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Half a memory : the Vietnam War in the American mind, 1975-1985

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Half A Memory:
The Vietnam War In The American Mind, 1975 - 1985

Mark W. Jackley

Submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts in History

University of Richmond, 1989

Dr. Barry Westin, Thesis Director

This study attempts to show how Americans in general remembered the Vietnam War from 1975 to 1985, the decade after it ended. A kind of social history, the study concentrates on the war as remembered in the popular realm, examining novels as well as nonfiction, poetry, plays, movies, articles in political journals, songs, memorials, public opinion polls and more. Most everything but academic history is discussed. The study notes how the war's political history was not much remembered; the warrior, not the war, became the focus of national memory. The study argues that personal memory predominated over political memory for a number of reasons, the most important being the relative unimportance of the nation of Vietnam to most Americans. America remembered the war in terms of how it touched individual Americans.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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HALF A MEMORY:
THE VIETNAM WAR IN THE AMERICAN MIND,
1975 - 1985

By

Mark W. Jackley

B.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1981

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the degree of

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PREFACE

This study attempts to show how Americans in general remembered the Vietnam War from 1975 to 1985, the decade after it ended. The focus of the study is history in the popular realm, including novels as well as nonfiction, poetry, plays, movies, television shows, articles in political journals, history in the political arena, songs, memorials, public opinion polls and more. Most everything but academic history is examined. As a kind of social history, the study seeks to determine the nature and influence of popular historical memory.

CHAPTER 1
THE PUBLIC FORGETS THE WAR

Wanting To Forget The War

When Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese on April 30, 1975, and the Vietnam War finally ended, Americans began viewing the long, divisive episode through historical lenses. Indeed, for the United States the war was history in 1975, for the Paris accords of 1973 had ended America's combat role in Indochina and arranged for the return of her prisoners of war. Their emotional homecoming was perhaps the only thing resembling a clear and satisfying conclusion. Having put the war behind them two years before, Americans were now in a position to be historical. In assessing the war and what went wrong, both political observers and ordinary citizens spoke with a trace of distance in their voice, reflecting not just the chronological distance between the Paris settlement and the fall of Saigon but also the physical and even spiritual one between war-torn Vietnam and the peaceful United States. They spoke with disgust and embarrassment as well, from the right, the left, the middle and the undefined.

On the left, Irving Howe, editor of Dissent magazine, called the American role in Saigon's last days "squalid," bringing to an "ugly culmination a history of confusion, deceit, stupidity, crime."¹ Howe's strong language was matched by other critics of the war. Frances Fitzgerald, author of Fire In The Lake, the award-winning history of Vietnam, said, "The rigidity and stupidity of American policy in Indochina has entirely to do with the fact that no American president has ever really cared what happened to Indochina." Referring to Richard Nixon and his advisers, Fitzgerald added that the war had dragged on "because a few cynical men wished to prove themselves right and to retain their old authority with the American public."² Stanley Karnow, a journalist who covered the war and would later write its best-selling popular history, said he could not believe that the United States, a nation of moral principles, had been responsible for "one of the major human tragedies of modern times."³ Several commentators used the

¹ Irving Howe, "Vietnam: The Sorrow and the Pity," Dissent (Summer 1975), 213.

² Frances Fitzgerald, "The End is The Beginning," New Republic, 3 May 1975, 8.

³ Stanley Karnow, "Grand Illusion," *ibid.*, 8.

word "evil" to describe American policies in Vietnam.⁴ Other descriptions were "moral and intellectual poverty"; "the arrogance of might" and "the arrogance of righteousness"; "stupid, tragic"; and policies conducted "madly."⁵

For very different reasons the political right also saw the war as wretched and decadent. Writing in the National Review, one of the leading conservative journals, Anthony Bouscaren quoted an American businessman in Saigon who called the United States "a simpering, defeatist, isolationist nation":

The damage done to America by the Vietnam debacle is inestimable. It is going to work a spell on America for 25 years. America is going into a national eclipse, and it is going that way willingly. It is bad enough for me personally to leave a place where I had planned to build a life. I don't expect anyone to give a damn about that. But America has lost its honor, and no one cares about that either.⁶

⁴ "On The Disaster," *ibid.*, and Jeffrey Race, "The Unlearned Lessons of Vietnam," Yale Review (December 1976), 162.

⁵ Hans Morgenthau, "The Elite Protects Itself," New Republic, 3 May 1975, 21; National Council of Churches, "Cleanse Us Of Arrogance," Christian Century, 7 May 1975, 462; David Halberstam, "Why It Never Worked," Newsweek, 14 April 1975, 3; Anthony Lewis, "Hubris, National and Personal," New Republic, 3 May 1975, 17.

⁶ Anthony Bouscaren, "All Quiet on the Eastern Front," National Review, 20 June 1975, 660.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sounded a similar theme, describing Congressional action toward South Vietnam in terms of abandonment and wondering what that said about American credibility.⁷ Navy Commander Richard Stratton, who spent six years in Vietnam and two months in a North Vietnamese prison, said:

America's disengagement was inevitable, but the manner in which we did it was embarrassing. I certainly thought we owed it to the Vietnamese to show a little more class than that. We led them down the primrose path and left them hanging on the end of the limb. Then we sawed it off. So why should we be surprised when we see them fall? As for me, I did everything I could. I can face myself in the mirror. I don't know how many other Americans like Jane Fonda can say the same thing.⁸

While public opinion of the war was diverse, most Americans were anxious to consign the event to history. A Gallup poll conducted in March 1975, when the North Vietnamese began their final, victorious drive, showed that 78 percent of those asked were against further aid to South Vietnam. In April, when President Gerald Ford requested \$300 million in emergency aid from Congress and was denied, 75 percent told Gallup they were against Ford's request.⁹ Americans regretted the collapse of South Vietnam, but

⁷ Department of State Bulletin, 28 April 1975, 548.

⁸ Time, "Opinions of U.S. Warmakers, 12 May 1975, 23.

⁹ Martin Arnold, "Hawks and Doves Glad It's Ending," New York Times, 20 April 1975, section I, p. 3.

