of whom are at the mercy of the talents
and vision of the filmmaker.

As mentioned above, I deconstruct—though not necessarily in Derridian fashion—the
accepted/inherited image of the Vietnam War and the soldiers who participated in it as they are
(re) constructed in American cinema. Among the various myths of the war created, maintained,
or developed by Hollywood, I have enumerated and will consider the following: that

1. The Vietnam War was an illegal operation conducted by a series of corrupt U.S. presidents
   and their cabinets.

2. The Vietnam War lacked a legitimate reason or purpose, at least one commensurate with the
destruction of Nazi Germany or Imperialist Japan.

3. The Vietnam War was a complete and utter failure with the exception of accomplishing a
higher kill ratio than the enemy.
4. The American soldiers of the Vietnam War were psychologically traumatized by the war itself at a rate far higher than soldiers of preceding wars, suggesting something particularly horrific about the latter conflict.

5. Americans back home were virtually unanimously united against the war and openly hostile to the U.S. government and the U.S. military.

6. Drug use was rampant among the Vietnam War’s soldiers as a result of the particularly horrific events of the conflict.

7. The U.S. soldiers were consistently and systematically betrayed by the U.S. government.

8. The U.S. soldiers were prevented from winning the war by corrupt and callous U.S. corporations seeking to maintain their successful capitalistic enterprises.

No analysis of the Vietnam film cycle is possible without intertextual dialogue with the counterculture movements of the 1960s. If the 1950s were candy-coated by mediated nostalgia, the decade known as “the sixties”—no century need actually be mentioned, the twentieth is automatically understood—more than any other decade of the past century, the period known as the sixties is the best remembered, despite clichéd anecdotes referencing drug use to the contrary, perhaps because so many millions of engaged Americans lived it and have written about it, referring, of course, to the aforementioned Baby Boom Generation, which may also be the worst remembered, as millions more Americans of the very same generation—the so-called silent majority—refrained from public events and publications, and thus reflections contradictory in ideology to the myth of the sixties as a period wholly embroiled in revolution are simply less frequently brought up. Todd Gitlin’s significant work, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, as its title clearly infers, while conscious of historians’ tendency toward mythmaking, including his own, cannot help but remember the sixties through the mind of a former Harvard student and president of the Students for a Democratic Society, the latter an organization that was the most recent iteration of activist socialism in America that began as early as The Intercollegiate Socialist Society, a student organization from 1905-1921. As with most activist organizations that wish to usurp the status quo of a capitalist society and replace it with a more egalitarian methodology, the SDS, constitutionally wary of leadership, including its own, fairly quickly descended into extremism within its own ranks. The New Left disintegrated as a unified
movement and morphed into split-off factions such as the Weather Underground. The values originally upheld devolved with bitter irony into those same behaviors so loathed in capitalism: cronyism, violence, distrust, power-mongering, and, perhaps most relevant, sexism. Gitlin’s preface to the second edition of his book captures well the myriad and conflicting constructs that have become known as “the sixties:”

All times of upheaval begin as surprises and end as clichés. Such is the fate of the great tidal swells of history—especially in a shorthand culture where insatiable media grind the flux of the world into the day’s sound bites. Wondering where we stand in history, or even whether there exists a comprehensible history in which to stand, we grapple for ready-made coordinates. And so, as time passes, oversimplifications become steadily less resistible. All the big pictures tend to turn monochromatic….no sooner do we enter a year whose final digit is nine than the great machinery of the media is flooding us with phrases to sum up the previous ten years and characterize the next. (1993)

Gitlin recognizes that dividing large periods of existence into neatly defined decades is a matter of convenience that is “ideological code, a symbolic repertory for the perplexed” and that “prefabricated images are wheeled out to enshrine myths” (xiii). Hollywood’s treatment of the sixties and the Vietnam War is duly redolent of this apparatus of remembrance. Gitlin notes that the fifties are said to be simplistically deemed an era of complacence, the sixties “glorious or disastrous,” and the eighties “nothing but self-indulgent” (xiii). Perhaps significantly, Gitlin skips the seventies altogether in his appraisal of glib historicity, as the seventies is the decade when many of the hopes and dreams of the sixties gave way to something else altogether and altogether unworthy of the lofty ideals of the sixties, as for example, the replacement of socially relevant folk and rock music with lyrically inane disco and the mind-expanding chemical known as LSD for the nervous system nitroglycerin, cocaine.

Some of today’s most successful film producers and writers have been shaped by the disconnect between the ideals of the sixties and the realities of the decade that followed by the same players. Matthew Weiner, for example, the creator of the TV series Mad Men, which begins in the early sixties and progresses to the latter, significantly more volatile years, claims that “The revolution happens, and is defeated” in 1968. He continues in somewhat of a rant,
expressing the conceit that the goals of the radicals of the sixties were noble but that the leaders of the movement basically sold out, succumbed to the capitalist charms of a steady income: “There is cultural change, but the tanks roll into Prague; the students go back to school” (The Atlantic 24). The reporter, Hanna Rosin, explains that Weiner had “witnessed [the era of the sixties] as the child of a liberal father in the 1980s, by which time the activists of the ’60s had flipped and become the greediest... motherfuckers” (24). Rosin observes that Weiner, “when he talks about individual characters...is a gentle creator, reserving judgment about their sins. But when he talks about society at large, he is a god of vengeance, and doesn’t hesitate to condemn” (25). This notion that “society” is somehow a construct of power, inevitably evil, literally never employed in an argument for good or human advancement, distinct from individual, human production, a monstrous entity upon which all of humanity’s evils can be blamed is profoundly the hallmark of the liberal mind. As that mind goes, humans don’t create society; society creates humans. “Society” is seemingly an autochthonous entity that spews forth fully formed humans, all of whom are doomed to struggle against perceived injustices that some “other” has imposed upon the innocent idealists. Weiner, like his ideological forebears, is marvelously conflicted and terrifically creative: his creation of the character Don Draper, the dapper, macho man among men of an era not often recalled with admiration, given his proclivities toward booze, tobacco (the über villain of the new modern era) and available women, by season three had been exposed as a mere construct of manhood, a façade, a veneer. Draper, it turns out, is a product of childhood abuse and thus not really an exemplar of masculinity. He is a fake, and, we are to presume, typical of all American men who carry themselves with regal strength. Weiner imagines that “real” men are not real at all. He vents his rage at the failed ideals of the radical sixties by building up and then tearing down the great American male, turning him into a fawning, defective creep. Weiner explains his motives thus:

I was 18 years old, watching the world run by a bunch of hypocrites...and at the same time, they were telling us how they had invented sex, how great it was to do all those drugs, they had no responsibilities, they really believed in stuff, they
were super-individuals. Then along comes this incredibly repressive, selfish, racist, money-grubbing...\(^3\)

Weiner’s attitude is evidence of anger towards the ancient meme regarding a youth’s allegiance to socialist ideals who has a heart but as an adult has developed a brain and thus devoted himself to mature conservative action, as in making a living (which Weiner has done quite well).\(^4\) His frustration is typical of the high-minded revolutionary who complains not a whit about being paid millions for one’s talent.

Lending to the general perception that the sixties was a decade of incessant discord is the fact that few publications and media reflections of the sixties portray California’s dominant feature as being a conservative state governed by Ronald Reagan. Today, while heroizing WW II soldiers as the “Greatest Generation,” Tom Brokaw produces a documentary on the Haight-Ashbury movement, *1968 with Tom Brokaw*, which admittedly is likely more fascinating than a documentary on Ronald Reagan but nevertheless reflective of only a tiny percentage of the population and its attitudes of the time. The mundane is rarely noted. As with Westerns, the myth of the sixties as an era of unbridled idealism and youthful exuberance far exceeds the reality.

Todd Gitlin, respected sociologist, political writer, novelist, and cultural commentator has written widely on the mass media, politics, intellectual life and the arts for both popular and scholarly publications, and whose vision, so profoundly shaped by the sixties, shows considerable development from youth to maturity as excerpted in these two disparate but related quotes from more recent works:

> My generation of the New Left—a generation that grew as the [Vietnam] war went on—relinquished any title to patriotism without much sense of loss. All that was left to the Left was to unearth righteous traditions and cultivate them in

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\(^3\) Weiner, a product of the second wave of entitled socialists, was born in 1965 in Baltimore, to a Jewish family. He attended The Park School of Baltimore and grew up in Los Angeles where he attended the Harvard School for Boys. His father was a medical researcher and chair of the neurology department at USC. His mother graduated from law school but never practiced. He enrolled in the College of Letters at Wesleyan University, studying literature, philosophy, and history and earned an MFA from the University of Southern California School of Cinema and Television (Witchel).

\(^4\) This turn of phrase by François Pierre Guillaume Guizot, France’s twenty-second Prime Minister (1847), may be the first meme ever, as it has been attributed to many others, including Winston Churchill, ever since: “Not to be a republican at twenty is proof of want of heart; to be one at thirty is proof of want of head.” Of course, the terms Democratic and Republican have been so altered over the years as to make definitive definitions problematic.
universities. The much-mocked political correctness of the next academic generations was a consolation prize. We lost—we squandered the politics—but won the textbooks (Varieties of Patriotic Experience) and...those who still cling to gauzy dreams about untainted militancy need to remember all the murders committed in the name of various radical ideologies that accomplished exactly nothing for the victims of racism. (“Paraphrasing the ’60s,” Los Angeles Times, January 27, 2007)

In his reworked dissertation on his years as president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (1981) Gitlin, also a professor in media studies and journalism, interestingly espouses a similar complaint as Weiner, although one more typical of conservatives, via the academic language of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony: the media is a tool of the corporate liberal apparatus and it acts as a liaison between elites and the masses and is largely responsible for distorting and destroying leftist social movements, including the SDS.⁵ For Weiner, it was capitalism, then, that spoiled his father’s ideological purity; for Gitlin, it was the media’s simplistic insistence on sound bites and star personalities and an inherent inability to sustain a mature dialogue on complex ideologies. Today, conservatives are well known for their insistence that the media is a wing of the socialist agenda and cannot, will not, express counter ideologies, and by expressing their complaint, may have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Somehow, both sides of the aisle find fault with the fourth estate. These elements of the mythos of the Vietnam War as dramatized in Hollywood cinema will function as catalysts for developing each chapter. As evidence, I develop a chapter each on two selected films of the Vietnam War cycle, The Green Berets (1968) and The Boys in Company C (1978), with concentrations upon Hamburger Hill (1987) and We Were Soldiers (2002) to demonstrate the development of the Vietnam War film over forty-plus years and thus demonstrate the changed attitudes towards that war and toward men in general.

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⁵ Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was a student activist movement in the United States that was one of the main representations of the New Left. The organization developed and expanded rapidly in the mid-1960s before dissolving at its last convention in 1969. The SDS became the leading organization of the anti-war movement on college campuses during the Vietnam War. As the war escalated, the membership of the SDS also increased greatly as more people were willing to scrutinize political decisions in moral terms (Isserman).
CHAPTER TWO

DISPELLING FILMIC MYTHS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

“Half the movies ever made could be called *Men with Guns.*”
John Sayles

“If a story seems moral, do not believe it... You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.”
Tim O’Brien, “How to Tell a True War Story”

Francois Truffaut once claimed that it was impossible to make an “anti-war film” because any war film, no matter what its message, was sure to be exhilarating (note the tautology: a war film is, ipso facto, pro-war, because war is exciting,” a clear and obvious fallacy). Truffaut’s words are spoken like a true man: if things blow up and there is massive damage, it must be exciting and therefore meaningful. Decades of gender studies have not yet disproven this apparent stereotype: guys love violence. John Belton, Professor of English and Film at Rutgers University, writes in his seminal film studies textbook that “the war movie is potentially the ultimate form of the cinema, creating conditions in which extreme expressions of love, hate, action, violence, and death can find representation” (*American Cinema/American Culture*, 195). Can it not be more clearly observed that the destruction of life on earth makes for the most profound observance of humanity and thus is the most compelling expression of art in cinema? Cinema is the most (at this time) precise representation and recreation for art’s sake, for entertainment’s sake, of human experience, and isn’t that something very troubling to ponder? Truffaut may have been waxing ironic, suggesting that the war film, by the nature of its genre, cannot be other than exhilarating. Why, we wonder, do fireworks awe us from childhood? The war film, especially the combat film Belton points out, is “uniquely capable of maximizing ... spectacle: marshaling thousands of troops in battle formation: blowing up bridges, battleships, ammunition dumps, airfields, towns, and cities and laying waste to not only individual armies but entire nations as well” (195). Aristotle’s dictum in *The Poetics* that spectacle is the least artistic element of tragedy was long ago forgotten by Hollywood’s filmmakers. But the morality of even an anti-war film was clear: the good guys were *us*, the bad guys were *them*.

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6 As opposed to films that may have to do with war but do not contain scenes of actual warfare, *Coming Home* (1978), for example.
As early as 1918, Erich Von Stroheim’s film, *The Heart of Humanity*, enacts a Prussian officer (code for “bad guy”), “distracted from his attempted rape of a Red Cross nurse by the screams of an infant, [who] picks the child up out of its cradle and tosses it out of a second-story window to its death” (Belton, 197). Such evil can be dealt with only by military means. In modern parlance: only a good guy with a gun can defeat a bad guy with a gun. Nevertheless, in fact surprisingly, given the heritage of the Hollywood titans and their great escapes from the tyranny of East Europe, i.e. Russia (see *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*), a great many films in Hollywood history are explicitly anti-war, including some from quite early on. For example, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), shockingly or tellingly, depending on one’s perspective, includes as extras hundreds of former German soldiers, all of whom had fought in WWI and were living in Los Angeles at the time of production and *Paths of Glory* (1957), based on the true story of a group of French soldiers in WWI who refuse to engage in a suicide mission and are subsequently executed for cowardice, are among the most respected of the genre. In the modern era, virtually all of the films of the Vietnam War cycle (roughly those made from the mid-1960s to the end of the 20th century) are anti-war, but not in the classical vein where fine young men meet tragic deaths and are always represented valiantly, the victims of mankind’s grander failings of hubris.

The modern anti-war film is just as likely to represent the Vietnam War soldier as morally suspect, or worse, as representing one or more of the explicit and persistent myths of the Vietnam War film cycle. The anti-hero of the Vietnam War film, thus, produces a more personal reaction, regardless of one’s political slant, precisely because he is not lionized. Brian De Palma’s films about war, for example, which include *Greetings* (1968), *Hi, Mom!* (1970), *Casualties of War* (1989), and *Redacted* (2007), are all explicitly anti-war, never once hinting at the possible positive outcomes of war: the freeing of political prisoners, the cessation of the slaughter of minority ethnic groups, the overthrowing of a particularly heinous dictator responsible for genocide, etc. He offers that “Once you consider the circumstances under which these things [tragic incidents of war] happen . . . my movie [*Redacted*] tries to show how decent individuals can go so wrong” (Interview, *National Public Radio* 2007). In other words, De Palma’s entries into the Vietnam War film cycle and later, the war in Iraq, suggest that the nature of war itself can cause good people to go bad. Such philosophical simplicity aside, in truth, none of his films include good characters who, as a result of the various pressures of war, therefore
engage in acts of atrocity that given other circumstances, they would not have. In all of his war films, the characters who do commit atrocities are shown to be significantly lacking in moral fortitude from the get-go, thus, certainly inadvertently on his part, dispelling one of the most odious myths of the Vietnam War as represented in film: that the nature of this particular war was such that moral collapse of its participants was, if not inevitable, then at least was more likely and frequent than in previous military conflicts in which the U.S. participated. Numerous examples of this destruction of the mythopoeic male of war exist to justify his position still today. Anthony Swofford, for example, author of Jarhead (2005), memorializes his frustrating and decidedly non-heroic experience as a soldier with having not gotten the opportunity to engage in heroic slaughter in the brief conflict in Iraq, Desert Storm. The film of the same name thus defies Truffaut’s frequently cited comment (despite the fact that no primary source exists of its utterance, an ironic fact—having something to do with truth—not lost on those familiar with war and its cinematic representations). Swofford, one of perhaps millions of men to regard military service and war—at the fact—as having been less than hoped for and exceedingly unrewarding notes that regarding the young recruits—all enlisted of course, as the military has been all-voluntary since, and perhaps even because of the Vietnam War—states in a 2003 interview with Mark Bowden, author of Black Hawk Down (1999) that “The news of their impending deployment prompts them [the soldiers of his unit] to hold a drunken war-movie marathon. They particularly like Vietnam War movies, most of which are purportedly antiwar. ‘But actually,’ Swofford explains, ‘Vietnam War films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended. . . .The magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man’” (“The Things They Carried.” New York Times. March 02, 2003). Swofford’s juxtaposition of war and pornography is fraught with implications and are later considered in depth, but his assessment demonstrates the difficulty of determining what distinguishes an anti-war film from a pro-war film because the filmmaker’s intention is clearly problematized by individual perspective. We might even presume that today’s military is likely heavy with young men who thrive on mayhem: that’s why they joined the military voluntarily. During the Vietnam War (and every war that preceded it), we can also presume with some accuracy that a significant percentage of those drafted were peaceniks. They didn’t choose to be soldiers; they were forced to be.
On its surface, the anti-war film emphasizes the pain, horror, and human costs of armed conflict, but for some theorists and commentators, its very recreation cinematically seems to produce the opposite effect: glorifying the thrill of armed conflict and the machinations that make it so dramatic, or worse, potentially shunting the observer’s ability to rationally appreciate cinematic realism when the subject is horrific. Siegfried Kracauer, for example, who, in 1960, released his text, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, argues that realism is the most important function of cinema but that the phenomena overwhelm consciousness:

Elemental catastrophes, the atrocities of war, acts of violence and terror, sexual debauchery [note the frequent, even fetishistic, conflagration of sex and violence in the masculine psychological and cinematic theories] and death are events which tend to overwhelm consciousness. In any case, they call forth excitements and agonies bound to thwart detached observation. No one witnessing such an event, let alone playing an active part in it, should therefore be expected accurately to account for what he has seen. Since these manifestations of crude nature, human or otherwise, fall into the area of physical reality, they range all the more among the cinematic subjects. Only the camera is able to represent them without distortion. (*Theory of Film*, 57)

In other words, Kracauer suggests that the viewer of cinematic acts of violence (he presumes that only men would observe such horrendous images, and more importantly, were responsible for not only filming them but causing them) would naturally—as in being in a Hobbesian state of nature—be so elementally affected as to be rendered objectively neutered. Nothing so patently silly can be taken seriously; the idea that the “camera” has a mind or psyche of its own is, if not outdated, merely sexist and perhaps autophobic. The camera is, of course, an extension of the filmmaker’s ego and cannot by extension represent “without distortion.” Nevertheless, Kracauer’s claim that “only the camera” can represent the “area of physical reality” more precisely is meant to comment on the documentarian of “real” events, not the producer of *recreated* real events, i.e., fiction films that seek to capture the concept of realism. If any cinematic term is ripe for interpretation, it is the word realism. Ironically, the technical necessities of making a war film, invariably striving for realism because of the massive seriousness of war, must engage in some of the most preposterous elements of formalism,
meaning artificiality, in order to produce the illusion of realism: explosions must be carefully
choreographed, blood is fake, smoke is fake, and actors pretend to be injured or dead, etc.

Also problematic in the telling of any film about the Vietnam War is the existence of
countless contemporary ethnographers, many of whom participate in the mythology of the war
and its combatants. In large part because of its having been omnipresent on network television in
an era when millions of Americans were provided identical reportage for over a decade (pick one
of three virtually identical networks to watch), and thus, the images of soldiers in battle were
excruciatingly frequent, films of the Vietnam War struggle to obtain images of realism, as if such
realism were in and of itself necessarily significant in the telling of a story cinematically. Indeed,
no other genre than the war film is expected to demonstrate such a high standard of expectation
of realism. Despite precise attention to uniforms, machinery, and soldier chatter, the concept of
realism in the Vietnam War film cycle has more to do with challenging the tropes associated
with the great American soldier: decency, courage, honor, righteousness, sacrifice, Godliness,
etc. John Belton’s theory of the “Vietnam Reversal” expresses the new realism. With few
exceptions, films of the Vietnam War cycle eschew the traditional educational process inherent
in virtually all WW I films, Sergeant York (1941) in particular, and the vast majority of WW II
films, where soldiers are taught the moral value of war from a nationalistic stance. If we are to
believe that America is a good country, founded on good values, we must, therefore, accept that
our government has our nation’s best interests at heart and that our military must, from time to
time, engage in terrible actions and sacrifice on a massive scale their lives on behalf of those
values. Even revisionist entries into the WW II combat film, for example, Saving Private Ryan
(1998), maintain extreme allegiance to the iconography of the heroic American G.I., despite his
having used flame throwers on surrendering German soldiers. But with the Vietnam War film,
according to Belton and many others, gone are the notions of God, duty, and country that have
been drummed into the heads of every young man in military academies since their inception.
Acutely bizarre is the frequently-employed trope, repeated many times in Saving Private Ryan,
of the skilled sharpshooter/assassin who ritualistically kisses his cruciform-adorned necklace—
why must he be Catholic?—just before he takes aim and shoots with apparently God-given
precision and kills another human being, a German sharpshooter in a bluff of some sort. The
Western audience’s reaction cannot be other than “hooray,” but this reaction is pure Pavlovian
conditioning. In the war film, choices are clear: some should die, some are heroes, some are
victims. According to Belton, in their place (notions of traditional patriotism) is the immediate and personal reality of fighting for nothing more than the man beside him, fighting merely to survive and to get the hell out of there. Clear now without any obfuscating sentiment is Hobbes’ infamous warning that life in the state of nature, i.e. war, is “nasty, brutish, and short.” Belton argues, in fact, that “The battlefield is a world in which the laws, beliefs, behavior, and morality of civilization are suspended,” and that this change is especially evident in the films of the Vietnam War cycle (196). Examples are myriad, and much of what follows is an attempt to locate the sources, causes, and effects of this tremendous cultural change by referencing several films of the Vietnam War cycle and by engaging in a close reading of two, but first I present evidence and respond to the simplicity of the “Vietnam Reversal” theory.

Eben Muse, author of the article “The Land of Nam: Romance and Persecution in Brian DePalma’s Casualties of War,” amplifies the notion of Bruce Weber, writing in his article "Cool Head, Hot Images" (New York Times Magazine, 1989) that “Casualties of War is, in fact, different from other celebrated movies about Vietnam largely because it makes presumptions about what audiences have learned from them” [emphasis mine]. Muse recognizes, then, that by 1989, the various myths that defined the Vietnam vet as antitymhopoeic—meaning designed to destroy and invert the centuries-old existing mythology associated with the great American soldier—were already so well known by the casual film-goer and observer of popular culture that no background suggesting dystopic cause was necessary as a narratological aid. The image of the fragmented, damaged, and bestial U.S. Nam vet had become always-already present in the national consciousness. Fully conscious of the fact that the four greatest films of the Vietnam War (Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter, Full Metal Jacket, and Platoon) were limited in their approaches (though Full Metal Jacket’s combat scenes of its second half take place during the Tet Offensive, only a very limited perspective of the months-long offensive is dramatized), Weber continues, “It [Casualties of War] is not a journey film [such as Apocalypse Now], or an allegory of good and evil that uses the war to track its characters’ decent into inhumanity [such as The Deer Hunter, Full Metal Jacket, and Platoon]. Nor is it a surrealistic portrait of the horrors of combat [such as Apocalypse Now]. Rather, almost from the start, it asks the viewer to accept the fundamental amorality that our soldiers embraced in order to survive” (117). Weber’s analysis oversuggests the case that soldiers must inevitably become rapists and murderers of women to survive the horrors of war, as this cannot be, especially given that this incident (based
on a true account from 1966, very early in the war, indeed) was exceedingly rare among the more than three million soldiers who served. Nevertheless, Hollywood produced at least a dozen films in 1972 alone portraying the Nam vet as a rapist (Lanning, 67, 68). Perhaps adhering to the dictum of Darryl F. Zanuck, during the production of *The Longest Day* (1962), that “There is nothing duller on the screen than being accurate but not dramatic,” DePalma, who admits he never served and did not, could not, know the realities of those who did, chose as his subject, among millions of personal stories, an aberration from twenty years prior to make his anti-war statement, perhaps for no other reason than to join the other hip filmmakers of his generation who had already received much critical acclaim for having portrayed the Vietnam War as a uniquely wicked, hallucinatory horror story of male evil, psychosis, and/or moral confusion: Coppola, Cimino, Stone, et al. (see Weber). Furthermore, the conscience of Daniel Eriksson, played with inescapable sincerity by the boy-faced Michael J. Fox, the character who witnesses the atrocity and is instrumental in breaking the masculine code of silence by testifying in court again the small platoon (all of whom were convicted), functions as the norm, the viewers’ conscience, and is unmistakably *not* morally compromised by the war at all. In the same article, Muse further notes that “since 1977, when the first postwar wave of Vietnam War films arrived, America has increasingly become dependent on Hollywood films for its understanding and knowledge of the war.” If this supposition is true, and it probably is, what an unfortunate state in which this nation’s education system finds itself. Hollywood movies simply are not responsible for teaching history with precision. Hollywood makes movies that excite the passions for passion’s sake. Muse continues: “This [dependence] is in part due to the mistrust other sources engendered of themselves during the war years. Neither politicians nor the press made any secret of their own agendas in telling the story, and part of each one's agenda was to discredit the other. The film industry, its agenda being largely to offer popular entertainment, remained aloof.” This is perhaps Muse’s most curious comment. Hollywood’s portrayal of the Vietnam War was anything but “aloof.” It was profoundly ideological from the get-go. If ever a neutral film about the Vietnam War was produced, it was most certainly not in Hollywood. Muse’s point regarding “popular entertainment,” however, is precisely right on: Hollywood’s main demographic, the youth of the time (as it has been ever since the late sixties), were surely to find cinematic thrills that portrayed the Vietnam War and its soldiers as freaked out, spontaneously violent, and inexplicably, existentially confused more so than the boring old tropes of their parents’ war.
films, hence, the immense backlash against *The Green Berets*, which can claim not a single bit of cool. When Hollywood finally did begin telling the story, it did so from the point of view of one source that had undergone a resurgence of popularity and trust: the soldier.

Indeed, there is a blatant lack of films from the Vietnam War film cycle that deal with the totality of the war, or major battles, as did so many films about WWII, many of them well into and past the years of the Vietnam War itself. *The Longest Day* (1962), for example, covered the enormous events of D-day, and starred John Wayne, Richard Burton, Robert Mitchum, Sean Connery, Henry Fonda, and scores of other iconic movies stars as well as scores of men who were actual participants in the historical event. As remembered in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, contributing historian Stephen E. Ambrose writes that

*The Longest Day* helps us visualize the Allied invasion of Normandy, which marked the beginning of the end of Nazi control on the West. A three-hour blockbuster, the film recreates on a grand scale the largest amphibious invasion in history [as if that, in and of itself, is something to be admired]. The deployment of thousands of troops and vast amounts of equipment, in addition to the technical wizardry of exploding shells, produced Academy Awards for cinematography and special effects. I can still recall the sense of pride I felt in the autumn of 1962 when I saw *The Longest Day* for the first time. *The Longest Day* is one of the great cinematic epics of the Second World War. The film’s producer and driving force, Darryl F. Zanuck, based his story on Cornelius Ryan’s enormously successful book of the same name, which had sold eight hundred thousand copies during its first year in print. Ryan had covered the Normandy invasion in 1944 for the London *Daily Telegraph* and later, over the course of a decade, he interviewed nearly one thousand survivors [if accurate, it must be noted an astonishing accomplishment]. In his book, published in 1959, Ryan ingeniously combined these personal reminiscences with a compelling account of the invasion. How to make use of those individual stories within a coherent, integrated story line was one of the major challenges faced by the filmmakers. It was a challenge they never quite met. (Carnes, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*)
By that, Ambrose means that no movie could possibly capture the totality of the events of D-Day, though the “filmmakers were tremendously successful” in recreating the “spectacle of the June 6 invasion” involving the movements of “nearly 175,000 men,” and thousands of Allied aircraft that flew “some fourteen thousand sorties” and ultimately, “more than one million Allied troops [who] surged into France” (236). Obviously, no film could. But Ambrose’s rapturous response to Zanuck’s exceptional piece of propaganda is unabashedly expounded upon, in stark contrast to the events and the films of the Vietnam War, a mere twenty years later, despite virtually identical ideological intentions—of the war itself, not the films that commented upon it:

The film’s theme is a patriotic one: the triumph of democracy over dictatorship. The Allied soldiers in *The Longest Day* are bold, confident in their leaders and their cause, and eager to seize the initiative, while the German soldiers are confused, fearful of opportunity, and deeply suspicious of the principles they serve. (236)

Ambrose observes that this “theme is often underscored visually by the immense fleets that rise up behind the invading soldiers. They are a miracle of industrial production, expressing perfectly Dwight Eisenhower’s 1942 warning: “Beware the fury of an aroused democracy” (236). Later in his commentary, Ambrose quotes Eisenhower again: “Good luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking” (240). The thought that any president since would or could speak with such eloquent bombast—echoes of Henry IV reverberate—is almost embarrassing and testament to the tremendous cultural shift that took place between WWII and the Vietnam War. Keep in mind that *The Longest Day* was made in 1962, nearly twenty years after the events dramatized, but during the buildup of the Vietnam War. Zanuck was not unaware of the passage of time and the tendency of warriors to honor one another as they approach their dotage, but his sympathetic portrayal of a number of German soldiers is worth noting. General Rommel, the “Desert Fox,” for example, was virtually lionized in the film, it having been well known by then that he was involved in the July 20, 1944 plot to kill Hitler, and that his involvement led to his death. Startlingly, Zanuck hired Rommel’s widow “to underscore…the general’s death and his subsequent martyrdom to the cause of the German resistance” (241). The generational shift in ideology was well underway,
but it would be many years later that the attitudes of the counterculture would prevail in Hollywood.

Fifteen years later, Hollywood again attempted to capture the sprawl of a major WW II event in director Richard Attenborough’s *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), again from a book by Cornelius Ryan (screenplay by William Goldman, one of Hollywood’s most prolific writers), but this time, though the soldiers of WW II are still portrayed honorably, the event dramatized illustrates the human cost of war rather than its acts of heroism. Clearly, something had changed. Why producers Joseph and Richard Levine financed the twenty-two million dollar film themselves [a classic no-no in Hollywood] and chose to tell the story of a British-led disaster remains a curiosity in the new era of the blockbuster (e.g., *Jaws, Star Wars*). *A Bridge Too Far* dramatizes a massive, failed mission to destroy numerous German-occupied bridges in the Netherlands and drew another tremendous cast of overtly masculine men, including Dirk Bogarde, James Caan, Michael Caine, Sean Connery, Edward Fox, Elliott Gould, Anthony Hopkins, Gene Hackman, Hardy Krüger, Laurence Olivier, Robert Redford and Maximilian Schell, each paid one million dollars per week. No expense was spared [yes, that’s a reference to Attenborough’s role in Steven Spielberg’s film *Jurassic Park*] and historians give the film credit for accuracy. Nevertheless, critics were not impressed with the film. Roger Ebert, perhaps the finest populist cinematic observer who straddles the two generations in question here, is facetious and strident in his 1977 review:

> This is such old stuff! And Levine and his director, Richard Attenborough, have brought absolutely nothing new to it. *A Bridge Too Far* could have been made at any time during the past 30 years and probably better, too, except that in the old days the studio heads would have vetoed it. It's a 170-minute downer about Operation Market Garden [really, who makes up these names?], an abortive attempt to land 35,000 paratroops behind the German lines, but why make a movie about total defeat and stupidity? (rogerebert.com)

Obviously, great art can be and has been made of human tragedy that includes serious foibles, as in stupidity, and results in total defeat (*Gone With the Wind, The Bridge on the River Kwai, The Iliad*, for example), but Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* also can’t help but wonder why such effort to dramatize war as failure was expended and first notes in his review, “It's a Long
War in *Bridge Too Far*” that “The movie is massive, shapeless, often unexpectedly moving [is that a bad thing?], confusing, sad, vivid and very, very long.” It should be noted that only in the U.S. is the length of a movie relevant; there seems to exist a cottage industry in complaining about the length of a film. We may accurately and sympathetically note that there are those who would argue that Tolstoy’s masterpiece, *War and Peace*, is too long. The modern era will not likely be recognized for its appreciation of patient and deep thought, but this is not a unique criticism. Each generation believes itself to have discovered the many failures of its predecessors and successors. Myriad examples of bad criticism abound. Perhaps myth, but as a result of an exceptional film, *Amadeus* (dir. Milos Forman 1984) now part of the cultural lexicon is Emperor Joseph II’s reaction to Mozart’s *The Abduction from the Seraglio* in 1782 in which the emperor suggests that Mozart’s work contained too many notes and is thus bad. The complete quote was, “Too many notes, my dear Mozart, and too beautiful for our ears.” The emperor may have been echoing a sentiment felt by many regarding Mozart’s music: that it was so complex and sublime that it sometimes overwhelmed the senses of his eighteenth-century audience. Or he may have said, “An extraordinary number of notes” or “a lot of notes” and been mistranslated from the German (Bernard and Fadiman 339).

If the images on the screen are moving, then audiences will be in thrall, regardless of its length. The precedent of audience tolerance was established long ago, probably by Irving Thalberg, who simply could not imagine a justification for Eric Von Stroheim’s virtually literal cinematic adaptation of the 1899 Frank Norris novel, *McTeague*, controversial for having exposed such obvious crude human characteristics as avarice. Von Stroheim, perhaps Hollywood’s second earliest infamous director (he worked his way up under the considerably more infamous D.W. Griffith), “considered *Greed* to be a Greek tragedy, in which environment and heredity controlled the characters’ fates and reduced them to primitive bête humaines (human beasts),” the basic premise of the naturalism/realist movement (Finler) and not incidentally related to a generational response to the horrors of war. In the 1950s, film critic André Bazin praised von Stroheim’s use of mise en scène and noted his "one simple rule for directing. Take a close look at the world, keep on doing so and in the end it will lay bare for you all its cruelty and ugliness" (Koszarski). The Hollywood moguls, as many historians have evinced, were almost embarrassingly desperate for recognition of their legitimate artistic contribution to culture, hence, an obsessive fervency for adapting the “classics,” both old and modern. Nevertheless,
movies were not for many years considered comparable to great literature. Von Stroheim, for example, infamously shot over eighty-five hours of footage, used sophisticated filming techniques such as deep-focus cinematography and montage editing, and spent many weeks shooting in Devil’s Valley, an actual desert, for the final dramatic scene of *Greed*. Years later, he declared:

> I intended to show men and women as they are all over the world, none of them perfect, with their good and bad qualities, their noble and idealistic sides and their jealous, vicious, mean and greedy sides. I was not going to compromise. I felt that after the last war, the motion picture going public had tired of the cinematographic 'chocolate éclairs' which had been stuffed down their throats and which had in a large degree figuratively ruined their stomachs with this overdose of Saccharose in pictures. Now, I felt, they were ready for a large bowl of plebian but honest corned beef and cabbage. (Koszarski)

A single tennis match, for example, can last five hours. The experience can be Sisyphean or Promethean, depending on one’s tolerance for agony and expectation of eventual reward. Thalberg claimed final cut and whittled Von Stroheim’s eight-hour marathon first cut down to two-and-a-half hours. Still, the film was a failure.

Unlike *The Longest Day*, which recalled one of the Allies' most stunning victories, *A Bridge Too Far* recalls one of their most tragic and costly defeats, when, in an attempt to conclude the war before the end of 1944, the English and Americans dropped 35,000 troops behind the enemy lines in the Netherlands to secure five bridges over the Rhine into Germany. The plan was the brainchild of British Field Marshall Bernard L. Montgomery, usually a cautious man, and it would have worked if intelligence reports had been heeded, if the weather had been perfect, if one German army had been surrounded, and if luck had been with the attackers. Instead, just about everything that could go wrong did go wrong. At the end of the operation, which was supposed to last four or five days but went to nine, the Allied casualties—killed, wounded and missing—were more than 17,000, compared to an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 in the Normandy landings (“It's a Long War in *Bridge Too Far*”).
The *Dirty Dozen* was released a decade prior to Attenborough’s culturally anachronistic homage to hubris in 1967 during a time of tremendous losses in Vietnam. Director Robert Aldrich, who had worked his way up the ladder from script supervisor to master of genre films—*Kiss Me Deadly*, considered a noir classic (1955), *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), and *The Flight of the Phoenix* (1965)—was widely criticized for glorifying a (presumed) fictional story of a U.S. Army Major assigned a dozen convicted murderers and/or rapists to train and lead them into a mass assassination mission of German officers in World War II. The cultural disconnect between old Hollywood machismo and the new counterculture kids on the block could not be more strikingly clear in such a pitch: these guys were American heroes to be cheered for their individualistic bravado; but in Vietnam, characters such as these were classified as psychopaths to be detested. The film stars a virtual litany of hyper-macho men of the previous era: Lee Marvin, Ernest Borgnine, Charles Bronson, Jim Brown (an African-American NFL superstar), George Kennedy, Telly Savalas, and John Cassavetes, who won the Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Oscars.org). The film currently holds a 95% positive rating on Rotten Tomatoes based on twenty-one reviews. None of the characters rape, weep, do drugs, or otherwise suffer from the torments of war, yet the film was a mega-hit; it was the 5th highest grossing film of 1967 and MGM's highest grossing movie of the year ("Big Rental Films of 1967"). The culture-shock could not be more evident: MGM, home of the greatest musicals and lighthearted fare for decades, had produced the most shocking and nihilistic film of the year. No one at the time believed that *The Dirty Dozen* had anything to do with reality (it did), and no one suggested that the film was a hidden reflection of the present and ongoing war in Southeast Asia (it wasn’t). Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and *The Dirty Dozen* is Hollywood entertainment par excellence. More than twenty years after WW II, Hollywood still produced propaganda of the “Greatest Generation,” a created term if ever there was one, to heroize a vast group of human beings who had little to do with one another other than having been born in roughly the same time frame, even as the sons of that generation (the equally specious term of congruence foisted on millions of disparate thinkers, the “Boomers”) were dying in Vietnam in a seemingly futile attempt to staunch the growth of communism. The reviews of the time clearly reacted to the incongruity. In response to the violence of the film, Roger Ebert, in his first year as a film reviewer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, wrote sarcastically: “I'm glad the Chicago Police Censor Board forgot about that part of the local censorship law where it says films shall not depict the
burning of the human body.” We all pick and choose from the list of right and wrong, and film
critics are certainly not immune. Indeed, it must be noted that though officially ended in 1968,
the infamous Hays Code had already begun to be utterly ignored in Hollywood as evidenced by
the sudden and clear generational shift in the tone and subject matter of the films nominated for
Academy Awards made in 1967: *Bonnie and Clyde, In the Heat of the Night*—winner of best
picture—*The Graduate, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, and the one film that was not like the
others and is to this day castigated as if it were an act of cruelty, the family-friendly and
therefore utterly uncool *Dr. Doolittle*. Ebert is, at first, seemingly put off by the trend towards the
lurid, but upon closer review, his facetiousness is clear: “If you have to censor, stick to censoring
sex, I say...but leave in the mutilation, leave in the sadism and by all means leave in the human
beings burning to death. It's not obscene as long as they burn to death with their clothes on.” In
other words, Ebert is remarking on the long-observed disconnect between Hollywood’s
acceptance of violence as entertainment but not sexuality. Ebert is clearly a man of his times and
wants Hollywood to “tell the truth about real horror, the mass slaughter of human beings in war,”
but apparently not so graphically. The salacious appetites of the counterculture, a revisioning of
the 1920s perversions of pleasure, were now more evidently juxtaposed against the reality of lost
lives and legs than in *My Forgotten Man* (1933), which laments the forgotten sacrifice of
American soldiers two dozen years earlier in WW I.