Congressmen heard little support in their districts for trying to save a lost cause. Don Bonker, a Democrat from Washington, said, "People are drained. They want to bury the memory of Indochina."¹⁰ Republican Garner Shriver of Kansas spoke for many when he said, "The feeling is that we've made a considerable contribution to Cambodia and South Vietnam and that we've done enough."¹¹

The most succinct expression may have come from Abner Mikva, a Democratic Congressman from suburban Chicago, who noted Americans "want to pull the oceans over their heads."¹² They wanted, in other words, to forget there was such a place as Vietnam. They wanted to forget that Americans had fought there for eight years, that some 58,000 had died, that 270,000 had been wounded, that the United States had spent so much blood and bile in fighting and arguing the war. Said a badly wounded Marine, "For the American public this will be forgotten. Just like a bad dream."¹³

Heeding public sentiment, President Ford gave a speech at Tulane University on April 23, 1975, in which he declared

¹⁰ Time, 14 April 1975, 22.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Newsweek, 28 April 1975, 12.

¹³ Ibid.

the Vietnam War to be over for the United States. His declaration drew enthusiastic applause from the audience. Ford called for "a great national reconciliation," saying, "Today America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished--as far as America is concerned."¹⁴ At a news conference several weeks later, Ford repeated himself, saying, "The war is over. It was sad and tragic in many respects. I think it would be unfortunate for us to rehash allegations as to individuals who might be to blame, or Administrations that might be at fault. It seems to me that it's over, we ought to look ahead"¹⁵

Ford thus set the tone for the postwar debate. The war itself, its political history and detail, would in fact be debated hardly at all. America would instead brush herself off, stride toward her bicentennial in 1976 and try to learn what she could from the Vietnam experience. How could learning take place without debate? The unspoken idea was to view the episode pragmatically, keeping it in the back of the mind, not dwelling on it and continuing to succumb to its poisons. In the much-remarked national manner, Americans would look to the future, not the past. There

¹⁴ New York Times, 24 April 1975, section I, p. 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7 May 1975, section I, p. 20.

would be healing and a minimum of recriminations. This was implied in Ford's "great national reconciliation."

Appropriately, his memoirs were entitled A Time To Heal, referring to both the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal which made him president.

As 1975 came to a close, so did the war in the American memory, for a time, anyway. Once the flood of postmortems had been issued by politicians, statesmen, newspaper columnists and various pundits, one saw or heard very little about the war. President Ford barely mentioned it in his 1976 State of the Union address,¹⁶ and it was not a topic of discussion in the presidential campaign of that year. Columnist Joseph Kraft noted how the war was conspicuous by its absence from the campaign, saying Ford and his eventual Democratic opponent, Jimmy Carter, were practicing "the politics of reassurance." By running as an outsider to Washington, Carter, said Kraft, implied the war was yet another mess stirred up in the capital, not a national creation. For his part, Ford was fond of quoting Dwight

¹⁶ Committee on House Administration, U.S. House of Representatives, The Presidential Campaign of 1976 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 179.

Eisenhower: "America is great because America is good."¹⁷

Neither party's platform mentioned the war, except for brief references to assisting Vietnam veterans.¹⁸

The war resurfaced in January 1977 when President Jimmy Carter's first executive action was to pardon those who evaded the Vietnam draft, making good on a campaign promise. In an interview the year before, Carter had spoken thoughtfully of those who had served in the war and those who had managed to avoid it. Said Carter:

In the area of the country where I live, defecting from military service is almost unheard of. Most of the young people in my section of Georgia are quite poor. They didn't know how to get to Canada, they didn't have enough money to hide in college. They thought this war was wrong. They preferred to stay home, but still they went to Vietnam. . . . It's very difficult for me to equate what they did to what the young people did who left the country. So for a long time it was hard for me to address the question in objective fashion, but I think it's time to get the Vietnam War over with. . . . I don't have the desire to punish anyone. I'd just like to tell the young folks who did defect to come home, with no requirement that you be punished or that you serve in some humanitarian capacity or anything. Just come back home, the whole thing's over.¹⁹

Carter's pardon angered some, but like the war it was soon forgotten. Like his predecessor, Carter spoke of healing,

¹⁷ Joseph Kraft, "Campaign Cop-Out," Washington Post, 4 April 1976, section III, p. 7.

¹⁸ Donald B. Johnson, ed., National Party Platforms, vol. 1 (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 928:979.

¹⁹ Washington Post, 22 January 1977, section I, p. 1.

of putting the bad memories to rest.

Through the late 1970s and into the eighties, certain aspects of the Vietnam War briefly held the public's attention. In his book The Unfinished War, Walter Capps showed how on most any given day a war-related topic could be found in the mass media. For example, on September 16, 1981, the Los Angeles Times carried a story about a new television film called Fly Away Angel, which its producer described as "an objective look at the war as if it had been fought one thousand years ago, as if I was writing a drama about the Trojan War." In the Times on the same day was news of a Vietnam veteran's suicide. On the day before his funeral there was news of a demonstration outside the Veterans Administration hospital which had treated the victim, whom, the demonstrators felt, had died because "the VA was unresponsive and irresponsible." The same week, People magazine ran a story about David Christian, who at 18 had become the Army's youngest second lieutenant to graduate from Officer's Candidate School and who, upon being disabled by napalm burns in Vietnam, became the Army's youngest retired captain at 21. Christian then launched a drive for Vietnam veterans' rights.²⁰

²⁰ Walter Capps, The Unfinished War (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1982), 2-4.