In another contemporary review, Bosley Crowther, film critic for *The New York Times*
from 1940 to 1967 (the latter being the year *The Dirty Dozen* was released and, we may
conclude, the year of the changing of the critical guard) called it "an astonishingly wanton war
film" and a "studied indulgence of sadism that is morbid and disgusting beyond words." He
further noted that

It is not simply that this violent picture of an American military venture is based
on a fictional supposition that is silly and irresponsible....But to have this bunch
of felons a totally incorrigible lot, some of them psychopathic, and to try to make
us believe that they would be committed by any American general to carry out an
exceedingly important raid that a regular commando group could do with equal
efficiency—and certainly with greater dependability—is downright
preposterous.
One can only wonder when a sophisticated cinephile (the word’s first known use, not incidentally, according to Merriam Webster, is 1968) such as Crowther began to require verisimilitude in war films (or any Hollywood film genre, for that matter). Crowther, seriously erudite, is shocked to find some of the portrayals "bizarre and bold":

Marvin's taut, pugnacious playing of the major...is tough and terrifying. John Cassavetes is wormy and noxious as a psychopath condemned to death, and Telly Savalas is swinish and maniacal as a religious fanatic and sex degenerate. Charles Bronson as an alienated murderer, Richard Jaeckel as a hard-boiled military policeman, and Jim Brown as a white-hating Negro stand out in the animalistic group.

The film critics for Variety (L.A. based) were more positive, calling The Dirty Dozen an "exciting Second World War pre-D-Day drama" based on a "good screenplay" with a "ring of authenticity to it." Perhaps unknown at the time and not likely recalled today, the characters portrayed in The Dirty Dozen are based in reality on the actions of “The Filthy Thirteen,” the name given to the Demolition Section of the Headquarters Company of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, of the United States Army, which fought in the European campaign in World War II, some of whom claimed Indian heritage—Choctaw, to be precise—and in true homage to legendary Indian war prowess, refused to bathe until they had carried out a mission, hence their sobriquet, “filthy.” Not known is how the number in transliteration from the actual to the cinematic went from thirteen to twelve, but both numbers suggest the same Medieval obsession with the last supper: this film/story is about sacrifice, and those involved were not angels, just as Christ’s disciples were not. Aficionados of this sidebar, the makers of Taxi Driver and fans of Travis Bickle, for example, know that the story of the Filthy Thirteen is the source of modern military bravado via the infamous photo of two men of the unit:

7 In a 1976 interview, Scorsese affirms that Travis Bickle was clearly Special Forces (Marines) as indicated by his haircut (“Blood and Guts Turn Me on!.”).
The Time Out Film Guide notes that over the years,

*The Dirty Dozen* has taken its place alongside that other commercial classic, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). The violence which liberal critics found so offensive has survived intact. Aldrich sets up dispensable characters with no past and no future, as Marvin reprieves a bunch of death row prisoners, forges them into a tough fighting unit, and leads them on a suicide mission into Nazi France. Apart
from the values of team spirit, cudgeled by Marvin into his dropout group, Aldrich appears to be against everything: anti-military, anti-Establishment, anti-women, anti-religion, anti-culture, anti-life. Overriding such nihilism is the super-cruidity of Aldrich's energy and his humor, sufficiently cynical to suggest that the whole thing is a game anyway, a spectacle that demands an audience.

Robert Aldrich, cousin to no other than Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, scion of the Rockefeller clan and vice president under Gerald Ford, chose to work his way up from production assistant to director in Hollywood, earning him virtual exclusion from the family fortune (Thomson, David). His films, however, are exceptional and deserve note: In 2012, John Patterson of The Guardian commented that Aldrich is "a wonderful director nearly thirty years dead now, whose body of work is in danger of slipping over the horizon." Famed Japanese film director Kiyoshi Kurosawa noted Aldrich's influence on him (Gonzalez).

A dozen years later, Hollywood still had no stomach for the present reality, perhaps not yet cognizant of or capable of narrating the myriad confusions of thousands of body bags arriving at U.S. military air bases each year. Midway, a big budget, old-fashioned macho WWII movie, was made a decade later in 1976 and boasts an entire older generation’s worth of male all-stars, each of whom had represented for decades the epitome of “real men,” meaning American men: Charlton Heston, Henry Fonda, James Coburn, and Robert Mitchum are effortlessly and unapologetically majestic, masculine icons of the military and Hollywood in the battle that turned out to be the turning point of the Pacific Theatre of World War II. The Vietnam War film cycle, however, concentrates virtually exclusively on intimate battles in little-known locations and the soldiers who fought there, but again, virtually none of them were played by major Hollywood stars, Burt Lancaster’s performance in the little-known Go Tell The Spartans, a low budget dyspeptic entry in the Vietnam-as-shit film oeuvre notwithstanding (1978). Eben Muse observes that Hollywood’s minimalist treatment of the Vietnam War elides its enormity and follows Belton’s theory that soldiers in Vietnam fought for no higher ideology than survival:

The soldier's point of view is extremely limited during a war, however. Although soldiers may have espoused or opposed the reasons for a war before entering it, once they have joined or have been drafted into the army, their primary goal is survival—at least according to their drill instructors. Soldiers are seldom
privileged with strategic information; what they know is primarily the immediate, experiential reality. The cumulative effect of this limitation on the point of view of Vietnam War films has been to eliminate the context of the war from the story of the war. The films have ignored discussion of the cause and consequences of the war; they have placed the war in a metaphysical, rather than social or political, context [emphasis mine]. It has become part of the battle between good and evil, a journey into darkness, or a loss of innocence. (“The Land of Nam: Romance and Persecution in Brian DePalma's Casualties of War”)

From this limited narratological stance in cinema on the Vietnam War comes a protracted representation of the U.S. soldier, leading to various stereotypes and myths, virtually all of them negative. As a starting point, Cynthia J. Fuchs writes in her essay on Taxi Driver that “as television images of Vietnam remind us, representation shapes meaning” (“All the Animals Come Out at Night” 48). Indeed, in the case of the archetypal Vietnam veteran, representation utterly creates meaning or at least the perception of reality. Robert DeNiro’s character, Travis Bickle, long ago entered the cinematic-cultural lexicon as “Crazy Nam Vet,” and the representation, intensely acted and intensely felt, remains imprinted on memory as if real; the representation of a psychopath in a film who is covertly identified as a Vietnam veteran is powerful enough to elide actual meaning borne of an extension of a suffering writer’s psyche and replace it culture-wide with the imaginary. Paul Schrader, the writer of Taxi Driver, made it clear that when he wrote the script in 1972, it emerged out of his personal experience and feelings of alienation at the time following a romantic breakup. Viewers of the film, released by Columbia Pictures in 1976, three years after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam began following the Paris Peace Accords of January 27, 1973, were quick to recognize the telltale signs of a Nam vet: an army jacket-wearing, pill-popping, mohawked (the source of which has now been established as being from WWII), and armed psychopath. Further research indicates that Schrader’s imagination was propelled by additional sources, none of them directly associated with the Vietnam War or its participants, of which Schrader, Scorsese, and DeNiro were not. For what it’s worth, scores of major Hollywood stars served in WW II; none served in Vietnam:

The article [“Travis Gave Punks a Hair of Aggression”] also talks about the inspiration for Travis Bickle’s character, which the screenwriter, Paul Schrader,
primarily based on two sources. The first one being Arthur Bremer, a paranoid schizophrenic who took a crippling shot at presidential candidate George Wallace [Bremer was not a Vietnam veteran]. The second source of inspiration for Travis Bickle was Schrader himself. Right before writing the script, Schrader was in a lonely and alienated position, much like the character he based upon himself was. Schrader lost his girlfriend and the apartment he was sleeping in, and he spent weeks living alone, desperate, depressed, and drunk in his car. Schrader made Bickle a Vietnam veteran because the national trauma of the war seemed to blend perfectly with Bickle’s paranoid psychosis. This article is important and relevant to *Taxi Driver* because it gives one a sense of where a unique character such as Travis Bickle can be conjured up from and where the inspiration for his personality came from (*The Toronto Star*, 2005).

Thus, the negative emotional state of a talented and perceptive writer, coupled with multiple national miseries (the Vietnam War itself, race riots, troubles in the Middle East, etc.) gives rise to a perfect storm of creative imagination that captures the near psychotic zeitgeist of the era, thereby imprinting on the minds of generations to come the image of the Vietnam War and its combatants as an hallucinogenic vision and the actions of the mentally unhinged. By making his protagonist, Travis Bickle, so utterly cool, by allowing him to rid one ugly, urban street of a common and relatively vile pimp, Schrader virtually deifies the image of the Vietnam veteran as a combination of morally righteous cowboy and self-deluded hero, therefore a psychopath and an unequivocally marred failure of American Exceptionalism. Travis Bickle is the mentally perverted stepchild of John Wayne and can never be accepted as heroic; he is, rather, according to the voices of the counterculture, an inevitable result of the perversion of the theory of American Exceptionalism, a new Frankenstein’s monster, utterly unaware of the Promethean fire of wisdom that states that America must not engage in the hubris of nation-building. It can lead only to the hatred of the creature from which that process is born.

"Dispelling Myths About Vietnam Veterans," by David Moniz, for *USA Today*, November 16, 2000, undertakes, as the title suggests, the arduous process of going over and dispelling some of the myths that are associated with the Vietnam veteran, particularly as they are fomented into the cultural imagination via cinema. For generations, the American public has
been bombarded by Hollywood and the media with the same image of the demoralized Vietnam War veteran, much like Travis Bickle is in *Taxi Driver*. The negative stereotypes surrounding the Vietnam War veteran have been ingrained into the minds of the masses and usually portray a social outcast who has been physically and/or psychologically damaged in the war. The article points out that many of the Vietnam soldiers Americans have come to know through movies such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home* and *Taxi Driver* perpetuate the suicidal, anarchist, angry, and depressed depiction of the veteran. On the contrary, the article suggests that these stereotypes are myths and that most veterans are happy, stable, and successful. Among the many other myths the article dismisses are that 100,000 Vietnam vets committed suicide and that up to 50% have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder. Moniz observed in 2000 that “as President Clinton [began] a historic visit to Vietnam…, twenty-five years after that divisive war's end, a growing number of researchers, scholars and prominent veterans are attacking the negative stereotype as pure myth. The real story about Vietnam soldiers, they say, needs to be told.”

The negative cinematic stereotypes associated with Vietnam veterans, such as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, have been so deeply embedded into the consciousness of the film-viewing public that it is difficult to imagine a filmic construction of a Vietnam War veteran in any other way. Travis Bickle is but the most infamous example of the type of character that perpetuates the myths corresponding to veterans of the war to the psyche/memory of the American people and the type of person/character this article attempts to dispel. The still-regnant myth proclaims the Nam vet as angry, suicidal, lonely, and alienated from urban society. Whether or not we can hypothesize that all of Travis’ problems are a direct result of the Vietnam War is not clear. However, his being a veteran is pertinent to the film; otherwise, his psychotic delusions of heroic manhood have no social constructionist mantel upon which to hang one’s theory. As the article asserts, most stereotypical Vietnam veterans oppose their country and its leaders—another myth—thus, Travis directs his frustrated anger at a promising presidential candidate in an apparent assassination attempt. Many of Travis’ emotions in *Taxi Driver*, such as feelings of rejection, resentment for society, and cynicism towards politicians, are reflective of the fictitious stereotypes of the veterans which haunt the national imaginary to this day. Moniz places a character such as Travis Bickle into the realm of fiction, away from society and reality, which is exactly where he belongs.
Myths of the war itself abound, and many are imbedded into national consciousness via photographs: Hugh Van Es’s 1975 photograph of the rooftop evacuation as Saigon fell, for example, became iconic. The shot, however, is not actually of the embassy as is virtually always reported. As North Vietnamese forces neared the city—despite the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 which stipulated a cease fire—the NVA entered the city of Saigon, resulting in more than 1,000 escaping Vietnamese joining the American military fleeing the country, mostly by helicopters from the US embassy roof. A few blocks away, however, others climbed a ladder on the roof of an apartment building that housed CIA officials and families, hoping to escape aboard a helicopter owned by Air America, the CIA-run airline. From his vantage point on a balcony several blocks away, Van Es recorded the scene with a 300-mm lens—the longest one he had.

![Figure #2 “22 Gia Long Street.” Photograph by Hugh Van Es. April 29, 1975.](image)

The photo earned Van Es considerable fame, but he told friends that he spent a great deal of time explaining that it was not a photo of the embassy roof, as was widely assumed. His shot of the helicopter escape from a Saigon rooftop on April 29, 1975 became a metaphor for the desperate

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8 The infamously secret Air America was made the subject of an equally infamous, as in bad, film by the same name, ironically starring Mel Gibson and Robert Downey Jr., both known for their talent, substance abuse, and subsequent fall from grace. The one not known for rape, heroin use, and ruining films is, as of this writing, still on the outs with Hollywood for the much graver sin of producing and directing without Hollywood control the most controversial independently financed film of all time, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), performed entirely in Aramaic, a stunning artistic accomplishment and which has earned over one billion dollars worldwide. *Air America*, however, cost a staggering thirty-five million dollars in 1990 and was a resounding failure. Nevertheless, Gibson’s thirty-plus years as a massively successful and popular movie star and director has been, perhaps, irreparably damaged due to his reported anti-Semitic tirade when arrested for drunk driving.

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US withdrawal and its policy failure in Vietnam (guardian.com). This and other iconic photographs ingrained into the national consciousness that serve to perpetuate the negative mythos of the Vietnam War will be examined.

As far as military conflicts go, there is, in fact, nothing unique about the war in Vietnam that would readily explain its bizarre place in history, with the exception of the widely-held belief that it was purportedly unique, an effective solipsism. The Vietnam War is to this day remembered as a horror show nonpareil, largely devoid of moral clarity and virtuous fortitude, and Hollywood is largely responsible for the distortion. Eben Muse notes that

The claim that the Vietnam War was fundamentally different from other wars America has fought fails to explain the difficulty Hollywood had describing it through the conventions of earlier war films. It was not so very different. It was not the first that Americans had fought in jungles, nor the first to be fought for vague reasons, nor even the first in which Americans had committed atrocities. America had fought World War I in what may best be described as a wasteland for a cause that may not easily be described at all, yet Hollywood had managed to glorify and justify it [Clearly, the cessation of the destruction of Europe in World War I was in America’s best interest, though President Wilson, wisely or not, refrained from committing U.S. troops to the war for several years; the value of preventing the spread of communism in a little-known Asian nation few Americans had heard of paled in comparison to the ethnic ties to Europe].

By the early seventies, the executives of Hollywood studios were beginning to accept into their ranks a younger generation, many of whom wanted not just to capture the counterculture youth market but whom also held similar non-traditional views regarding the U.S. government, military, and the changing notions of masculinity. As evidence, virtually all of the major films of the Vietnam War include scenes of U.S. military atrocities: In *Apocalypse Now*, U.S. soldiers machine gun to death an entire unarmed Vietnamese family huddled helplessly in their humble fishing junk, children included. Only a puppy survives, a Western sentimental conceit, and an American soldier, an idiot, in the Steinbeck mode, is moved to care for the puppy, not the
Vietnamese family mutilated by machine gun fire; in *Platoon*, a U.S. soldier, freaked out on drugs, terrorizes a mentally retarded Vietnamese boy by firing his machine gun at the boy’s feet, forcing him to dance on his one remaining leg—a pumped up version of the oft-seen cowboy trope; Brian DePalma’s *Casualties of War* is entirely about the gang rape and murder of a Vietnamese girl by a U.S. platoon led by a rogue sergeant. *The Deer Hunter*, however, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1978, received criticism for including a scene where captured U.S. soldiers are forced by the V.C. to participate in a game of Russian roulette, which is not historically accurate (being suspended by one’s arms behind the back for years is, as John McCain attests). Most analyses recognize that the “game” is a metaphor for war itself: random and brutal violence perpetrated by men to prove their manhood. Two of the three main characters suffer complete mental breakdowns. Only one is able to handle the trauma of war, Robert DeNiro’s character, Nick. He is the titular “deer hunter,” capable of understanding and coping with the male fascination with killing animals and other men as a mode of survival and a recognition, quite existential, of man’s pecking order in nature. Those who lose this knowledge lose their minds and/or lives. According to Dave Moniz, writing for *USA Today* in 2000,

Researchers have long known the psychological hazards of combat, and soldiers have had difficulty adjusting after every war—even popular [emphasis mine] ones. *The Best Years of Our Lives*, for example, a film from 1946, won the Academy Award for best picture for examining the emotional problems that three veterans faced upon their return from World War II, America's "good war." (‘Dispelling Vietnam Myths’)

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9 Generally regarded as a masterpiece of the war genre, *Platoon* functions as a metaphor of good vs. evil, but not in its portrayal of the U.S. soldier/government/ideology vs. the Vietnamese soldier/government/ideology. Rather, Stone presents the U.S. military and its ideological hegemony within itself as the site of struggle, thus eliding the horrors of communism entirely.

10 Among the most significant and controversial films of the Vietnam War cycle, *The Deer Hunter*, infamous for its inauthentic Russian Roulette scene, is applicable to my research in that it is the first film to portray the complete physical and psychological ruination of the American soldier as a result of the war, in particular, via the savage and cruel inscrutability of the Viet Cong.
The trauma of warfare upon the soldier is as old as the world. Even the cunning Odysseus is found weeping on the island of Calypso, grieving for his lost soldier-friends and longing for nothing more than his wife, son, and home.

Alongside the regnant image of the Vietnam veteran as emotionally ruined sits the equally prevalent myth of him as having committed unspeakable atrocities. According to Vietnam War apologists—and the Internet is rampant with their blogs—the following quote from Nixon appears hundreds of times:

Isolated atrocities committed by American soldiers produced torrents of outrage from anti-war critics and the news media while Communist atrocities were so common that they received hardly any media mention at all. The United States sought to minimize and prevent attacks on civilians while North Vietnam made attacks on civilians a centerpiece of its strategy. Americans who deliberately killed civilians received prison sentences while Communists who did so received commendations (uswings.com). From 1957 to 1973, the National Liberation Front assassinated 36,725 Vietnamese and abducted another 58,499. The death squads focused on leaders at the village level and on anyone who improved the lives of the peasants such as medical personnel, social workers, and school teachers. (Nixon Presidential Papers, nixon.archives.gov)

Given Nixon’s place in history, it is unlikely that his comments regarding U. S. soldiers in Vietnam will change minds already fixated on the powerful images of dead villagers in black pajamas. To the American mind, they must have then and still do look like children in their pajamas. Curiously, the single most horrific incident of atrocity by U.S. soldiers—Lt. Calley, in particular—is the massacre at My Lai, and this event has not yet been the centerpiece of a major film. As he included a My Lai-like scene in Platoon, Oliver Stone is the likely candidate to add this event to his Vietnam trilogy, and he has tried: Pinkville, which is entirely about the infamous My Lai Massacre, has been delayed since 2007. As the Vietnam War fades further into history, Hollywood shows utterly no interest in revisiting the events (with the exception of the holocaust, no event in history will bear repeating every single year in Hollywood). More than a dozen films about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have failed at the box office, a more likely reason for the decline in war films of any sort (heyyouguy.co.uk). As this event is pivotal in our understanding
of the war, its combatants, and its confluence of reported and remembered images, it is worth noting that PBS did include in some detail the events of My Lai in its landmark TV series *American Experience*: “Vietnam: A Television History” (1983-1988). Reporters for the series narrated the exposition well:

> On March 16, 1968, the angry and frustrated men of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, America 1 Division entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai. "This is what you've been waiting for—search and destroy—and you've got it," said their superior officers. A short time later the killing began. When news of the atrocities surfaced, it sent shockwaves through the U.S. political establishment, the military's chain of command, and an already divided American public.

As reported, the U.S. soldiers were poised for conflict:

> My Lai lay in the South Vietnamese district of Son My, a heavily mined area where the Vietcong were deeply entrenched. Numerous members of Charlie Company had been maimed or killed in the area during the preceding weeks. The agitated troops, under the command of Lt. William Calley, entered the village poised for engagement with their elusive enemy. As the "search and destroy" mission unfolded, it soon degenerated into the massacre of over three hundred apparently unarmed civilians including women, children, and the elderly [other sources place the carnage at some five hundred dead]. Calley ordered his men to enter the village firing, though there had been no report of opposing fire. According to eyewitness reports offered after the event, several old men were bayoneted, praying women and children were shot in the back of the head, and at least one girl was raped and then killed. For his part, Calley was said to have rounded up a group of the villagers, ordered them into a ditch, and mowed them down in a fury of machine gun fire.

The ironies that abound in any military’s code of conduct regarding how one may or may not go about engaging in war need not be extensively elucidated here. Several superb films, such as *The Bridge on the River Quai* (dir. David Lean, 1957), have concentrated entirely on this dilemma. Times have clearly changed: the ancient Greeks, a civilization much admired in the humanities
to this day, thought nothing of raping women and pillaging villages: that is how Greece enriched itself. “The Iliad” is rife with examples of codes of masculine and military conduct, never mind the silly sidebars of both Achilles (being dressed by his mother as a girl) and Odysseus (feigning madness) trying desperately to avoid being drafted in the first place. Both are remembered as heroes, but scrutiny finds them bizarre icons of masculinity. Regarding military codes of honor, fallen soldiers, for example, must be given proper burial rites; hence, we see the fall of the greatest Greek hero, Achilles, who in his wrath (meaning male excess, i.e. hubris) desecrated the body of the Trojan hero Hector and consequently brought about the punishment of the gods for his exuberance in warfare. But the poet is not troubled by the notion that “to the victor go the spoils,” especially when it comes to taking young women as prizes, even virgin priestesses (Athena rarely, if ever, protected girls who ran to her for protection; see the story of Medusa for sad evidence). Achilles’ mistake was in forgetting that the higher ranking King Agamemnon is expected to have first dibs on captured females. Once inside the walls of Troy, the Greek victors slaughtered virtually everyone not suitable to keeping for slave labor or sexual pleasure, meaning the youngest and the eldest were all killed, and the goods of Troy became the goods of the Greeks, which, aside from glory, was entirely the point of war. Lt. Calley, however, was charged with six counts of premeditated murder. On November 12, 1969, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh broke the story and revealed that Calley was charged with murdering 109 Vietnamese (time.com). Calley, like Oswald, was quickly portrayed in the media as a frustrated loser.

According to Jules Loh in his article, "Average Guy Calley Found Niche in Army":

Calley graduated from Miami Edison High School in Miami and then attended Palm Beach Junior College in 1963. He dropped out in 1964 after receiving unsatisfactory grades, consisting of one C, two Ds, and four Fs. Calley then worked at a variety of jobs before enlistment, including as a bellhop, dishwasher, salesman, insurance appraiser and train conductor. (Loh)

Seymour Hersh, scion of Lithuanian and Polish Jewish parents, similarly struggled early on: “His parents ran a dry-cleaning shop in the far west side neighborhood of Chicago, called Austin. After graduating from the University of Chicago with a history degree, Hersh found himself struggling to find a job. He began working at Walgreens before being accepted into the
University of Chicago Law School but was soon expelled for poor grades” (Sherman, Scott). Nevertheless, as a freelance muckraker, he won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1970 for his exposé of Calley and My Lai. Hersh, in his own way, is equally infamous, though he was never a soldier. To this day, he remains a gadfly. Regarding the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, he wrote in September 2013 during an interview with The Guardian, “that the 2011 raid that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden was ‘one big lie, not one word of it is true.’ He made the claim that the Obama administration lies systematically, and that American media outlets are reluctant to challenge the administration, saying "It's pathetic, they are more than obsequious, they are afraid to pick on this guy [Obama]" (O’Carroll).

Today, of course, soldiers are castigated, tried, and imprisoned for engaging in what once was considered heroic behavior: the taking of booty and women. What greater recipe for cognitive dissonance and consequently mental illness is there in the past several hundred years than to send young men into war without their being a commensurate reward for their courage and success? 11 The modern military mission seems to be telling young soldiers that they may engage in horrific human slaughter—within certain confines—on behalf of some greater, vague goal, e.g., freedom from the tyranny of monarchism, the preservation of the union, the salvation of Europe, resistance to the spread of communism, Islamism, etc., but that they—the soldiers—may not profit from their labors in the vulgar ways of the past. Regarding the so-called massacre at My Lai—and who owns and thus determines the use of the word massacre?—there came an almost immediate call for investigation, ostensibly by several of the soldiers themselves as well as members of the press who had caught wind of the supposed anomaly (depending on a single soldier’s perspective, My Lai was not an anomaly but a common occurrence of the war). Soldiers were frequently ordered to burn hooches, but they were not apparently ordered to slaughter the civilians; invariably, by the time U.S. soldiers located a village, the V.C. were long gone, hidden in miles of underground tunnels. This inevitability is what gave rise to such acts of sheer fury and brutality born of frustration and the realization that one was being used as fodder, the stuff of legend and movies.

11 See later my discussion of evolutionary psychology from Stephen Pinker, which argues that today’s males are, in fact, though still products of Jungian archetypes, including that of the warrior/savage, significantly less violent than in generations past, and that this change may be linked to a kind of feminizing of the male.
Word of the atrocities did not reach the American public until November 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh published a story detailing his conversations with a Vietnam veteran, Ron Ridenhour. Ridenhour learned of the events at My Lai from members of Charlie Company who had been there. Before speaking with Hersh, he had appealed to Congress, the White House, and the Pentagon to investigate the matter. The military investigation resulted in Calley's being charged with murder in September 1969—a full two months before the Hersh story hit the streets.

Furthermore, questions regarding the soldiers' conduct came under scrutiny.

As the gruesome details of My Lai reached the American public, serious questions arose concerning the conduct of American soldiers in Vietnam. A military commission investigating the massacre found widespread failures of leadership, discipline, and morale among the Army's fighting units. As the war progressed, many "career" soldiers had either been rotated out or retired. Many more had died. In their place were scores of draftees whose fitness for leadership in the field of battle was questionable at best. Military officials blamed inequities in the draft policy for the often slim talent pool from which they were forced to choose leaders. Many maintained that if the educated middle class ("the Harvards," as they were called) had joined in the fight, a man of Lt. William Calley's emotional and intellectual stature would never have been issuing orders.

This passage contains several myths of the war, to be individually examined below. Lt. Calley, for example, a scapegoat if ever there was one, was “an unemployed college dropout, [who] had managed to graduate from Officer's Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1967 [note the expression “college dropout,” as if the term conclusively infers being intellectually or morally unequipped to finish. Calley, in fact, did have rather poor grades in school. Note also the sardonic suggestion that Calley had somehow “managed” to graduate from Officer’s Candidate School”]. It cannot be underestimated how exceptional an accomplishment it is to pass OCC, but as with the mythos regarding Lee Harvey Oswald, the media then and still today engages in a kind of character assassination to delimit our understanding of atrocity and to perhaps assuage our national guilt in training boys to kill and then blaming them for being very effective at the
task; it is as if we, the average America observer, cannot accept that a mere “nobody” is capable of firing a rifle well (Jacqueline Kennedy referred to Oswald as a “silly little communist”—Oswald earned the level of marksman (the minimum level of proficiency) in the U.S. Marines, four years prior to the assassination of J.F.K.—or of believing that it is his duty to eliminate those who hide the enemy. At his trial, Calley testified that he was ordered by Captain Ernest Medina to kill everyone in the village of My Lai. Still, there was only enough photographic and recorded evidence to convict Calley, alone, of murder. He was sentenced to life in prison, but was released in 1974, following many appeals. After being issued a dishonorable discharge, Calley entered the insurance business. During his trial, Calley testified in a manner no doubt expected:

I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy. That was my job that day. That was the mission I was given. I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women and children. They were all classified as the same, and that's the classification that we dealt with over there, just as the enemy. I felt then and I still do that I acted as I was directed, and I carried out the order that I was given and I do not feel wrong in doing so.

In other words, Calley acted upon the same methodology as Sherman: “total war.” Had the U.S. prevailed in Vietnam, scholars would be compelled to ponder whether Lt. Calley’s acts would be deemed heroic and lionized in cinema, as were the accomplishments of Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier in U.S. history. Less known, except by those of the era or those interested in history, is that Audie Murphy suffered terribly from what was then termed “battle fatigue.” Nevertheless, he remains today the single greatest icon of American military heroism, and his acceptance, in fact, recruitment, into Hollywood’s elite led to his performing in over forty films, including appearing as himself in the 1955 adaptation of his 1949 book, To Hell and Back. It became the biggest hit in the history of Universal Studios at the time (Variety Weekly). Multiple examples of how men judge men at any given time are present in the infamous actions of Lt. Calley, and illustrates, as is so often the case, how time leavens opinion. Of the twenty-six officers and soldiers initially charged for their part in the My Lai Massacre or the subsequent cover-up, only Calley was convicted. Many saw My Lai as a direct result of the military’s attrition strategy with its emphasis on "body counts" and "kill ratios." In fact, many in America
were outraged by Calley's sentence. As an extraordinary example of how myth trumps reality, note that “Georgia's Governor Jimmy Carter instituted "American Fighting Man's Day" and asked Georgians to drive for a week with their lights on. Indiana's governor asked all state flags to be flown at half-staff for Calley, and Utah's and Kansas, Texas, New Jersey, and South Carolina legislatures requested clemency for Calley. Alabama's governor George Wallace visited Calley in the stockade and requested that Nixon pardon him (Frum, David. 2000. How We Got Here: The 1970s).

After the conviction, the White House received over five thousand telegrams; the ratio was one hundred to one in favor of leniency. In a telephone survey of the American public, seventy-nine percent disagreed with the verdict, eighty-one percent believed that the life sentence Calley had received was too stern, and sixty-nine percent believed Calley had been made a scapegoat (Cookman, Journal of American History). Cookman’s research suggests that the average American polled was at odds with the cinematic representations of Vietnam veterans, perhaps because virtually no producer, director, or star other than Oliver Stone had served and thus saw the war from the outside, ideologically, and unrealistically.

Between WWII and Vietnam, then, what had changed? In a word, everything. The generation that would come to be known as the “Greatest Generation,” a fairly recent sobriquet, the coinage of which is attributed mainly to news journalist Tom Brokaw’s book of the same name. This generation’s warriors are heroized primarily due to having won WWII and having defeated the competing ideologies of German Fascism and Japanese Imperialism. It must be noted, that non-Americans made extraordinary sacrifices as well. The Soviet Union, not incidentally, lost more soldiers than any of the Allied forces combined, over twenty million (Haynes, “Counting Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A Note Europe Asia Studies”). Brokaw’s book successfully cemented in the minds of the average American the simplistic idea that the U.S. soldiers who fought in WWII were the “Greatest Generation” of a nation’s three hundred year history of war and strife, an admirable but limited observation; it fails to recognize that the better known term for their children, the “Boomer Generation,” defines millions of Americans by little more than being part of a large birth cycle in a given period of time, and Brokaw’s book also fails to demonstrate that many Americans in the later thirties and early forties were staunchly against entering another war in Europe. There is, it must be admitted,
something ridiculous to the notion that humans born within a minor or major number of years of one another must, therefore, be of a certain equanimity of mind. Nevertheless, the common perception of the Boomer generation is inextricably tied to the popular perception of the times, cemented in the phrase “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” despite the fact that the vast number of Americans of that time were conservative and found the coming changes anathema. The reality of the era, curiously, is not represented in Hollywood movies, despite the fact that the President of the Screen Actors Guild during this time was none other than the icon of conservative politics and future governor of California and president of the United States, Ronald Reagan. The regnant image of the youth of the sixties is entirely attributable to the powers of expression: movies, music, and public actions, as in sit-ins. The media then, as it does today, covers what is interesting and not necessarily what is indicative of the majority of citizen opinion. Nixon would gain political clout by appealing to the “silent majority,” an effective expression to identify those Americans who are more reticent to speak aloud their thoughts and not prone to explicit behaviors that bring attention to their political perspectives (watergate.info). This is not to suggest that being silent makes one more intrinsically moral or right; the opposite could certainly be argued. I admit that it would be a stretch to connote the silence of those who disagreed with Fascism in Europe during the thirties and forties to those in America in the sixties and seventies who were restrained in expressing their approval of the U.S. efforts to slow the progress of communism in Vietnam, but there is some notional comparison there worth considering. The point made here is that Hollywood’s representation of the Vietnam War and its combatants did not reflect the views of the vast majority of Americans at the time.

The similarities between the Vietnam War and other U.S. conflicts are far more relevant to this study to determine the causes of the so-called “Vietnam Reversal” in Hollywood movies and myriad other cultural expressions and deeply-held myths of the war. Much, for example, has been made of the fact that the Vietnam War was not, technically, a war, because it was never declared such by Congress. In fact, most military conflicts throughout the history of the U.S., whether we define them as wars or not, have been undeclared. There have been surprisingly few “declared” wars in U.S. history, a mere five: the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. Not even the American Revolution was technically declared as such for the obvious reason that neither Congress nor the Constitution yet
existed. The Vietnam War was “authorized” by Congress, as have been the vast majority of U.S. military actions (fas.org).

While Disraeli or Twain, whomever we choose to honor, is credited with suggesting that statistics are the worst kind of lie, statistics, diligently and soberly collected are instrumental in quantifying human experience, clinical as that may seem, and perhaps necessary in qualifying human experience.12 What follows is a sampling of statistics (and/or facts), some of which remain among the most pervasive and common myths associated with the Vietnam War and are subsequently cemented into the national psyche via cinema and other media outlets. Some data not of the Vietnam War included are for comparison’s sake and to provide perspective. Most of the data come from the website USWings.com, a company that supplies Hollywood with accurate military uniforms and especially aviation apparel, but has been cross-referenced with the U.S. government’s online repository of military statistics, archives.gov, cnn.com, The History Channel, and the U.S. Department of Defense, and, as expected, many sources are in conflict with one another. Statistics on any event of scale and significance are virtually endless, and the idea here is not to belabor the point ad nauseam but to make it sufficiently clear: much of what is held in the popular American perception regarding the Vietnam War is just plain wrong. Also, these data are necessary to successfully demonstrate the regnant dystopic and antmythopoeic locus of most films of the Vietnam War film cycle, particularly the first wave.

- 9,087,000 military personnel served on active duty during the official Vietnam era from August 5, 1964 to May 7, 1975 with 2,709,918 Americans having served in uniform in Vietnam. 58,148 to 58,209 (reports vary) U.S. soldiers were killed in Vietnam over a period of nearly twenty years with as many as 9,000 recorded as accidents (archives.gov). By contrast, in a mere three years, June 25, 1950 to July 27, 1953, nearly 1.8 million American soldiers fought in the Korean War. 36,516 - 36,686 (reports vary) U.S. soldiers were killed in battle, along with 2,830 non-battle deaths (Rhem). The point here is not to suggest that the soldiers of Vietnam did not experience the attendant horrors of war but to demonstrate how much progress had been made between the two wars in Southeast Asia in preventing casualties. Gruesome as such statistics are to compare, casualties in Korea

12 If one were asked whether it matters if five or five hundred civilians were slaughtered at My Lai, any caring person would certainly affirm that it does, though certain philosophers might require a Hedonistic calculus to determine a reason why that is; it can only be that scale matters, either in suffering or joy.
equaled 12,000 per year, which equals 1,000 per month; in Vietnam, casualties were 5,300 per year, 441 per month, less than half the rate of loss of life a mere decade earlier. The survival rates are reflective of improved evacuation methods, the helicopter being the most significant by far, and improved medical procedures, which has been evident in every war historically but particularly in the twentieth century.

- 75,000 were severely disabled, 23,214 were 100% disabled, and 5,283 lost limbs.
- Of those killed, 61% were younger than 21 and 11,465 of those killed were younger than 20 years old.
- Of those killed, 17,539 were married.
- Average age of men killed: 23.1 years.
- 97% of Vietnam veterans were honorably discharged.
- Vietnam veterans have a lower unemployment rate than the same non-vet age groups.
- 87% of Americans hold Vietnam veterans in high esteem.
- There is no difference in drug usage between Vietnam veterans and non-Vietnam veterans of the same age group (Source: Veterans Administration Study).
- Vietnam veterans are less likely to be in prison—only one-half of one percent of Vietnam veterans has been jailed for crimes.
- 85% of Vietnam veterans made successful transitions to civilian life.