David Christian's story and most others about the war were notable for their human interest, but also for their lack of political history. Hollywood and to a lesser extent the publishing industry produced Vietnam stories that were usually personal, fictitious or both, and the number of these were at first a trickle, for years would pass before the war became an acceptable subject. Upon receiving the first draft of an American veteran's tale, one literary agent remembered thinking, "Vietnam--oh, God, I don't need this. How do I go about turning it down?"²¹ If personal versions were a trickle, objective histories, even popular works, were a mere drip. Americans, it seemed, liked a good story and Vietnam stories were no exception, but few were interested in the war itself. They were drawn to the personal struggles of a David Christian, but not to the politics of his war. From 1975 to 1985 only two general histories made their mark: Vietnam: A History, by Stanley Karnow, a long, journalistic account which accompanied a Public Broadcasting series on the war; and America's Longest War, by historian George Herring, a concise, academic account which became the standard college text. There were, of course, many other works, but most were specialized and

²¹ David Gelman, "Vietnam Marches Home," Newsweek, 13 February 1978, 86.

did not reach a wide audience. Karnow's and Herring's works did reach many, Karnow's selling 350,000 copies by 1985, but neither was a publishing phenomenon.²² They hardly filled the void of Vietnam War history.

Proof of the void's existence was to be found in public opinion surveys, classrooms and even the White House. A poll by the New York Times, commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the war's end in 1985, showed that two out of five Americans could not identify South Vietnam as our ally.²³ James Matray, a historian who taught a course on the war at New Mexico State University at Las Cruces, described his students as "tabula rasa" on the subject,²⁴ and he was echoed by fellow historians. George Herring, who taught at the University of Kentucky, told a reporter for the Wall Street Journal that he realized a new age had dawned when a student innocently asked what napalm was.²⁵ Another historian tested his students on the first day of class and recalled most had never heard of My Lai, the Tet

²² Washington Post, 19 April 1985, section I, p. 14.

²³ Adam Clymer, "Public Opinion and Vietnam: The Enduring Legacy," New York Times Magazine, 31 March 1985, 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁵ Wall Street Journal, 24 January 1985, section I, p. 1.

Offensive or the Gulf of Tonkin.²⁶

The students were not alone in their ignorance. At a press conference in February 1982, President Ronald Reagan said, incorrectly on all accounts, that before the 1954 Geneva settlement Vietnam had been divided into North and South; Ho Chi Minh had avoided the elections which were to have reunified the nation in 1956; and John Kennedy had sent the first American combat troops to Vietnam.²⁷ Reagan was more than matched, however, by a young woman not long out of high school, training for Army airborne duty at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. When a reporter asked for her opinion of the Vietnam War, she said, "It was stupid."

"Would you feel that way if we had won?" the reporter replied.

"I thought we did win."

"When did you find out we lost?"

"Just now. I never studied it, you know."²⁸

Being Able To Forget The War

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Newsweek, "Lyndon B. Reagan on Vietnam," 3 March 1982, 30.

²⁸ Clymer, 35.

In the years after 1975, Americans wished to forget the Vietnam War for understandable reasons. People of all political stripes found it an anxious, embarrassing memory. It was a difficult episode to grasp as well, for its history was long and gradual and seemed to lack a clear beginning, middle and end. According to one writer, "It ended as it began, imperceptibly."²⁹ Another writer described the war as having "a kind of nightmare geometry There was no organizing principle, no discernible narrative line--instead there was a web of stories"³⁰ Lance Morrow, who wrote widely on the war's legacy, said America lost the war "ambiguously," quoting Gillespie "Sonny" Montgomery, a conservative Congressman from Mississippi: "'We didn't really lose it. They didn't overrun us or push us into the sea. We just fought the war in a strange way It's an issue that's past now. Americans always want to move on to other things.'"³¹

²⁹ A.D. Horne, ed., The Wounded Generation (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), xi.

³⁰ Kathryn Marshall, In The Combat Zone (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 14.

³¹ Lance Morrow, "America After Vietnam," Horizons (July 1977), 43-44.

The war was further muddied in memory by the ambivalence of those who still argued it. The left's ambivalence seemed to be greater, the right's rather muted but telling all the same. In Commentary, the influential conservative magazine, writer Robert Tucker defended his opposition to the war and then wavered. He called the conflict a "classic case of an imperial war," the work of men who wanted to preserve America's "political preponderance," but ended by worrying about the implications of abandoning South Vietnam.³² His worries stemmed from an ambivalence that grew during the war, an attitude Tucker and others noted. Americans had wanted to end the war, but a hasty withdrawal or an admitted defeat were never acceptable courses. Henry Kissinger mentioned the same dual attitude in his memoirs: "Thousands of decent and patriotic Americans from every walk of life were moved to protest against an enterprise that had exacted such a human toll. At the same time, poll after poll showed the overwhelming majority of the American public unprepared to accept an outright, humiliating American defeat."³³ One such poll in November 1967 had shown 44 percent in favor of complete or gradual

³² Robert Tucker, "Vietnam: The Final Reckoning," Commentary (May 1975), 28-29.

³³ Henry Kissinger, Years Of Upheaval (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 84.

withdrawal, but 55 percent wanting a tougher, more effective policy.³⁴

Americans did not like losing period, and after seeing so many of their countrymen die in Vietnam were not about to give up the cause completely. In his personal account of the war, A Rumor Of War, former Marine Phillip Caputo got to the heart of the matter, saying, "There was so much human suffering . . . that I could not respond to it. It was numbing. I wanted to see it end. At the same time, a part of me did not want to see it end in a North Vietnamese victory. I kept thinking about Levy, about Sullivan, about all of the others, and something in me cried out against the waste of their lives."³⁵ Writing in 1977, political scientists Sol Sanders and William Henderson said, "The American people are still weary of Vietnam, and most of us--even the doves--are at least a little touched by feelings of guilt."³⁶

In the years to follow, a sort of left-wing repentance became a familiar refrain. Political writer Fred Barnes,

³⁴ Myra MacPherson, Long Time Passing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Books, 1984), 24.

³⁵ Phillip Caputo, A Rumor Of War (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 342.

³⁶ Sol Sanders and William Henderson, "The Consequences of Vietnam," Orbis (Spring 1977), 74.

who said he voted for radical Dick Gregory in 1968 but then had a change of heart after North Vietnam won, took such journalistic colleagues as Walter Cronkite to task for not doing the same.³⁷ The editors of the New Republic, which in 1975 had called the war evil, threw themselves at the mercy of a forgiving God when considering it ten years later.

. . . we should be haunted by the way we deserted men and women who clung to us out of conviction or out of innocence, even men and women who clung to us out of avarice or just plain fear . . . there was something unseemly in our haste to deny them that last measure of assistance that might have enabled them to establish some position of strength from which they could bargain with the enemy. . . . On what moral calculus were these decisions made? And, given what we know today, on what calculus are they to be defended?³⁸

After 1975, the right wing's most persistent champions of the war were Richard Nixon and Norman Podhoretz, editor of Commentary and author of the book Why We Were In Vietnam. Nixon's defense of the war began in 1969, when he became Commander in Chief. In his memoirs he gave a cut and dried version:

The congressional bombing cutoff, coupled with the limitation placed on the President by the War Powers Act of November 1973, set off a string of events that led to a Communist takeover in Cambodia and, on April 30, 1975, the North Vietnamese conquest of South Vietnam. . . . Congress denied first to me, and then to President Ford, the means to enforce the Paris agreement at a time when the North Vietnamese were openly violating it. Even

³⁷ Fred Barnes, "My Change of Heart," New Republic, 29 April 1985, 12.

³⁸ New Republic, 29 April 1985, 8-9.

more devastating and inexcusable, in 1974 Congress began cutting back on military aid for South Vietnam at a time when the Soviets were increasing aid to North Vietnam. . . . The war and peace in Indochina that America had won at such cost over 12 years of sacrifice and fighting were lost within a matter of months once Congress refused to fulfill our obligations. And it is Congress that must bear the responsibility for the tragic results.³⁹

Nixon's argument was an American version of the German "stab-in-the-back" theory, which had blamed spineless politicians for losing a war, World War One, thought to have been won on the battlefield. As Norman Podhoretz pointed out, however, after the Tet Offensive swung public opinion against the war in 1968 neither the Johnson nor Nixon administrations offered further reasons for being in Vietnam. Instead, they talked of how best to leave. The effect, said Podhoretz, "was to concede the moral and political arguments to the antiwar forces--by now a coalition that included people who had led the country into Vietnam in the first place and were eager to atone by leading it out."⁴⁰ Henry Kissinger confirmed what Podhoretz said, noting, "We did not question the desirability of disengagement."⁴¹ It was a crucial point in the debate, for

³⁹ Richard M. Nixon, Memoirs (New York: Gosset and Dunlap, 1978), 889.

⁴⁰ Norman Podhoretz, Why We Were In Vietnam (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 10.

⁴¹ Kissinger, 83.

the right wing, which embraced the war as its own when Nixon became president, did not articulate reasons for sending American combat troops to Vietnam in the first place. Rather, the right settled for a moral argument best phrased by Podhoretz, who called the war "an act of imprudent idealism whose moral soundness has been so overwhelmingly vindicated by the hideous consequences of our defeat."⁴²

Possibly, such an argument rang as hollow to many Americans as the early left-wing argument that a Communist victory was not so terrible. According to Podhoretz, Americans who had seen nearly 58,000 of their countrymen die for "imprudent idealism" were to be consoled by its "moral soundness." Americans were probably somewhat consoled by the idea that the war was begun with good intentions. John Roche, an aide to Lyndon Johnson, said, "I will argue to my dying day that this was the most idealistic war we have ever fought, fundamentally a war for an abstraction: the freedom of a bunch of Asians at the end of the world."⁴³ Roche's comment, however, underscored the probable weakness of the conservative line as pursued by Podhoretz and himself. To say the war was fought out of imprudent idealism or for an

⁴² Podhoretz, 210.

⁴³ John Roche, "Vietnam Ten Years Later," National Review, 3 May 1985, 44.

abstraction was to say, in essence, the war and its casualties were unnecessary. Thus, while the left recanted, the right tried to stay firm on slippery ground. Neither's versions were widely embraced.

This lack of political consensus made the war easier for Americans to forget, but it would not seem to have fully explained their amnesia. For had not the war been a national trauma? When Americans thought of the war, scenes of pain and turmoil came to mind: the My Lai massacre, the Tet Offensive, the little girl in the famous photograph running down the road after her village was napalmed, the Kent State killings, the mayhem at the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago, Americans tortured in enemy cells, veterans throwing away their purple hearts in front of the Pentagon. Television journalist Howard K. Smith spoke the conventional wisdom when he ranked the war as America's third greatest crisis, behind only the Civil War and the Great Depression.⁴⁴ So did Myra MacPherson, author of Long Time Passing, a social history of the war and its effects, when she said, "As much as we yearn to put it behind us, we cannot get over all the pain and divisions it caused."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Jan Scruggs, To Heal A Nation (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 1.

⁴⁵ MacPherson, 607.

The war had surely seemed traumatic and was remembered as such by most who made the effort, mainly in the mass media.

A few observers, though, wondered if for most Americans the war was not a lasting trauma, but really just a scar.

In Commentary, Charles Horner said, "The consequences of our defeat, being neither so vivid nor so apparent as an occupying army in the nation's capital, remind us that whatever we lost in Vietnam, others have lost more."⁴⁶

Gloria Emerson, author of Winners And Losers, one of the war's first social histories (1976), said, "The country was not particularly shattered by the war--so it is not surprising that a healing is occurring now. We are an inattentive and self-absorbed people. I suppose that inattentiveness is also a protection of sorts."⁴⁷ Ward Just, who covered the war for the Washington Post and wrote one its early novels, Stringer, put the matter thus: The United States was "two nations where Vietnam is concerned--those deeply touched by what happened there and those not affected."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Charles Horner, "America Five Years After Defeat," Commentary (April 1980), 50.