**Myth:** One of the most common beliefs is that the average age of an infantryman fighting in Vietnam was nineteen.

**Fact:** According to most sources, the average age of an infantryman serving in Vietnam was actually between twenty-two and twenty-three years of age. None of the enlisted grades have an average age of less than twenty. Nevertheless, much has been made of the relatively young age of the U.S. combatants in the Vietnam War. There is a distinctly more sorrowful reaction to the thought of a teenager dying in war than to a man but a few years older. This tells us something about how masculinity is perceived. It may be that having reached a certain age of maturity, men lose cultural empathy. This erroneous factoid, that the average age of a soldier in Vietnam was nineteen, not frequently disputed, became part of the cultural lexicon of the Vietnam War in 1985, when "19," a song by British musician Paul Hardcastle, was released and reached the top
twenty in the U.S. The song has a strong anti-war message, focusing on America's involvement in the Vietnam War and the effect it had on the soldiers who served. Maturity cannot entirely be measured by years, and youth is not necessarily commensurate with poor capacity to deal with stress, and the emotional effect of connoting this war with the mass slaughter of very young males is certainly moving. However, the presence of young men at war is typical throughout history and is perhaps best noted in the employ of boys in the 16th through the 19th centuries as fifers, drummers, and flag bearers who were immediately targeted in the first volleys when opposing forces met because of their (the boys') significant role in communicating the location of the soldiers amidst the smoke and chaos of battle. Currently, the legal age to enlist in the U.S. military is a mere seventeen years of age, with parental consent. The average age of the U.S. soldier in WWI and WWII was between twenty-five and twenty-seven; the higher average has to do with the much higher roles of enlistment. For example, a staggering sixty-five million military personnel served in WWI from July 28, 1914 until November 11, 1918, Armistice Day (Chambers, II. *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, 849); in contrast, 9,087,000 military personnel served on active duty during the official Vietnam era from August 5, 1964 to May 7, 1975, though only 2,709,918 Americans actually served in uniform in Vietnam. Vietnam veterans represent 9.7% of their generation, slightly higher than in previous conflicts, which counters the argument that a smaller slice of the population than ever carried the burden of war. Of those killed, 61% were younger than twenty-one, and 11,465 of those killed were younger than twenty years old. The average age of men killed, however, was twenty-three. Issues regarding male maturity, then, are not highly relevant to the study of the outsized reaction to the events and trauma of the Vietnam War. I insist that the profound cultural shift that occurred between the two aforementioned generations, perhaps one of true advancement in male sensitivity to all things cruel—war being the most obvious example—among those who came to be known as the counterculture generation, had much more to do with perception than reality but nevertheless created the popular, regnant historical image. One of the more popular quotes regarding fact and fiction comes, as one would expect, from the movies: “This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend” (McBride). The line is, not surprisingly, from an exceptionally prescient and pessimistic American Western film—the genre perhaps most rife with mythology—directed by John Ford, starring James Stewart and John Wayne, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), based, not incidentally, on a short story
by a woman, Dorothy Marie Johnson, in 1949, a film that recognizes the contribution of the tough American male who “won” the West with his gun, then rode off into the sunset to make way for the “new” male, educated and sensitive and who now rules by law. Though Stewart’s Eastern lawyer is likable, it is clear that Wayne’s Western cowboy is the true hero, the one whom we are to most admire. Johnson also wrote in 1950 one of the single most barbaric odes to masculine strength, fortitude, and savagery, *A Man Called Horse*, also a Western, not made into a film until 1970 (Green).

**Myth:** The common belief is that most Vietnam veterans were drafted.

**Fact:** Two thirds of the men who served in Vietnam were volunteers. In comparison, two thirds of the men who served in World War II were drafted. Approximately 70% of those killed in Vietnam were volunteers. Most men enlisted because they believed that they had a greater chance of avoiding serving in the infantry, where near 80% of casualties took place.\(^\text{13}\)

**Myth:** The media have reported that suicides among Vietnam veterans range from 50,000 to 100,000—six to eleven times the non-Vietnam veteran population and that mental illness was/is rampant among Vietnam veterans. The list of Hollywood films that portray Vietnam War veterans as emotionally damaged by the war is too long to list; this trope is, in fact, likely the single most prevalent.\(^\text{14}\) Examples abound, but one would be hard pressed to identify a single character in *Apocalypse, Now* (Coppola, 1979) as being mentally stable, perhaps the strongest cinematic example of Vietnam soldier as psychotic. The opening scene, in fact, identifies the narrator (whose opening internal, non-diagetic monologue, is credited to writer Michael Herr, author of *Dispatches*, a stream-of-consciousness recollection of his experiences while serving in Vietnam), Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) as losing his mind in a seedy Saigon hotel room, either from having served in the Special Forces for three years already in Vietnam or from having had to wait an extended period for a new mission. Why he specifically is selected to seek out and kill with “extreme prejudice” the rogue Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) is never

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\(^\text{13}\) The word infantry is derived from the Latin infantem, originally “a youth,” who served in groups composed of those soldiers who were too-inexperienced or too low in rank for membership to the cavalry.

\(^\text{14}\) Though the phrase is fortunately slowly slipping from use, “going postal” refers originally to the events of August 20, 1986, when postal worker Patrick Sherrill shot twenty co-workers, killing fourteen of them, before committing suicide. Sherrill had, if fact, been a Marine. Several other USPS employees over the next two decades also killed co-workers, two also committed suicide, and one was a woman. No other than the first had served in Vietnam.
explained but may be assumed to have something to do with his mental state: he needs to be in
the field engaged in warfare to escape being compelled to think. The suggestion that an
experienced captain would accept from military intelligence brass a mission to assassinate a
highly decorated colonel effectively and immediately establishes “the horror, the horror” of the
U.S. presence in Vietnam. Curiously, Captain Willard acts upon his mission thereafter with
detached precision until he actually meets Kurtz, who terrorizes Willard by tossing the head of
one of his crewman onto his lap while he is tied and caged. Coppola’s theme is obviously war
and madness, explicitly noting the masculine primitive archetype.

Fact: Mortality studies show that 9,000 is a better estimate: "The CDC Vietnam Experience
Study Mortality Assessment showed that during the first five years after discharge, deaths from
suicide were 1.7 times more likely among Vietnam veterans than non-Vietnam veterans. After
that initial post-service period, Vietnam veterans were no more likely to die from suicide than
non-Vietnam veterans. In fact, after the five-year post-service period, the rate of suicides is less
in the Vietnam veterans’ group.

Myth: The common belief is that a disproportionate number of blacks were killed in the Vietnam
War.

Fact: 86% of the men who died in Vietnam were Caucasians, 12.5% were black, and 1.2% were
other races (archives.gov). Sociologists Charles C. Moskos and John Sibley Butler in All That
We Can Be: Black Leadership And Racial Integration The Army Way (1997) analyzed the claim
that blacks were used like cannon fodder during Vietnam "and can report definitely that this
charge is untrue. Black fatalities amounted to twelve percent of all Americans killed in Southeast
Asia, a figure proportional to the number of blacks in the U.S. population at the time and slightly
lower than the proportion of blacks in the Army at the close of the war." Earlier sources note that
in at least one year, 1964-1965, African-American soldiers died at a higher percentage relative to
their population back home because a greater percentage served in the infantry (Goff, Brothers:
Black Soldiers in the Nam, 1982).

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15 It has elsewhere in scholarship been fully established that Kurtz is quoting Conrad's Heart of Darkness and is

16 Apocalypse Now was deemed "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant” and selected for preservation by
the National Film Registry in 2000.
Myth: The common belief is that the war was fought largely by the poor and uneducated.

Fact: Servicemen who went to Vietnam from well-to-do areas actually had a slightly elevated risk of dying because they were more likely to be pilots or infantry officers. Vietnam veterans were the best educated forces our nation had ever sent into combat. 79% had a high school education or better.

Myth: The common belief is that the domino theory was proved false.

Fact: The domino theory was accurate. The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, stayed free of communism because of the U.S. commitment to Vietnam. The Indonesians threw the Soviets out in 1966 because of America's commitment in Vietnam. Without that commitment, communism would have swept all the way to the Malacca Straits that is south of Singapore and of great strategic importance to the free world. If you ask people who live in these countries who won the war in Vietnam, they have a different opinion from the American news media. The Vietnam War was the turning point for communism in the world. Literally no country has chosen communism as its political ideology since the Vietnam War ended, though several South American countries maintain socialist/Marxist ideals.

Myth: The common belief is that the fighting in Vietnam was not as intense as in World War II.

Fact: The average infantryman in the South Pacific during World War II saw about forty days of combat in four years. The average infantryman in Vietnam saw about two hundred forty days of combat in one year thanks to the mobility of the helicopter. Although the percent that died is similar to other wars, amputations or crippling wounds were 300 percent higher than in World War II (because of improved evacuation and medical attention). 75,000 Vietnam veterans are severely disabled. MEDEVAC helicopters flew nearly 500,000 missions. Over 900,000 patients were airlifted (nearly half were American; that means, the other half were not). The average time lapse between wounding to hospitalization was less than one hour. As a result, less than one percent of all Americans wounded who survived the first twenty-four hours died. The helicopter provided unprecedented mobility. Without the helicopter, it would have taken three times as many troops to secure the eight-hundred-mile border with Cambodia and Laos (politicians
thought the Geneva Conventions of 1954 and the Geneva Accords or 1962 would secure the border. It did not).

**Myth:** Kim Phuc, the emaciated nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running naked from the napalm strike near Trang Bang on June 8, 1972, (shown countless times on American television) was burned by American bombing.

![Image of Napalm Girl](image)

**Fact:** In the history of photography, there may be no more heart-rending artifact of human cruelty captured on film as this infamous image (which won the Pulitzer Prize). The children from left to right are Phan Thanh Tam, younger brother of Kim Phuc, who lost an eye, Phan Thanh Phuc, youngest brother of Kim Phuc, Kim Phuc, and Kim’s cousins Ho Van Bon, and Ho Thi Ting. Behind them are soldiers of the Vietnam Army 25th Division. This photograph played no small part in cementing in the hearts and minds of Americans that the war in Vietnam was immoral. In fact, no American had direct involvement in this incident—not that it ultimately mattered—near Trang Bang, which had been attacked and occupied by North Vietnamese forces that burned Phan Thi Kim Phuc. The planes doing the bombing near the village were VNAF (Vietnam Air Force) and were being flown by Vietnamese pilots in support of South Vietnamese troops on the ground. The Vietnamese pilot who dropped the napalm in error is currently living in the United States. The AP photographer, Nick Ut, who took the picture, is also Vietnamese.
The incident in the photo took place on the second day of a three-day battle between the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) who occupied the village of Trang Bang and the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) who were trying to force the NVA out of the village. Recent reports in the news media that an American commander ordered the air strike that burned Kim Phuc are incorrect. There were no Americans involved in any capacity. "We (Americans) had nothing to do with controlling VNAF," according to Lieutenant General (Ret) James F. Hollingsworth, the Commanding General of TRAC at that time. Also, it has been incorrectly reported that two of Kim Phuc's brothers were killed in this incident. They were Kim's cousins, not her brothers, though there is no comfort in that correction. Indeed, there is no denying the fact that such pain inflicted upon children is reprehensible, heartbreaking, and regrettable, yet all acts of war have had this result. The camera makes the difference in how image attaches to belief. And there is always another angle to the story.

Nick Ut took this image, among others, seconds after his infamous shot of Kim Phuc running naked and horrified down a main street in Trang Bang. Television crews and South Vietnamese troops attended to her immediately after she was burned by a misdirected aerial napalm attack, something few are likely to know. But the images of the horror of war and its arresting artifacts of pain and sadness are what remain in the historical consciousness; the efforts to alleviate the pain of war are not as well recorded, either in journalism or cinema, perhaps because there may be something disingenuous about the process. According to Kim Phuc Foundation International,

After snapping the photograph, Ut took Kim Phuc and the other injured children to Barsky Hospital in Saigon, where it was determined that her burns were so severe that she probably would not survive. After a fourteen-month hospital stay and seventeen surgical procedures, however, she was able to return home. Ut continued to visit her until he was evacuated during the fall of Saigon. Audio tapes of President Richard Nixon, in conversation with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman in 1972, reveal that Nixon mused, "I'm wondering if that was fixed," after seeing the photograph.

17 Eight nurses, including two male nurses, died in Vietnam, and their names are written on the Vietnam Memorial. See Paula Bailey, “The Best and Worst of Times: American Nurses in Vietnam.”
Given the frequent use of altered photographs by the Soviet Union during these times, it may not be so remarkable that Nixon would have such a callous response, but such is the mind of men at war, even by proxy, which both the Korean and Vietnam Wars most certainly were, it must be said. After the release of this tape, Út commented,

Even though it has become one of the most memorable images of the twentieth century, President Nixon once doubted the authenticity of my photograph when he saw it in the papers on 12 June 1972...the picture for me and unquestionably
for many others could not have been more real. The photo was as authentic as the Vietnam War itself. The horror of the Vietnam War recorded by me did not have to be fixed. That terrified little girl is still alive today and has become an eloquent testimony to the authenticity of that photo. That moment thirty years ago will be one Kim Phúc and I will never forget. It has ultimately changed both our lives.

Of the thousands of photographs and film clips made during the Vietnam War, not one carried a more personal message: children are not just dying; they are being burned to death. Nick Ut shared his thoughts in full:

As soon as she saw me, she said: “I want some water, I’m too hot, too hot,” – in Vietnamese, “Nong qua, nong qua!” And she wanted something to drink. I got her some water. She drank it and I told her I would help her. I picked up Kim and took her to my car. I ran up about 10 miles to Cu Chi hospital, to try to save her life. At the hospital, there were so many Vietnamese people—soldiers were dying there. They didn’t care about the children. Then I told them: “I am a media reporter, please help her, I don’t want her to die.” And the people helped her right away.

Christopher Wain, ITN correspondent traveling with Ut, also remembers the events after the napalm struck:

There was a blast of heat which felt like someone had opened the door of an oven. Then we saw Kim and the rest of the children. None of them were making any sound at all—until they saw the adults. Then they started to scream. We were short of film and my cameraman, the late, great Alan Downes, was worried that I was asking him to waste precious film shooting horrific pictures which were too awful to use. My attitude was that we needed to show what it was like, and to their lasting credit, ITN ran the shots.

War casualty numbers numb the mind and elide the horror. Estimates of close to four million deaths occurred during the Vietnam War. But it is the singularity that affects and haunts; thus is the power of film. The outside observer simply cannot comprehend the magnitude of the event of war and neither can the filmic chronicler, but a single frame of film locates an era forever.
Nick quickly realized that without help Kim would die and so drove her and other injured family members to the hospital. Kim already thought she was doomed and while reporters and soldiers tried to treat her horrible wounds, she told her brother Tam, “I think I am going to die.” Driving an hour to the provincial Vietnamese hospital in Cu Chi, halfway up the highway to Saigon, Kim passed out from the pain. The hospital was used to war injuries, and after years of civil war knew that Kim’s chances of living were slim to none and tried to triage her, or put her aside so they could treat other wounded who had better chances of living. Only at Nick’s urging that the girl had been photographed and her picture would be shown all over the world did the hospital staff agree to operate. Nick didn’t leave to develop his film until she was put on the operating table. At first his editors refused to run it because she was naked but when Nick explained that she had no clothes because they had been burned off her body they changed their minds and sent it around the world. (“Kim Phuc and Nick Ut Meet Again”)

Kim tore her clothes off herself, as they were burning her from the Napalm. To this date, no Hollywood film has reenacted this event, despite filmic evidence of its occurrence. We may presume that the documentary, i.e. real footage, is sufficient to make the point: the Americans are to blame for the trauma. Far less publicized is film shot by British television cameraman Alan Downes for the British ITN news service and his Vietnamese counterpart, Le Phuc Dinh, who was working for the American station NBC, which shows the events just before and after the photograph was taken. In the top-left frame, a man (possibly Nick Út) stands and appears to take photographs as a passing airplane drops bombs. A group of children, Kim Phúc among them, runs away in fear, toward photographers who were already there to capture the potentially profound images of the event, their having clearly been informed of the impending drama. Within a few seconds, Kim encounters reporters dressed in military fatigues, among them, Christopher Wain, who gave her water and poured some over her burns. As she turns sideways, the severity of the burns on her arm and back can be seen (bottom-left frame). A crying woman runs in the opposite direction holding her badly burned child (bottom-right frame). Sections of the film shot were included in Hearts and Minds, the 1974 Academy Award–winning documentary about the Vietnam War, directed by Peter Davis. The infamous phrases “friendly fire” and “collateral damage” do not and cannot assuage the agony. The point being made here is
that U.S. pilots were not responsible—at least this time—for this particularly arresting and iconic image, which many suggest served as the final nail in the coffin against any justifiable reason for remaining in Vietnam. For comparison’s sake, allied bombings over France during WW II resulted in nearly 8,000 civilian casualties; what is lacking, of course, is a photograph of a burned and terrified child, fleeing towards the Americans for help, or a mother carrying her burned child to the “allies” who surely would help. Would such a photograph, had it existed, have changed the course of public opinion during WWII?

Figure #5 “Napalm Girl 3” Alan Downes/ITN, before and after Nick Ut’s iconic photograph was taken. June 8, 1972.

Myth: The United States lost the war in Vietnam.

Fact: This is certainly the most contentious of issues regarding the war in Vietnam, as it goes to the very heart of the construct of “American Exceptionalism” and its concomitant masculine visage of world dominance, as if the world were a soccer game played upon a massive field (see later, analysis of the main imagic symbol of The Boys in Company C of America’s misplaced and culturally ignorant presence, a ludicrous soccer match, a game not unknown to Americans
but not at all particularly admired past grade six). Military apologists abound, and literally all insist that the American military [emphasis mine] was not defeated in Vietnam. The American military did not, in fact, lose a battle of any consequence: “From a military standpoint, it was almost an unprecedented performance” (General Westmoreland, quoting Douglas Pike, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley). Nevertheless, mountains of reportage locate Vietnam as America’s locus of hubris and a deserving comeuppance. According to U.S. Wings.com, one of the grander claims of Vietnam apologetics is that the United States [military, to be precise] did not lose the war in Vietnam: the South Vietnamese did. The fall of Saigon happened April 30, 1975, two years after [emphasis mine] the American military left Vietnam. The last American troops departed in their entirety March 29, 1973, which the exception of Marines stationed to protect the employees of the embassy. The question becomes then, how could [the U.S. military] lose a war [they] had already stopped fighting? The combatants fought to an agreed stalemate. The peace settlement was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. It called for the release of all U.S. prisoners, withdrawal of U.S. forces, limitation of both sides' forces inside South Vietnam and a commitment to peaceful reunification. The 140,000 evacuees in April 1975 during the fall of Saigon consisted almost entirely of civilians and Vietnamese military, not American military running for their lives. There were almost twice as many casualties in Southeast Asia (primarily Cambodia—see the heart-wrenching film, The Killing Fields, directed by Roland Joffé in 1984) in the first two years after the fall of Saigon in 1975 than there were during the ten years the U.S. was involved in Vietnam. Blame for the perceived loss and the countless assassinations and torture visited upon Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians goes mainly to the American media and their undying support-by-misrepresentation of the anti-War movement in the United States. (USWings.com)

Despite such inflammatory and emotional reportage, the facts are confirmed: the U.S. military had virtually completely withdrawn as required by the Paris Peace Accords of 1973. The infamous “fall of Saigon” occurred two years later; the perception is, however, that the U.S. military was overrun and had suffered a humiliating defeat. To the soldiers who served in
country, the distinction is not mere ball field squabbling among boys; war and death are real, and it matters greatly who won. To many men, nothing matters more.

Furthermore, according to the same source,

As with much of the Vietnam War, the news media misreported and misinterpreted the 1968 Tet Offensive. It was reported as an overwhelming success for the Communist forces and a decided defeat for the U.S. forces. Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite initial victories by the Communist forces, the Tet Offensive resulted in a major defeat of those forces. [NVA] General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the designer of the Tet Offensive, is considered by some as ranking with Wellington, Grant, Lee, and MacArthur as a great commander. Still, militarily, the Tet Offensive was a total defeat of the Communist forces on all fronts. It resulted in the death of some 45,000 NVA troops and the complete, if not total destruction of the Viet Cong elements in South Vietnam [If that were true, it may be quickly wondered why the U.S. withdrew; the best possible answer is the admission that the confluence of events which led up to the conflict, the misery, the cost, the loss of life, culminated in the unthinkably tragic realization that the goal of the U.S. was never actually to conquer the country of Vietnam]. The organization of the Viet Cong units in the South never recovered [the V.C. were, by definition, the communist guerillas stationed in the south of Vietnam; they were there a dozen years before the Americans arrived, having fought the Japanese for years]. The Tet Offensive succeeded on only one front and that was the news front and the political arena. This was another example in the Vietnam War of an inaccuracy becoming the perceived truth. However inaccurately reported, the news media made the Tet Offensive famous. (uswings.com)

The frequent complaint that the “news media” prevailed in distorting the actual events of history may never be situated in the realm of honesty, given the passions involved; it is the nature of reportage that some will feel justified while others will suffer indignation. But it has been sufficiently recorded here that the trauma of the Vietnam War was the point; never did Hollywood (nor the media) latch onto or support the concept that this conflict was a grand,
noble, and moral gesture toward freedom and was enacted for the honorable goal of the democratization of a repressed county as it, the concept of freedom, had been clearly represented during WW II. Not insignificantly, the war in Korea, fought for precisely the same reasons as the war in Vietnam, received much less attention in Hollywood than the Vietnam War, despite the greater loss of American soldiers’ lives in a mere three years (1950-1953). Never was a generation of American soldiers so utterly ignored, despite their massive casualties. Hollywood made but one notable film, Pork Chop Hill (1959), concerning the events of the Korean War, later discussed at greater length. The times, indeed, had changed.

Inarguably, the single most horrific images to come from the war in Vietnam are those of Buddhist monks engaging in self-immolation. While it would be fallacious to term these events as myth—they certainly did occur—their occurrence was not specifically, though they were tangentially, in protest to the U.S. occupation and the ongoing evils of the war.

Figure #6 “Quang Duc: self-immolation.” Malcolm Browne. June 11, 1963.

These acts were specifically to protest the discriminatory practices of President Ngô Đình Diệm, who was Catholic (about 10% of all Vietnamese had converted to the religion of the French
occupiers, though many chose, as is often the case, to convert for financial and political gain) against the majority Buddhists. Diem's brother, Ngô Đình Thục, had risen to the status of Archbishop, the most senior Catholic cleric in the country. The horrific act of self-immolation by Thích Quảng Đức, June 11, 1963, captured live on motion picture and still photography, a single image shown countless times in American living rooms, was in protest to Diệm’s policy of not permitting Buddhists to display flags honoring Vesak, the birthday of Gautama Buddha. President Kennedy is said to have remarked that "No news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world as that one" (Zi). Malcolm Browne won a Pulitzer Prize for his photograph of the monk's death. There is something equally horrific in the irony here: one man burns himself to death to protest manmade cruelty; another man earns the world’s most prestigious prize for taking a picture of the act. Because the event so startled and disturbed Western observers—David Halberstam was there—few would ever deign to note how precisely staged was this piece of gruesome theater. The image is so iconic that no Western filmmaker has included the scene in a Vietnam War film.\textsuperscript{18} But few American’s would ever learn the distinction; neither does it particularly matter. Were not Diệm, the U.S.-supported leader of South Vietnam, anti-Buddhist and pro-American, the practice would not likely have gained resurgence. Though not before ever seen by ordinary Americans, self-immolation by Buddhist monks was not novel to the people of Vietnam. It had been practiced for centuries to protest the repeated foreign occupations of the country, and occasionally, though rarely, occurs still in Vietnam. As recently as May, 2014, a Vietnamese woman set herself on fire in downtown Ho Chi Minh City in front of the Reunification Palace in protest against China’s deployment of an oil rig in waters claimed by Hanoi (theguardian.com).

\textbf{Ephemera}

- Interesting Census Stats and "Been There" Wanabees:

Despite the infamy of the Vietnam War, men who did not serve often claim otherwise, and this is not a recent irony. 1,713,823 of those who served in Vietnam were still alive as of August, 1995

\textsuperscript{18} The bizarre film, \textit{Seven Psychopaths}, (2012) a black comedy crime film written and directed by Martin McDonagh, includes an imaginary flashback to the event, filmed in exquisite silence under the narration of Christopher Walken, which more than suggests that the strangeness of the Vietnam War film cycle has come full circle. Walken's character in \textit{The Deer Hunter} (1978) was driven insane by the trauma of having been captured by the VC and forced to engage in matches of Russian roulette with his own comrades. In the more recent film, he plays one of the titular “psychopaths,” and his monologue is a clear meta-homage to his earlier performance.
(census figures). During that same census count, the number of Americans falsely claiming to have served in-country was 9,492,958. This is, perhaps, the most bizarre of all Vietnam War stats: the fake “I have served” claims, which have in recent years become infamous. Actor Brian Dennehy, for example, who played the territorial sheriff in First Blood (1982), publically apologized for having claimed to have served in combat in Vietnam, apparently to enhance his persona as a real man (denverpost.com). The first and only film of the Rambo trilogy to be based on the novel of the same name, First Blood may be the first film of the Vietnam War cycle to portray the Vietnam veteran as suffering from PTSD and a victim of political/cultural/militaristic savagery. Because Rambo is played with a super-human physique and First Blood spawned the vacuous Rambo sequels, is it often forgotten that, despite its sensationalistic heroics, First Blood is a somber film and a fairly serious critique of U.S. military and governmental policy during the Vietnam War. As of the census taken during August, 2000, the surviving U.S. Vietnam veteran population estimate is 1,002,511. During this census count, the number of Americans falsely claiming to have served in-country is 13,853,027. By this count, four out of five who claim to be Vietnam veterans are not, a stunning reversal of cultural cachet. Somewhere along the way, it became admirable to have served. The sad truth is that millions of American men nearing old age have no security and desperately attempt to draw disability benefits through fraudulent means. In a way, the men who served in Vietnam are still being misrepresented.
CHAPTER THREE

IN DEFENSE OF *THE GREEN BERETS*

Perhaps the single most controversial film in the Vietnam cycle, as it represented the
generational and political divide of the times, *The Green Berets* (1968) is foundational in any
desire to discover the source of such an immense cultural shift between the so-called world wars
and the conflict of Vietnam. After over fifty years of unabashedly propagandistic, pro-American
war films from Hollywood, virtually all box-office successes, *The Green Berets* may represent
the moment when everything changed.

It’s a common refrain that Hollywood produced only one film about the Vietnam War
during the twenty-plus years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, John Wayne’s oft-lambasted ode
to American heroism, *The Green Berets*. Why this (erroneous) observation, virtually a meme
among war film aficionados, is a relevant complaint remains a mystery. In comparison,
Hollywood produced only two major films about the Civil War, an incalculably greater event in
American history than the Vietnam War, in a span of fifty years: *Birth of a Nation* (1915), D.W.
Griffith’s masterpiece, though a hit, was soon after regarded as racist—and astonishingly
actually made during WWI—one can only wonder where the cast of thousands of healthy men
came from and how they avoided the draft. President Woodrow Wilson of the Progressive Party,
who is not remembered for concerning himself with African-Americans’ or, for that matter,
women’s rights, has been infamously remembered (perhaps unfairly) for having regarded
Griffith’s film, based on the novel, *The Clansman*, written by Wilson's good friend, Thomas
Dixon, as being "…like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so
terribly true" (pbs.org); and *Gone With the Wind* (1939), today, also based on a smash hit novel
and also considered today as embarrassingly racist in its treatment of black characters. Buster
Keaton’s film, *The General* (1926), though set during the Civil War, is not specifically “about”
the Civil War. *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), based on Stephen Crane’s classic book (1893)
was directed by John Huston and starred Audie Murphy, real-life hero from World War II, but is
not often appreciated in retrospectives (Haydon). In fact, one would be hard-pressed to think of
any other great film about the Civil War until the modern era than *Glory* (1989), one of the few
Hollywood films, profoundly ironically, to portray the Union forces as on the right side. Later, I
examine the argument that claims that the severity of an historical event upon the national psyche may be connected to Hollywood’s reluctance to recreate the anguish in cinema. The holocaust is the most severe example. Hollywood did not touch this monstrosity for decades (some scholarship suggests that the executives of the Hollywood studios were discouraged by Washington for fear of exacerbating the European situation). In any case, no other major film perhaps in all of Hollywood’s history has been met with such critical derision as John Wayne’s *The Green Berets*, and it remains incumbent upon me to investigate the reversal of respect for the American heroic military male, still to this day, not better iconized than by John Wayne.

Thomas Schatz, writing the forward to *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second* (1999), by Jeremy Devine, wastes little time in defining Wayne’s 1968 effort as “jingoistic fantasy” and makes note that its release in the same year as the Tet Offensive—an event generally described as a military disaster for the U.S. but shown earlier to be not exactly true—all “but confirmed an industry bias that war-related features were box-office poison” (viii). Actually, also shown earlier, *The Dirty Dozen*, from a mere year earlier, was a smash hit; but then again, it was about WWII and starred the previous generation’s macho actors: Lee Marvin, Ernest Borgnine, Charles Bronson, John Cassavetes, et al. Later, Schatz evokes the construct that U.S. military intervention in Vietnam was best examined in cinema via ‘indirection,’ i.e., films that were not explicitly about the war but dealt with the “macho ethos, blood lust, and nationalistic fervor that paved the way to Vietnam,” as if any war film at the time were not, at least in part, about “macho ethos, blood lust, and nationalistic fervor” (viii). These characteristics of masculinity are not, in and of themselves, necessarily wicked, and may, in fact, be necessary components of the soldier to not merely survive war but to win. At least, they were not thought of so to such a great extent (there have always been meaningful antiwar voices) until applied to the Vietnam War. In his book, *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*, Clark Dougan places the Tet Offensive in its more complete historical context and finds that timing may have played a great part in reception of *The Green Berets*:

The term “Tet Offensive” usually refers to the January–February 1968 National Liberation Front (NLF) offensive. Regular and irregular forces of the People's Army of Vietnam fought against the forces of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the United States, and their allies. The purpose of the offensive was to
strike military and civilian command and control centers throughout South Vietnam and to spark a general uprising among the population that would then topple the Saigon government, thus ending the war in a single blow. The initial attacks stunned the U.S. and South Vietnamese armies and took them by surprise, but most were quickly contained and beaten back, inflicting massive casualties on Communist forces. During the Battle of Huế, intense fighting lasted for a month and the NLF executed thousands of residents in the Massacre at Huế. Around the US combat base at Khe Sanh fighting continued for two more months. Although the offensive was a military defeat for the Communists, it had a profound effect on the US government and shocked the US public, which had been led to believe by its political and military leaders that the Communists were, due to previous defeats, incapable of launching such a massive effort. (Dougan, 1983)

In other words, the acute shock of the Tet Offensive—and especially its reporting by America’s voice, Walter Cronkite, as being a disaster—must certainly have inflamed the passions of those who despised the war and thus *The Green Berets* which unabashedly extolled its merits. The symbolic nature of the military offensive, and what most Americans are most likely not aware of, is almost too profound to express. The military action of the NVA, coordinated with tens of thousands of VC (throughout the entire country), was set off during Tết Nguyên Dán, one of the most sacred holidays of Vietnam, which celebrates the "Feast of the First Morning of the First Day," or more simply, spring, which worldwide symbolizes renewed life. An equivalent analogy to the Western mind might be a major military assault on the White House, Easter morning, while children are engaged in the Easter egg hunt. The trauma of the month-long event could not have been more profound. Though eventually the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces earned the larger kill-ratio, Ho Chi Minh and his warriors had won the symbolic battle—the ability to strike at many points simultaneously, indicating sophisticated leadership—captured on film by scores of journalists for all the world to see. Tet was the event that ultimately demonstrated to the U.S. forces and to the U.S. media—which immediately expressed the events as disastrous to the American TV viewer—that the cause was lost.

Tom Dirks of Filmsite for AMC is typical of critics who determine a film of the Vietnam Cycle valid only if it depicts the events of the war as not merely anti-war—as virtually all war
films are—but conducive to the mythos of the ideals of the counterculture. For example, in the following passage, Dirks employs the language of those who refused to accept the transfer of American Exceptionalism, so prevalent in films about WWII, to the Vietnam War film cycle:

The Vietnam War experience produced only one film during the actual era of conflict and it was one of the worst films ever made about Vietnam: the propagandistic, inaccurate, pro-war *The Green Berets* (1968), a shamelessly jingoistic, heavy-handed, gung-ho action film starring John Wayne as ultra-patriotic, anti-Communist Colonel Mike Kirby—the leader of elite, hand-picked Special Forces troops fighting against the Vietcong.

Replace the locale of the film from Vietnam to Europe during WWII, and everything Dirks says here becomes virtually treasonous. As I insist and state often, the only actual difference in the filmic and cultural representations of the two wars—separated by a single generation—is the ideology: WW II was about defeating fascism (in Europe); the Vietnam War was about defeating communism (in Southeast Asia). The latter, however, was and remains the preferred ideology in many of America’s universities as well as in Hollywood and thus holds a singularly powerful hegemonic status in popular culture. Certainly, Hollywood never made a film that justified the rise of fascism in Europe; why then would it justify the rise of communism in Southeast Asia? Many have argued that the comparison is a logical fallacy, an invalid analogy. Reasonable observations, however, systematically fail to differentiate between the two dictatorial totalitarian schemes: both ideologies resulted in unprecedented slaughter and neither have anything to do with individual liberty, the single-most precious concept to the American consciousness, if not always lived up to. The clear irony, however, is that one system continues to be justified while the other is utterly demonized. There is no legitimate discourse here, and it may defy attempt. To suggest otherwise, even for the sake of discourse, is to be instantly labeled a fascist, or worse, anti-Semitic, despite massive research that demonstrates that the former Soviet Union was at least equally instrumental in the mass eradication of European (both Eastern and Western) Jews, the most obvious victims of WWII. Timothy Snyder’s article for *The New York Review of Books*.

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19 Previously noted, this is an erroneous factoid. More truthfully, it should be recorded that Hollywood produced only one big budget film on the events of the Vietnam War during the years of actual combat. There were during the war years several small, independently produced films as well as a number of significant documentaries about the conflict.
“Hitler vs. Stalin: Who Killed More?” (2011) undertakes the gruesome apologetic that Hitler’s sole purpose was to exterminate Jews; Stalin’s regime merely resulted [emphasis mine] in over five million Jews killed.

All of which is to suggest that first wave Hollywood films during and after the Vietnam War that suggested the communists were the bad guys were utterly verboten. According to Dirks, “This war film flopped [actually, the film was quite successful, and according to Wayne himself, in part because of the negative publicity], probably because it echoed Wayne's earlier Westerns and cowboys-vs.-Indians mentality, with the star apparently engaging the enemy singlehandedly, and walking off into the sunset at film's end,” as if Hollywood had never before employed such an ancient heroic trope (“Wayne’s Green Berets”). In fact, Wayne’s character is but the leader of a squadron, the typical force employed by the U.S. Special Forces, and many of the soldiers are shown killing and being killed while carrying out their mission. Dirk’s insistence that The Green Berets is “propagandistic” and “shamelessly jingoistic” (see the powerfully emotional term “jingoistic” used also in “The Vietnam Film Oscars” by Peter Biskind in Vanity Fair) and more representative of an earlier attitude in Hollywood films, namely the simplistic representations of the hundreds-year-long battles between Americans (most frequently as cowboys) and the native population (reduced to the curiously inane and long-lasting, despite being anachronistic, term “Indians”) illustrates more the accepted mythos of the counterculture sixties—the U.S. as imperialistic war machine, communist movements among native populations as something benign, etc.—than a legitimate recognition and analysis of the mission and tactics of the U.S. Army and its newly formed special operations unit known as the Green Berets. In virtually no film of the Vietnam War cycle is the mass slaughter of the Communist North Vietnamese of the helpless, often hapless, and ill-led South Vietnamese addressed as the primary narrative. Thus, the presence of U.S. soldiers as honorable defenders of the weak from the strong—the motto of the Green Berets is De Oppresso Liber (To Liberate the Oppressed)—overtly the ideology of the Green Berets, was always-already suspect.

Peter Biskind, film historian and author of several books on Hollywood, too, writing many years later, appropriates the same language, maintaining the myth: “Throughout the duration of the bloody, wasteful, and fratricidal Vietnam War—roughly, say, from the commitment of the first American military advisers, in 1961, to the war’s end, in 1975—the
Hollywood studios maintained a discreet silence, save for a few exceptions, such as John Wayne’s jingoist [emphasis mine] picture, The Green Berets, released in 1968 (It must be asked, when, exactly, did a pro-American war film become “jingoist” as opposed to being benignly patriotic?). Biskind continues: This was a deeply unpopular war [virtually all wars in which the U.S. participated were deeply unpopular: New Yorkers rioted when Abraham Lincoln initiated the draft in 1863], and conventional studio wisdom held that Americans saw enough of it [the war in Vietnam] on the six-o’clock news. But the dam finally broke in 1978 [a full decade later, when a new generation of studio executives had grabbed the keys to the kingdom], when the studios released two high-profile features, both replete with Hollywood’s best and brightest, Coming Home and The Deer Hunter (Vanity Fair, March 2008). As Biskind notes, “Even though three years had passed since the panicky evacuation of U.S. personnel and some South Vietnamese friends from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon [note that this historical error, previously noted here, though somewhat pedantic to insist be made clear, is still in employ nearly forty years after the fact], the two pictures, which seemed to come down on opposite sides of the conflict [no, both were virulently, perniciously, exuberantly anti-American in their insistence that no good whatsoever came of the war] brought the war home with a vengeance, reopening old wounds and inflaming passions long thought spent. As Bruce Gilbert, associate producer of Coming Home, puts it, ‘The war may have been over, but the war over the interpretation of the war was just beginning.’ Both movies vacuumed up Oscar nominations—The Deer Hunter nine, Coming Home eight—setting the stage for the war to be refought at, of all places, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, in Los Angeles. It was a battle that would echo the real one in its bitterness” (“The Vietnam Oscars”).

A decade is an era in Hollywood, so it is not surprising that it took so long for the concept of the Vietnam Reversal to take hold in cinema. John Wayne had been an American icon for nearly half of the twentieth century, and it took the full power of the counterculture/baby boomer generation to take him down. Roger Ebert, perhaps the most influential film critic of the new era, launched one of the first shots across the bow of American Exceptionalism in Vietnam when he wrote in 1968 that

The Green Berets simply will not do as a film about the war in Vietnam. It is offensive not only to those who oppose American policy but even to those who
support it [a brilliant argument that cannot logically be countered, given that it is a precise tautology: the film is bad because it is offensive to literally all thinkers and viewers—the film, in fact, was a smash hit with traditionally-minded Americans]. At this moment in our history, locked in the longest and one of the most controversial wars we have ever fought, what we certainly do not need is a movie depicting Vietnam in terms of cowboys and Indians.

Ebert’s commentary, written under journalistic deadline in an era that could not provide multiple viewings, pauses, and contemplation via digital media, is worthy of exhortation for no other reason than that he observed and recorded so well and to such a great extent a single film projected on a screen. My argument is not that Ebert or those of his mindset were mistaken in their evaluations of the few films of the Vietnam War but rather that he/they were ideologically opposed from the outset to the idea that the United States government and military might just have been engaging in a noble struggle, one more difficult to define than that against the uniformed Nazis and Imperial Japanese, and that therefore their analyses of any film that portrayed the United States military as honorable or at least benign in its goal was suspect in fair criticism. Ebert’s negative comparison of *The Green Berets*, oft repeated, claims of the conflict in Vietnam that the war—and therefore any film that lionizes its participants—is cruel and dishonest and unworthy of the thousands who have died there. It is not a simple war. We all know it is not simple. Perhaps we could have believed this film in 1962 or 1963, when most of us didn't much care what was happening in Vietnam. But we cannot believe it today. Not after television has brought the reality of the war to us. Not after the Fulbright hearings and the congressional debates and the primaries. Not after 23,000 Americans have been killed. Whether we are for the war or against it, we all know it is a terribly complicated struggle. There is a desperate need in this country for a film that will depict the war in honest terms. There have been two such films: Eugene Jones' heart-wrenching masterpiece "A Face of War" and the Academy Award-winning documentary "The Anderson Platoon." The Jones film has never played in Chicago. The other closed after a week.
Neither film that Ebert admires is overtly against the war; rather, he says,

both try to explain it in terms of the confused struggle there and the soldiers who
are fighting it. It is this sort of film that many Americans hunger for: a film that
will tell it like it is. We need no more propaganda. But propaganda is what we get
in *The Green Berets*, a heavy-handed, remarkably old-fashioned film. It is
supposed to be about Vietnam, but it isn't. The military adventures we see could
be from any war [the notion that the country and conflict in Vietnam is somehow
unique in the annals of warfare is among the most pernicious myths of the war
and indicative of the naiveté of the paladins of the time]. In one, the enemy
attacks a camp and the two sides shoot at each other [the methodology of the U.S.
military in both Korea and Vietnam was to secure a location and build a base
camp from which maneuvers into enemy territory originated; inevitably, the
enemy would attack. This methodology is definitely redolent of the U.S.
military’s decades-long war of attrition against the native tribes].

Ebert continues in his review to deride the tropes of virtually every Hollywood war film ever
made (including the highly respected *Saving Private Ryan*) as in, for example, the multicultural
cast. But to what purpose? Platoons are diverse and never before more so than in the Vietnam
War. The United States is a huge country, and it is inevitable that screenwriters attempt to
capture in war films the vastness of the demographics. In fact, they are virtually required to.
Were Hollywood not to attempt to cast multiple nationalities as Americans in war films
especially, then the resultant criticism would be that Hollywood refuses to recognize the
contribution of non-Anglos in this nation’s wars. What Ebert refuses to dignify or is incapable of
noting is the reversal: why is every war film trope—accepted and heroized for nearly a century
of filmmaking—when applied to the Vietnam War film cycle, suddenly unworthy of our
admiration? Ebert offers a rhetorical query: “What does this [the standard multicultural
characters of hundreds of Hollywood war films] have to do with Vietnam?” What, we must ask,
has changed that so upsets Ebert’s mind? How is the incursion of the Green Berets into Vietnam
to capture a high-ranking officer not something to do with Vietnam? For Ebert, the war is not
about any militaristic goal; it is purely about enforcing U.S. hegemony in the world, apparently
with no particular purpose. The drafted population—which he evaded—had not in any
significant way changed since World War II. Ebert continues to wonder: “What about the reality there? What about the campaign to pacify the countryside? To win the psychological war? To devise techniques to fight a guerrilla war? [The Green Berets were devised *precisely* to fight guerrilla war, and they did, quite successfully.] To cope with the tragic dilemma of civilians in a ravaged land? To establish democracy where it has not been known before?” Ebert’s passion overwhelms his objectivity. Is it so horrible to impose democracy upon a land that has never known of it? The question is absurd, as Vietnam had been colonized by the French for over one hundred years. Democracy? Clearly not, but the concept of such was certainly known. In other words, *The Green Berets* is a bad film because it does not reflect the ideological positions of the counterculture, to which Ebert clearly had aligned himself. One can only wonder to what higher ideal Ebert imagined war existed previously. Was there an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Japanese or the Germans, neither of whom knew true democracy either? Had Hollywood ever addressed the true horror of the Holocaust or the ravaged land of the French, who died more at the hands of the arriving Americans than at those of the occupying Germans? What could Ebert possible mean by the phrase “psychological war?” Presumably, he is referring to PSYWAR, i.e., psychological warfare, a well-known element of modern warfare, especially as dramatized in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), itself very much part of Hollywood myth, as a result of the assassination of J.F.K. barely a year later. As explained by Jacques Ellul, French philosopher, law professor, sociologist, lay theologian, and Christian anarchist, in his 1973 treatise, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*,

psychological warfare *[is] a common peace policy practice between nations as a form of indirect aggression in place of military aggression. This type of propaganda drains the public opinion of an opposing regime by stripping away its power on public opinion. This form of aggression is hard to defend against because no international court of justice is capable of protecting against psychological aggression since it cannot be legally adjudicated. The only defense is using the same means of psychological warfare. It is the burden of every government to defend its state against propaganda aggression. Here the propagandists is [sic] dealing with a foreign adversary whose morale he seeks to destroy by psychological means so that the opponent begins to doubt the validity of his beliefs and actions.
The term propaganda has long been problematic if not purposely problematized, but it’s etymological origin is plain and simple: Catholic Latin for “propagating the faith.” The word has not changed at all in four hundred years. The Latin word is, precisely, propaganda. Nevertheless, the word propaganda, along with such words as “art” or “obscenity,” may be the most deliriously malleable word extant. It means what the user wants it to mean.

Ebert’s analysis of *The Green Berets* continues: “As I have suggested, the film is embarrassing to hawks as well as doves.” In one remarkable speech, John Wayne tells the journalist George Beckworth, played by David Janssen: "Out here, due process is a bullet," a bold fact made real in the summary execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém, a Việt Cộng soldier, by Brigadier General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan. Ebert’s condemnation is relentless: Is that our policy? What is our policy? The film doesn't make it clear.” Actually, it most certainly and unapologetically does make it clear many times over, hence, the backlash: to liberate the besieged South Vietnamese, nominally pro-democracy, from the onslaught of North Vietnamese/Chinese Communists, by any means necessary. Ebert believes that “Judging by *The Green Berets*, we seem to be fighting a war for no particular purpose against a semi-anonymous enemy.” In fact, the film very early on presents its case all-too-bluntly in a public press conference. Journalist George Beckworth, initially skeptical, questions the motives of the U.S. military:

George Beckworth

How do you know we should be fighting for this present government of South Vietnam? They have no constitution. They haven't had any free elections. And six months ago, a committee was appointed to form a constitution... and still no constitution.

Sergeant Muldoon

The school I went to, Mr. Beckworth, taught us That the thirteen colonies, with proper and educated leadership, all with the same goal in mind, AFTER the Revolutionary War, took from 1776 to 1787, eleven years of peaceful effort, before they came up with a paper that all thirteen colonies would sign... our present Constitution.
George Beckworth

That's very good, Sergeant. But there are still a lot of people who believe that this is simply a war between the Vietnamese people! It's their war, let's let them handle it.

Sergeant Muldoon

Let them handle it, Mr. Beckworth?

[Points to a collection of weapons]

Captured weaponry.

[as Muldoon takes the weapons from the board, he names them, then drops them on the table in front of Beckworth]

From Red China: Chicom K-50 sub-machine gun...
Chinese communist! SKS Soviet-made semi-automatic carbine... Russian communist! Ammunition, Czechoslovakian-made... Czech communist! No sir, Mr. Beckworth! It doesn't take a lead weight to fall on me or a hit from one of those weapons to recognize that what's involved here is communist domination of the world!

Extremely rare is the Hollywood war film that delegates equal time to both sides of a conflict, though this inclusion is not, in and of itself, requisite for a fine film. A few are bonafide masterpieces: *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *The Grand Illusion* (1937), *The Bridge on the River Quai* (1957) and perhaps *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983). Though stilted and trite, *The Green Beret’s* ideology is unambiguous, as was the purpose for the incursion into Vietnam: to stop the spread of communism. In fact, Hollywood’s anti-Vietnam War films are guilty of Ebert’s complaint in never actually addressing the obvious—the horrors of communism—but rather concentrating exclusively on the horrors of war itself.

Nevertheless, it cannot be overestimated how obscure the purpose of the war in Vietnam was reported at the time—something to do with the “Domino Theory” and the purported but never demonstrated evils of communism—and how ineffectual were the efforts of the State Department to convince the average American of the righteousness of the war. Year after year, American boys came home in body bags, and those images were frequent on the evening news. There seemed to be no positive to cling to. Ebert recognizes that in *The Green Berets*: “There is no word about democracy or freedom, nationalism or self-determination. It appears that the war
has been caused entirely by the enemy and that the enemy commits atrocities because he enjoys them. There seems to be no other issue.” Indeed, no justification for the war is warranted, as there was never justification for entering the wars in Europe—twice—in the previous half century, at least not until after the fact: America was not attacked during WWI, and the attack on Pearl Harbor is suspect still to this day. Millions had died in Europe under the progress of fascism, whether German, Italian, or Spanish, but the U.S. stayed out, and for many good reasons, not the least of which was a mere generation’s memory of WWI. The filmmakers of The Green Berets presumed that the cause was self-evident: to protect the innocent from the wicked. But the ideologies had changed. No review of Hollywood propaganda films of WWII questioned the motives of the Nazis or the Imperialist Japanese; they were evil, end of discussion. The voices of the counterculture regarding Vietnam, begged to differ. Ebert continues:

This is not only dishonest, but unfair. If I were a soldier in Vietnam, I would not want to be represented by The Green Berets. I would not want my fellow citizens to think I was as stupid and simple-minded as the Americans in this film. I would prefer a more realistic film, in which I was seen not as a hero but as an individual human being trying to act ethically in a difficult position.

Ebert’s review, virtually a tirade, certainly captures the passion of the counterculture’s mindset: not only could Ebert not envision “an individual human being trying to act ethically in a difficult position” in Vietnam as actually heroic, but he could only see the Vietnam War as wrong in utterly every respect, and any film that attempted to render it noble, even via the beloved tropes of Hollywood war films for over half a century, could not be tolerated, justified, or be properly critiqued. Ebert, of course, never served nor ever knew the reality of actual war, not that that renders his opinion moot. He empathized, but knew not the real; he responded to the filmic recreation. But no major film portrayed the Vietnam soldier as heroic, so Ebert could not, as a Chicago neophyte, envision him—a real soldier—as such. Ebert admits that such a film has been made: Jones' A Face of War. I saw it in the company of several Marines recently returned from Vietnam. They found it a fair and true film, neither for nor against the war but about it. It is a soldier's film, starring not John Wayne and his fellow stereotyped heroes but actual infantrymen in the field, most of them young, sincere, brave, weary and saddened by the things they see.
and some of the things they must do. *A Face of War* is available for exhibition in Chicago. It should be shown, not in a little art theater somewhere, but in one of the big Loop movie palaces. At this time, confronted by this war we all need to understand, *A Face of War* might help neutralize the virus of *The Green Berets*. For what we desperately need are not heroics and bugle calls, and clichés and atrocity stories, but honesty and compassion.

What we see here is the change, an affected remorse for the woe-begotten soldier, as if he had never a thought of his own or a belief in the righteousness of a cause, foreign as it may be to defenders of the counterculture mentality. *A Face of War* was shot over a period of nearly one hundred days by Eugene Jones, a documentary filmmaker embedded with a Marines platoon, well in keeping with the advent of this new “Television War.” It is pure cinema vérité, meaning no narration or plot. The soldiers merely move through the countryside until they draw fire. Hollywood productions, of course, require structure. Few audiences would pay to witness two hours of random combat. Ebert does not identify which clichés Wayne employs and why they are thus dishonest and fail to elicit compassion. Jones’ film is relentlessly real, but the methodology results in extreme distanciation. The viewer has no connection to the soldiers because none are introduced or made real; they are virtually automatons.

Renata Adler’s review for *The New York Times*, published a day after the film’s release, June 20, 1968, is perhaps, the most infamous of the many negative reviews. She utterly spews counterculture bile:

*The Green Berets* is a film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail that it passes through being fun, through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers or for Vietnam (the film could not be more false or do a greater disservice to either of them) but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus in this country. Simplicities of the right, simplicities of the left, but this one is beyond the possible. It is vile and insane. On top of that, it is dull…The film, directed by John Wayne and nominally based on a novel by Robin Moore, has no hero. It is vaguely about some Green Berets, led by John Wayne, trying to persuade
Wayne's idea of a liberal journalist (David Janssen) that this war is a fine thing for Vietnam and for America.

The hero, is, of course, the Green Beret soldier who rightly or wrongly gave up his life for the cause. Adler could not know or feel the reality of war; she could only condemn it, but she does not say why. Adler’s parents fled Nazi Germany in 1933, and her political stance in favor of Marxism as a student of Levi-Strauss at the Sorbonne is blatant and aggressive. Adler, whose philosophy she published as being “radical centrism,” was chief film critic of *The New York Times* for exactly one year, 1968-1969, and she served as staff writer-reporter for *The New Yorker* for four decades, during which time, she engaged in several legal actions, earning her the sobriquet of “most litigious critic” (*Spy* magazine). Bob Woodward of Watergate and “Deep Throat” fame said in a 1989 *Playboy* magazine interview that Adler had "a kind of infantile ignorance about the way reporters work, because she's not a practicing journalist" (Lubow “Renata Adler Is Making Enemies Again”). Her review says virtually nothing about the actual film; it is merely a two-thousand word ad-hominem jeremiad, demonstrating nothing less than a pure detestation of the U.S. policy to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Adler’s critique rails against the most basic tenants of military action and the war/combat film:

The movie has human props taken from every war film ever made: a parachute jump [and why not? That is the typical method of immediate inland intrusion of military forces]; an idea of Vietcong soldiers, in luxury, uniform, champagne and caviar, apparently based on the German high command.

Wayne includes scenes based on numerous accounts of the pampered and notorious lifestyles of the high command of both sides, but more interesting is the reference by Adler to any semblance of Nazi behavior, as if the Germans were the only men in history to adorn themselves in the regalia and paraphernalia of martial accomplishment. Later, she admits being annoyed by “a little Asian orphan named Hamchuck, pronounced Hamchuck but more like Upchuck than anything.” Viewers of a similarly sentimentalized Southeast Asian character, Short Round, in Steven Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), were equally annoyed by the obsequious inauthenticity (both characters, despite having experienced hideous pain and loss, are overtly and inexplicably spunky and thus irritating). Nevertheless, Hamchuck was no sidekick inserted into *The Green Berets* for comedic relief: he was meant to represent the reality of
thousands of actual war orphans. But America cinema had progressed beyond the quaint sentimentality of “Oliver,” which won best picture in 1969, a year of curious backlash, given the competition: Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*; Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers*; and Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*. By war’s end, many thousands like Hamchunk (a non-native name of bizarre, even ludicrous etymology) were adopted by American families; many thousands were not. Those who were left behind in Vietnam of mixed race, called Amerasians, “a clunky State Department term for mixed-race children of the war,” became outcasts in their own country for obvious reasons: their mothers bet on the wrong side (globalpost.com). To this day, Amerasians in Vietnam are desperate to escape their unfortunate infamy. According to State Department data provided to GlobalPost, the number of approved Amerasian visas has dwindled to an average of two hundred forty per year in the last decade. Last year, the figure slipped to a new low: twenty-three admissions.

Not incidentally, but too sentimentally scripted and filmed for the hardened times, an American officer, played by Jim Hutton, whose character is severely delimited by making him a jokester and clever thief of hard-to-get supplies—a staple in many WWII films but out-of-sorts in the postmodern world of Vietnam—takes “the little Asian orphan” under his wing, an obvious salute to the American soldiers’ instinct to protect the innocent from the wicked. Predictably, such a character is sacrificed to drive the point home: American soldiers are dying to protect Asian children from tyranny. Peterson—whom Hamchung pronounces Peter-san, an Asian suffix and epithet of respect—dies in the raid to capture the NVA general but in a particularly gruesome way: while on patrol with the squadron, he is rather suddenly and unceremoniously trapped in a snare by the legs, snatched upside down, and swung with impressive precision into a bamboo frame of stakes and thus impaled. In other words, Peterson is so dramatically and so suddenly dispatched that American audiences could not help but reflexively laugh at the visual absurdity, a typical and well-documented reaction to horrific events. Those who fought in the Pacific theatre and knew well the guerilla tactics of the Asian soldiers knew otherwise, and though filmically, the scene appears ludicrous, the tactic is legitimate. Vietnam had been occupied by the Japanese during the WWII years, and it may be legitimately concluded that such war tactics were learned and adopted. The fact that the filmmakers failed in effectively presenting such an horrific death is, in itself, rather tragic, as the camera merely made the gruesome appear slapstick.
Adler’s jeremiad reveals the extraordinary passions regarding the war at the time but more precisely those of the counterculture who deemed the war infamy. The thought that the U.S. had a legitimate and moral justification to resist the spread of communism and to protect those caught in the ideological crosshairs is not even a flicker in the reviewer’s mind:

What is sick, what is an outrage and a travesty is that while it [The Green Berets] is meant to be an argument against war opposition—while it keeps reiterating its own line at every step, much as soap operas keep recapitulating their plots—it seems so totally impervious to any of the questions that it raises. It is so full of its own caricature of patriotism that it cannot even find the right things to falsify.

It may simply be that the reviewer required a more sophisticated, nuanced depiction of the war than Wayne was able to provide, and therein lies the generational divide that defines the era. For Adler, Wayne’s depiction of patriotism—clear and unbefuddled—is a “caricature of patriotism.” What would constitute an acceptable cinematic mode of patriotism is not defined, nor could it be, given the resistance to the notion that perhaps communism is, in fact, the greater ideological evil and the primary cause of the suffering of the Vietnamese and thus the impetus for America’s military involvement. Adler concludes her review with furious eloquence but abstruse reasoning:

No acting, no direction, no writing, no authenticity, of course. But it is worse. It is completely incommunicado, out of touch. It trips something that would outrage any human sensibility, like mines, at every step and staggers on….If the left-wing extremist's nightmare of what we already are has become the right-wing extremist's ideal of what we ought to be we are in steeper trouble than anyone could have imagined.

Adler’s complaint clearly has more to do with her ideological aversion to the war than to the film’s formalistic weaknesses. The fact that the film attempts to justify the presence of American Special Forces in Vietnam leaves her livid, and her avoidance in expressing just why is both telling and provocative.

Peter Rollins, in his 1984 essay, “The Vietnam War: Perceptions through Literature, Film, and Television,” states that the Green Beret’s “pastiche of clichés from Westerns and WWII films repelled most reviewers in 1968” and that “Wayne’s smugness bothered journalists,
especially in the context of the Tet offensive and campus unrest” (425). What had changed that for decades of Hollywood production tropes had been the epitome of American masculine exceptionalism had now become derided as smugness? “Every generation blames the one before,” laments songwriter Mike Rutherford of the English pop/rock band, Mike and the Mechanics (1988), as the narrator of the song “In the Living Years” recalls with sorrow having not been present the day his father died. He now sees the error of his youthful pride looking back at him in his newborn boy’s eyes. But that portion of the Boomer generation called the counterculture utterly denounced its ancestors and produced a cultural upheaval never before or since witnessed in the U.S. John Wayne is the bad guy? The overwhelmingly negative reaction from those in the mainstream media of the time reflects the clear and significant change in attitudes regarding accepting America’s moral rightness in military actions. John Wayne had been an American icon for decades. The characters he portrayed slaughtered Native Americans on behalf of the U.S. Cavalry, cowboys who claimed tens of thousands of miles of land as theirs, despite the fact that those lands had been occupied for thousands of years by previous peoples, and the mantle of Manifest Destiny that was taught in every school in America as righteous. For decades, the vast number of American filmgoers admired him for this and had accepted the ideology entirely, especially given that they, and we today, are the recipients of the benefits of the lands that his characters had conquered. He had not changed; the new generation had, or at least those with access to mass media.

Rollins suggests that Apocalypse Now (Coppola, 1979), “plays like a nightmare version of The Green Berets” by “reversing the standard Hollywood formula.” As Rollins sees it, “Coppola’s Viet Cong are cowboys, while United States commanders like [sic] Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) are rapacious Indians mounted on helicopters. The narrator, Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), is an inverted John Wayne figure whose values have been destroyed by an immoral war and who accepts a mission so that he can forget the moral confusion of state-side America. Instead of hope for a constructive settlement of the conflict (as in The Green Berets), Apocalypse Now ends with madness and violence” (426). Rollins is correct in that Apocalypse Now is nightmarish, which was reportedly Coppola’s intention, as well as that of writer John Milius. Viewers today are unanimous in recognizing their success, though this was not initially the case. The film was tremendously controversial, primarily because of its infamous budget excesses. Its artistic excellence was only latently acknowledged. Apocalypse Now is a cinematic
masterpiece precisely because it so well captures the nightmare that is war, but it also simultaneously perpetuates many of the most insidious myths of the Vietnam War in at least three major ways: 1) by cinematically emulating the effects of psychotropic drugs in several scenes to suggest that the war itself was schizoid-psychotic and without rational purpose  2) by refusing to heroize any of the participants, thus suggesting all were overcome by the “horror, the horror” of the war, and 3) by maintaining an existential pretense that moral judgment is not a valid option is the liminal state of Vietnam. Virtually every character, minor and major, is to some degree mentally unstable, but the ultimate goal is to reach the destination of deepest, archetypal, existential despair, the inner forest of the primordial jungle, the metaphorical lost masculine soul, now exemplified and ruled over by Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando), ostensibly psychotic as a result of the mysteries of jungle warfare, an Anglo trope attributed to Polish/English writer Joseph Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness, first serialized in 1899. Kurtz, having allowed himself to become one with the true visage of human nature, i.e., pure blood lust for power, is ritualistically slaughtered for the good of the tribe—the U.S. and all real civilization—and in the process, Kurtz is absolved of his crimes against humanity, having dared revert to an original state of nature, via allowing himself to be sacrificed, even at the hands of an “an errand boy, sent by grocery clerks, to collect a bill.”

But Rolling is precisely backwards in his attempt to reverse the Cowboy/Indian paradigm of so many early Hollywood Westerns. The U.S. Air Cavalry (helicopters) swooping down from the skies upon the Communist Vietnamese (to the roaring sound of Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” no less, a piece of über-Anglo culture if ever there was one), is clearly the descendant of the horse-mounted soldiers of the 19th century tasked with eradicating the native population of the North American continent. The technical superiority of the modern flying cavalry is obvious (they’re called the Air Cav for a reason), as is their insignia, a horse’s head. The Vietnamese are clearly physically and metaphorically the equivalence of Native Americans who must fight against the overwhelmingly sophisticated military technology of an invading foreign race with antiquated sticks and ditches. Apocalypse Now adheres to the Cowboy/Indian dichotomy utterly, but with one obvious reversal: the cowboys are now the bad guys, and the Indians are the victims.
Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970), a Vietnam War film well-disguised as a serio-comic parody of the Western, aka, American exceptionalism disguised as justification for genocide, also ripped open the wound of “how America was won” three years prior to Coppola’s film. Penn portrays one of America’s great heroes of conquest, George Armstrong Custer, as a raving lunatic. Nevertheless, according to Scott McGee, writing for Turner Classic Movies, despite overwhelming protest and attacks on the movie in the press, Wayne was famously resolute in defense of the film. Audiences rewarded Wayne's persistence by pouring over $11 million into the box office coffers. It was his opinion that *The Green Berets* was a financial success because the "ridiculously one-sided criticism of the picture only made people more conscious of it," proving that "the reviews were not very effective." The Duke always maintained that he was simply trying to remind the audience that soldiers were dying for them. He knew about this firsthand because he had volunteered for a tour of Vietnam combat zones where he entertained troops, often at the risk of his own safety. It was this experience that inspired his movie. (TMC.com)

Despite the critical infamy the film aroused, the base of filmgoers of the time were apparently soundly traditionally patriotic, as evidenced by the success of the film’s theme song, “Ballad of the Green Berets” (written by Robin Moore, author of the book of the same title, and its performer, Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler and based on the music and lyrical meter of an American ballad from 1890, “The Butcher Boy”), which was number one on the U.S. music charts for five weeks. In fact, the overt patriotism of the song vies with the other number one song of the time (March, 1966), “California Dreaming” by the Mamas and the Papas, a peace-and-love band of exceptional talent and popularity. Sadler, by contrast, “was exactly what his name and uniform implied he was: a real-life, active-duty member of the United States Army Special Forces—the elite unit popularly known as the Green Berets. In early 1965, Sadler suffered a severe punji stick injury (the crude but effective device that killed Sgt. Petersen) that brought a premature end to his tour of duty as a combat medic in Vietnam” (historychannel.com). Furthermore,

Thanks to Hollywood, America's collective memory of the Vietnam War is now inextricably linked with the popular music of that era. More specifically, it is linked with the music of the late-60s counterculture and antiwar movement. But
opposition to the war was far from widespread back in 1966—a fact that was reflected not just in popular opinion polls, but in the pop charts, too. Near the very height of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, on March 5, 1966, American popular-music fans made a #1 hit out of a song called "Ballad of the Green Berets," by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler.

The rivalry between "Ballad of the Green Berets" and "California Dreaming" was so fierce that the two records tied for the number one record of 1966, according to Cashbox. Pop songs in the 1960s famously transcended music for mere entertainment’s sake; many were quite overtly political statements. According to The History Channel, the surprise success of Sadler’s ode to the sacrifices made by the actual Green Berets resulted in swift creative and ideological response, again showing the new, alternative masculine:

While it would not be accurate to call "The Ballad of the Green Berets" a pro-war song, it was certainly a song that enjoyed popularity among those who opposed the growing anti-war movement. A year after "Green Berets" came out, Buffalo Springfield would release the anti-war anthem "For What It's Worth," which continues to be Hollywood's go-to choice for many films and television programs depicting American involvement in the Vietnam War. On this day [March 5] in 1966, however, the American airwaves belonged to a clean cut, uniformed member of the U.S. Army and his anti-antiwar epic.

Not since the Civil War has there been an event so polarizing as the Vietnam War that also produced the passion of so much artistry. What is clear, however, is that those opposed to the war most definitely won the “cultural” war in popular music, film, and critical commentary. One would be hard-pressed to find a single other song or film that positively recognizes the contribution to masculine ideals as represented in this war than the song and film The Green Berets. The commentators on American exceptionalism had clearly changed. Not likely known by the average filmgoer or critic of the times, the U.S. Department of Defense was not entirely on board with John Wayne. McGee continues:

Long before box office or critical response became a factor, Wayne had different worries prior to production. He needed some of the resources of the Pentagon to
make his film as realistic as possible, but the military brass at the Pentagon were no fans of the 1965 national bestseller on which the movie was based. Robin Moore’s collection of short stories called “The Green Berets” portrayed the crack commando unit as lawless, sadistic, and racist. Moore, who plays a cameo in the film and claimed to have trained as a Green Beret, stated that these attributes were the signs of "real men." A feature-length, big budget movie that was to be based on such a depiction of the American military elite made the Pentagon quite nervous. Naturally, Pentagon officials demanded changes to the script before Wayne and company were granted access to Fort Benning, Georgia, with all its modern hardware at their disposal. These conflicts in pre-production, as well as normal shooting delays, hampered the film’s release until July, 1968, a full six months after the Communists’ Tet Offensive, which was the beginning of the end for an American victory in Vietnam. The delayed release proved unfortunate since The Green Berets arrived on the heels of the notorious My Lai massacre in March, 1968, an incident which seriously undermined the film’s credibility.

McGee insists that “for fans of John Wayne, The Green Berets is significant because it is one of his most personal projects and genuinely reflects his true feelings about the Vietnam situation. It also holds the dubious distinction of being the only pro-war film made in the sixties and is justly famous for a hilarious gaffe in the final scene: the film ends with a shot of the sun setting in the China Sea to the east of Vietnam.” Vietnam’s seaward coastline faces west, so the setting sun would be visible only over the jungle to the east. Hollywood’s disregard of realism for the sake of emotion is infamous. The Green Berets was filmed almost entirely at Ft. Benning, Georgia, which bears no resemblance to any part of the country of Vietnam at all; then again, all of Gone with the Wind was filmed in southern California, including the majestic plantation Tara. Wayne and his son, Michael, credited as producer, certainly would have benefited from shooting in Hawaii or South America, where the terrain, weather, and jungles are significantly closer ecologically to those of Vietnam, but access to U.S. military equipment in the states took precedence for obvious reasons: it’s possible to recreate with some semblance of accuracy the terrain of a foreign landscape; it’s not possible to fake airplanes, helicopters, tanks, and ships (at least not in 1969, and extremely low budget films that tried, where it is obvious to even children that plastic or wooden model battleships are being tossed about in a swimming pool, are not
worthy of legitimate commentary). Film critic and professor Emanuel Levy may have been alone in finding it important in his review at the time to note “that Wayne was not attempting to promote the cause of the Vietnam War as much as he was trying to portray the Special Forces in their unique role in the military.” According to Levy,

Wayne said his motive was to glorify American soldiers as the finest fighting men 'without going into why we are there, or if they should be there.' His 'compulsion' to do the movie was based on his pride of the Special Forces, determined to show 'what a magnificent job this still little-known branch of service is doing.'... 'I wasn't trying to send a message out to anybody,' he reasoned, 'or debating whether it is right or wrong for the United States to be in this war.'"

Levy also notes that Wayne acknowledged war is generally not popular but the soldiers are in a role of sacrifice—often against their personal will or judgment. Levy quotes Wayne: “What war was ever popular for God's sake? Those men don't want to be in Vietnam any more than anyone else. Once you go over there, you won't be middle-of-the-road" (Levy, Green Berets Review).

In fact, there were a handful of films made prior to and during the war, virtually all portraying the Americans as well-meaning, the Viet Minh Communists as barbarous, and the South Vietnamese as desperate but brave pawns. In 1952’s A Yank in Indo-China, for example, “a pair of American flyers run bombing raids against the Chinese munitions dumps. On one such run, the Viet Minh shoot them down, and they must escape through the jungle until United Nations forces rescue them. The enemy is, as it was in Korea, the Chinese, rather than the native Communists” (Muse, 25). Samuel Fuller’s China Gate (1957) portrays Americans as mercenaries working for the French Foreign Legion hired to blow up Viet Minh munitions dumps. Angie Dickenson, of German decent, inexplicably plays a Eurasian woman named Lucky Legs who must use her body to curry support for her “half-breed” son by an American soldier. By any standard, the attempts as commentary on miscegenation fall short of sincere, given the bizarre casting. Though the “film opens with documentary footage of an agrarian Viet Nam while a narrator describes the benefits of French culture brought to the country (“they advanced their way of living and the thriving nation became the rice bowl of Asia”) and the danger that Viet Nam faces if Moscow’s puppet Ho Chi Minh allows the oppressive communist influence to replace the benign French,” Fuller’s film was banned in France (Muse, 25). Lucky Legs
ultimately dies for the cause by blowing up the munitions dump of the communist suitor; her son will be brought to America to be raised by his father who has learned his lesson in multicultural respect. In fact, Brock [his father by Lucky Legs] reconciles with his child and is last seen walking along holding his hand in preparation for returning to America, as Nat King Cole reprises the title song, an image borrowed in Wayne’s film more than a decade later. The film was also banned in Israel for “indulging in excessive cruelty. The Israeli film censorship board indicated the film depicted Chinese and Russian soldiers as monsters (“Israel Bans Film”). As Muse notes in his book, *The Land of Nam*, “From the beginning then, American films described the conflict in Vietnam as a war for hearts and minds. They compared the benefits of American and communist intervention and weighted the scales toward America. Ideology exists, but only as an empty piece of rhetoric. Americans must fight communism on a personal level” (Muse, 26). So, given Hollywood’s tendency toward sentimentalism, the themes that would prevail in the later period of the Vietnam War film cycle (the late seventies through the eighties) were established well before Wayne’s film and would merely inform his vision, predominant among them the main belief that the Americans may be flawed, but they are not the monsters that the Vietnamese communists are. This justification changes generationally, as later demonstrated. The roles of good guy/bad guy will reverse, which further and more importantly expresses John Belton’s concept of the “Vietnam Reversal.”

Graham Greene’s novel, *The Quiet American*, written in 1955, was also among the first critical works to establish America as the bad guy in Southeast Asia or at least an untrustworthy guest, given its commitment to France—the actual colonial power at that time. The U.S. virtually never had a chance to succeed in halting the growth of communism in Vietnam as long as it supported the French presence. *The Quiet American* was first filmed in 1958 and was well received critically. Writing in the *New York Times*, film critic Bosley Crowther said: "Scenes shot in Saigon have a vivid documentary quality and, indeed, the whole film has an aroma of genuine friction in the seething Orient" (*New York Times* online archive). Observers today may wonder and recoil at the expression, “seething Orient.” Greene, in fact, was livid that his anti-war message had been virtually excised from the film, especially given that it was directed by well-respected and long-time Hollywood writer, director, and producer, Joseph Mankiewicz, was assisted by CIA officer Edward Lansdale, whom some believed to be the actual “Pyle” character of the novel, played by none other than Audie Murphy of WW II fame (IMDB.com) and would
never—even in the waning days of the Production Code—have been permitted much leeway in criticizing the activities of the CIA in Vietnam. Upon hearing of Greene’s disavowal of the film, Murphy said he never would have done the movie if the tone of the story had not changed from anti-American to pro-American, noting that "my part is one of the greatest I've ever had" (Hopper). Crowther recognizes that the film “rather clearly pulls the sting out of Mr. Greene's report, removing the anti-American venom from its ironic parable (New York Times online archive). In any case, both the novel and film very early on successfully establish in the minds of the average American observer the role of Westerners in Vietnam as that of conspiratorial, sinister, and eager to fight over the Vietnamese girl, who clearly can be seen as Vietnam itself. In order to survive, she goes with whomever in winning at the moment—the British, the French, the American, and finally the North Vietnamese Communist.

Also from 1955 is the fictionalized account of the historical fall of the elite French forces at Dien Bien Phu, Jump into Hell, directed by David Butler. Despite the opportunity to record one of the greatest military failures of a Western power in history, the film, according to critic Emanuel Levy...

fails to establish that more than 10,000 French troops participated in the battle. In actuality, the battle at Dien Bien Phu (located on the North Vietnam/Laos border) was between French troops (as well as those Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians fighting on their side) and the 60,000 troops under the command of Viet Minh General Vo Nguyen Giap. The battle lasted from March 13, 1954 to May 7, 1954, when the French stronghold was overrun. As a direct result of this major defeat, France agreed to the independence of Vietnam at the Geneva Conference that year. (emanuellevy.com)

Jump into Hell, as its cornball title implies, is sentimental pap in every category: acting, dialogue, stock footage, camera technique, and especially as the film ends with a wide shot of some barren, hilly countryside, bearing no resemblance to Vietnam at all, while a sweepingly incongruous violin-laden soundtrack reversed its historical immediacy to the dustbins of “B” film obscurity. The film’s poster, perhaps more than the film itself, doomed it from ever being recognized for its actual timeliness, by exclaiming in ludicrous verbiage the “Story of the gallant stand at Dienbienphu.” Astonishingly, one fourth of the one-sheet is devoted to pulp fiction
sexual innuendo, as if the slaughter of five thousand soldiers were insufficient a topic to garner interest.  

Clearly, neither France nor the U.S. learned from the debacle of Dien Bien Phu. The U.S. would basically take the place of the French in Vietnam, and the French would continue their imperialism elsewhere, as in North Africa, which too, eventually, ended in disaster. At least an extraordinary film came of it: *The Battle of Algiers*, made in 1966. One can only surmise if John Wayne had seen the film and whether it had the effect of tempering his belief in military incursions into Western colonial territories in revolt. Certainly, his naïve views, expressed in *The

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20 Screenwriter Irving Wallace, né Wallechinsky, of a Russian Jewish family, was known for his heavily researched novels, many with a sexual theme. One critic described him “as the most successful of all the many exponents of junk fiction perhaps because he took it all so seriously, not to say lugubriously” (*The Times*, 1990). Wallace is the definition of the hard-working writer. He published thirty-three books, not a single one known today.
Green Berets, would suggest otherwise. Even with the miserable experience of the Korean War, it must be assumed that U.S. patriots simply thought that they could never lose at war and that communism must be slowed at all costs.