⁴⁷ Morrow, 43.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

The strongest evidence to support this line of dissent was that the war had been largely forgotten. If it had been a trauma, how was that possible? One answer may have been that it was not truly a trauma for most Americans, or if it was, it was a trauma played out half way around the world, with reverberations in Washington, D.C., Cambridge and Berkley, and in small towns when service chaplains grimly rang the doorbell. For the 26.8 million young men who were eligible for the draft during the war, there was on the average a 10 percent chance of facing combat in Vietnam, only seven percent if one was from a family of middle or high income, 15 percent if one was poor.⁴⁹ Most who served in Vietnam did not see combat, instead playing a supporting role of some kind. While many young men found the very prospect of the draft traumatic, while some wrestled with their conscience, with the logistics of avoiding service or with club-wielding policemen at anti-war rallies, this was not the same sort of anguish as seeing a friend blown to pieces by a Viet Cong mortar or having oneself disfigured in similar fashion. Generally speaking, the real trauma would seem to have been experienced in Vietnam, where the war was, not in the United States. Again, those in the age group

⁴⁹ Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, "The Vietnam Generation," Horne, 6.

most likely to be affected by the war, those of draft age, faced only a 10 percent chance of combat. Many, especially college students of means, easily beat the odds.

Many Americans either too young or too old for the draft were likely not permanently touched by the war. A young writer named David Bell said in 1985, "Despite hearing about the war constantly during my childhood, from television and student protests, the war had no real impact on me." He added that as a college student in 1980 he noticed little opposition among his contemporaries to Jimmy Carter's plan for draft registration, saying the Vietnam War "was already as alien to us personally as World War Two or Korea." To verify his impressions Bell interviewed young men and women at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, where a 19-year-old told him, "I was really confused when my parents said we were at war. It didn't seem like that. You couldn't exactly walk down the streets and notice it."⁵⁰ A national survey in 1985 revealed that 44 percent of those polled said they did not remember discussing the war with their family or friends while it was being fought. Thirty-six percent said the war affected them "hardly at all" and 17 percent said "not in

⁵⁰ David Bell, "The Lost Generation Gap," New Republic, 29 April 1985, 14.

the least."⁵¹

Much was made of the Vietnam War having been televised, in all its horror, into the living rooms of America. But a study of the televised war showed that much less than half the film footage was related to battle, and, the Tet Offensive aside, only six or seven percent showed heavy combat. John Mueller, one of the study's authors, noted that television existed during the Korean War and that studies made during World War Two indicated that realistic photographs did not change people's ideas of war. Said Mueller, "If you think that the war in Vietnam was a television war, and that people turned against the war because they saw it every night, it is equivalent to saying that the American people are so stupid that they don't know what war is. People know what wars are; they do not have to have them explained on television."⁵² If most Americans did not see the war first hand and if television did not transmit the trauma, what was the war's true effect over here? Perhaps it was captured by one soldier's anecdote. Martin Greenberg told of chatting with a young lady at a San Francisco nightclub the evening before departing for

⁵¹ Washington Post, 15 April 1985, section I, p. 19.

⁵² Lawrence Lichty, Murray Fromson and John Mueller, "A Television War?" Vietnam As History, Peter Baestrup, ed. (New York: Wilson Books, 1983), 86-88.

Vietnam. When he informed her of his travel plans, she dented his romantic armor with a shrug. Said Greenberg, "It was as if I had said that I was going to a Giants game at Candlestick."⁵³

Both the obvious and more subtle reasons for forgetting the war--its distastefulness, confusing narrative and minimal concrete effect on the American public--were an explanation that was still lacking somehow. Another question was begged. Even if the war was not the indelible trauma many believed, was it not still an important episode, one that people should have been compelled to remember? Americans were supposed to be infamously ahistorical, but they did remember events like the Civil War and World War Two, and besides, the Vietnam War was recent, controversial, colorful in its way. It was a sorry tale but good copy. Why, then, the political amnesia?

The root of the answer may have been exposed by Joseph Lelyveld, a writer for the New York Times Magazine. In examining the American memory of the war, he said, ". . . when we talk about Vietnam we are seldom talking about the country of that name or the situation of the people who live

⁵³ Martin Greenberg and Augustus Norton, Touring Nam (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 9.

there. Usually we are talking about ourselves. Probably we always were."⁵⁴ Other commentators noted the trend, the "self-absorption" Gloria Emerson had cited. Stanley Herman, a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago Divinity School, said, ". . . our commentary on Vietnam has narrowed into a preoccupation with American experiences of the war," adding that Hollywood films such as The Deerhunter and Apocalypse Now, a growing number of war novels and the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington all served to focus attention on "what the war did to us." He said further, "This in turn has not extinguished the smoldering debates about the meaning of the war, debates that continue to ignore the large majority of victims--the Vietnamese who stayed in Vietnam. . . . Turned inward, we have forgotten that our national agony, however defined, was not the principal moral fact of the war."⁵⁵ Peter Marin, another who explored the war's moral side, described the Vietnamese as "stickfigures in the American dream."⁵⁶ A survey in 1970, three years before America withdrew from

⁵⁴ Joseph Lelyveld, "Vietnam In Retrospect," New York Times Magazine, 31 March 1985, p. 30.

⁵⁵ Stewart Herman, "Vietnam: Widening Our Perspective," Christian Century, 1 May 1985, 442.

⁵⁶ Peter Marin, "Coming To Terms With Vietnam," Harper's (December 1980), 43.

Vietnam, showed there was no scholar in the United States who devoted most of his or her time to studying North Vietnam, no American university had a tenured professorship in Vietnamese studies and fewer than 30 college students in the entire nation studied the Vietnamese language.⁵⁷

The feelings of many Americans toward their lost ally were expressed by one Alan "Doc" Cornett, an Army sergeant with 20 years of service who told a reporter in 1985, "You could lose all respect for the Vietnamese, till you fought beside them, touched them, lived with them." When he arrived in Vietnam, Cornett had joined his buddies in hurling cans of C-rations at Vietnamese civilians from a speeding truck. But he became fluent in the language and two of its dialects, befriended a South Vietnamese soldier with whom he worked as a Special Forces medic and eventually married the man's sister. Because he was one of the few who really knew the Vietnamese, Cornett was one of the few who thought of them first when recalling the war. "We deserted them, you know," he told the reporter.⁵⁸

American veterans of the war routinely remembered playing with Vietnamese children or lending a hand to

⁵⁷ Fox Butterfield, "The New Vietnam Scholarship," New York Times Magazine, 13 February 1984, 30-31.