According to Howard Thompson, writing for the New York Times in 1959, Five Gates to Hell is considerably better than the ads would indicate ("White Women Enslaved in War-Torn Indo-China!"):

Five Gates to Hell refers to a jungle fortress, where some pretty French Army nurses and two doctors are deposited by some lustful, bloodthirsty Vietnamese bandits (apparently affiliated with communist fighters). For a picture of bald melodramatic content that frankly pivots on sex, the result is steadily suspenseful, generally convincing and, now and then, even moving. And definitely not for children. The credit for fashioning a harshly adult wartime vignette that inoffensively jangles the nerves goes to James Clavell. A film newcomer who last year landed on the movie map with his worthy script for The Fly, Mr. Clavell turns up here as writer-director-producer of a picture that easily could have been outright trash. Unfortunately, and without much choice, the story hits a final, bloody melodramatic snag, as the escaping women battle their pursuing captors. Balancing this, on the other hand, is the restraint of one of the best scenes (howlingly trumpeted in those ads), when the terrified women are distributed among their captors. Within Mr. Clavell's graphic yarn (and an obvious shoestring budget, shrewdly offset by Sam Leavitt's photography), some interesting characterizations are generally well-played. Neville Brand, as the semi-barbaric chieftain who comes to love Dolores Michaels, one of the nurses, is as effective as Miss Michaels is listless. But Patricia Owens, as a hard-bitten fatalist, and Ken Scott, as a stalwart physician, are quite good indeed. Without making history, Mr. Clavell has carved a gripping little chiller out of a jungle. No small feat. Mr. Clavell is a man to watch.

Blatantly absent from Thompson’s review is any knowledge of the actual Vietnam and its political importance in the Cold War. Aside from the scenes of guerilla warfare and brutality, Clavell’s film merely selects an obviously exotic location in which to place women in peril.
Observers of a certain age may be forgiven for hearing a tiny, insect voice crying out “Help me!” while giving any serious consideration or apologetic to Clavell’s “B” Vietnam War movie ethic.

Clearly not for mere sensationalistic purposes, Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* (1993), based on the memoirs of Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, includes personal verification of the commonness of rape by both the South and North Vietnamese as a means of terror and punishment. Unlike Clavell, however, Stone’s film suggests strongly that the horrors of Vietnam are directly related to the Western presence. Stone’s film is not specifically, though it is tangentially, a study of male cruelty upon the feminine, per se; his is a study of how the industrial West—ostensibly a masculine construct—defiles the agrarian, i.e. feminine, East, the latter which would, apparently, exist in Edenic perfection, were it not for Western intrusion, a typically juvenile construct of the American counterculture. Masculine cruelty has existed always and universally, and the presence of Anglos in imagined mystical lands as the sole arbiters of wickedness is either evidence of ignorance of historical knowledge or belligerent insistence on the imaginary “other” as being in a state of purity always. Scholars of war and of human evolution are not so easily persuaded by such simplistic theorems. It is often proclaimed that prostitution is the world’s oldest profession, a vulgar aside to what is more likely the truth: war is the world’s oldest profession, and prostitution is merely one its concomitant survivalist results.

Other films of the Vietnam War film cycle that precede *The Green Berets* include *The Ugly American*, based on the 1958 political novel by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer. Written and directed by George Englund, shot in 1963 (though not in Vietnam) and starring Marlon Brando, *The Ugly American* further cemented as de rigueur the criticism of Americans in Southeast Asia for their “ugly” appearance and their “ugly” behavior, though Burdick and Lederer wrote the book as “fiction…based on fact” in response to the “growing fear of Communist expansion” and strongly believed that “the responsibility for this growth lay in America’s failed response” so far:

We do not need the horde of 1,500,000 Americans—mostly amateurs—who are now working for the United States overseas. What we need is a small force of

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21 *Heaven & Earth* (1993) is the third and final film in Stone's Vietnam War trilogy. The film is based on the books *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, which Le Ly Hayslip wrote about her experiences during and after the Vietnam War.
Despite their good intentions, such Peace Corps-type initiatives invariably smack of condescension. Inherent in their logic is the fallacy that all would be well in the third world if only America’s best and brightest would just show them how to exist. Nevertheless, Americans did go to Vietnam to help the meek but found themselves in a centuries-old fiasco of disparate national and international politics and unknown peoples vying for control at any cost. *The Ugly American* portrays the communists in particular as a “duplicitous, determined enemy with goals of domination” but notes that “American policy in these [small, Asian] countries is counterproductive because it places too little faith in the people of the countries” (Muse, 31). Because of this politically dualistic position, novels and films such as *The Quiet American* and *The Ugly American* create the unassailable theme that America consistently fails to get it right in Vietnam (or Southeast Asia, for that matter). Muse notes that virtually all early films of the Vietnam War film cycle fall into a similar pattern “that would continue through the in-country films of the war-years: an elite force entering the hell of Indo-China on a special mission to fight Communism” (31). And failing.

*A Yank in Vietnam*, produced, directed by and starring Marshall Thompson, a minor film and television actor, was shot entirely on location in Vietnam in 1964 employing actual South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians in the majority of roles. As reported in his biography on IMDB.com, Thompson’s film could have had tragic consequences: “It was an on-location anti-Viet Cong picture that had the Viet Cong putting a price on his head during the shoot. The picture was important in that it was the first filmed during the war and while under fire.” The plot is standard warfare/heroics boilerplate: a Marine survives a helicopter crash and lands in enemy territory. Fortunately, rebels, in particular a Vietnamese woman (again, the presence of the feminine is determinately necessary to assuage and justify the masculine tendency), help guide him through the dense jungles to safety. Along the way, he saves a POW and ends up
falling in love with the man's daughter. *A Yank in Vietnam* was not reviewed by any media of substance, never saw broad domestic release, and quickly disappeared and was forgotten, as are thousands of low-budget, no-star vehicles without studio marketing. Had any critic or film commentator made the effort to notice at the time, however, the simple plot might be recognized as an early entry into the Vietnam-as-female warrior theory, where the jungle and its inhabitants are seen as the feminine psyche, mysterious, dangerous, and courageous, as numerous analyses of *Full Metal Jacket* would suggest twenty years later. Whether portrayed as the savior/lover or the sniper/assassin, the Vietnamese female character invariably falls into Said’s critiques in *Orientalism* as a fantasy figure of the Western imperialist imagination. Nevertheless, *A Yank in Vietnam*, its sophomoric title notwithstanding, is perhaps remembered only as certainly the first and possibly the last American film about U.S. involvement in Vietnam to unabashedly and sincerely portray the South Vietnamese as innocents under brutal communist assault and their American supporters as virtuous defenders of their freedom.

*To the Shores of Hell* (1966) continues the tropes established in the early Vietnam War film cycle, not the least of which is the old-fashioned use of the word “hell” in the title. According to Eben Muse, the Viet Minh, now called the Viet Cong, are “barbarians; they use poison arrows, burn orphanages, and kill nurses and children” (33). They are also portrayed as “extremely stupid” and a “tool of the North Vietnamese Army” (33). The Americans are all “dedicated professionals,” and the film’s “final scene confirms the message of American determination, power, and benevolence” (34). Today, it is virtually impossible to imagine that for over a decade, America’s involvement in Vietnam was portrayed in Hollywood films as substantially altruistic, heroic, and righteous. Following the backlash of *The Green Berets* in 1968, however, American audiences would have to wait more than thirty years for some semblance of positive representation of their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers in the Vietnam War film cycle, as in the ostensibly revisionist *We Were Soldiers* (2002), later analyzed in some detail.

*The Green Berets* is often ridiculed for adhering to the cinematic tropes of WWII films, which critics of the late sixties were quick to deride as out-of-touch and irrelevant to the war in Vietnam. Modern, revisionist films of WWII are praised for eschewing generic conventions that gibe with reality rather than cling to prior Hollywood paradigms, despite the ongoing
glorification of the “Greatest Generation” and their exploits in war as well as their virtual deification in Hollywood movies. Jeanine Basinger observes with ambivalence, however, the immediate reviews of Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg, 1998), noting that many claimed it to be “a new and different World War II combat film because it finally refutes the dishonesty of previous Hollywood movies of the genre” (“Translating War: The Combat Film Genre and Saving Private Ryan”). The truth, she admits, “is not so simple, and Saving Private Ryan represents another case in the ongoing struggle for film historians, who must constantly deal with modern critics who judge artistic events by the standards of their own times,” inferring that even an exceptionally advanced representation of combat as is Saving Private Ryan succumbs to the basic tropes of the war/combat genre [are the tropes of a genre so egregious that a filmmaker must “succumb” to their employ?]. To determine the validity of the charge, it is instrumental to list and consider just what, then, are the oft-referred-to generic elements of the WWII war film that are so inimical to capturing the essence of the Vietnam War, later delineated.

Basinger, noting the critical acclaim of Saving Private Ryan, deconstructs the notions of cinematic purity and historical accuracy attributed to Saving Private Ryan and thereby identifies the main characteristics of the WWII film and in doing so, recognizes the falsity of claims that the tropes of the WWII films differed significantly from the films of the Vietnam War cycle, or vice versa: “Taking an overview based on actual screenings, where does Saving Private Ryan fit? It has been defined by modern critics as groundbreaking and anti-generic; the desire to bury the cornball, recruiting poster legend of John Wayne: to get it right this time.” Note the go-to reference for what had become the most obvious example, at least in cinematic criticism, of false consciousness, the now caricature of John Wayne and American bravado and American exceptionalism (at least among modern film critics), which had a mere twenty years earlier won WWII and is iconized without apology today as the “Greatest Generation.” Basinger, a film historian and specialist in films of WWII is actually quoting James Wolcott, perhaps slyly in defense of John Wayne, from his article, “Tanks for the Memories,” for Vanity Fair, published in that same timeframe, August 1998, in her review: “The primary differences that have been cited are (1) its realistic combat violence, (2) its unusual story format in which soldiers question leadership and the point of their mission, and (3) its new and different purpose.” In other words, Basinger seems troubled that Spielberg employs three of the most consistent cinematic tools of the Vietnam War film cycle to accomplish, what, exactly? Deconstruct and ridicule the Vietnam
War and/or its films? On the point of realism, there can be no comparison: audience’s tolerances for and technology’s ability to provide extraordinarily shocking imagery of bodies undergoing mutilation in warfare in 1968 were not that of 1998. The presumed protections to this nation’s gentle spirit and sense of decency that the Hays Code had sought to provide had been under assault since at least Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), but Hollywood in 1968, despite the appearance of a few adult-themed films (*Rosemary’s Baby*, *Barbarella*, *The Boston Strangler*, *Faces*) still refrained from portraying extreme violence in a manner that eschews realism for artifice.

Historian Stephen Ambrose, who served as advisor to Spielberg, was asked in a PBS interview in 1998 whether he believed that *Saving Private Ryan* would “be a turning point as far as how war is depicted in the future...on film?” His response was unequivocal:

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Sure. Absolutely. Just as people have been saying—and I agree with it—that Spielberg couldn’t have made this movie if there hadn’t been a Vietnam War and then the genre of Vietnam War movies came along afterwards, and now this movie takes its position immediately as a classic, and classics become classics because they change everything that follows after it, and every war movie made from now on is going to be influenced by this. (pbs.org)
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Ambrose seems to suggest that the unrelenting realism of Spielberg’s revisionist WWII film—which cinematically recreates with astonishingly graphic precision the images of thousands of men’s bodies being mutilated by the instruments of war—could not as a filmic approach to the genre exist had the horrors of the Vietnam War and its various cinematic representations not occurred first. As noted before, Wayne would not have been provided the instruments of warfare from the U.S. military had he been utterly realistic in portraying what those instruments actually do to the human body. As to the second point, *Saving Private Ryan* is by no means the first film to suggest that soldiers rebelled against their leadership and/or mission: *Catch 22* (1970), for example, which ridicules the aleatoric and absurd nature of war, set during WWII. It must be assumed that rebellion against warfare is at least as old as warfare itself. This is why young men historically have been literally kidnapped and forced into military service. Again, we are reminded of both Achilles and Odysseus. The difference is that Hollywood did not suggest that

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22 Heller, having served as U.S. Air Force aircrew in Italy in World War II, began writing *Catch-22* nearly a decade after WWII ended.
the soldier’s cause in WWII was anything but righteous, justified, and noble. The films of the Vietnam War cycle virtually insist upon the opposite. Then again, was saving Helen justified? Men go to war against one another for lesser cause than a pretty woman. A man’s honor is often nothing less than code for his ego.

Basinger’s and others’ complaint is more in the ideological position that the film takes, which explains her concern with its “new and different purpose” to show, as much as is filmically possible, the true nature of bodies destroyed by the instruments or war and also the simple reactive nature of acts of war (G.I.s are shown flame-torching surrendering German soldiers). The fact that audiences were so immensely moved and startled by Spielberg’s cinematic advance and boldness in realism suggests that audiences in 1998 were still quite capable of being stunned and were not, perhaps, so jaded as one might suspect of a generation that had witnessed The Exorcist as early as 1973, a film arguably far more vile than one that depicts war realistically. The comparison is not so arbitrary as it may seem. Horror films and war films often attempt to elicit similar responses: shock, extreme disturbance, commentary on existential dread, the ambiguous nature of existence, etc. It must also be noted that it matters significantly the age (and by extension, the generation) of the viewer and reviewer in determining the level of shock a work of film may produce. Subsequent generations always demonstrate a disconcerting nonchalance to their parents’ notions of that which is wicked and horrifying and just wrong. The Boomer generation deserves credit for being, en masse, the first to suggest that war, for whatever purpose, is monstrous, and that there must be a better way for humans to exist. Unfortunately, such idealistic goals were perverted by the extraneous: drug use, promiscuity, and bell bottoms.

Also referencing Saving Private Ryan and its witheringly brutal depiction of warfare, the ugliness of the desperation to survive, the massive destruction of nature and humankind’s structures of civilization, and the limited role of patriotism as the soldier’s driving ideology (once the bullets actually begin to fly), historians Frank J. Wetta and Martin Novelli conclude as recently as 2003:

Thus, the spirit of the John Wayne syndrome had finally been exorcised from war movies. Finally, movies could be mature and morally honest about war, it was
reasoned. Beyond the depiction of combat itself, the themes reflected a change as well. Compare the patriotic assertions in \textit{The Green Berets}, for instance, to the absence of any such ideals in just about every movie after 1975, including \textit{Private Ryan}. By the time Wayne's tribute to the Special Forces came out, the cynical view of patriotism, especially for critics, had begun to replace "simplistic moralities." At the end of the Vietnam War, the nation, in the view of many, lay sick, infected with a malaise, robbed of its vigorous sense of triumphalism. The "Vietnam Syndrome," as it came to be called, not only affected national resolve but, of course, infected Hollywood films as well. The country made by war had become the country humiliated by defeat” ("Now a Major Motion Picture": War Films and Hollywood's New Patriotism”).

More than thirty years later, the specter of \textit{The Green Berets} hovers over the critical reception of a filmic masterpiece, \textit{Saving Private Ryan}, and compels reevaluation and begs the question: if it was justifiable for Americans to flame-torch the Japanese Imperialists or German Fascist-Socialists, why not then the Vietnamese Communists? Spielberg’s homage to the Greatest Generation never strays from portraying the Americans as righteous, despite the blunt acts of brutality they commit on the battlefield. There is not a single moment given to the ideology of the Germans, even sixty years after the event. They are the bad guys, end of discussion. Wayne’s ode to American exceptionalism in Vietnam, however, simplistic by cinematic and academic standards, remains today a testament to America’s willingness to sacrifice the lives of its young men for causes not entirely defined, believed by some, but not honored by the nation’s media.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Boys In Company “C”: The Boys Are Not All Right

"To keep their sanity in an insane war, they had to be crazy."

No film about the Vietnam War can ever be made that is anything other than tragic for the simple reason that the United States did not achieve its goal of terminating communism and installing democracy in that tiny jungle of Southeast Asia. It then may be that any commentary, any work of art on this particular conflict, resounds with the words of Shakespeare, fatalistically describing life thus: “It is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing” (Macbeth, 5.5.26-28). Directed by Sidney J. Furie, written by Rick Natkin and Furie, The Boys in Company C (1978)

follows the lives of five young Marine inductees beginning with their arrival to and training in boot camp in 1967 [a time-honored and perfectly reasonable convention of the genre] through their tour in Vietnam in 1968 that quickly devolves into a hellish nightmare, which war can only be. Disheartened by futile combat, appalled by the corruption of their South Vietnamese allies, and constantly endangered by the incompetence of their own company commander, the young men find a possible and purposely ridiculous way out of the war: they are told that if they can defeat a rival soccer team, they can spend the rest of their tour playing exhibition games behind the lines. But as they might have predicted, nothing in Vietnam is as simple as it seems. (DVD liner notes)

Neither is the making of the film itself. The Boys of Company C was executive-produced by Raymond Chow Man-Wai, a Hong Kong film producer. Chow was the head of publicity and the production chief of the influential Shaw Brothers production company between 1958 and 1970.23 He broke away, created his own production company, Golden Harvest, and due to his

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23 Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd. was the largest film production company of Hong Kong in 1925, and for decades, produced nearly a thousand films via the Hollywood studio system, the most successful being what Americans would call Kung Fu movies. Quentin Tarantino probably saw all of them. Raymond Chow was their most prolific producer, and he broke away to become far more successful internationally, bringing Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Blade Runner to Western audiences.
greater appreciation of actors, was responsible for successfully launching the martial arts and Hong Kong cinema onto the international stage with the biggest stars of Hong Kong cinema, including Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Tsui Hark and many others. At first glance, it may seem painfully ironic that a Chinese film executive produced a film about the ridiculousness of the Vietnam War. Upon a second glance, it makes perfect sense: the Chinese despised the South Vietnamese and supported the Communist North Vietnamese, led by Ho Chi Minh (who probably detested the source of his funding for the war against the Americans, given that the Chinese had dominated Vietnam off and on for a thousand years). Thus, the portrayal of the South Vietnamese, particularly via the vile character Colonel Trang (played by Filipino actor, Vic Diaz, who made a good living playing scuzzy characters), literally the only speaking part of a South Vietnamese adult, is severely delimited between the fatuously wicked Trang and the simplistically innocent Vietnamese children and their terrorized grandparents. The utter lack of legitimate South Vietnamese characters—soldiers, journalists, politicians, shopkeepers, etc.—places The Boys in Company C in the tunnel vision of a journeyman screenwriter and hack British filmmaker, neither of whom had any knowledge of war except in the abstract world of storytelling.

Film critic of the Village Voice in the sixties, Andrew Sarris, gained a lifetime of devotees and cache by extolling the virtues of the infamous auteur theory, which placed the impetus of artistic license in filmmaking upon the director, his vision far superseding the screenwriter’s, the producer’s, and the studio suits.’ Sarris brought to America the French cinema manifesto, espoused in the 1954 article by Truffaut “La Qualité Française ("the French Quality") and “La Politique des Auteurs,” which Sarris named “The Auteur Theory,” most basically translated as the author theory, meaning that the true vision of a film is that of the director,

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24 The Gold Bauhinia Star (Chinese: 金紫荆星章, GBS) is the highest rank in Order of the Bauhinia Star in Hong Kong, created in 1997 to replace the British honors system of the Order of the British Empire after the transfer of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China and the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). (Types of Honours and Awards). It is awarded to those who have given distinguished service to the community or rendered public or voluntary services of a very high degree of merit.

25 Sidney Furie is the director of over fifty films, beginning in 1959, and who belongs to the hundreds of working directors whose catalog contains not a single film of excellence but many of sad repute, despite their having big stars attached: Little Fauss and Big Halsy (1970) starred Robert Redford; The Jazz Singer (1980), starred Neil Diamond, a film on many lists among the worst ever made; Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987), starred Christopher Reeve, and was produced by the infamous Israeli arms dealers, Menachem Golan and Yoram Globus. Furie’s parents were Polish-Jewish immigrants who arrived in Canada in 1930. The “French” name, Furie, is created.
though he may not be, and in most cases is not, the actual author, screenwriter, of the film. Sarris’ devotion to the nouvelle vague is easily defended when the topic of great filmmakers presents itself among cinema aficionados. The game is simple and definitive: name five great filmmakers. Griffith, Hitchcock, Welles, Capra, Wilder, Truffaut, Godard, Antonioni, Bergman, Kurosawa, Spielberg, Coppola, Scorsese. The list grows without effort. Now, name five great screenplay writers. Only pure cinephiles can. The point here: Furie is but a hired hand, no auteur. There appears nothing in his work to suggest a single glimpse of artistry. Furie succumbs to several overused tropes from WWII films and sets a low standard from which The Boys in Company C never quite manages to explicate itself:

1. Getting the “Ladies” into Fighting Shape

   Yes, the defeminization of the male into a brutal killing machine is well documented in the Vietnam War film cycle and virtually all war films prior, but commentators from Jeffords to Belton fail to see the obvious—at the very least, may we not note that most men are not brutes but must be thus transformed by said in order to have any material value—though its effect is not at all evident in a single character in The Boys in Company C. With the exception of Tyrone Washington, who arrives at boot camp always-already street tough, not a single recruit as a result of basic training gains an ounce of weight, strength, fortitude, or simple maturity of mind.26 Unlike as in Full Metal Jacket, made nearly a decade later, or numerous combat films wherein the training of the actors to mentally and physically resemble that of young men whom had actually undergone basic training, not a single recruit snaps under the pressure of basic training. The D. I. is played by the same retired marine in both films, R. Lee Ermey. Famously hired as a technical advisor, having served in Vietnam and as a Drill Instructor in the states, Ermey was so effective that Lurie hired him to play the part of Drill Instructor Staff Sergeant Loyce, his film debut. In Furie’s film, not a single character becomes a maniacal murderer in the battlefield, and not a single character commits rape.27 The recruits, do, however, wonder just what their mission really is, get shot at by faceless people with machine guns who appear seemingly out of nowhere,

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26 See, in particular, the training scene where the recruits are frightened into shivering, simpering idiots (with the exception of “Superfly” Washington, who is too cool to be fooled) by an exercise of false fire, and they, the simpleton white guys, cowering like children, discover an opened crate of plastic bags, which naïfs Vinnie and Alfie mistake as sleeping bags and crawl into. They are, of course, body bags, which the two naïfs realize with a shudder.

a persistent trope, and care for the agrarian peasants, ignorant of the fact that the majority despise them for being yet another foreign invader in a thousand-year-long epic. In fact, Kubrick, in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), employs several of the same basic tropes that Furie employed many years earlier: the shaving-of-the-hair-scene (curiously, long hair on men had only relatively recently in American history become an affront to masculinity—virtually every great figure of the Civil War had long hair) and the grabbing by the hand and lifting up of the testicles while marching and thus “being-masculinized-scene,” to name but two.

It is likely impossible to imagine an equivalent feminine mirror version of such a ridiculous call to gender clarification, but there is a feminine cinematic trope and counterpoint to that of the dutiful soldier. Women are, historically, heroized for choosing to die during the ordeal of childbirth for the sake of the child, whom she, the mother, tragically, having carried for nearly a year of her life, will not have the benefit, the reward, of knowing, holding, loving, raising. Many films of the genteel era (the era of the Hays Production Code) shape the scenario delicately: there is a sudden sense of concern from the doctor (often a drunk, a perfectly understandable stereotype, not often explained to the average viewer, but if it were your profession to deliver babies a hundred years ago and see women frequently bleed to death in childbirth and have no recourse to save her, we might readily accept the traumatized alcohol-prone sawbones as a legitimate character) and everyone is banished from the birthing room save a subordinate woman, often a native-American, African-American, or Latina—because, we are expected to presume—they know of these things. There then follows a calling out and dashing about for hot water, torn sheets, and, frequently, a bottle of whiskey, though never for the one in actual pain. Then, expect fevered close-ups of sweaty foreheads and a cutaway to a hall/sitting room/porch where a man paces, stoically concerned, smoking feverishly. The editing progresses into reaction shots of faces startled by screams of agony. Next comes a pregnant pause while the spectator is compelled to ponder the vicissitudes of life and death. A shot of the tick-tock of a grandfather clock takes on great symbolic importance. Then, the diasonic tour de force: a baby’s cries. Cross-cut to many faces, relieved, lit up with joy. The music, however, soon turns to a somber key. The doctor steps out from the birthing room—close up on his weary and defeated face as he morosely shakes and lowers his head in guilt, signifying that he could not save the mother. She fought bravely; she gave her life so that another could live. As trite as this scene is, played out over scores of films, there simply is no tragedy so clearly told. To die giving birth to
life, the ultimate act of ironic heroism, cannot be trumped. Men, on the other end of the spectrum, are heroized merely for dying when they’re told to. And generation after generation, ad nauseam, they continue to.

_The Boys in Company C_ begins with various young men—the titular “boys” arriving to Marine Camp for basic training via that most American of machines, the automobile—though not a single actor appears to be a teenager or even in his very early twenties. How these “boys” evaded the draft until well into their twenties is not mentioned. This is a minor complaint against verisimilitude, as Hollywood historically casts actors older than the characters they play for numerous reasons: acting experience, being legally allowed to work all hours, the potential of demonstrating the aging process, etc. Each recruit, however, is embarrassingly stereotypical and introduced so quickly, presumably to match the pace of the drill sergeants’ orders (a few arrive via bus and are typically yelled at to “fall out”) that the viewer has little time to make a connection. This technique was actually quite modern at the time and was meant to demonstrate the recognition of the growing short attention span of the new audience. Recent scholarship has shown that since 1935, in fact, “shot lengths [in movies] have gotten shorter...contemporary films have more motion and movement than earlier films...[and] in contemporary films, shorter shots also have proportionately more motion than longer shots.”

Presented first is the naïve writer Alvin (Alvie) Foster (James Canning), who serves as the film’s sometime raconteur. The first-person narrative comes and goes and consequently broadens the aesthetic distance and dashes any sentiment hoped for. Alvie is so naïve as to be false; his voice is high-pitched and golly-gee-whiz in delivery, as if Furie had directed the actor to emulate Opie Taylor from _The Andy Griffith Show_ circa 1960. Alvie is pathetically thin, gangly, awkward—showing no physical evidence of having passed basic training—and is visibly incapable of carrying a pack of eighty pounds, and since his character is so unabashedly decent and harmless (he is never shown in actual battle), his demise is inevitable, if not utterly predictable. We learn from his narration during his arrival to boot camp that it is 1967, but Furie makes little effort to capture the period cinematically. There is no soundtrack of the era, either diatonic or non-diatonic. There are no touches of real observation in costuming, no original uses

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of visual metonymy, e.g., a peace-sign medallion on the neck of the Jesus hippy or simply a close shot of a pair of sandals, sans socks, a pick in the Afro of the only black character in the entire movie, a pen in the shirt pocket of the ostensible narrator, a bag of Red Man chewing tobacco or a tin can of dip indentation in the back pocket of the country boy, a fingered crucifix in the neck of the Brooklyn Italian, etc. Spielberg employed this technique (every character is assigned a talisman) masterfully in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), but Furie seems to lack any such creative touches (the risk of simplistic metonymy admitted). As in *Go Tell the Spartans*, released the same year as *Boys*, 1978, director Ted Post, a TV veteran, shoots with utter disregard for artistry. To be fair, regarding my defense of *The Green Berets*, director John Wayne, despite thirty years of experience learning to frame, light, and edit film from John Ford, created a cinematically pedestrian film.

Dave Bisbee, played by Craig Wasson (who also appears in *Go Tell the Spartans* in effectively the same role, that of the conscientious observer who maintains a higher ethic than all others), arrives at boot camp in handcuffs, presumably having been caught draft-dodging. He is the pacifist, long-haired, hippy-dippy Jesus freak who “loves everybody, man.” His girlfriend, only briefly included in his establishing scene, berates her father, a high-ranking somebody, likely responsible for getting this cretin drafted and away from his daughter. The sergeants immediately take especial delight in ridiculing his feminine sensibility, despite his full beard and resemblance to a typical Anglicized Christ. As John Belton argues, if every human psyche consists of masculine and feminine elements, the psyche of the male soldier must be reshaped to repress the feminine—to transform him into a ruthless, unemotional, fighting machine. In every war film, masculinity is put in crisis; the toughness of the hero becomes an issue crucial to both his survival and that of his fellow soldiers. Drill sergeants in Marine boot camps repeatedly refer to young recruits as “ladies.” (200)

The Brooklyn ethnic (in this case, Italian, but just as often Jewish), Vinnie Fazio (Michael Lembeck), is a character as believable as Arthur Fonzarelli from *Happy Days*, Gary Marshall’s beloved ode to fifties post-WWII nostalgia. Fazio is the fast-talking trickster (an hoary stock character, reprised by Jim Hutton in *The Green Berets*), always looking for an “angle” and a way to beat the system. He is first established as caring only for himself, number one, but he quickly
takes a special liking to Alvie, the naïf, acquiring for him a difficult-to-find writing tablet and pencil, though his act of kindness is not provided legitimate motivation or narrative explication. Later, when Fazio discovers that he alone and not his friend Alvie has contracted a venereal disease from a prostitute, Fazio angrily accuses Alvie of being homosexual, since it’s apparent that Alvie did not, in fact, participate during their not-seen excursion into the city, which is too bad, as the grit and grime and reality of the American soldier visiting Vietnamese prostitutes is fodder enough for a dozen films.²⁹ The scene is told entirely after-the-fact and not presented diagnostically, so it fails to register as potentially meaningful. Fazio simply comes off as childlike, calling another boy names. Given that Furie had made many films in the past concentrating on homosociality (The Leather Boys, 1964, made in the UK, for example, is bold for its time in dramatizing a male relationship that is certainly homosexual), it seems strange that he would demonstrate so little creative flair here a full decade into Hollywood’s freedom from provincial mores.³⁰

Private Billy Ray Pike, played by Andrew Stevens, who earned a Golden Globe nomination for his performance, is the naïve grunt who goes from innocence to knowledge, the cinematic representative of the bildungsroman. He plays the backer chewin gun-ho enlistee redneck, the one extant Hollywood stereotype not yet elevated to the level of academic umbrage. He is a natural athlete and true believer in baseball; therefore, he is justifiably horrified when he is ordered to play soccer to appease the South Vietnamese hierarchy. He becomes addicted to pain killers and is ironically encouraged to quit using for the good of the company by the actual drug dealer character, Tyrone Washington.

²⁹ Both documentaries, The Anderson Platoon (1967) and Hearts and Minds (1974), won the Academy Award, and both are artistically superior than most Hollywood productions about the war, as the Cinéma vérité approach rarely fails when covering actual war. Both films, and especially the latter, include scenes where soldiers visit prostitutes. Despite complaints of few feminine representations in the Vietnam War film cycle, the limited contact with Vietnamese women U.S. soldiers encountered is factual, nurses and prostitutes being the primary.

³⁰ Adapted from Eliot George’s (a pseudonym of Gillian Freeman) novel, The Leather Boys is a bold and engaging drama set against the decadent motorcycle clubs of 1960s England. Canadian Sidney J. Furie’s film combines the sexual frankness and harsh realism of the British New Wave and confronts themes of class and homoeroticism at a time when being openly gay was still illegal (british60scinema.net).
2. Dealing with the Race Thing and Basic Training

Tyrone Washington is the hardcore street black character (meaning from Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Oakland, or New York) played by Stan Shaw, who receives first billing and is thus ostensibly the main character, though the screenplay more often than not loses connection to his narrative. Washington is costumed so ridiculously in his establishing scene that viewers can be excused for thinking they have stumbled upon a Blaxploitation film. He arrives at boot camp in the back of a drug dealer’s pimp-mobile, his “boss” decrying the fact that “shit-eating-turd-packing-honky-motherfuckers” are “drafting his main man away...to kill chinks.” No other character is permitted such colorful language, which is a strange and inadvertently racist cop-out, as it suggests, condescendingly, that only the inner-city black male has animosity toward other races and might, in fact, be blatantly racist. We don’t dare question the authenticity of his rage. The “boss” ends by telling Washington to “take care, nigga,” and then they slap palms. For 1978, that dialogue is fairly straightforward and legitimate in capturing 1968; nevertheless, the jive-talkin’ street pimp had already become a caricature in shows such as “Starsky and Hutch,” though without the actual n-word. The actual n-word in never used in the film, for which Furie and his producers should be lauded: not one of the white characters is an overt racist, which, according to most reports, is not much of an issue among soldiers who have made it through basic training and a week or two in country. Nothing clears the cobwebs of society away from masculine posturing quite like being in the same boat/trench/foxhole in war.

Though typically portrayed as grueling and necessary to produce strong soldiers who can withstand the harsh trials of war, in Boys, none of the recruits appears to have developed his physique as a result. The white boys all remain scrawny and variously pathetic; the one black character (named Washington, of course, as he is the leader, and we are meant to note that many surnames of African-Americans come from their slave owners of hundreds of years earlier) is massive and dominant, and like an anti-Uncle Tom, does not suffer these fools. Nevertheless, he must be convinced by the clear-thinking Drill Sergeant Loyce (R. Lee Ermey) to save the stupid crackers from the folly of their privileged existence by protecting them from their foolish natures or risk dying in Vietnam. Literally every Caucasian character, with the exception of Drill Sergeant Loyce, is portrayed as weak, both physically and mentally. Furie maintains this bold thread, despite its incongruity with the regnant claims of racism that held the nation’s media
captive and insisted that the white man had all the power. Washington, however, is among the first variant of the “magical negro” character, “a supporting stock character in American cinema who is portrayed as coming to the aid of a film's white protagonist. These characters, who often possess special insight or mystical powers, have been a long tradition in American fiction” (Farley, "That Old Black Magic").

The Magical Negro serves as a plot device to help the [white] protagonist get out of trouble, typically through helping the white character recognize his own faults and overcome them [Billy Ray Pike’s drug addiction]. Although he has magical powers, [Washington can see a VC sniper in the thick brush a thousand yards away and would have gotten him were it not for the foolish acts of a berserk, white machine gunner] his "magic is ostensibly directed toward helping and enlightening a white male character." (Hicks, "Hoodoo Economics: White Men’s Work and Black Men’s Magic in Contemporary American Film").

In an effort to heroize black men in fiction, white writers have inadvertently found themselves in a quagmire of ridicule. Matthew Hughey, for example, writes in his article, “Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films," for the August 2009 issue of Social Problems" that

These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation. It is this feature of the Magical Negro that some people find most troubling. Although from a certain perspective the character may seem to be showing blacks in a positive light, he is still ultimately subordinate to whites. He is also regarded as an exception, allowing white America to "like individual black people but not black culture."

Hughey echoes an observation, utterly mythic, made by William Faulkner half a century ago, a distinction between white Northerners and Southerners regarding their attitudes toward black folk: as the legend goes, Faulkner states for all the world to hear:
The Negro is—is a part of our economy and our—our southern traditions. It's true anywhere, Virginia, Mississippi, or Texas. The—the—the southern—the white southerner loves Negroes as individual Negroes, and—but he—he don't like Negroes in the mass, as apart from the northerner who in theory loves the Negroes in the mass but he's terrified and frightened of individual Negroes. [audience laughter] I think that is a—the—the condition of the Negro in the South has got to be changed for the simple reason, two simple reasons. One is that he's—there's seventeen million of him now. He is diffuse over the country to where he can be a political factor anywhere. And also, if we are to cope with—with a—a culture which says that man is—is of no importance as measured and matched against the state, if we're to cope with that and be successful, we ourselves have got to have a culture in which any man is of infinite importance, much more important than the state, and we can't have seventeen million second class citizens in a culture like that and have anybody believe it. But it's a slow process. It will take a great deal of patience and—and good sense. But it must be done. (Faulkner at Virginia)

Faulkner shares elsewhere in his address his admission that

There were many things I could do for two or three days and earn enough money to live on for the rest of the month. By temperament I’m a vagabond and a tramp. I don’t want money badly enough to work for it. In my opinion it’s a shame that there is so much work in the world. One of the saddest things is that the only thing that a man can do for eight hours a day, day after day, is work. You can’t eat eight hours a day nor drink for eight hours a day nor make love for eight hours — all you can do for eight hours is work. Which is the reason why man makes himself and everybody else so miserable and unhappy. (Faulkner at Virginia)

There are but a few demarcations that denote a man, and earning money is perhaps triumphant. Lacking that talent, there is next in line for admiration the ability to kill other men. Washington is not a caricature of this archetype, ala Rambo, but he is literally the only man auctothonously capable in the entire film.
3. The Haircutting, Defeminization Ceremony

No Jesus freaks/hippies/girlymen allowed. Girls have long hair; boys heads should be shaved so that they don’t look like girls. This trope occurs in several films of the Vietnam War film cycle that include scenes of basic training (*Full Metal Jacket, An Officer and a Gentleman*—wherein the recently shorn recruits are referred to as “scrotum heads.”), but Furie’s film may be the first. For some inexplicable reason, the ceremony is always portrayed as humiliating, as if each man were a Nazarite being profoundly abused. The reality is strictly generational. Clearly, something had changed from the fifties (when boys and men wore crew cuts proudly—with the notable exception of Elvis Presley) to the sixties and seventies (when boys and men wore shags proudly). As mentioned elsewhere, long hair on men reigned supreme for millennia without ever connoting femininity or weakness. St. Paul, however, upsetting the cart, writes in his letter to the Corinthians, 11:14, “Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?” Given that heroic men of the ancient world frequently were defined by their manly locks—think leonine (Hercules, Sansom, John the Baptist, for example), and that Paul must certainly have known of them, it seems incongruous that he would, in a letter to converts in Corinth, Greece, be suggesting the do’s and don’ts of men’s hairstyles. But such is the nature of zealots, virtually always men, everywhere. The historical list of bizarre rules of behavior, grooming, and dress to which men and women must adhere or be damned seem created by a disturbed adolescent, a character from a Rod Sterling episode of *The Twilight Zone*: do not cut your sideburns, do not cut your hair, do not shave your beard, cover your head, cut off the foreskin of your penis, do not masturbate, during your menstrual cycle, take your unclean self to another tent, etc. The list of how men and women should behave is endless and contradictory (predominately established by men), and it may rightfully be asked how anyone reared in an environment of such indoctrination could be mentally healthy.