⁵⁸ Clymer, 42.

villagers. Thomas Pelleton, an intelligence specialist with the 101st Airborne, wrote home from Phu Bai about such experiences. "We played games with them, went for a walk to the beach, took pictures, in general just loved them up. They stole my watch, but it didn't really matter. . . ."59

Just as routinely, though, one found in the war's literature accounts of American atrocities, in which Vietnamese friend and foe alike were treated as animals. In his oral history 'Nam, Mark Baker was told of random rapes, killings and tortures.⁶⁰ Lieutenant William Calley's book, His Own Story, was numbing in its boy-next-door description of a soldier's dehumanization.⁶¹ In Rumor Of War, Phillip Caputo remembered being told that one of his men had been cutting off the ears of dead Viet Cong. Wrote Caputo, "An image of Hanson flashed in my mind: a quiet boy of about nineteen, tall and thin, with dark blond hair, he was so American-looking he could have posed for a Norman Rockwell in the old Saturday Evening Post. I tried to imagine him performing the act Loker had just described, but

⁵⁹ Bernard Edelman, ed., Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam (New York: Norton, 1985), 49.

⁶⁰ Mark Baker, Nam (New York: Quill Press, 1982), 211-215.

⁶¹ William Calley, His Own Story (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

couldn't."⁶² In his book Dispatches, journalist Michael Herr repeated a well-worn joke: "What you do is, you load all the Friendlies onto ships and take them out to the South China Sea. Then you bomb the country flat. Then you sink the ships."⁶³

Since Americans knew little of Vietnam, since American soldiers felt little kinship with her people and since most in the United States remembered the war's effects on their country only, there was the strong suggestion that Vietnam in truth meant little to America. Here again semantics were important. The Vietnam War had been important because Americans were fighting it; American lives and prestige were on the line. Once the war was over, however, its political history was easily forgotten, at the behest of several presidents, no less. Casualties, social turmoil and Communist re-education camps aside, the war's strategic effects were unclear. Cambodia and Laos were both overrun by Communists, but Thailand and other nations in the region did not fall like so many dominoes. In 1979, Vietnam fought a short border war with its recent wartime ally, China. By the early 1980s there were signs of tension between Vietnam

⁶² Caputo, 125.

⁶³ Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977), 59.

and the Soviet Union, the former seeming to resent its principal ally's intrusiveness.

The Vietnam War had been important, but for reasons of culture, geography and strategy, Vietnam itself may not have been. William Sullivan, a career diplomat and former Ambassador to Laos, spoke of the war in retrospect as an inevitable result of the Cold War.

. . . we were damned lucky it happened in a place that didn't matter all that much, like Indochina. Had we taken a stand in a place like Hungary, it could have blown up the world, including the United States. Fifty-eight thousand lives is too many to pay for a lesson, but it's probably smaller than we might have paid had we gone into Czechoslovakia in '68, or done something else that would have led to a direct confrontation with the Soviets or the Chinese.⁶⁴

Such a clash, if not an Armageddon, would surely have been remembered in political detail. The Vietnam War was not. The failure to achieve its purpose--an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam--was mourned but not met with alarm. It is possible, perhaps likely, that the war's history was forgotten because few were pressed to remember.

⁶⁴ Kim Willenson, ed., The Bad War (New York: The New American Library, 1987), 385.

CHAPTER 2

THE VETERANS REMEMBER

Meaninglessness

In his novel Fragments, Vietnam veteran Jack Fuller described a soldier's uncomfortable homecoming. At breakfast with his mother and father the morning after returning from the war, the soldier got news that was supposed to be sensitive.

"John Russell was over in Vietnam," said my mother. "Do you remember him?"

"The name," I said. "Sure. John Russell. He was a year or two behind me, I think."

"He was killed there," my mother said softly.

"Fuckit," I said.

Said Fuller's soldier as the narrative continued, "When I looked up and saw their faces, I realized what I had said, not only the word but the way it sounded, and I was sorry."¹

Fuller's fictional scene dramatized the gap between the minority of Americans who had seen the war and the majority who had not, the "two countries" Ward Just had noted. The same sort of gap had been mentioned by writers of previous modern wars. Poet Karl Shapiro, who fought in the Second World War, spoke of "the majority, untouched by steel or

¹ Jack Fuller, Fragments (New York: William Morrow, 1984), 165-167.

psychoneurosis."² Writing of the First World War, e.e. cummings described those who "don't and never never will know, they don't want to, no"³ In Dispatches, Michael Herr recalled a Marine in Hue who grabbed him forcibly as the writer was leaving the city, and implored him to "tell it," to describe the war truthfully for the uninitiated. Herr said other soldiers did the same "with an emotion whose intensity would shock you . . . because they really did have the feeling that it wasn't being told for them, that they were going through all of this and that somehow no one back in the World knew about it."⁴

Herr and fellow journalists did tell about the war in critically acclaimed books, but much of its literature came from the soldiers themselves. Wrote George Herring, "One must go back to World War One to find a body of war literature as personal and introspective as that produced by the Vietnam War."⁵ A number of Vietnam veterans saw the parallel. Poet R.L. Barth wrote this:

You watch with me: Owen, Blunden, Sassoon.

² Thomas J. Walsh, American War Literature (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 182.

³ Ibid., 272.

⁴ Herr, 206-207.

⁵ George Herring, "Vietnam Remembered," Journal of American History (June 1986), 152.

Through sentry duty, everything you meant
 Thickens to fear of nights without a moon.
 War's war. We are, my friends, no different.⁶

In his surrealist Vietnam War novel Going After Cacciato, veteran Tim O'Brien began with a quote from Siegfried Sassoon: "Soldiers are dreamers."⁷ Phillip Caputo began the epilogue to A Rumor Of War by quoting Sassoon also.⁸ When asked at a writer's conference why the literature of the two wars seemed so similar, O'Brien replied, "An absence of clear purpose is the easiest answer."⁹

Such an absence of purpose or meaning has helped define modern war literature in general. It is well known as a theme in First World War books such as All Quiet On The Western Front and A Farewell To Arms, but it appears in earlier and later works, too: War And Peace, The Red Badge Of Courage and The Downfall by Emile Zola in the nineteenth

⁶ John Topham, ed., Vietnam Literature Anthology: A Balanced Perspective (Philadelphia: American Poetry and Literature Press, 1985), 43.