4. The Member of the Company who Cares for the “People” of Vietnam

Dave Bisbee, the overtly-coded modern Jesus freak (though he never speaks of religion, only pacifism), an oft-employed phenotype, proclaims the people of Vietnam, especially the children as “beautiful, wonderful people.” In fact, the final words of the film on the screen are:
“The Boys in Company C wish to thank the Republic of the Philippines [where the film was shot] and its beautiful people for their kind cooperation in the making of this film.” There is something condescending about referring to a nation’s citizens as “beautiful people,” perhaps illustrating Said’s message of Orientalism which identifies the Anglo’s tendency to see Asians as exotic creatures, too attractive, not quite human. Wasson embodies the role of a blithe naturalist, devoid of any knowledge of colonialism and Vietnam’s thousand-year history of warfare, innocently enough, with dignity and an admirable lack of irony, so we might ask why a mild-mannered character, two thousand years after the life of Christ (or a near contemporary of Gandhi) is so frequently ridiculed by the citizenry of a country that proclaims its allegiance to Christianity in virtually every social platform: the military, government, education, sports, even monetary slogans. The casual observer knows that Bisbee represents the hippy, the regnant image, for better or for worse, that denotes the generational and cultural divide of the sixties: Christ may have been a long-haired pacifist, but the average church-goer of the sixties was appalled by the use of drugs as a gateway to spiritual enlightenment, as well as by the lack of basic attention to hygiene, gentlemanly rapport with society, and worthy employment, the latter failure being the most egregious sin against manhood: an able-bodied man who does not work is the most despised member of society, other than actual criminals. The prostitute has her defenders (she is a victim of circumstances, most certainly masculine dominance); the layabout, the shirker, the slacker, however, has none. Bisbee is thoroughly earnest and is granted the inexplicable knowledge and consequent exposure of the grand reveal of military corruption: his Marine company has been assigned to provide support to an Army battalion to make sure that important supplies make it to base camp, but among the supplies is a vast array of luxuries for the comfort of some high-ranking officer, whose presence is not personified. He is a ghost, a wraith, a symbol of the grunt’s fearful imagination, the real reason why they are dying, and he is also an emotional diversion for the simple-minded. To believe that the U.S. government orchestrated the war in Vietnam for no other reason than to provide promotion opportunities for career officers is to miss the forest for the trees, which, in the context of The Boys in Company C, is completely understandable. The film is presented from the perspective of the grunt, who at twenty-two years of age, is not likely thinking of the fine ideological points between Marx and Adam Smith.

31 The phrase, though much older, "In God we Trust," was adopted as the official motto of the United States in 1956 and imprinted on all U.S. currency.
Bisbee is the embodiment of the Woodstock oeuvre: he plays acoustic guitar for the South Vietnamese children and is allowed, incongruously, to tote it in country, though it magically disappears when the soldiers are in combat. As the voice, heart, and mind of gentleness and righteousness, he nevertheless betrays his no-kill conscience—justifiably—and kills the corrupt South Vietnamese Colonel, whose men then kill him, making him a martyr for...we must conclude, the “innocent people,” the common villagers of Vietnam, whose agrarian lives would be simple and free, were it not for the presence of the U.S. military.

Regarding the concept of cinematic realism, despite having R. Lee Ermey as an advisor, Furie’s cast bears little resemblance to actual marines, Bisbee being, along with Alvie, among the more ridiculous. For example, they are frequently seen without their rifles, an overt omission in the genre. Marines, it is said, shit, shower, shave, and sleep with their rifles. A decade later, Stanley Kubrick got it right. He employs to great effect in Full Metal Jacket (1987) the Rifleman’s Creed, a masterpiece of masculine indoctrination and poetic personification of the most serious sort which every Marine is required to learn in basic training and would not likely ignore in the field of battle. According to legend, it was written by USMC Major General William H. Rupertus, following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Placed in this context—casualties were above 2,500—the development of a new code of honor, based on being prepared not merely to fight back but to shoot to kill, is typical of the masculine mindset and utterly human: you hurt me; I will hurt you back worse. The soldiers of the Vietnam War were most certainly familiar with the attack on Pearl Harbor, and though they were either babies or not yet born by that “date which will live in infamy,” that event remained the modern rallying cry to war for the next generation of boys to men (who, at that time, but the very elderly, could remember the Maine?). The oral tradition was and still is alive and well. Sons learn from their fathers, and this creed is memorized by Marines to this day:

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.
My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life.
My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will...
My rifle and I know that what counts in war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count.
We will hit...My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will keep my rifle clean and ready, even as I am clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will...
Before God, I swear this creed. My rifle and I are the defenders of my country.
We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.
So be it, until victory is America's and there is no enemy, but peace! (Naltyin)

What young conscript under the circumstances could resist such a pragmatic call to patriotism? Not many in 1941, as history suggests, when nearly twenty percent of the country’s workmen were farmers or tended livestock, meaning they were fully reared in the normalcy of the rifle as a tool. As demonstration of the changed construct of masculinity from the “Greatest Generation” to the “Baby Boomers,” is it imaginable that during the Vietnam War or at any subsequent military action a supremely high-ranking general would be so fearlessly hawkish in speaking to the troops as was General George Patton in 1941?

We'll win this war, but we'll win it only by fighting and by showing the Germans that we've got more guts than they have; or ever will have. We're not going to just shoot the sons-of-bitches, we're going to rip out their living Goddamned guts and use them to grease the treads of our tanks. We're going to murder those lousy Hun cocksuckers by the bushel-fucking-basket. War is a bloody, killing business. You've got to spill their blood, or they will spill yours. Rip them up the belly. Shoot them in the guts. When shells are hitting all around you and you wipe the dirt off your face and realize that instead of dirt it's the blood and guts of what once was your best friend beside you, you'll know what to do!

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32 In 1940, the total population of the U.S was 131,820,000. 30,840,000 were farmers, 18% of the labor force (Growing a Nation).
Patton was certainly a journalist’s meal ticket, so brazen was he in his outspoken bravado. But he is probably best remembered for this famous statement: “I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor, dumb bastard die for his country.” Patton may have uttered something along those lines, but the actual lines were written by Francis Ford Coppola for the movie *Patton* (1970), and as the screenwriter, he clearly captured the essence of Patton’s Olympian braggadocio, a form of survivalist performativity (think Mohammed Ali, not at all the world’s strongest boxer, but certainly the most egotistical, a masculine trait that may or may not result in success—when it does, he is proclaimed a hero; when it does not, he is just another forgotten loser with a big mouth). The actual Patton was much less subtle: “You can't run an army without profanity; and it has to be eloquent profanity. An army without profanity couldn't fight its way out of a piss-soaked paper bag... As for the types of comments I make, sometimes I just, by God, get carried away with my own eloquence” (Blumenson).

5. The Corrupt South Vietnamese Official, the Invisible V.C., and The Innocent Villagers

Very few of the films of the Vietnam War film cycle portray the South Vietnamese honorably, and *The Boys in Company C* is no exception.

According to Lanning,

South Vietnamese civilians are portrayed as prostitutes, pimps, drug pushers, and black marketeers. The only other function of South Vietnamese civilians in the movies is to serve as the victims of torture and atrocities by American and ARVN soldiers and its military men are reluctant warriors prone to slothfulness, cowardice, and treachery. (134)

Not one of the million-plus South Vietnamese who gave their lives for some semblance of democracy, perverted as it may have been, is portrayed. Filipino actor Vic Diaz, who made a career playing the swarthy bad guy in scores of low budget films, plays in *Boys* a repulsive, fat Colonel who is vile and corrupt; he accepts Tyrone Washington’s plan to transport heroin to the U.S. in body bags, though Washington, supposedly having found a higher cause, i.e. fighting

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33 See *American Gangster* (2007), loosely based on a true story, directed by Ridley Scott, starring Denzel Washington as a heroin smuggler in 1968 who indeed uses the body bags of dead American soldiers. The film was
for his men, later refutes him. While Furie does not make Washington’s transformation at all clear—there are no filmic cues to devise a definitive theory for his character’s reversal—we may presume that Washington has discovered a higher calling, that of the most valued soldier and team leader. There are merely two scenes of actual combat in *Boys* (the ludicrous finale notwithstanding). In neither is the face of the enemy shown, perhaps the most prevalent myth of the war. Lanning admits that for the average American soldier, the V.C. and the NVA were “fleeting...ghostlike figures” (139). Meanwhile, Bisbee sings to a group of Vietnamese villagers, mostly children. This group represents all South Vietnamese civilians: Edenic women and their children. Furie portrays, via Bisbee, the naïve but admirable effort of the American forces to protect the innocents. He also deserves credit for eschewing the ubiquitous whorehouse scene favored by so many other films of the Vietnam War film cycle, *Hamburger Hill* (1987) for example.

5. The Member of the Company who Throws Himself upon a Grenade

...to save, in this case, a group of Vietnamese children. This is the naïve narrator, Alvie Foster, the pages of his diary which “no one would believe,” scattered about the soccer field, gone with the wind, lost to posterity, the playground locale an absurd, childish metaphor for an absurd, childish war. Truth be told, in United States military history, more citations for the Medal of Honor have been awarded to soldiers (posthumously, sadly obvious) for hurling themselves onto grenades to save fellow soldiers than any other act of heroism (*Medal of Honor Recipients, Vietnam War*).\(^3^4\) But somewhere along the way, the representation/dramatization of this most extraordinary act of masculine instinct, courage, and selflessness became cliché, and its use as a bid for empathy in Furie’s film fails in even the category of bathos. Alvie, who is never shown in combat, is such an oblivious naïf as to rob him of any semblance of masculine verisimilitude. He is little more than a canary in a coal mine, a sacrificial anode. Neither is his character provided sufficient back story or cinematic identification (though this complaint is certainly subjective) to explain his sudden suicidal act on behalf of a dozen nameless Vietnamese children. Alvie is not nominated for numerous awards, but gained infamy when three former DEA agents sued for defamation. Prolific screenwriter Steven Zaillian (*Schindler’s List; Gangs of New York*) pitched the story as one of "American business and race" (Leland, “Gross National Product”).

\(^3^4\) During the Vietnam War, 248 Medals of Honor were awarded, 156 (62.9%) of them posthumously. Soldiers of the Army received the most with 161, followed by 57 to the Marines, 16 to the Navy and the remaining 14 to the Air Force (Medal of Honor statistics; United States Army Center of Military History).
the hero, and his character is not, therefore, allowed a moment of discovery, in the vein of anagnorisis. Consequently, his act of sacrifice lacks weight. His death is sad, but it does not rise to the level of tragedy, and the representation of his act lacks representative verisimilitude; his body barely moves upon the grenade’s explosion. In reality, a hand grenade at close range virtually mutilates the body. Such a pale representation of the detonation of a grenade upon the human body is ridiculous and perhaps offensive to actual observants, and why Furie chose not to avail himself of the technical advances in enhancing cinematic realism is not recorded. In art, however, the distinction is critical. This event occurs during the climactic scene where VC snipers attack Company C while they are engaged in a soccer match wherein the American soldiers have been ordered to lose on purpose so as not to insult the host team, all South Vietnamese. The match is in honor of Colonel Trang, the repellant drug lord. Of course, this conceit functions as an obvious metaphor of the war and common complaint of those who served in combat: that the U.S. soldiers were consistently hampered from fully engaging the enemy and thereby actually winning the war. It is now recognized that there never was a plan to “win” the war; the U.S. could certainly have destroyed Hanoi but would not risk escalating the conflict to nuclear proportions with China and the U.S.S.R. The war’s results were infamously defined by the gruesome calculus of body counts. Not many films rise to Aristotelian levels of tragedy, and neither do many films of the Vietnam War film cycle, and so they fail to affect the observers’ consciousness. Were Alvie, for example, to have been betrayed by a Vietnamese youth, or fragged by his lieutenant, or affected by the sight of his friends being blown apart during a nightmarish perimeter breach and “bugged out,” opportunities for a heightened dramatic experience would open up, and his naiveté and sacrifice might have risen to the level of tragedy. As it is, Alvie is one of many flat characters, meaning without an arc, and thus functions on the most basic level of dramatic character. He seems also incapable of learning anything about the dangers of war. In a previous scene, where Company C assaults a beachhead, their amphibious vehicle, which carries the majority of the company, becomes stuck in the sand, portrayed as a standard occurrence designed to highlight the presumed engineering incompetence behind the military equipment and weaponry provided American soldiers and thus typical of their fatalities. Once ashore, Alvie pulls out a pocket-sized camera, and, fascinated by the exotic beauty of the Indonesian peninsula, what with its white sand and Palm trees, is immediately and predictably shot by a puff of smoke emanating from said lovely Palm tree. Alvie is quickly medivaced from
the beach, the hovering helicopter magically protected from the magic bullets in the tree. Again, Furie chooses not to include in his frame the “other,” preferring to maintain the myth of the North Vietnamese wraith, capable of lasting months without water or food, hiding in a palm tree, waiting to shoot round eye. Only Tyrone Washington and Dave Bisbee grow to a new level of understanding as a result of their trials and tribulations in war, though Furie allows neither to open up on the obvious target. Furie, in fact, frequently forgoes cause and effect, choosing to represent merely an act and nothing more, which, if this were a French film, would suffice. Bisbee, in the finale, gives his life for the “other,” but Washington survives, having not allowed himself to be tempted by or to care for the “other.” He does not allow himself to be distracted by the children or the prostitutes. He remains aloof to the host country’s people but devoted to his own team, fools though they all are. It should be noted, that though Furie’s film fails on many levels, the inclusion of a doomed romance as distraction from the brutality of war is not one of them.

Hollywood film producers are rarely scholars of art, history, philosophy, literature, or the humanities, and most films of the Vietnam War cycle are unworthy of commenting upon the true horrors, the true acts of wanton and accidental cruelty, and the tribal/team mentality of sacrifice so devoutly to be wished. The male human, conscripted into the ultimate test of his masculinity, is offered but two choices: kill or be killed. Phrased otherwise, the soldier must choose to die with honor (meaning without any semblance of cowardice) or die without honor (meaning cowering in the moment of death). With the obvious exception of death as a result of actual adult warfare (is this not another telling of schoolboys on an island, left to their natural instincts?), the masculine ideal is not one whit removed from the mores developed on boys’ playfields learned and absorbed by grade six. As is made clear too often, the sensitive male, the musician, the writer, the peacemaker, is lost to humanity in warfare. Piggy dies, plump, nearsighted, and asthmatic, easy prey to Jack, the primal hunter. What remain are the street toughs (The Dead End Kids; The Warriors) and the tricksters. Melville might have agreed with such nihilism.

6. Soldier holding another dying soldier, crying profusely

When Alvie gives his life, Vinnie Fazio loses his devil-may-care optimism and is overcome with emotion, allowing himself to be held against the chest of Washington, who gives comfort and tells Vinnie not to worry about crying. All men cry. This image was once a moving
acknowledgement of the unique heroics of war: an individual sacrifices his life in an excruciatingly horrific manner to save the group, the platoon, the squad, the many, or just the one beside him. Among the countless indignities of war, the emotional breakdown of the once-brave soldier under duress is nowadays mocked profusely and quite brilliantly, as hardcore comedy goes, which exists to demythologize and profane that which has been historically codified as heroic, grand, sentimental, honorable, devout, or sacred. Tropic Thunder (Stiller, 2008) is a meta-war film designed to mock the cinematic representations of the Vietnam War film cycle, given the new male’s invitation to emotionality yet never honor a single reality of men in combat whose bodies are mutilated. The film is hilarious, as parody/mocksery often is, but the actual is lost in the multiple representations. Is the horrific of war death merely banal, as Arendt suggests? Strong, rough, young men, blasted on the battlefield, are said to cry out for their mothers as they die. Is dying in agony on the battlefield a filmic trope no more worthy than parody? That may be the essence of the paradox of masculinity. There are those who cry while they die, and there are those who laugh while others die. Men make war; men make movies that lionize men in war; men make movies that mock movies that lionize men in war; men critique both kinds of war movies.

In the climactic scene, it’s difficult to choose which may serve as the single most offensive image of the film to the military (and no, the U.S. military did not support the film). As the firefight begins and scores of soldiers and civilians run about helter skelter (they are made to look utterly undisciplined, ill-trained, and incapable of returning fire), an American voice is heard yelling “all officers into the air raid shelter now!” though no actual face is attached to the voice. Infantrymen shuttle a handful of U.S. officers into a concrete bunker and turn to stand guard while the mayhem escalates: satchels of explosives are tossed from atop the various buildings by the VC snipers, yet despite the presence of a full company of U.S soldiers, not a single sniper is shot in retaliation. Inexplicably, Colonel Trang and his minions are seen scurrying directly into the open soccer field rather than taking cover in the bunker. Colonel Trang is heard giving the order to “Grab someone! Form a human shield!” Astonishingly, a Green Beret is seen picking up a Vietnamese child to protect Colonel Trang. That child is soon tossed away, her body now limp and is later discovered to be one of the two that Bisbee has developed protective tendencies toward. As he weeps profusely over the child’s dead body, her brother identifies Colonel Trang as responsible. Bisbee flies into a rage, grabs a dead soldier’s
M16, and chases down Colonel Trang and shoots him in the back. Trang’s surviving bodyguard immediately kills Bisbee. Furie never returns to the scene, however, not one single frame. There is no evidence to suggest that Furie’s lack of artistry is somehow the point, meaning, for example, that death in Vietnam is without artistry. His adherence to simple continuity editing is not merely boring but frequently lacks reverse shots to create a sense of completion of an action. There is no response to the call. Consequently, Bisbee’s turn from pacifist to angel of vengeance is rendered trite, predictable, and unmoving. Were we to see, perhaps, the surviving child’s eyes at Bisbee’s mad act of vengeance, or Bisbee’s, as they expire, or his guitar, the symbol of his gentle nature stomped to kindling by hundreds of boots in the mad panic of combat...well, choices to lift an image beyond the mundane are myriad and frustratingly evident. The spectator, both within the frame and outside it is left bereft of the opportunity to agonize, with the exception of Fazio, who does not even secure or cover the body of his fallen comrade; neither do we see the appropriate securing of the body of Bisbee, an outrage to the most famous credo of the Marines. Furie fails to represent the imaginary as real in a single aspect. In Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986), the spectator is invited to identify with a clear mirror self, the character of Chris (short for Christian, perhaps), but Furie’s film (like Stone’s, the first of a trilogy, though not of the same caliber and thus forgotten) attempts a multi-character approach that never rises above simplistic stereotypes and ignores profoundly important codes of masculine/military honor.

7. **Soldier who becomes addicted to drugs**

*The Boys in Company C* does not ignore the presence of drugs in the military, though it is not shown to be the war that causes men to seek out this means of escape from pain, and not once does Furie show soldiers as a group (as in *Platoon*) getting high. In an unusual twist, it is the all-American athlete, Billy Ray Pike, who succumbs, but he arrived at camp already addicted to pain killers due to his sports activities and oblivious to his predicament, which is believable, given his youth, his innocence, and his purity of heart. He simply does not know that medicine prescribed by a doctor can make him an addict. Washington, the man of the streets, certainly does and chews Pike out for his naiveté and weakness. They have a severe falling out, but eventually, these two come to a reluctant mutual respect. Theirs is the most overt commentary on

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35 “Nemo reside” is the motto of the Marine Corps’ Personnel Retrieval and Processing Company, the team charged with retrieving the remains of fallen service members from the battlefield. Virtually all infantry take an oath to “leave no man behind.”
the difficulty of the Southern rural White and the Northern urban Black to befriend one another, and Furie handles it with admirable sensitivity. After the climactic soccer field-as-battlefield scene during which both gentle boys, Alvie and Bisbee, die, Washington, clearly now the company leader (though he is not granted a soldier’s greatest honor, which is bravery under fire—again, Furie does not include a single frame wherein a U.S. Marine shoots a bad guy), orders Pike to quit the war, creating a ruse that Pike is brain-damaged from the battle, which offends Pike, until he realizes Washington’s higher moral: Washington knows that Pike’s girlfriend is pregnant and that Pike must return home to be the honorable father to his child and not let him (the male pronoun is used for the child) become “a bastard [is there an equally derogatory word in the English language for a girl child whose paternity is unknown?], calling some other man Daddy.”

8. Virulent tirade at officer by a private

Hollywood combat films, especially those from the Vietnam War film cycle, too frequently allow a subordinate to vent his frustration at a superior officer without his being reprimanded. Captain Collins (Scott Hylands) represents the stooge of the higher-ups, the officer obsessed with body counts, who blindly following orders from above, who kowtows to the South Vietnamese officers, who puts his men into dangerous predicaments, and who predictably gets many of his men killed, but in his defense, who claims ignorance of a major plot point, though it is not sufficiently explicated. In other words, even the gung-ho officer has been betrayed. Isn’t the point of war to kill more of the other than he kills of yours? When did that motive become so problematized? Had the U.S. developed some form of death wish, as the movies would suggest? Charles Bronson, a staple of machismo in scores of Hollywood B-film since the sixties, would suddenly find his star rise, due to the startling and, some would say worrisome, success of Death Wish (1974), suggesting just that. The spectator is compelled to recognize and accept that “real” men kill bad guys. Bronson’s character’s wife and daughter are raped, and his was wife is killed by street thugs who break into the architect’s New York City apartment, events frequently employed in movies as necessary to motivate good men (meaning domesticated) to engage in retaliatory action (drawing upon his archetypal latent savage or “wild man”),\(^{36}\) meaning

justification for astonishing brutality. Bronson’s character is presented as a bleeding-heart liberal who thinks of crime as being caused by poverty but who tragically learns that evil is not so clearly a product of economic disparity. Some men are just savages. Bisbee, inexplicably, discovers and uncovers the truth of their mission, which results in at least two causalities: to provide additional protection for a major convoy of trucks which Bisbee exposes as containing fancy furniture, liquor, sides of beef and pork, and other extraordinary goods (given the context) for an Army general, a virtual whorehouse. Clearly, making a general this comfortable in the process of war is evidence of malfeasance. Boys attempts to rise to the occasion of serious commentary on the history of warfare (during the Civil War, there were nearly as many prostitutes in camp as soldiers) but Furie consistently refuses to engage the full conversation: he tosses the conventional grenade (the accusation that an Army General is being provided with truckloads of luxury at the expense of the Marines’ lives ordered to protect the convoy), and lets it explode (Bisbee, in full umbrage mode, yanks open the doors to the enormous delivery trucks (all unlocked) exposing their contents: wicker furniture, lamps, mattresses, liquor, sides of beef, etc. Captain Collins is reduced to a blubbering fool, crying that he “didn’t know.” When the company reaches base, Bisbee, framed somewhat hidden from others, is seen smoking a joint and jauntily singing “Happy Birthday...fuck you” to General Dearborne (unseen), the Army general and apparent sybarite. Bisbee’s eyes are on the trailer displaying the banner “Happy Birthday General Dearborne,” and after a short cutaway to the scene where Washington saves Billy Ray Pike from an overdose, we cut back to a shot of the trailer, which immediately explodes, sending smoke and debris everywhere and, predictably, causes chaos among the soldiers who presume that the VC have overrun the base. Machine gun fire and rocket launchers are employed willy-nilly by the Army until Marine Lt. Archer (James Whitmore Jr.) uses his sidearm as a threat to compel the Army soldier—clearly under the influence of acid—frantically launching mortar rounds into base structures to stand down. In other words, the Army is portrayed as utterly incompetent, incapable of recognizing an actual assault from the enemy, and seasoned Lt. Archer of the Marines must stop the chaos. Next, we see Bisbee, stoned, wandering

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37 The word “hooker” predates the Civil War, but legend associates it with Union Army Major General Joseph Hooker, whose name is most likely slandered. Nevertheless, in 1864, there were 450 brothels in Washington and over 75 brothels in nearby Alexandria, Virginia. A newspaper estimated there were 5000 “public” women in the District and another 2500 in Alexandria and Georgetown, bringing the total to 7500 by the war’s third year. Small towns were overrun by the sex trade when army troops set up nearby camps. With such profuse R & R, it should be wondered how either side had the strength to slaughter one another (Clinton).
in the street, strumming his guitar, unfazed by the mayhem about him. Washington, the magic Negro, must run directly into fire to grab Bisbee and lower his body. Bisbee casually admits that there is no VC assault; he detonated a claymore under the general’s trailer. Barely two beats later, Washington is seen holding the near-to-death Pike, screaming that he, Pike, must want to live, that he, Washington, can’t save him by himself, one of the few scenes with an actual established motivation: it was Pike who earlier risked his life to explicate Washington from a hidden landmine in a rice paddy. Nevertheless, with the exception of Lt. Archer, literally every white character is portrayed as being completely unsuited to the travails of war. If Furie meant for this to be the point of his film, it is ineffectually realized. To argue that the African-American male is the savior of white privilege is to over-read. As a Marine—though he did not serve in combat—even Daniel Ellsberg, leading critic of the war, and some might argue, its greatest traitor, might have agreed with Furie’s depiction of the absurd nature of the Vietnam War, if only due to typical male competition, especially between the branches. 38 If one is looking for evidence that men are confused beings, the enmity between the various military branches of the same government might be the game-winner. Historically, of course, there are hundreds of instances where the branches of the military have worked together with astonishing grace and comradery, but this is not the case in the Vietnam War film cycle.

In brief, then, *The Boys in Company C* establishes numerous of the myths that pervade the representations of the Vietnam War:

1) The South Vietnamese allies were unworthy of protection, prone to corruption, and were, in fact, complicit in their own destruction.

2) U.S. commanders (always the officers, virtually never the sergeants, a salute to the working class status of the non-commissioned officers) were vainglorious, unfit for duty, cared only for promotion via body counts, and were hazards to their men, resulting in tremendous casualties, very often including their own.

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38 Among many instances of infamy, the leaking of “The Pentagon Papers” being his tour de force, Ellsberg was quoted in the 1974 academy award winning documentary *Hearts and Minds* as saying “We weren’t on the wrong side; we were the wrong side.”
3) One myth claims that a 1st or 2nd lieutenant’s lifespan in Vietnam was calculated in minutes, obviously untrue. In fact, nearly three times as many sergeants died as did 1st and 2nd lieutenants, there being, of course, far more enlisted soldiers than officers (the wall.usa.com).

Sergeants may be portrayed as hard-asses, but they are rarely portrayed as incompetent. But officers are.\(^3\) Captain Collins calls in an air strike on what he suspects in a VC village—a logical assumption, given that his company has suffered several wounded soldiers while crossing a bridge from a sniper whose muzzle flashes are clearly visible in full daylight. Despite frantic attempts to return fire, the entire company fails to hit the target. When they approach the tree line to investigate, the sniper is gone, presumably down a tunnel, which the company, inexplicably, does not attempt to locate and destroy. Private Bisbee refuses a direct order to radio to the Air Force the coordinates of the village a mere mile away and clearly in sight; consequently, Captain Collins ostensibly places him under field arrest and assures him that when they reach base camp, Bisbee will be tossed in the brig. This does not happen. Instead, Bisbee detonates the general’s mobile “whorehouse.” Had Furie a bit more flair for representing the absurd, as, for example, Robert Altman has in \(M*A*S*H\) (1970), any number of scenarios might capture the essence of the irrational nature of warfare and some men’s devotion to war itself, the cause having little to do with their allegiance. There simply is never a moment of real shock to jolt the spectator from a state of ennui, though Bisbee’s act of protest makes the attempt. Blowing up the general’s trailer with a claymore mine suffices to express the filmmaker’s attitude that the American leaders are the bad guys; were the general actually inside the trailer, however, depicted in flagrante delicto with a Vietnamese prostitute, the critique of the war rises to another level.\(^4\)

In the ensuing scene, the company approaches the village that has been bombed. Of course, we are presented no clear evidence of the VC, just scores of women, old men, and children (none of whom are dead or dying, a bizarre cop-out, given the setup). The absence of literally all adult males quite obviously suggests that this is indeed a VC village and the men are hiding in tunnels, but at no point does Furie allow the observation and neither do the soldiers

\(^3\) In one extreme exception, Sgt. Oleonowski (played by Jonathan Goldsmith, a longtime character actor who recently is enjoying fame in a beer commercial as “The Most Interesting Man in the World.”) is a heroin addict in the little known low-budget film \(Go Tell the Spartans\) (1978).

\(^4\) It would not be until Brian DePalma’s film \(Casualties of War\) in 1989 that a filmmaker dares to portray the U.S. as actual rapists of Vietnam.
discover a tunnel. Instead, we are exposed to shots of the company displaying grief over the destruction, though there are no bodies, so Furie’s scene lacks legitimate motivation. Bisbee mocks the Captain that his coveted body count is actually a few dead chickens. A teenaged boy in the telltale black pajama pants is briefly interrogated, but Pike recognizes that the stick he is found wielding is actually a makeshift baseball bat. In other words, he and his buddies could not possibly be VC: they play baseball. In his cultural myopia and naiveté, Pike pulls the boy away from Sergeant Curry (Noble Willingham) who is ready to work the kid over on the spot, and the soldiers and Vietnamese kids quickly put together a frenetic pickup game, replete with exaggerated but good-natured arguments over calls. Again, Furie misses the point: were the U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese kids to get into an actual fight over a baseball game, his war-as-sports metaphor might work. But Furie chooses the simplistic assertion that the “other” is just like “us.” Meanwhile, at no time are the wounded America soldiers referenced again, a troubling omission in continuity and logic. Quickly arriving via helicopter are not medics but Colonel Trang, the corrupt South Vietnamese official (and the only adult speaking part of the South Vietnamese) sporting a greasy mustache and pot belly (images of Simon Legree and silent film antagonists who tie women to railroad tracks come to mind) and at his side is a U.S. Special Forces “advisor” assigned to him, the amusingly named Major Royal. Their goal is to interrogate the boy, which greatly upsets the naïve Pike and others. Captain Collins orders the company to move out, and as they reach a distance appropriate to the scope of a long shot, Pike aggressively resists moving on, suspecting that he can hear the boy screaming. Captain Collins attempts to return Pike’s medicine, earlier confiscated, as an inducement to carry on. A struggle with Captain Collins ensues, and Sergeant Curry knocks Pike out—symbolically heavy-handedly with the makeshift baseball bat. Instantly, we hear the expected shot emanate from the village. Washington, returning to pick up Pike, takes this moment to deliver a stunningly irrational tirade:

Washington
(to Captain Collins)

You wouldna’ done that if that was a white boy back there...but to you, he’s nothing but a Gook. He’s just a yellow nigger.

Captain Collins

He is the enemy!
Washington

No, you’re the enemy!

This exchange perfectly captures the emotionality of the Vietnam War from the perspective of the new generation’s heightened sensitivity to issues of race and dominance. At no point in the film does Furie establish that racism lurks in either the hearts or minds of the officers or the sergeants who serve them, so Washington’s outburst ruptures the moment and is rendered an awkward incidence of transference. The wide angle view of history records that in WWII, millions of Germans were killed by Americans, Englishmen, and Russians, and millions of Russians were killed by Germans (all Caucasians), but the wars in Korea and, especially, Vietnam came to be seen as more about race than ideology, specifically by the younger generation that identifies as the counterculture, and the fact that Caucasians had recently slaughtered each other by the millions does not, necessarily, elide the theory that the Vietnam War was as much about race as it was about ideology, but the latter is a far more problematized position to hold, given that the U.S. has supported numerous regimes based on ideology without regard to race: Chiang Kai-shek over Mao Tse-tung; Ngô Đình Diệm over Hồ Chí Minh; Fulgencio Batista over Fidel Castro, Augusto Pinochet over Salvador Allende, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi over Ayatollah Khomeini, the Contras over the Sandinistas, etc.

3) U.S. soldiers were mostly physically and/or mentally ill-equipped for the war. To its credit, *The Boys in Company C* does not dramatize a single instance of mental breakdown, though Pike nearly overdoses from drugs procured by South Vietnamese dealers on the street. Only two firefights occur, and only Washington is portrayed as courageous and competent. In truth, *The Boys in Company C* does not definitively count as a combat film, ala *Platoon* or *Hamburger Hill*, the latter especially. Nevertheless, other than Washington (who, at one point, comes close to fragging Captain Collins), every member of the company is a negative portrayal of masculinity.

4) The Vietnam War itself was an exercise in ludicrousness, having no clear plan or moral purpose. As with the Korean War, which resulted in nearly as many U.S. casualties in a mere three years as did the Vietnam War in ten, the demonization of communism in Vietnam simply did not resonate with the Boomer generation as effectively as did the demonization of Nazism and Japanese Imperialism to those of a generation earlier. In *The Boys of Company C*, there is not a single mention of fighting communism, promoting democratic values, or defending the
South Vietnamese from a superior enemy, the Russian and Chinese-supplied North Vietnamese Army.

In their article for *The Journal of Military History* (2003) "Now a Major Motion Picture: War Films and Hollywood's New Patriotism,” authors Frank J. Wetta and Martin A. Novelli write:

If a Martian spaceship landed outside the lobby of a Cineplex showing *The Boys in Company C* (1977) or *Hamburger Hill* (1987) and the crew went to the movies, after two hours of film-going, the aliens would emerge from the theater without the faintest idea of what all the fighting was about. They would have heard numerous assertions about loyalty to one’s buddies and surviving the horrors of battle but not a word to answer the question: "Why are these men fighting and dying?" Seeding any of these films with some sort of ideological justification had become so absurd a concept that apparently no one would risk saying a word on the subject (866).

As to the risk of expressing an ideology, the danger to the filmmaker is understandable, especially given the still-festering wounds upon the national psyche. Though tame by the standard set later by *Platoon*, the producers and director of *The Boys in Company C* do not for a minute of film suggest that the U.S. may have had a moral justification to enter the war, poorly implemented though it may be. As for aliens—Martian or local, for that matter—having no idea what the fighting is all about, the same could be said of virtually any war film were the spectator not always-already privy to its historical background. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for example, opens not with the infamously graphic D-Day landing on Omaha Beach, France, but with an overtly sentimental tracking shot of an old man being followed by his family in ostentatious, even biblical awe, as if he were the messiah, through a cemetery of thousands of crosses and a few scattered Stars of David. Confusingly, the old man looks nothing like the younger version of Ryan (played by Matt Damon), and though the zoom to extreme close-up of the old man’s blue eye into montage of the raging blue sea is lovely to behold, there is no diastic connection

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41 The Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial is located at Colleville-sur-Mer, France, on a cliff overlooking Omaha Beach. 9,386 servicemen, of which 307 are unknown, are buried in ten grave plots. The names of 1,557 soldiers missing in action are also listed.
to just whom this old man is. Were the zoom out to be revealed as the young Ryan, the scene might make sense. This is his flashback, we are compelled to presume. But this is not the case. We are instead thrust into the POV of Captain John H. Miller (Tom Hanks) whom we later must appreciate has given his life for Ryan, as did many others, for no other reason than that Ryan’s mother had already lost her other sons to the cause. The following fifteen minutes of film is devoted to, at that time, the most realistic representation of nearly ten thousand men being killed by various war machines towards which the men in boats inexplicably continue to run. In 1854, a little under three hundred casualties resulted from the infamous Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War, and this event was considered horrendous. By comparison, a little less than one hundred years later, the allied assault on Europe known as D-Day resulted in an estimated nine-thousand casualties. Martians would, indeed, wonder why? Of course, we are meant to appreciate the reverence of the loss of so many men of war, but without context, the Martian landing party of 1944 would be no less confused than that of 1968. At no point in Spielberg’s film is the specter of the Jewish problem/question mentioned. The filmmakers presume the viewers are always-already informed (why would Wetta and Novelli presume otherwise regarding the Vietnam War?). The term lebensraum is not mentioned, and no German character is given voice; as with the myth of the ghostly VC, to the soldier on the field in Europe, the German is also an inhuman wraith (and as is the Japanese soldier in the Pacific theater). The effects of the Treaty of Versailles are not snuck into the dialogue. Economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that the treaty was too harsh—a "Carthaginian peace" and said the figure of reparations was excessive and counter-productive (Marks, "The Myths of Reparations"). One of the holy mantras of screenwriting is to limit dialogic exposition: films should show, not tell. Boys, indeed, makes no attempt to justify the purpose of the war, and that is the point the filmmakers wish to make: there is no purpose. As with the vast majority of works of the Vietnam War film cycle, Furie’s film is overtly anti-war and intends to demythologize the glamour of war, the superiority of the U.S. soldier, and the nobility of the U.S. cause in foreign wars. Were the film not so poorly written, shot, edited, and acted (for the most part), Furie would have at least reached a willing audience.

\[42\] Carthaginian Peace is a term that refers to the imposition of a very brutal peace by completely crushing the enemy. It derives from the peace imposed on Carthage by Rome.
Despite his extensive experience, Furie almost entirely lacks a sense of artistry in Boys. One scene only stands out as having been well crafted and comes closest to capturing the absurd nature of the company’s directionless odyssey: as the company treks on through wide open fields and dirt roads following the debacle of the fire-bombed village of innocents, the commanders receive “intelligence” of an “enemy communications center.” Lt. Archer, with Washington as his best soldier alongside, locates and assaults a wooden shack, having first efficiently and competently coordinated with his crew chiefs and maintained excellent radio communications with the company, in clear antithesis to the ill-conceived maneuvers of Captain Collins (who at this time is driving both Pike and Bisbee to some other hamlet, unbeknownst to them, to prepare for the soccer match). The shack turns out to be merely a relay station for Radio Hanoi. It is apparently self-sufficient and thus unmanned. Having been the voice of reason throughout the journey, Lt. Archer is suddenly overcome with rage at the false intelligence and concludes that his company is being used as bait to lure a battalion of NVA into the open, whereupon a large enemy body count can be accomplished. Out of spite, Lt. Archer calls in an air raid on an empty field, bragging to Washington that he is going to spend a million dollars. What follows is a pale assault upon the barren hill, by never-before-seen heavy artillery, one helicopter, and two small planes, not jets. Prior to the low budget “fireworks” and extensive diagetic noise of explosions, which are, of course, much less costly, Lt. Archer asks Washington “what the hell is that God-awful smell?” Washington laughs and explains that the smell is the two of them; they have not bathed in many days. This innocuous piece of dialogue serves to segue into the film’s one scene of affective discomfort: Furie cuts to a shot of dozens of naked soldiers, apparently having bathed in a pond and who are now enjoying the show au naturel, hooting and hollering with every explosion. Why only one of them (the injured, gruff old sergeant) is actually washing in the pond while a score stand naked in their boots (all seen from behind) as explosions light up the sky during magic hour is ripe for phallocentric interpretation. Raw, naked, ejaculatory power, perhaps? The gun, the rifle, the cannon, all are too easily denoted as phallic symbols, except that they function only to kill; the male genitalia, though capable of causing harm, is not so designed on purpose. Susan Jeffords, in The Remasculination of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (1989), devotes considerable scholarship to a feminist reading of (primarily) the third wave of Vietnam films, those that overtly empathize with the U.S. soldier or worse, admire the newly mythologized superhero, a la Rambo. Whereas the first and second wave films of the Vietnam
War film cycle frequently *emasculated* the U.S. male (portraying him as a cuckold or worse, a paraplegic, incapable of using his penis) the third wave, according to Jeffords, “remasculated” the male by allowing him to exact revenge and garner his imagined much-deserved honor, and in so doing, did a great disservice to women by claiming status and sympathy as victim and thus further his hegemonic status as the preferred gender. Jeffords concludes that

> Gender relations in American culture have been redefined in recent years through the complex representation and *dissemination* (my emphasis; we must admit the apropos choice of word) of a discourse of warfare linked primarily to the Vietnam War...[leading to an] increasing breakdown of gender articulations [that have] become specified to redefine the constructions of masculine and feminine in even firmer and more exclusionary terms, so that women are effectively eliminated from the masculine narration of war....And because of the *seminal* (my emphasis) position of gender dominance in relation to other forms of dominance in U.S. culture, power relations defined through race, sexual preference, ethnicity, class, and so on are becoming equally polarized. (186)

Returning to the most interesting scene in *Boys in Company C*, Jeffords responds to the notion of war as “an aesthetic of technology...as an object of beauty”... and, quoting William Broyles Jr.,⁴³ posits that “the erotic [is] the key interpretive feature of the aesthetic of technology:” “The seduction of war is in its offering such intense beauty—divorced from all civilized values, but beauty still” (10). Jeffords then, “In speaking of the link between eroticism and the body,” paraphrases Georges Bataille, literary auteur of transgression, as preface to her commentary on the scene, who “explains that the sexual act epitomizes the moment of transgression that denies boundaries, specifically, the boundary of death. Jeffords writes that

> As an aesthetic, the technology of war became a conscious spectacle to the men fighting the war, who stood and watched distant firefights in the night, illuminated by flares, with tracer bullets marking their paths against the sky like a show of fireworks. *The Boys of Company C* includes a scene where munitions become

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⁴³ William Dodson "Bill" Broyles, Jr. was drafted into the United States Marine Corps and served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971. In 1988, Broyles co-created the award-winning television series, *China Beach*, a weekly drama for about the doctors and nurses stationed in Danang.
pure theater. When they discover that they are being used as a decoy to attract North Vietnamese troops, soldiers call in a fake battle, giving coordinates near their location. As the artillery explodes, they sit on a nearby hillside and cheer the show. (11)

Lt. Archer does, in fact, refer to the aerial bombing as a “show,” but Jeffords is so determined to consociate war with theater and men as spellbound spectators and practitioners of the instruments, the technology, of war, as surrogate sex acts, that she ignores the obvious: half the men are utterly naked (and it’s daytime, for what it’s worth; nothing is occult). Furie’s sudden turn to soft-core porn is startling, unsettling, ridiculous, and his only moment of cinematic interest if only for its remarkable incongruity and utter gratuitousness. Not even Midnight Cowboy (1969), infamously rated X, dared show the male genitals, despite the fact that the film was more than suggestively about masculinity and male sexuality. Genitalia are still to this day verboten in American cinema, even in the war film, the only genre that could conceivably break the mold. Hemingway wrote, more than half a century ago, about the typical result of munitions exploding beneath a man’s legs. As far as my research has found, no filmmaker has dramatized and shown male genitalia mutilated on the battlefield. For all the talk about America’s obsession with sex, it is telling that nudity—and especially nudity that includes shots of human genitalia—are utterly absent from American cinema, even in the war genre.

Robert Eberwein, on the other hand, in his equally impressive text on gender, Masculinity and Sexuality in the American War Film (2007), sees homosexuality in such scenes. He does not miss the gratuitous nudity, though he does not recognize it as such. He notes, for example, that the men are “in fact, having fun as, naked, they watch the destruction (115). As filmed, the men certainly do seem to be rejoicing, but in other words, Eberwein may be a product of his own male gaze, not conscious of the sordid display of the body for the sake of titillation, in this case male, not much dissimilar in tone to the inclusion of naked girls in a shower room in countless drive-in flicks designed to thrill teenaged boys, except that Furie does not use his camera in nearly so vulgar a manner. He may, in fact, be engaging in a bit of appropriation. Realistically, soldiers do not stand naked in the field of war as if they were attending a gay frat party. Eberwein first makes note of the fact that at least one inductee “pretends to be gay to avoid being

44 The Sun also Rises, 1926, is concerned with male identity when lacking the sexual functionality of his genitals.
inducted, a comic scene played for laughs in a way that had been presented earlier in *Alice’s Restaurant* (Arthur Penn, 1969) and would be repeated a year [sic] later in *Hair* (Milos Foreman, 1979. Eberwein’s editor certainly meant to write that *Hair* was produced a decade, not a year, later than *Alice’s Restaurant*). Penn’s silly film was prescient, in its own way, by giving stoners a text to cling to. Foreman’s film, based on the 1967 Broadway musical, was, however, a decade too late. The let’s-get-naked-and-dance-through-Central Park homage to flower-power was embarrassingly passé. By 1979, the Vietnam War was no longer on the cultural front burner: disco and cocaine were. The Rolling Stones held the status of greatest band of the world, the Beatles having relinquished their title nearly a decade earlier, and had produced their 1978 album *Some Girls*, which was unapologetically influenced by the dance/disco craze. Though the change was quite a shock to their devotees, the Rolling Stones had clearly accepted that the times had indeed changed. The reaction was not nearly so tumultuous a musical/cultural change of persona as Bob Dylan’s adoption of the electric guitar, considered at the time by his true believers to be a profound betrayal of the deepest values of the counterculture/protest/folk movement. Somewhere along the way, even electricity had been demonized, associated with technology and thus modern warfare. The album, besides being a testament to that which is au courant, signifies a cultural exhaustion with the decades-long protest movement, soon to be inscribed in the history books as a “crisis of confidence,” later termed a cultural “malaise,” a word not actually employed by President Carter, but as with so many other media-created memes, lives on, regardless of factuality. “Some Girls,” the titular song, is stupendously controversial for the line in the lyric which casually claims that “black girls just want to get fucked all night/I just don't have that much jam.” Nowhere in the album is Vietnam mentioned, but the race issue had taken a profound, albeit vulgar, turn. Years earlier, in fact, Mick Jagger had been crowned the king of transgressive rock with “Brown Sugar” (1971), ostensibly about having sexual relations with a black woman but more likely about heroin. Vietnam and protest music was passé; sex, however, remained the current currency. Eberwein, speaking from the neo-nexus, returns to the overtrod and artificial construct of the penis as weapon:

The most sexualized moment in the film comes as Tyrone Washington...and the other soldiers are bathing at a pond on a sunny hillside. The scene begins with

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45 The album hit number one in the U.S. and went six times platinum. Ironically, despite the disco beat of several songs, many reviewers calling it a classic return to form and their best album since 1972’s *Exile on Main St.*
shots of large artillery howitzers firing shells from on top of a hill, then opens to show a number of naked men sitting around the water, celebrating the shelling from behind them...the scene both compresses and expands the logic of the rifle/gun chant (“This is my rifle...”). On the one hand, the men are naked, without any weapons in their own hands. On the other, they are metonymically linked to the large howitzers. And they are, in fact, having fun as, naked, they watch the destruction. (115)

The symbolic association between the naked men, whose fronts are turned in the direction of the artillery, and the artillery itself is unavoidable and also juvenile and laughable. Furie is not guilty of fetishizing the technology of weaponry, but Eberwein insists that the scene is “sexual” in that the “naked male bodies are linked to large guns spewing forth destruction” (116). Eberwein also, as does Jeffords, sees the framing as theatrical: “Furie has established the mise-en-scène like the interior if a movie theater: the action (the firing of the guns) proceeds from behind the men, who can watch the effects of the firing in front of them. They are physically between the source of death and its effects, exulting (115). Should we then conclude the following calculus: masculinity = sexuality = violence = death? Eberwein ends his commentary on The Boys in Company C with what seems to be a contradiction of interpretation: “...the men’s nakedness in the presence of the booming guns and airplanes spewing fire underscores their vulnerability” (116). Well, which is the naked man? Destructive or vulnerable? The case can be made for both: the naked man is both potentially destructive and obviously vulnerable, but Furie is either not apparently conscious of or interested in locating a definitive moment. Cinematic options abound in such a primordial scenario, though it cannot be known whether the producer(s) had the will, desire, or imagination: a single explosion—either self-inflicted or not—for example, to a naked soldier’s icon of power/vulnerability would have at least made a statement. When a mortar shell falls short of its target and causes unintended damage to a force’s own men, it’s called a short round.

Furie does avoid at least one over-trod trope: the groovy soundtrack. Would the opening of Apocalypse Now, with its brilliant use of diagetic (helicopters) and non-diagetic (music) sound in harmony be as haunting without The Doors’ “The End?” Despite a seemingly endless stream of exceptional popular music from the sixties and seventies, Furie and his producers chose not to
employ a soundtrack of hippy/groovy and/or antiwar songs. They most likely could not afford the rights, a virtually never-observed or commented upon irony: even the most fervent anti-war musicians (Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, U2, et al.) do not donate their music to filmmakers, ever. Instead, the film employs, to good enough effect, the gentle and haunting lament by actor Craig Wasson, who plays Dave Bisbee, the gentle guitarist, who wrote and performs the film’s theme song, “Here I Am:"

Uncle Sam I’m in Vietnam,
It’s a jungle it’s a prison. But here I am,
Dreaming of the outside and freedom, planning my get away.
Far away from this one ship bay,
In the southeast tip of Asia. Where I lay,
Dreaming of the outside and freedom, planning my getaway.
Weapon drawn I got my web gear on,
I'm crawling on my belly near Khe Sanh
Dreaming of the outside and freedom planning my getaway.
But there is a guard on the inside with a rifle in hand,
And a guard on the outside on this government land.
Uncle Sam I’m in Vietnam it’s a jungle it’s a prison but here I am, here I am...

Craig Wasson did not serve in Vietnam, yet that kind of statement is often the badge upon which opinion is given credence. But the mentality that “you must have been there” is neither fair nor necessarily relevant to art. Examples are manifold, but a few will suffice: hundreds of artists throughout history have movingly reproduced via numerous media the passion of Christ’s suffering without, obviously, having been there to witness the event. Stephen Crane famously had not served in the Civil War when he wrote his moving testament to the quagmire that is the ancient notion of being an honorable and brave man, The Red Badge of Courage (1895). The title refers to the color of blood from being wounded in battle, the visual proof of having been part of the ultimate test of manhood: war. Crane was born several years after the Civil War ended, but the lingering effects of such a tumultuous event infect the next generation of boys. The Vietnam War had the same effect, and for the same reason: it was lost, at least as popular and literary culture would have us believe (though the Union is the victor, Henry Fleming must overcome the worst failing of masculinity: cowardice). There are no famous films that lionize the valiant soldiers of the Union, with the exception, perhaps, of Glory (1989), which concentrates its message more upon the bitter irony of African-American men, not long before freed from slavery in the northern states, conscripted to battle against the Confederacy, yet segregated and led by white officers. (Almost a hundred years
later to the day, African-American soldiers in Vietnam were presented with not dissimilar ironies.) Curiously, Hollywood placed its sentiment squarely upon the myth of the fallen, glorious South, most notably portrayed in the best-seller *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell’s smash hit novel, first published in 1936 and made into the biggest Hollywood hit for half a century in 1939. The casting of just which leading lady of the time was to play Scarlett O’Hara was national news; the issue of slavery and the massive loss of life were merely backdrops to the romance. Just as *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, by Thomas F. Dixon, published in 1905, the second work in his Ku Klux Klan trilogy, galvanized the uncomfortable sentiment of the majority white nation (at least its book-buying customers), D.W. Griffith’s epic film upon which it is based, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), was a stunning success, despite widespread protests of its lionization of the KKK and demonization of freed slaves. So peculiar are the vicissitudes of popular culture and so frequently are they utterly contrary to the historical record that is must be imagined that some form of delusion guides Hollywood’s producers and directors. Under what mindset could the travesty of slavery be so minimized in proportion to just whom Scarlett would sleep with to justify the extraordinary success of both novel and film? Twenty-five years earlier, D. W. Griffith was sufficiently taken aback at the criticism of *Birth of a Nation* that he devoted himself to a corrective, *Intolerance* (1916), which is wildly imaginative, touches on four disconnected periods of history, is massive in scope, running three and a half hours and literally employing a cast of thousands, and is almost entirely incomprehensible. Film critic and scholar, David Thomson, author of numerous texts on film, decried the film’s "self-destructive frenzy":

The cross-cutting, self-interrupting format is wearisome .... The sheer pretension is a roadblock, and one longs for the "Modern Story" to hold the screen .... [That story] is still very exciting in terms of its cross-cutting in the attempt to save the boy from the gallows. This episode is what Griffith did best: brilliant, modern suspense, geared up to rapidity — whenever Griffith let himself slow down he was yielding to bathos .... Anyone concerned with film history has to see *Intolerance*, and pass on. (Thomson, *Have You Seen...?*)

Wasson’s lyrics are subtle but clear: there is no mention of honor, duty, bravery, heroism, patriotism, or otherwise serving a cause larger than one’s own existence. Instead, he connotes the battle zone of Vietnam to being in a prison, where he dreams of and plans his escape, hopes to get
away, but is guarded from freedom by a soldier with “rifle in hand” who works for the government. There is real truth to this sentiment: for centuries, men have been literally kidnapped (known as conscripted) and forced to participate in massive acts of wickedness because their kidnappers are stronger than they are and claim national/religious/ideological rights by rule. We must ask, what kind of man willingly makes his living by forcing other men into combat at threat of imprisonment or death? War would not exist were there not numerous of this kind of man. Not for nothing does each branch of the military have its own police force. Many, if not most, men must be coerced to do violence against those toward whom they have no personal enmity. As proof, America has a long history of draft dodgers, more than can be adequately enumerated here, and the reasons for disobeying the call to manly duty are legion, not the least of which is simple self-preservation, inarguably the strongest instinct in humans. They—the young conscripts unable to avoid military duty—must be trained (some would say brainwashed) to tap into an apparent well of archetypal masculine brutality that generations of cultural advances have attempted to quash via the teaching of manners, gentleness, and recognition of the many mutual benefits of diplomacy. Boys everywhere are taught to “shake hands and make up” when conflicts occur. Many men, somewhere along the way, betray this artifice, but most do not. Hollywood has never made a film about the long history of men avoiding war. Somehow, The Boys in Company C manages to frustrate both types of men. In his review of The Boys in Company C, Andrew Sarris of The Village Voice confounds by claiming that, “the super-hawks will regard the film as commie propaganda, and the super-doves will dismiss it as hypocritically exploitative,” which, he suggests, may explain why the movie failed to find an audience. If that is the case, which is arguable, then Furie succeeded in crafting a fine film, one that compels audiences to actually consider both sides of a complex argument, rather than kowtow to a particular perspective and ideology. But Sarris is being needlessly complacent and insincere for the sake of moral relativism; there is not one single moment from beginning to end in The Boys in Company C that suggests that the U.S. is engaged in an honorable humanitarian mission to save the lives of millions of people who are being compelled at risk of death—under the pretense of national unity—to join the totalitarian ideology of yet another charismatic cult leader, Ho Chi Minh. There are no “super-hawks” who find this film admirable. For the assistant to the producer (and future Vice President of Paramount Pictures),

46 Martin Scorsese’s Gangs of New York (2002) is structured around the riots in New York, 1863, as a result of Lincoln’s issuance of the draft, but viewers are forgiven for not noticing, so incoherent is the film.
Max Youngstein, *The Boys in Company C* had an “overriding objective to show that war in itself is the ultimate obscenity... Any war is the ultimate obscenity... it’s the constant proof that man has not yet evolved to maturity” (Suid 346). Suid notes, regardless of the filmmakers’ intent, that the presentation of the Marines “bore little resemblance to their training procedures, activities, or experiences in Vietnam. In fact, if the United States has fought the war as portrayed in *The Boys in Company C*, the Marines probably would not have made it off the beaches...(note elsewhere that, indeed, the amphibious landing of Company C is botched: their landing vehicle becomes stuck in the sand, rendering them vulnerable. Alvie is almost immediately shot, precisely for acting like a tourist, not a Marine).


Although it followed a group of young men from their Marine boot camp training to combat in Vietnam ...contained at best only a superficial denouncement of Vietnam (must there be a denouncement?). Its newspaper advertisements that proclaimed "To keep their sanity in an insane war, they had to be crazy" provided more insights into the filmmaker's perspective of the war than anything in the movie. In the film, boot camp training consisted of a stream of four-letter words and a drill instructor mishandling recruits. As a logical extension of such absurdities, all sense of discipline and the military chain of command is lost once the unit reaches Vietnam.

The loss of discipline is a common and entirely understandable trope, when one takes into consideration the reality of bullets striking and entering the human body, explosions that take off parts of the human body, etc., but these events of the horrific are not the reason for the incompetence of Furie’s boys. As presented, they are merely lousy soldiers, with the exception of Washington, and, as a group, function, no doubt unintentionally, as a rude comment upon the boys of generation Boom, one of the great ironies of the anti-war generation: in service to the peace and love ideal, they are portrayed as the most pathetic exemplars in popular culture of

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47 Lawrence H. Suid is contract historian for the Department of Defense and author of *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*, generally considered the bible on the subject, so vast and thoughtful is it in scope and scholarship (1978). His doctoral dissertation was on Hollywood and the movies of the Vietnam era.
masculinity ever. And because the movie resembled countless other war films of earlier eras and imitated the third act of M*A*S*H (Altman, 1970) with its sports-as-war metaphor, while saying nothing unique about Vietnam, “audiences generally ignored it.” Altman’s film remains a minor classic among the anti-war subgenre. Altman’s film succeeds in large part because he allows his anti-war protagonists the distinct oeuvre of cool, despite their overt sexism, rather like Don Draper in HBO’s series Mad Men. Their very names place them among masculine cult favorites: Hawkeye Pierce, for example, is a name that first suggests avian clarity of vision and predatory skill and second the ability to see through and/or cut into or otherwise enter others’ bodies, though he is an inveterate, chauvinist pig. His partner is Trapper John, a name filled with misogynistic implications, if we dare to further deconstruct: Trap her, John! A “john,” of course, is the male customer of a prostitute, its derivation obscure, no doubt to the misfortune of men named John, a name once connoted with godliness. Altman, utterly revered among film commentators and even more so among actors, allows Pierce and John to humiliate the “uptight” head nurse, Major Margaret O’Houlihan, who represents the naïf, the fool who believes in the war’s cause. Her “flaw” is located within her sexuality, meaning her resistance to the smug overtures of the two doctors, who plot, plan, and carry out a massively humiliating act of theater by having the entire tent to the women’s showers lifted while O’Houlihan is showering and thus, obviously nude while most of the MASH unit sit on foldout chairs and applaud the “performance.” Earlier, the two pranksters plant a microphone in her private tent while she is engaged in an amorous conversation which is then broadcast throughout the camp on loudspeakers for everyone to hear, including, via echo and feedback, O’Houlihan and her paramour as well. The point of her humiliation is to punish her for her overt devotion to the rules of the army, and thus expose her as a hypocrite when she, too, is exposed as having sexual desire (she has been established as a strict den mother to the younger nurses, insisting that they not engage in acts of fornication, etc.). Furie’s exposure of the male body is not designed to humiliate, and if it is meant to titillate, it is very tame, but it has no legitimate narrative purpose as established in the screenplay. It does, however, successfully connote the male sex organ with violence, a profoundly problematized trope.

Suid is being generous: Furie’s film has not a single moment of cinematic artistry, even accidentally, on the overtly satirical level of Altman’s minor masterpiece, which ends with a
perverse homage to Christ’s last supper, as DaVinci framed it. The character who attempts suicide (seen briefly in the position of Christ at the center of the table), to the plaintive tune “Suicide is Painless,” which became the theme song to the long-running TV show M*A*S*H (but noticeably without the bitterly ironic lyrics), is distraught not because of the horrors of the war but because he could not “get it up” the night before with a WAC (Women’s Army Corp), a commentary on the male ego and psyche if ever there was one, and a bit rife with interpretive fodder: the U.S. military is impotent in its efforts to...take control of the feminine Vietnam and thus must, at least, symbolically die? The early seventies in Hollywood was a rare and brief time in cinematic history when passionate filmmakers were given reign over the world’s greatest train set, as Orson Welles once said, and effect was regnant, not necessarily truth.

Suid further professes that

Given the content of Boys in Company C, the producers did not even bother to request cooperation from the Marines. By way of contrast, the makers of Go Tell the Spartans did submit their script in hopes of obtaining military assistance. The Defense Department found the story "unusual" in that it showed American advisors in Vietnam in the early 1960s "heroically carrying out their assignment." The Army, however, had problems because the script presented "an offhand collection of losers" making up the American unit at a time in history when advisors in Vietnam "were virtually all outstanding individuals, hand-picked for their jobs, and quite experienced."

Regarding the little remembered Go Tell the Spartans (a fine literary title), Suid notes that

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48 The song was written specifically for Ken Prymus (the actor playing Private Seidman), who sang it during the faux suicide of Walter "Painless Pole" Waldowski (John Schuck) in the film's "Last Supper" scene. Robert Altman had two stipulations about the song for Mandel: first, it had to be called "Suicide Is Painless"; second, it had to be the "Stupidest song ever written." Altman tried to write the lyrics himself, but found that it was too difficult for his 45-year-old brain to write "stupid enough." Instead he gave the task to his 14-year-old-son, Michael, who apparently wrote the lyrics in five minutes ("Interview with Johnny Mandel").

49 The Greek lyric poet Simonides (c. 556 – 468 BC) wrote of the famous battle of Thermopylae, further mythologized for the modern audience in the film 300 (2007): "Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by/That here, obedient to Spartan law, we lie." The ancient requirement that men must follow orders, however absurd, and die in battle to be proclaimed heroic, is, thousands of years later, not one bit altered.
Given DOD regulations requiring historical accuracy and plausibility in stories qualifying for cooperation, the Army indicated that the filmmakers would have to revise the script if they wanted assistance. Although factual inaccuracies could have been corrected, the script contained an irreconcilable problem. The Army could not accept the Burt Lancaster character of an aging major who explains that his failure to be promoted was due to his being caught making love to a general's wife by the general and the President of the United States. For their part, the screenwriter and producer refused to change the sequence because they liked Lancaster’s portrayal. As a result, *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) received no cooperation. The film’s authenticity (nothing could be further from the truth: the film was shot with the apparent budget of an episode of *Starsky and Hutch* on the backlots of Hollywood, California, and looks amateurish, shot with subpar film stock) resulted from unofficial technical advice given by the deputy director of the Army’s Los Angeles Office of Information.

Suid does not provide the name of this deputy director or explain why an officer of the Army would admire a screenplay that so early in the Vietnam War (1964, when the army was termed “military advisors” rather like in today’s growing presence in Syria) portrays the U.S. combatants as already defeated. Lancaster’s performance, smug and fatalistic, suggests that he has already determined that the cause in Vietnam is lost, an absurd conceit, given that the film is set in 1964. Then again, he is witness to the ugly truth of the Communist’s will-to-power: children were used to carry weapons and ammunition and were recognized as VC pawns by the South Vietnamese soldiers, represented by the brutal “Cowboy” in *Spartans*. Cowboy is right when he guns down a group of children in the night, their bodies shown to be laden with ammunition. The Americans, however, cannot bear the thought that children are being used as cannon fodder, one of many ridiculous myths of the telling of the Vietnam War. American soldiers had for many years seen such sad tactics in Germany, Japan, and Korea. The films of the Vietnam War, however, were the first to expose the ugly truth (with the exception of the aforementioned Civil War, though children were not used a bait). The unnamed deputy director, nevertheless,
liked the script so much that he took a leave from his job and worked with the
director during the shooting. With this assistance, the film did in large measure
become a tribute to the Army's advisors in the early days of the Vietnam War.
The climactic firefight created the feeling of real combat, unlike the major battle
in *The Green Berets* that looked like a John Wayne shootout with the Indians. But
although it became the closest of any Vietnam film released up to that time to
capture the American experience in the war and received praise from critics and
even the military, Spartans quickly passed from view.

*Go Tell the Spartans* ends without a shootout and thus fails to live up to the myth of the great
300 Spartans who died repelling the invading Persians. Instead, director Ted Post shoots a dark
and effectively frightening sequence of *retreat* as the American outpost—denied backup or
support—is overrun by the magic enemy, none of whom are seen or apparently killed. Lancaster
and Wasson set the remaining stores of munitions to detonate, incongruously in ten seconds, not
when the VC enter the base, from a remote detonator. Director Ted Post films Lancaster and
Wasson running from base camp toward camera; the munitions go off in no less than three
seconds—not the ten that Wasson’s munitions expert has declared—accomplishing absolutely
nothing except to make the two of them look incompetent. Already lame, a cliché of the defeated
male (always the leg, meaning his maleness), Lancaster and Wasson crawl away to hide in the
woods. Their attempt to blow the base and kill many VC is a pathetic failure, and Post makes no
attempt to finish the sequence. Cowboy is shot in the back by a magic VC (perhaps the most
common and ludicrous trope of the Vietnam War film cycle, given that over one million North
Vietnamese were counted as dead, meaning that they were not in the least ghostlike but utterly
visible) who pops up from his magic hole in the ground, magically able to see in the dark and
magically positioned precisely in the woods under a two-by-two trap door, where the company
has decided to evacuate and sit helpless to the superior wiles of the home team. Wasson’s
character is dragged into the woods by an honorable elder (played by the successful Chinese
actor, James Wong), who, having apparent magical skills of his own, is capable of being and not
being visible (meaning he appears, wraithlike, after a devastating firefight, without apparent
regard to the laws of physics, a favored myth of the Vietnam War film cycle), and, because there
must be someone to tell the tale, hides Cpl. Courcey from the VC. By morning, the spectator is
compelled to discover that the entire American outpost has been wiped out (a mere five or six
bodies are shown, which is moving, but not exactly on the scale of the burning of Atlanta, or the wasteland of Gettysburg, or a single dying soldier’s hand reaching for a butterfly), and, through the eyes of the lone survivor, we see the extent of the wickedness of the enemy: Lancaster’s body, among several others, has been stripped nude and left to rot, face down, near a riverbed. *Go Tell the Spartans* is relentlessly, though artlessly bleak. The seventies are often iconized as the decade when Hollywood movies “got real,” and there are scores of brazen films that earned the sobriquet. *Go Tell the Spartans* is a pale, amateurish attempt.

Stories about losers are, in fact, a mainstay of literature and film: from Oliver Twist to Henry Fleming to Holden Caulfield to Billy Jack, there is no shortage of boys and men who fought and failed but won our hearts and minds. To fight the good fight though to lose; is not that the space wherein pathos and dramatic effect is performed? Is that not the very definition of manhood as noble? The cause matters, of course, but it is apparently the sacrifice that truly affects the spectator, if well presented. If the man dies in the effort, utterly regardless of cause, then all is forgiven, though in some cases, a difficult code to honor.⁵⁰ A film’s earnestness may, if poorly realized, doom it to failure. Youngstein, according to Suid, admits that his desire to create a statement against war turned out to be ‘far from...an in-depth statement’ that ‘left open by a large margin’ “room for more serious film statements about Vietnam” (Suid 347). In numerous ways, this is the fate of *The Boys in Company C*. The production values are, at best, on par with those of basic T.V. The acting, camerawork, and editing are significantly subpar to serious films of the era or even two decades prior. Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957), for example, an exceptional work of art which, Andrew Sarris, longtime film critic of *The Village Voice*, a cinematic autodidact par excellence, holding no more than a bachelor’s degree from Columbia University earned in 1951, placed in his silly category of filmmakers whom he considered as suffering from “Strained Seriousness” in his 1968 masterwork, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*. Included in this category with Kubrick are John Frankenheimer, director of *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *The Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), both films predating the counterculture mentality that heroizes the stooge, the villain, the

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⁵⁰ *Das Boot*, a 1981 German war film written and directed by Wolfgang Petersen, is a spectacularly moving anomaly which accomplishes the unthinkable: to humanize the Nazis, mostly young Germans, most not actually members of the Nazi party (an important distinction), but still, fighting for Hitler’s fatherland, in this case, within a U-boat. Hollywood has never so well captured the horrific association of the submarine to a coffin. The expression “watery grave” comes to mind. Because the spectator knows the outcome, the sense of doom of waiting to see a hundred men drown in the depths of the ocean is visceral.
pathetic pawn of the greater power; also included is Norman Jewison, whose oeuvre deserves special recognition for straddling the Jewish/Christian divide with extraordinary artistry: *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973); Lester, Lumet, Schlesinger, Sturges, Wise, the list of luminaries is astonishing, certainly in retrospect, in whom Sarris found little to admire. Sarris includes Furie in this category as having created “talented but uneven [work and committing the] “mortal sin of pretentiousness...Their ambitious projects tend to inflate rather than expand,” whatever that means (Sarris, 189). Making a movie is exponentially more difficult than criticizing one. Suid wonders: “To make a fair statement against the Vietnam conflict”—throughout his massive tome, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*, Suid far more often employs the phrase Vietnam War [emphasis mine], not Vietnam conflict, a semantic distinction fought over to this day—“can filmmakers change history to satisfy the needs of their messages?” (346).

According to *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (for lovers of language, a wonderful title), the answer is an unequivocal yes. In over fifty essays on as many films, illustrious historians take to task and studiously dismantle the more elaborate instances of poetic license in cinema. Stanley Karnow, author of the highly respected *Vietnam: A History* (1983), writes of Oliver Stone’s film *JFK* (1991) that “I [Karnow] lack the credentials to judge Stone as a filmmaker...nor am I competent to assess the picture’s rendition of the Kennedy assassination....However, I feel qualified to comment on the movie’s Vietnam perspective, having covered the wars there for more than forty years” (272). Regarding Stone’s insistence that “Kennedy, had he lived, would have abandoned Vietnam,” and that “Johnson was determined to intensify the war” countermanding Kennedy’s orders, “twists the episode out of all recognition.” (272). Kennedy hoped that U.S. support would give the South Vietnamese “the chance to strengthen themselves” (272). But “Nothing in Kennedy’s public utterances, however, suggested that he even remotely envisioned scuttling Vietnam....But Stone may have the final word. Friends who teach high school and college courses on Vietnam tell me that, for most of the students, *JFK* is the truth” (273). So too, likely, is the image of the Vietnam veteran—crazed, drugged, ignorant, incapable, etc.—as reproduced by Hollywood.

A very few scenes do stand out and capture some semblance of gravitas: the first is a tight shot, one camera, two actors, an actor’s classroom exercise. During basic training, the main
DI (Ermey) and Washington (Shaw) face off, and this scene is pivotal. Street-smart Washington has grown increasingly frustrated with the “lily-white doofuses” of his company who lack all basic survival skills typically associated with males. In an overt scene of redneck heckling, Washington, pointedly positioned on his knees while engaged in a typical duty to which privates are assigned to break them of their pride and singularity—white-washing a rock with a big ol’ paintbrush, Tom Sawyer-like—singing an anti-war song, “Don’ Wanna Fight,” in the embarrassing style of the blues circa a cotton-picking slave, is harassed by a handful of “honky” yokels, a scene created without narrative legitimacy but rather to imply that overt, unabashed, white-on-black racism was prevalent at the time. Washington, cool as Shaft, responds with Kung Fu mastery, quickly dispatching the “honky motherfuckers.” We learn that Washington’s real problem is that he is saddled with a company of pansy-ass white boys, none of whom, we must accept, could find his way out of a wet paper bag, all of which is to clearly suggest that white America has failed in its traditional duty to masculinize its boys. Only black America, struggling for basic civil rights, remains in touch with its archetypal roots of violence, its true savage self, its inner Iron John. In the real world, had such a scene occurred on any military base in the U.S., circa 1968, Washington would have been arrested by the M.P.s and tossed into the brig for the duration of basic training. But in Hollywood, war films that attempt to include race relations as a theme are not much removed from sports movies. The strictures of class and race are amended when a superior athlete is required to help the team. Because of his physical strength and street warrior persona, Washington, the black soldier, descendant of slaves, is, ironically, the best suited of the recruits for the Marines, if only he can rise above and overcome his natural revulsion of spoiled and racist whites and accept the role of leadership meant to forestall the imminent slaughter of each member of the platoon when they are sent to Vietnam. The scene is effective, despite its simplistic moral, primarily because of the legitimate verisimilitude brought

51 The word honky is a curious ethnonym, its derivation not clearly determined, but its use is exclusively pejorative, though not particularly effectively. Its use was ubiquitous in television sitcoms of the seventies featuring predominately black casts (The Jeffersons, Sanford and Son, Good Times). The Jeffersons, for example, whose protagonist, George Jefferson, is an openly racist African-American, who, having achieved economic parity with whites, is thereby freed to speak his mind, ala the blatantly racist Irish-American character, Archie Bunker, and employs the word honky frequently when referring to whites toward whom he has no respect, Abraham Lincoln included. The vagaries of the applications of language from a hegemonic perspective are evident in the fact that American television never used the word nigger (with the exception of 1977’s epic miniseries Roots) but the powerful Broadcast Standards and Practices had no reservations with the word honky. There was one stunning exception: comedians Richard Pryor and Chevy Chase in a 1975 Saturday Night Live skit infamously played a word association game in a mock interview where the word nigger spoken by a white man elicits a death threat from the black interviewee, clearly capturing the demarcation line in racial linguistics of power.
by R. Lee Ermey. It is shot in one take with virtually no camera movements or cuts. Some of the actors’ lines are stumbled over, which actually results in a kind of honesty, ala a challenging scene in theater school which all actors of The Method, be it of Stanislavsky, Boleslavsky, or Strasburg, are taught to embrace and recognize as *truth*. Audiences, however, recognize bad community theater acting when they see it, and so do film critics. The main man Washington, after requesting permission to enter, having been taunted by the faceless honkies during his Tom Sawyer task, proceeds to berate Staff Sergeant Loyce (Ermey) for having been saddled with a bunch of worthless white dudes, whom he has earlier told to stay clear of him because they are all “a bunch of fuckups” who are going to die in Vietnam. That scene occurs in the barracks during lights out, when the “boys” have been told to go to bed. The military is infamous for treating young men in the prime of life as if they were twelve-year-olds at summer camp, but the truth is much more horrible: the mothers of boys barely able to masturbate are rounded up and trained to kill, all for a good cause. In the male equivalent of a girl’s sleepover and pillow fight scene, a common trope of repressed sexuality in movies a decade earlier, one young male is caught masturbating in his bunk by the others and is rousted and tossed about, landing dangerously close to the big, black man. All of the white recruits in the barracks scene back away from Washington as if he were a lion. The change has come: no longer is the black dude portrayed as an errant knave (actually, one would be hard-pressed to find any major Hollywood film later than the thirties that so defined the black male, though such is the myth). By the sixties, the “man” was clearly identified as “white power,” and he was the enemy. That so many white boys and men (both groovy and academic) bought into such a simplistic and racist point of view is evidence of the power of media, cinema, and popular cultural perception. Never in history has a particular demographic been so obsessed with guilt as the liberal white male of the sixties whose legacy is regnant in academia and popular culture to this day. But according to Perry Luckett, in his article “The Black Soldier in Vietnam War Literature and Film” (1990), published in the journal *War, Literature, and the Arts* for the Department of English, United States Air Force Academy,

...positively depicted black soldiers are ubiquitous in Vietnam narratives. A few black characters are cowards or shammers, who shirk duties, blame others for problems, or harp about discrimination when they want to avoid unpleasantness. But most fictional Blacks [sic] are brave, loyal, and protective of their
comrades—no matter the color of their skin—because they share the same trials of war, the same need to survive that causes brothers...in arms to bond together. (1)

Luckett also recognizes that Hollywood’s depiction of black soldiers

...admittedly, in some cases...represents how primarily white authors have tried to counteract racist portrayals of the past. [Luckett is hedging his argument here, a bit, by tossing in the adverb ‘primarily;’ as of 1990, literally not a single Hollywood film on the Vietnam War was written by or directed by an African-American].