⁷ Tim O'Brien, Going After Cacciato (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978).

⁸ Caputo, 338.

⁹ Freedman, 55.

century¹⁰, and The Naked And The Dead, Catch 22 and the Korean War film MASH in the twentieth.

Samuel Freedman, a journalist who studied Vietnam War literature, said of its authors, "Their art is a search for that final, missing piece,"¹¹ something to illuminate an unclear experience. According to W. D. Ehrhart, one of the more well-known Vietnam veteran poets, "For anyone who's been through an extremely traumatic experience, there's a driving need to explore it, to understand it. There is a turmoil inside. Those of us who could, articulated it with writing, painting, whatever."¹² John Ketwig, another veteran and author of And A Hard Rain Fell, wrote, "I only know that I'm searching for something, I have to find it, and I don't even know what it is."¹³ In Fragments, Jack Fuller described the search as such:

Fragments You tried in vain to make connections. You yearned for explanations, exculpations. You remembered the details, the moments of horror. But you remembered the closeness, too, your pure mortal reliance on others. And no matter how you

¹⁰ Sophus Keith Winter, The Realistic War Novel (Seattle: University of Washington Bookstore, 1930), 8.

¹¹ Freedman, 51.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John Ketwig, And A Hard Rain Fell (New York: MacMillan, 1985), 294.

put the fragments together, they did not make a whole.¹⁴

Complicating the search for some veterans who wrote was the common attitude that the Vietnam War, or any war, was meaningless. Men who had seen combat sometimes had no patience with abstract political explanations. Said Phillip Caputo, "I was finished with governments and their abstract causes, and I would never again allow myself to fall under the charms and spells of political witch doctors like John F. Kennedy."¹⁵ Some writers had trouble finding any explanation other than that the war was pure madness. In his novel Meditations In Green, veteran Stephen Wright described a cut-and-paste magazine collage on a soldier's wall in Vietnam, a creation meant to communicate the idea of insanity:

There would be much to ponder: presidents and penises, officers and orifices, history as an illustrated stroke book, from the ancient mamasan in conical hat and black latex to last year's Playmate of the Year from whose glossy pink ass a stick of five-hundred-pound bombs dropped onto a football field mined with pizzas where one team marked AFL rushed another team marked NLF for possession of the oversized head of Mickey Mouse decapitated by the blades of a Cobra helicopter streaming rockets into the U.S. Capitol dome that was a beanie on the head of Ho Chi Minh.¹⁶

¹⁴ Fuller, 153.

¹⁵ Caputo, 332.

¹⁶ Stephen Wright, Meditations In Green (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 121.

The jungle warfare of Vietnam seemed to further obscure meaning. Phillip Caputo wrote, "Because of the sporadic, confused nature of the fighting, it is impossible to give an orderly account of what we did. With one or two exceptions, I have only disjointed recollections of this period, the spring of 1965. The incidents I do remember, I remember vividly; but I can come up with no connecting threads to tie events neatly together."¹⁷ In Going After Cacciato, Tim O'Brien produced this much-quoted passage:

They did not even know the simple things: A sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it victory. No sense of order or momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels. No Patton rushing for the Rhine, no beachheads to storm and win and hold for the duration. They did not have targets. They did not have a cause. They did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite. On a given day, they did not know whether they were in Quang Ngai, or how being there might influence larger outcomes. They did not know the names of most villages. They did not know which villages were critical. They did not know strategies. They did not know the terms of the war, its architecture, the rules of fair play"¹⁸

Jan Barry, a veteran and poet, described in A Nun In Ninh Hoa how strange and exotic Vietnam seemed to Americans. The Buddhist nun in the poem self-immolated in protest against the South Vietnamese government, an act Barry said

¹⁷ Caputo, 96.

¹⁸ O'Brien, 128.

was "quite a sight for a boy from Tennessee" The poem's last line is, "Jeesus! How'd we get in this crazy place?"¹⁹ John Del Vecchio, author of the novel The Thirteenth Valley, called Vietnam a place "where stars are dim and do not twinkle."²⁰

The theme of senselessness was at the heart of the 1979 film Apocalypse Now, one of Hollywood's splashier attempts at capturing the Vietnam War. Marlon Brando played the role of a Green Beret colonel driven crazy by the war, living in the jungle among Montagnard tribesmen who believed him to be a god. As a special American unit works its way up the Mekong River to dispense with the renegade officer, scenes of madness unfold, one of the most memorable showing soldiers surfing in the midst of a helicopter raid on a Viet Cong inlet. The war was depicted in a like manner on stage. In playwright and veteran David Rabe's war trilogy, appearing from 1969 to 1977, mindless destruction was the lietmotif. In Sticks And Bones, a blind veteran slit his wrists, and both Streamers and The Basic Training Of Pavlo Hummel ended with soldiers murdering comrades.²¹

¹⁹ W.D. Ehrhart, ed., Carrying The Darkness: Vietnam War Poetry (New York: Avon Books, 1985), 27.

²⁰ John Del Vecchio, The Thirteenth Valley (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 108.

²¹ Freedman, 53.

Michael Herr was perhaps the most vivid in showing the war as madness. Employing an unusual and compelling style, Herr wrote parts of his true account Dispatches while undergoing psychotherapy. In the New York Times Review Of Books, critic Roger Sale said, "Herr at his best hurls one into his experience, insists an uninitiated reader be comforted with no politics, no certain morality, no clear outline of history."²² Herr's style was an extension of a belief he stated in Dispatches: "Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history."²³ The "obvious, undeniable" history was the war's immediate effects of death and destruction and dehumanization. The secret history, in Herr's view, would have been politics and strategic rationale. Herr elaborated on this idea toward the end of his book: "It seemed now that everybody knew someone who had been in Vietnam and didn't want to talk about it. Maybe they just didn't know how. People I'd meet

²² John Hellman, American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 165.