These fictional soldiers tend to merge into a ‘type’ with certain standard characteristics [meaning stereotypes]. For example, most Blacks are cool, menacing, and capable, because of their supposed natural toughness—developed on the streets of Detroit, Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles. (2)

Why Luckett (or Furie) fails to include white men from America’s urban jungles as having also developed street smarts and toughness is one of many weaknesses in the argument that blacks are tougher than whites. Any film aficionado knows that this narrative—the tough guys of the mean streets—goes all the way back to the silent era of gritty immigrant tales of the rough and tumble chutzpa of boys of German, Irish, Italian, Russian, Jewish, Armenian, Greek descent, the list goes on and on. The story of the black man, however, is significantly removed from the romanticized narrative of the plucky, Ellis Island immigrant for the obvious reason that no African chose to emigrate to the U.S. and neither did he arrive free. Furie’s film does not belabor the point or even make note of it. It is understood. Washington does not get a moving, impassioned monologue lamenting the difference of racial heritage in the U.S., which is a shame, as it might have added the necessary singularity of meaning to an otherwise rambling and ultimately silly movie that never rises to the occasion, though it deserves credit for eschewing myriad racial tropes. Instead, the filmmakers decide to proclaim Washington as the real man, the hero, the one who among a dozen white losers must represent the U.S. against the yellow man, though not a single Vietnamese character other that the corrupt South Vietnamese colonel is

52 I am not a proponent of the theory that suggests that an author must be of the race, gender, religion, or any other determiner to accurately represent “the other.” There simply are too many extraordinary works of literary insight to presume that the author must belong to a particular category.
written or presented on screen. Bruce Springsteen’s oft misunderstood protest song, “Born in the
U.S.A.” does a much better job of stating the obvious: the average American male “Got in a
little hometown jam/so they put a rifle in my hand/Sent me off to a foreign land/ to go and kill
the yellow man.”

Regarding the construct of “the other,” David Desser, in his essay, “Charlie Don’t Surf,”
anthologized in Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television and edited by Michael
Anderegg, creates more than discovers or uncovers, via deconstructive evidence, a theory. Much
has been made of the “continuation of the ‘yellow menace’ propaganda of half a century ago” in
discussing the Vietnam War film cycle. One might ask, however, how else is the enemy, who
happens to be of another race, in this case Asian, to be portrayed in the face of combat but as
wicked, relentless, strange, and inhumane? Could any cultural narrative be significantly
antithetical to its national anthemic duty? The Japanese were certainly dehumanized in virtually
all WW II films, but then again, so were the Germans. To the soldier in the field, there is little
difference between enemies, with the possible exception of physical appearance: they are all the
“Other.” Viewed through the lens of common sense, one concludes that, of course, “they” are all
the “Other,” for if “they” were not, there would be no conflict. “They” would be “us” and
therefore, presumably, friendlies. But men are not so simple, even if racial constructs suggest
otherwise. Even during conflicts between soldiers of the same race, as in the U.S. civil war, the
Korean War, and the Vietnam War, sides are chosen and both are “Othered.” The Confederates
loathed the Yanks and vice versa, despite the fact that thousands on both sides were from the
same family line. The same is true with the wars in Southeast Asia. Family members frequently
found themselves on opposite sides of the ideological divide. With extremely few exceptions,
virtually all war films demonize the enemy, and if the enemy happens to be of another race than
the majority of the U.S. soldiers, racism is, ipso facto, the result of representation. Desser rightly
notes that in both Go Tell the Spartans and The Boys in Company C that the Vietnamese are “not
merely the enemy” but “posited as an inexplicable Other,” including the South Vietnamese
allies. Nevertheless, “the enemy is, in fact, granted more respect, though not necessarily more

53 Called for induction when he was eighteen, Springsteen failed his physical examination and did not serve in
Vietnam. Springsteen is famous for his extraordinary performances that last for hours on end with exceptional
energy. In an interview in Rolling Stone magazine in 1984, he said, "When I got on the bus to go take my physical, I
thought one thing: I ain't goin'." He had suffered a concussion in a motorcycle accident when he was seventeen, and
this together with his "crazy" behavior at induction and not taking the tests was enough to get him a 4F (Loder,
Kurt).
humanity, than the ‘host country nationals’ for whom the Americans are supposedly fighting” (6).

Writing for the New York Times in 1978, reviewer Janet Maslin quickly dispenses with the stereotypes of The Boys in Company C:

Dave Bisbee is a hippie who says, when he is drafted into the Marines, "I guess that's my karma coming out," and who is seldom without his guitar. Vinnie Fazio is a fast-talking ladies' man from Brooklyn. Alvin Foster is a sensitive type, and he keeps the journal upon which the movie is supposedly based. Billy Ray Pike is an even more sensitive type, because he worries about having left his young sweetheart pregnant and later winds up hooked on drugs in Vietnam. And Tyrone Washington is a former ghetto dope dealer who turns out to have astounding leadership abilities, plus the soul of a philosopher and a heart of gold.

Maslin further notes that the characters are, in fact, “...so stereotypical, and hence so constricted, that they don't seem to have any feelings of consequence about what they do or what happens to them.” That may be taking the point too far: the characters are shown to eventually care deeply for one another, a perfectly acceptable pursuit of the “ragtag group of misfits” trope. Maslin believes that the stereotyped characters “amounts to a failure to take any stand on Vietnam,” but as earlier argued, Furie does take a stance: Vietnam is a space where American boys go to die for no discernable reason. Maslin is spot on, however, in claiming that “As a film about heroism, it is chiefly remarkable for its gutlessness.” As stated earlier, Furie seems not to have been interested in pursuing any sense of realism, and in a so-called war film, one that contains at least a few scenes of combat, the absence of blood, images of death, or moments of tremendous horror is strangely antiseptic and results in the most unfortunate form of distanciation: the spectator is not permitted to care who lives and who dies. We are certainly not moved by the image, cinema’s greatest tool, but neither are we moved by the word; the screenwriter does not allow a single character a single memorable moment of speech. Maslin is bothered by the lack of time placement, noted earlier as both potentially effective—war takes place in another dimension, without irony, and, ala The Twilight Zone, no diminishment of the real intended, without time or space—but also limiting: not one single song o’ the times? She wishes to see some reference to
the tumult of “the troubled American political climate of 1967, which is when the story takes place,” a reasonable expectation. But for that to occur, the film’s structural narrative would have to be bifurcated between “in country” and “back home,” which would inevitably dilute the film as combat film. As fans of combat films would attest, nothing destroys the pace and intensity of a war film faster than (a) flashbacks to “the world,” meaning the U.S, (b) an irrelevant and intrusive romance, or (c) overt narrative commentary on “the times.” Nevertheless, Boys does lack a sense of time once the introduction of the young males as products of either the normative fifties, i.e. conservative, traditional, patriotic children of the Leave it to Beaver construct or as products of the counterculture, i.e. Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, The Jefferson Airplane. As mentioned elsewhere, by eschewing a soundtrack typical of the period—an often simplistic and heavy-handed device virtually required of period films (and even the main narrative element in some, as in “Good Morning, Vietnam)—Boys must rely on other signifiers: the haircutting scene, the rice paddy trek, the plastic body bag. Regarding the film’s ostensible hero, Washington, Maslin find that “it's hard to recall anyone on the screen who has demonstrated such unrelenting nobility, such unmitigated righteousness, in recent years,” a fine and respectable observation. Washington is the hero, the one whose character has evolved from the inside out. He has grown from selfish to selfless, regardless of the burdens of racism, lunacy, pathetic representations of masculinity all around him, and, of course, a war without stated cause. Maslin ends her commentary with the typical coup de grâce of her times: “And it's hard to imagine a less appropriate occasion on which those qualities might reappear.” Maslin is not so much annoyed at the poor film that is The Boys in Company C as she is at its weak condemnation of the war. Nowhere in her review does she notice that the two gentlest boys, Alvie and Bisbee, give their lives in defense of the most innocent and vulnerable.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND EPHEMERA: ABOUT FACE

“In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

C.S. Lewis, “The Abolition of Man” (1943)

“You can kill ten of our men for every one we kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and we will win.”

Ho Chi Minh (1946)

“I will work harder.”

Boxer, the cart-horse in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945)

Perhaps no period of America’s history is so fragmented in the popular conscience as the sixties and the Vietnam War that spanned most of that decade. Virtually endogenous to the Vietnam War film cycle are the prevailing myths developed by Hollywood and preserved by those adamantly opposed to the war. For example, the Nam vet became metonym for psycho and a stock character in numerous low budget films as an excuse to establish scenarios of legitimate social conflict via simplistic, reductionist characterizations of hundreds of thousands of American men whose lives had been irrevocably altered by the rigors of military training and combat experience. The best of these films attempted to express a modicum of empathy for the soldier, portraying him as victim of a monolithic state apparatus from which he is incapable of escape; the worst of these films merely capitalized on and sensationalized the image of the wounded soldier and his evident mental trauma. There is nothing really new to see here. Filmmakers have capitalized on every cultural fear since the advent of film: the Indian savage, the urban gangster, the mutant monster of science, the perverse murderer in the nation’s heartland, et al. But no icon of violent, mental rupture has been employed to greater horrific narrative and cultural effect than the Vietnam War veteran. The bad guys of horror movies—Jason, of the hockey mask; Michael Myers, of the white face; and Freddie Krueger, of the bladed fingers—are silly cyphers derived from utterly no legitimate source of universal or cultural psychic disturbance. But the Nam vet is real and remains the most problematic of American
The war in Vietnam serves as a microcosm for numerous dichotomies: the East/West divide, between which we’re told by Kipling “never the twain shall meet”; male/female, with the U.S. as male (violent, materialistic, imperialistic, industrial, and penetrating) and Vietnam as female (passive, verdant, mysterious, agricultural, and receptive); modern/ancient; democracy/communism; rich/poor; individualistic/communal; the list is virtually endless, but such dichotomies go both ways. For example, Vietnam has a much longer militaristic past than the U.S., having worked to resist Chinese occupation and control for two millennia; Vietnamese culture is significantly more patriarchal than the U.S ever was and cannot legitimately be considered “feminine.”

The Western mind is perhaps too naïve and thus mistakes primordial jungle, underdeveloped natural resources, and village-dwellers romantically. Certainly Oliver Stone does in the last film of his Vietnam trilogy, *Between Heaven and Earth* (1993), which opens with a cinematic reversal to Coppola’s audacious and ominous introduction to Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now*. Whereas Coppola juxtaposes the jungle tree line of Vietnam with the warped sound of Huey choppers and the dirge-like tones of the Doors’ anthem to death, “The End,” Stone adopts a near Disneyesque tone in the opening shots of *Between Heaven and Earth*: we hear a young Vietnamese girl’s voice-over, sweet and gentle, commenting upon her life, foreshadowing war and suffering, but noting that her village is the most “beautiful place on earth.” Such a pretense of romanticism on the part of Stone is strangely anachronistic, given his obvious knowledge of Vietnam’s brutal recent history under Japanese, French, and Chinese rule. Stone’s camera pans across a verdant field, the early morning sun gently lighting the earthly paradise, and comes to rest upon the figures of the young girl and her kind-faced father, the two having arrived at a rural temple as they pray to a golden figure of Buddha to start their day. The music, at first clearly Asian, rather suddenly transforms into a full Western orchestra, swoons loudly and dramatically to greet the opening credits. Stone comes very close to emulating the peaceful, agrarian images that open the controversial documentary, *Hearts and Minds* (Davis, 1974), which also begins with a panning shot of rice farmers, men and women (the face of one lovely, young woman in particular is zoomed in on), while the dulcet tones of a Vietnamese woman’s voice singing (non-diagonetically) places the viewer in the imaginary world of the Eastern paradise. Within one

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minute, Davis’s camera captures a South Vietnamese soldier, his rifle strapped to his back, striding across the rice field, looking back at the camera with suspicion. The dualities are immediately established: life-giving nature/life-threatening man; beautiful woman/ugly man; a humble horse-drawn carriage is overrun by two men on a motor scooter.

The Nam film cycle is the polar opposite of the anti-communist propaganda films of the 1950s. According to J. Hoberman, “Most of the movies are what Jacques Ellul would call “sociological propaganda”—they were part of a particular climate or mentality. Just about the only people who thought that the government was dictating content were the writers and readers of the Daily Worker” (An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War 2012). Writing in 2000 in his massive undertaking, Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam: 1970-1979, David Cook correctly observes, regarding Arthur Penn’s extreme revisionist parody of U.S. actions against Native Americans, Little Big Man, (1970) that “there has probably never been another time in the history of American cinema when a 150-minute film that bitterly indicts American imperialism and depicts the U.S. military waging genocidal war could become a popular hit” (Cook 75). Penn unabashedly portrays hitherto hero, Custer, as a babbling idiot of monstrous proportion. In making his film timely as an anti-war Vietnam parable, Penn goes so far as to stage a “version of the Washita River massacre to resemble photographs of the My Lai massacre of March 16, 1968, which had recently appeared in the American press—a parallel that was widely recognized at the time… The Hollywood Reporter noted that this sequence looked ‘like the 6 P.M. new footage from Vietnam’” (Cook 74, 75). Little, Big Man, Thomas Berger’s “picaresque novel” [was adapted by] “screenwriter Calder Willingham, whose credits included The Graduate and Stanley Kubrick’s Paths of Glory” (74). Penn also hired Asian-Americans as extras to represent victims of U.S. military atrocities to further the comparison to the war in Vietnam. The analogy is undeniably apt; the U.S. military killed over two million Vietnamese and virtually eradicated the natives of the land mass known now as the United States of America. Given further scope, were this an anthropological study, painfully ironic and historic connections could be made between the Asians and their migratory descendants, the American Indians. Cook’s point that no other so

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55 Calder Baynard Willingham, Jr. (1922 - 1995) was an American novelist and screenwriter whom The New Yorker credited with having “fathered modern black comedy.” Willingham dropped out of The Citadel and then worked for the Office of War Information in Washington in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, which may explain his disdain for the armed forces, American exceptionalism, and mythologized notions of masculinity.
profoundly anti-American film would likely “become a popular hit” remains true. Hollywood’s movers and shakers continue to devote millions of dollars in the everlasting attempt to decry U.S. military actions anywhere, even in response to the shattering events of September, 11, 2001 and the new threat of Islamism. The box office receipts of Hollywood films made about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, all of them presenting the U.S. invasions as flawed if not another example of brute imperialism, have been meager. The handful of Hollywood films about the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and on terrorism as an undefined boogeyman are virtually all negative. Even the admirable homage to the idiocy of male bravado in *The Hurt Locker* nevertheless portrays the protagonist, heroic in his duty as a bomb diffuser, as mentally unhinged, another masculine caricature with a death wish, and absolutely no backstory or psychological motivation is provided to explain the ostensible hero’s choice of occupation. He is later shown to care about the children of Iraq, and he is devastated to learn that the enemy goes so far as to surgically implant a bomb into a youth’s body, knowing that the idealistic American will try to intervene and be traumatized by the outcome. Later, he is shown to be unable to cope back at home while in a grocery store, presented with the mundane task of choosing among scores of brightly packaged breakfast cereals, suggesting something about the masculine thrill for war being unsurpassable as experience, and all else is mind and soul-numbing by comparison. This kind of man gets off on the thrill of maybe/maybe not being bodily exploded, a subtle homage to DePalma’s metaphor of war as Russian Roulette. Unlike their Vietnam film predecessors, however, the recent war films all failed at the box office. Definitely changed, however, is the attitude toward soldiers themselves. Nam vets were treated badly; vets of the wars in the Middle East are treated heroically. Since the events of 9/11, society had returned to its previous respect for the military, or at least the soldiers who do the fighting. Hollywood, typically, misunderstood the nation’s zeitgeist. Whereas the counterculture of the sixties decried America’s intervention in the war of communist expansion in Southeast Asia, Hollywood of the new century, with painful irony, also resists warfare as a solution to Islamic jihad, despite its ravenous desire to eradicate Israel.

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56 See my essay *Hollywood and the New War on Terrorism* (2009) as evidence of the failure of the new wave of anti-war/anti-America films set, this time, in Iraq and Afghanistan.
Ephemera

As mentioned earlier, that which is missing in a film or in an event’s representation is potentially significant and worth at least brief mention. Consider, for example, what approaches to the Vietnam War were excluded from Hollywood’s selections of narratives:

1. There are no films centering on African-Americans who served in Vietnam and their particular perspective, despite the frequent claim that African-American soldiers died at a much higher ratio to their numbers than Caucasian soldiers (true in the first two years). Hollywood has made only one successful major war film that centers on the African-American experience in war, Glory (1989), which is set during the Civil War, but not for lack of trying. George Lucas produced the universally panned Red Tails (2012), the umpteenth telling of the heroic Tuskegee Airmen, all black (there was no expression, African-American, in 1944), who fought both Nazis and racism back home. Hollywood’s attempts to honor minorities and their contributions to America are more often than not embarrassing failures to connect to wide audiences.

2. There are no films that center on the atrocities of the North Vietnamese upon the people of Vietnam, North and/or South, prior to or during the arrival of American troops. In the majority of the films of the Vietnam War cycle, typically, viciousness is a trait assigned to the South Vietnamese soldiers. DePalma was castigated for his infamous scenes of North Vietnamese torture of captured U.S. soldiers in The Deer Hunter, an image of pure fiction and thus unworthy of reflecting the actual methods of torture U.S. soldiers experienced. Television news producers mediated this generic image via the live assassination of a member of the Viet Cong by South Vietnamese Brigadier General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, who was at the time of the infamous photo and live filming, South Vietnam’s chief of National Police. Loan gained international attention when, during the Tet Offensive, he summarily executed handcuffed prisoner Nguyễn Văn Lém, a Việt Cộng soldier, February 1, 1968, in front of Võ Sửu, a cameraman for NBC, and Eddie Adams, an Associated Press photographer.
Figure #8. “General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner in Saigon.” Eddie Adams (February, 1, 1968).

Somewhere near three million Vietnamese died during America’s wartime involvement. Three million. But this photograph, as only a single image can, stunned the national conscience. Body counts are an abstraction and allow evasion; the image of a man’s head being blown apart by a pistol at the hand of another man, however, is soul-shattering. In the argument between words and images, there really is no debate: the image wins. A thousand words of explanation could never overcome the horror of actually seeing a man’s head blown apart. Humans are first and foremost visual animals. We respond to what we see. Only later do we ponder. As proof, consider how ineffectual are the reports of the South Vietnamese sources—being, of course, the only ones present (except for the American photographer)—who reported that Lém was the leader of a VC death squad who had been captured near a ditch which contained dozens of murdered South Vietnamese police officers. Regardless of the facts of the case—summary executions in war are and always have been common—the photo created a firestorm in the psyche of Americans who were, curiously—given that such images were common in war reporting—horrified to see such atrocities in this particular and peculiar war. The negative reaction to the image and event and others like them is indicative of the changing attitudes towards what was considered acceptable male behavior. Was there a rise in sensitivity, perhaps

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57 I was not able to locate photographic evidence of such an event.
misguided, for the “other,” even at the expense of sympathy for one’s own kind and a growing revulsion toward violence? A mere twenty-five years earlier, a filmed summary execution of a Nazi (certainly) or Japanese (perhaps) soldier by the British or American soldiers would have drawn approval in the eyes of most Americans, but as of 1968, masculine sensibilities had changed profoundly, as Arthur Schlesinger infers in his brief essay, “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” written in 1958. Schlesinger begins his claim that some kind of existential crisis among American men had begun by asking, “What has happened to the American male? For a long time, he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity.” [The] “Frontiersmen of James Fennimore Cooper, for example, never had any concern about masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it.” There seems to Schlesinger, primarily as a result of having taken to heart Hemingway’s themes of the damaged male—typically by war, not incidentally—that by “midcentury [the 20th], the male role had plainly lost its rugged clarity of outline.” This supposed evolutionary change is here regarded with suspicion, not admiration. Schlesinger notes the rise of the role of women in society and pays it due respect; he notes the rise of the willingness of men to accept domestic duties as being merely “superficial.” He sees, rather, the real danger in masculine crisis as a growing willingness, a weak-kneed compliance, to adapt to corporate conformity. Ultimately, Schlesinger’s lament is not that men are no longer manly in any overt way, but that they are failing the challenges of individualism, which would, evidently, mean resisting the rise of corporatism. Nevertheless, the conversation had indeed begun: are American men of the mid-twentieth century not quite the men their fathers were?

Equally relevant in how Adams’ iconic photo was received by the general American population is the virtual exclusion of similar images of atrocity committed by the North Vietnamese, creating an imbalance in perception. The photo won Adams the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography, but less known is that he was later said to have regretted its impact. The image became an anti-war icon, and, again, the stereotype of all media in Vietnam as being antagonistic to the U.S. cause falls out of myth with further evidence and hindsight. Concerning Loan and his famous photograph, Adams, fully cognizant of the immense influence of filmed images, “later apologized in person to General Nguyễn and his family for the damage it did to his reputation. When Loan died of cancer in Virginia, Adams praised him: ‘The guy was a hero. America should be crying. I just hate to see him go this way, without people knowing anything
about him’ (Robbins, “This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive.” 2010). In eulogy to Loan, Adams wrote:

I won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for a photograph of one man shooting another. Two people died in that photograph: the recipient of the bullet and General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. What the photograph didn't say was, "What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American soldiers?" General Loan was what you would call a real warrior, admired by his troops. I'm not saying what he did was right, but you have to put yourself in his position. The photograph also doesn't say that the general devoted much of his time trying to get hospitals built in Vietnam for war casualties. This picture really messed up his life. He never blamed me. He told me if I hadn't taken the picture, someone else would have, but I've felt bad for him and his family for a long time. I had kept in contact with him; the last time we spoke was about six months ago, when he was very ill. I sent flowers when I heard that he had died and wrote, "I'm sorry. There are tears in my eyes." (Time. July 27, 1998)

Despite the fact that Hollywood made very few films honoring the sacrifice of the U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, attitudes towards soldiers on foreign combat missions have almost completely reversed in a single generation, just as they had before. Whereas stories of returning Vietnam veterans being spat upon are almost certainly false, the media did very little to honor them; today, soldiers from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are spoken of in virtually religious tones (though the films about the wars against terrorism are still predominately negative. This seems to be the new politically correct paradigm: hate the war, love the warrior). Though Hollywood continues to produce films decrying the U.S. mission to combat Muslim terrorism, there are virtually no protests aimed against the U.S. soldier emanating from university campuses. Clearly, a cultural shift, no doubt generational as well, has occurred, again (the new angst is aimed at the corporate monster on Wall Street, but the elite students of Berkeley and
Columbia seem not so interested in or devoted to the cause as they once were. No titans of Wall Street have been captured by force and held captive until the media accepts their demands). Along with a renewed respect for the soldier today, there seems to be a concomitant irony regarding political will against the state: the leaker of the Pentagon Papers was then and is today hailed as a hero (and members of the Weather Underground are tenured professors). The modern revolutionary and leaker of international papers via the Internet, Julian Assange, however, is quickly banished—to the former Soviet Union for protection—for maintaining the same ideology: the public has a right to know the secrets behind government and industry actions.

3. No Girls Allowed. Michael Lee Lanning notes the lack of fully developed female characters in the films of the Vietnam War and that most are relegated to “Minor parts as whores (Hamburger Hill), atrocity victims (Between Heaven and Earth), and enemy soldiers (Full Metal Jacket)” (Vietnam at the Movies, 82). I would add to the list the girlfriend/wife back home who (see “Dear John” letters) betrays the soldier’s love for another, as in Coming Home, which develops Jane Fonda’s character as having much more sympathy for and attraction to a paralyzed veteran than her own husband, also a damaged veteran. Her husband’s betrayal leads to his moving suicide (the Nam vet must die for his crimes against humanity), though his character is not afforded much empathy (he actually shot himself in the leg to get shipped out as a response to the horror he felt for having killed the “enemy”). Jon Voigt’s character’s paralysis (never explained or dramatized) is noteworthy as a comment on masculinity in that he is rendered passive via his impotence and thus non-threatening to a war-weary nation. He also functions as a Hollywood wish-fulfillment symbol of a formerly gung-ho, aggressive America(n) now castrated and shamed for his crimes against the innocent Asian “other” who lives in peace with nature and has been radicalized only in reaction to Western, militaristic, imperialistic aggression. Voigt’s character is a profound commentary on the gender wars: his impotence is shown to be inconsequential to Fonda. She does not need a man with a functional penis; she is perfectly happy to receive oral sex (no doubt a surprise to many men) because this form of sex does not carry the taint of male penetration, which signifies dominance. Jane Fonda may remain a succubus in the popular masculine memory (she did sit on the enemy’s tank), but she may also prove to be his most profound lover.
The story of Le Ly Hayslip (born Phùng Thị Lê Lý) is the single exception in the Vietnam War film cycle. Her experience as a young Vietnamese girl is told in her memoir and first book, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (1989) later filmed as *Between Heaven and Earth*, directed by Oliver Stone in 1993. Her tragic life exemplifies the Western expression of being caught between a rock and a hard place. The South Vietnamese torture her; the North Vietnamese rape her; and the Americans use her for love and sex. Literally every male character in her life is a profound disappointment to her. Her first American husband brings her to safety in the U.S. before Vietnam falls to the communists, but he succumbs to emphysema in a few short years. She marries Dennis Hayslip a year later, but he was a heavy drinker, clinically depressed, and full of rage, and accused of committing domestic violence. The couple filed for divorce in 1982. Soon after, he committed suicide (importantly, if we are committed to thinking of the male construct, he left her very wealthy). Unfortunately, but predictive of audiences,

The film’s drubbing by the critics [most of whom found the film overlong and overwrought] was matched by the public’s almost complete apathy to the project... [and] was virtually ignored at the domestic as well as international box office. Perhaps, in a perverse manner, its seeming irrelevancy confirmed the evolution of the collective American consciousness beyond the urgency of embracing the opportunity for catharsis provided by Stone’s much superior film of nearly a decade earlier, *Platoon*. (Devine, 364-365)

Stone’s third film in his Vietnam trilogy had a production budget of thirty-three million dollars yet earned just under six million dollars (boxofficemojo.com), a tremendous failure. Reasons for a film’s failure to find an audience are myriad, but given the multiple opportunities modern distribution affords (theatrical release, cable release, DVD sales, etc.) the most likely explanation is that the film simply failed to capture interest (the lack of a popular star, Tommy Lee Jones notwithstanding, also is a major factor). Stone’s film, though beautiful and moving, failed to recognize the changed attitude among Americans regarding the U.S. mission in Vietnam: despite the carnage, the cruelty, the ineffectual ideological purpose, the significant evidence of barbarism, the mission, at least from the perspective of the common soldier, the new attitude sees the war as having been indeed altruistic and noble, perhaps even heroic. The success of Mel...
Gibson’s film, *We Were Soldiers* (2002), based on the book *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* by Lieutenant General (Ret.) Hal Moore and reporter Joseph L. Galloway, both of whom were at the battle dramatized, certainly suggests so. Though exorbitantly budgeted at seventy-five million dollars (much of it going to star Gibson), the film at least broke even, earning around seventy-eight million dollars. Perhaps more significant, the nation’s major film critics were unabashedly complimentary, even Roger Ebert, now the elder statesman of American cinema, gives the film three and half stars and notes that *We Were Soldiers* and *Black Hawk Down*, directed by Ridley Scott in 2001 (the latter film returns to the early Vietnam War cycle’s imperative that U.S. military incursions into foreign lands, this time, in an attempt to eradicate the Somalian warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, are doomed to failure) both seem to replace patriotism with professionalism. This movie waves the flag more than the other (even the Viet Cong’s Ahn looks at the stars and stripes with enigmatic thoughtfulness), but the narration tells us, "In the end, they fought for each other." This is an echo of the "Black Hawk Down" line, "It's about the men next to you. That's all it is." It seems that Belton’s Vietnam Reversal remains the regnant purpose for brothers in arms. It’s still not about the cause; it’s about your fellow soldier. Lisa Schwarzbaum, one of several film critics for *Entertainment Weekly*, noted the film's...fair treatment of both sides. The writer-director [Randall Wallace] bestows honor—generously, apolitically—not only on the dead and still living American veterans who fought in Ia Drang, but also on their families, on their Vietnamese adversaries, and on the families of their adversaries too. Rarely has a foe been portrayed with such measured respect for a separate reality, which should come as a relief to critics (I'm one) of the enemy's facelessness in *Black Hawk Down*; vignettes of gallantry among Vietnamese soldiers and such humanizing visual details as a Vietnamese sweetheart's photograph left behind in no way interfere with the primary, rousing saga of a fine American leader who kept his promise to his men to "leave no one behind dead or alive."

Perhaps most remarkable is Todd McCarthy’s review in *Variety* (admittedly, a trade magazine) which remarks that the film “presents the fighting realistically, violently and relatively coherently given the chaotic circumstances." McCarthy then proclaims, as if history were speaking to its younger self, that
Mel Gibson has the closest thing to a John Wayne part that anyone's played since the Duke himself rode into the sunset, and he plays it damn well. Gibson's performance anchors the film with commanding star power to burn. This officer truly loves his men, and the credibility with which the actor is able to express Moore's leadership qualities as well as his sensitive side is genuinely impressive.

It might be that sentiments regarding men at war were profoundly altered as a result of the events of 9/11/2001, mere months before Gibson’s film was released. But the change had been coming for quite some time, as if a national tantrum, however justified, had finally run its course. The counterculture generation legitimately believed that peace could prevail over war, and the multiple movements of their time were definitely watershed moments. The effects are felt today. Steven Pinker argues effectively, in his massive study, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined,*” precisely that: from the lessening of casualties by design to the better treatment of animals, men (as a gender), for the most part, worldwide, are far less likely to engage in violence than their historical predecessors. As an evolutionary psychologist, Pinker may even be suggesting that the male is evolving biologically toward a less violent being.

Comparing the horrors of the mid twentieth century to anything since seems evidence enough to support his assertion. Rape is now a crime (in most parts of the world); it rarely was anywhere on earth a mere fifty years ago; child abuse is now a crime; it rarely was a mere fifty years ago. “Domestic abuse” is a neologism. Former president George H.W. Bush was roundly teased in 1988 when he admitted that he wanted a “kinder and gentler nation.” The knee-jerk macho reaction of the media at the time insisted on emasculating this American war hero (who recently skydived at age ninety-two), but his sentiment prevailed. Every school in America today is obsessed with combating bullying. Ask anyone reared in the fifties, and he or she will tell you that in *their* day, what is now called bullying was called toughening up the tenderfoot. Not too long ago, no adult man in a position of leadership could be seen crying (Nixon was roundly mocked for a tear or two); today, John Boehner makes a living at it. George W. Bush strutted as if he were a cowboy, his arms slung to his sides, as if ready to draw; Barack Obama, on the other hand, is lithe and elegant in motion, virtually dancing down the stairs of Air Force One.

4. Unlike several WW II films about the major political and military figures of the day, such as *Patton* (1970) and *MacArthur* (1977), virtually no films of the Vietnam War Cycle—despite its
heavy politicization—concentrate on the major political figures of history of that time: LBJ, Westmoreland, and McNamara (Nixon, directed by Oliver Stone in 1995, is a biography of a complex president but contains very little connection to the Vietnam War). Furthermore, unlike with Patton and McArthur who were heroized in major Hollywood films, General Westmoreland was utterly demonized in the press, despite his having significant success in battle, including much higher kill-ratios of the enemy and much lower casualties and fatalities of U.S. troops than his famous predecessors from WW II. The introduction to Jeremy Devine’s encyclopedic analysis of some four-hundred films of the Vietnam War clearly proclaims that “...whatever the subgenre, the overall message of those [WWII] war films was essentially the same: the nation was a social and cultural community with a shared history and destiny, and with a populace utterly unified in its commitment to the war effort….Vietnam marked something else entirely: American’s loss of innocence, its abuse of power on a global scale [emphasis mine], and social divisions that only grew worse in the face of a national crisis” (Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second, vii). Without meaning to seem facetious, it’s fair to ask: has there ever been a generation to suffer under war that did not perceive its experience as “a loss of innocence?” Whether the U.S. did, in fact, “abuse” its “power on a global scale” is, again, almost beside the point, if one considers that the means might indeed justify the ends. Ho Chi Minh certainly did, but we cannot deny that the majority made their choice, even if it wasn’t at a voting booth. Vietnam today is a miserably poor nation, and the argument can certainly be made that the U.S. is significantly to blame, not only for having wrought havoc upon that nation but also for having failed to staunch the advance of totalitarianism. By comparison, not facile, South Korea is a fantastically successful nation (if one admits that the benefits of modernity are a positive).

Virtually all commentary at the time (the sixties and the seventies) followed this paradigm: WWII, the good war; Vietnam, the bad war. Certainly, this is how Hollywood portrayed the dynamic. There are numerous reasons why such a simplistic dichotomy developed, but the most obvious is ideological: the counterculture activists and the new Hollywood executives were proponents of socialism and saw the U.S. excursion into Vietnam as an imperialistic/capitalistic incursion. But there is precedent in serious (high) culture (meaning Broadway) to suggest that the U.S. involvement in WWII was not completely honorable in its intentions. It is undeniable that there are those who profit from warfare. Arthur Miller, a mere two years after WW II (1947), suggested so in his bitter anti-homage to American
exceptionalism, *All My Sons*, which is based on “a true story.”* 58 WW II can easily be demonstrated to be the more monstrous event, the employment of the atomic bomb being the most readily recognizable example, but not one person was accused of spitting on G.I.s when they stepped off the Queen Mary (did babies die as a result of the U.S. incursion into Europe? Of course they did. Why were such images not recorded, or if they were, why were they not on the front page of the *New York Times*? Why did not the *Washington Post*? Why did neither the Nobel nor Pulitzer committees award a single photographer for such an image? It might, in fact, be argued that the actions of the U.S. during the war in Vietnam were more humane—insofar as it is possible to wage war humanely—than previously in history, as the atomic weapon was not employed to bring about victory in Southeast Asia. The more likely explanation that the U.S. employed the atomic weapon in 1945 but not during the 1960s is that in 1945, the U.S. was the sole owner of the technology, and there was no potential for equal retaliation. The same was not the case in the 1960s, as China and the Soviet Union, the primary suppliers of weapons to the People’s Republic of Vietnam, held hundreds of nuclear weapons.59

Statistics are endless, so only one example is necessary to make the point that the war in Vietnam was far less horrific than was WW II and that the perceptions otherwise are virtually a creation of Hollywood and those of the 1960s and 1970s who held vastly different opinions regarding notions of nationality, patriotism, and masculinity. The French civilian casualties of allied air bombing alone were greater than the entire loss of lives of American soldiers in more than a decade of fighting in Vietnam: “Between 1940 and 1945, France was the second most

58 Arthur Asher Miller was born on October 17, 1915, in Harlem, the second of three children of Augusta and Isidore Miller. His father was an Austrian Jewish immigrant, and his mother was born in New York, to Austrian Jewish parents. His father owned a women's clothing manufacturing business employing 400 people and became wealthy enough to own multiple homes and employ a chauffeur. In the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the family lost almost everything. Briefly a proponent of the Communist party, refusing to testify against his peers, his works, ironically, in 1969, were banned in the Soviet Union after he campaigned for the freedom of dissident writers.

59 See the history of the Rosenbergs, et al, all Russian, Jewish communists, who allegedly provided the Soviet union with diagrams of the atomic bomb. The federal judge who imposed the death sentence on the Rosenbergs, Irving Robert Kaufman, was also Jewish and was heavily influenced by prosecutor Roy Cohn, also Jewish, appointed by Joseph McCarthy in part to avoid the impression of anti-Semitism. Both Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn have been repeatedly castigated by Hollywood over the years for their anti-communist actions. McCarthy has been portrayed as a cross-dressing transvestite; Roy Cohn, secretly gay, died of AIDS-related complications in 1986. He remains one of the most detested characters in Hollywood lore. It may be impossible to untangle the competing ideologies, but the Soviets and soon the Chinese developed the atomic bomb, leading to the next era, known as the Cold War. The wars in Korea and Vietnam, however, were certainly hot and without question, were wars by proxy between the Eastern nations of communism and the Western nations of democracy. To this day, no film has successfully told the story of either war from a political perspective, though *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), in its paranoid and convoluted way comes closest.
bombed country of the war after Germany. By liberation, the Allies had dropped 600,000 bombs on 1,500 cities, towns, and villages. The Allied bombing campaign killed over 67,000 French civilians and wounded tens of thousands more. Most hit were Boulogne, Clermont-Ferrand, Saint-Etienne, Caen, Le Havre, Brest, Lorient, Saint-Nazaire” (Miquelon.org). If ever there were a greater irony than killing more of one’s allies than one’s enemies in order to save one’s allies from one’s enemies, it will likely pale in comparison to the military actions of WW II. The fact that the U.S. military applied significantly more precise technology in Vietnam in an effort to minimize—in the infamous term “collateral damage”—suggests that, at the very least, the effort was made. Nevertheless, carpet bombings prevailed, and the use of biological herbicides (Agent Orange, the most infamous) to kill off entire swaths of jungle to expose the enemy combatants also suggests a contradiction of approach.

In all of history, no other masculine narrative carries such great weight as that of the “brothers in arms” mythos. There may, in fact, be no greater tragedy of human existence than the double-edged sword that places a man’s highest glory in his capacity to slaughter other men in combat while simultaneously deifying those beside whom he fights. Those who are resistant are branded cowards and killed for this failing. The great raconteurs know that the hearts and minds of men are changeable and myriad. To speak of the “soldier” is to speak of but one facet that is man. In “The Iliad,” Achilles is the epitome of the young man, blessed with extraordinary strength, fortitude, arrogance, pride, and pitiless rage in warfare, yet in “The Odyssey,” now a shade in Hades, he responds to Odysseus’ praises of his kleos (glory) even in Hades with indignity and resentment for having given up his life for a lie: “No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!/ By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man/Some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive/than rule down here over all the breathless dead” (Fagles, 11.547-558). Dying young in battle is not quite so great, a multi-millennial lesson not apparently learned to this day.

The war in Vietnam was not unique in its horrors. It was not the first to send home young men in ruins beyond repair. It was not the first to be waged in great part for political rather than for moral or defensive purposes. It was not the first to engender anti-war sentiments. It was not the first to spawn a massive outpouring of creativity in music, literature, and popular art. It was,

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60 See, for example, *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *The Execution of Private Slovik* (1974).
however, the first to excoriate rather than exhort its combatants. And as of this writing, it remains the only one.
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