²³ Herr, 218.

would take it for granted that I was articulate, ask me if I minded, but usually the questions were political, square, innocent, they already knew what they wanted to hear, I'd practically forgotten the language."²⁴

Herr was revealing an essential point in modern writing, that language could not convey the ghastliness, surrealism and absurdity of war. This view was a rebellion against traditional history, arguing that a graphic, tangible and human portrayal was much truer than political abstractions. Writers who took this view wanted no tidy versions of an untidy affair. However, Michael Herr and others wondered if even the bluntest, most untraditional style could make the untouched masses comprehend war. Herr noted that when looking at war pictures in Life magazine as a child, "something wasn't clear at all, something repressed that monitored the images and withheld their essential information. . . . I didn't have a language for it then. . . ." ²⁵ Veteran Jack Strahan addressed the same idea in his poem Dialogues With A Reporter:

How can you comprehend,
among your short and easy questions,
the meaning of this word, fear,

²⁴ Ibid., 251.

²⁵ Ibid., 18.

or the lack of feelings which start
 somewhere in your mind and travel
 slowly toward your gut where
 helplessness is not a word,
 but a knowledge of playing out slowly,
 an idiocy of men dying openly,
 who did not wonder how or why,
 or if someone like yourself
 would be along later asking these
 questions in your embarrassed voice?"²⁶

W.D. Ehrhart wrote a similar poem, Imagine, in which he
 described his questioners trying to imagine war:

They listened, and they strained
 to visualize the words:
 newsreels and photographs, books
 and Wilfred Owen tumbled
 through their minds.
 Pulses quickened.
 They didn't notice, as he talked,
 his eyes, as he talked,
 his eyes beginning to focus
 through the wall, at nothing,
 or at something inside.

²⁶ Topham, 29.

When he finished speaking,
someone asked him:
had he ever killed?²⁷

Perhaps the most famous passage in war literature to argue against abstractions was Ernest Hemingway's in A Farewell To Arms. His protagonist Frederick Henry said, "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow become obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."²⁸ Much of the Vietnam War's literature was mundane in its concrete detail. In Going After Cacciato, Tim O'Brien wrote, "Over the next week they destroyed twelve tunnels. They killed a water buffalo. They burned rice and shot chickens and scattered jugs of grain. They trampled paddies. Tore up fences. Dumped dirt into wells, diverted ditches, provoked madness."²⁹ One of the novel's chapters bore the simple title How Bernie Lynn Died After Frenchie Tucker.³⁰ Like an extended tour of combat, the effect was numbing.

²⁷ Timothy J. Lomperis, ed., Reading The Wind (Durham, N.C.: The Asia Society, Duke University, 1987), 29.

²⁸ Frank McConnell, "A Name For Loss," Commonweal, 9 August 1985, 441.

²⁹ O'Brien, 105.

³⁰ Ibid., 66.

Jack Fuller pointed to a soldier's phrase that appears repeatedly in the war's literature: "It don't mean nothing." Wrote Fuller, "It was one of those things you said to one another for comfort, one of those things you really wanted to believe. A guy in another unit got greased. Don't mean nothin'. A round pierced your canteen and at first you weren't sure whether the dark stain spreading across your fatigues was water or blood. Don't mean nothin'. You survived, didn't you? Don't mean nothin' at all."³¹

Meaning

While the theme of meaninglessness haunted Vietnam War writers, most persisted in their search for meaning of a kind. They were compelled to believe that such a traumatic experience as war offered something in the way of enlightenment. Robert Jay Lifton, a psychologist who studied veterans and their problems, recalled listening to a triple amputee testify before a U.S. Senate subcommittee about the difficulties of getting proper medical treatment. The veteran spoke also of another problem--his doubts that

³¹ Fuller, 14.

his sacrifice had meant anything. He later told Lifton he wanted to run for political office in his native deep South. When Lifton asked if a dissident such as himself were electable in that region, the veteran replied, "I'm no dissident! I've got to believe there was some value in that war."³² Addressing the peace movement, a soldier who wrote his hometown newspaper from Vietnam uttered a similar sentiment: "Don't shout and preach your nothingness to me."³³

Usually, as George Herring had noted in comparing the literature of the Vietnam War and World War One, veterans who wrote found a sort of personal, introspective meaning. The writers were aware of this and made no excuses. In his prologue to A Rumor Of War, Phillip Caputo wrote, "This book does not pretend to be history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy. . . . In a general sense, it is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them."³⁴ In his personal account Once A Warrior King, former Army officer David Donovan said much

³² Robert Jay Lifton, "The Postwar War," Journal of Social Issues, vol. 31, no. 4 (1975), 188-189.

³³ Edelman, 227.

³⁴ Caputo, xi.

the same: "I and . . . other Americans lived there alone and fought our own little war. This book portrays my memory of that experience It eschews the finer topics of international politics, military strategy, global economics, and who did what to whom first. These subjects are well worn and only lead to endless debate and disagreement, achieving nothing."³⁵ Mark Baker, in the preface to 'Nam, said, "This book is not the Truth about Vietnam. Everyone holds a piece of that puzzle."³⁶

In response to a journalist's question, Tim O'Brien explored the matter of personal versus political remembrance. "When you think about novels about the war," he said, "they're rarely political. Because the issues you confront are personal, not political. Staying alive, burning a village, watching the bombs fall. The primary things one cares about in battle aren't the political issues. It's being scared, being brave. Those are the things that go back to Homer. Those are the ancient things."³⁷ O'Brien was among the most profound of the veterans who searched for meaning, quoting Plato and

³⁵ David Donovan, Once A Warrior King (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), viii.

³⁶ Baker, 16.

³⁷ Freedman, 55.

Socrates in his ruminations. In both the fictional Going After Cacciato and the nonfictional If I Die In A Combat Zone, O'Brien found meaning in personal courage. The latter contained a long, philosophical passage that analyzed the quality:

Courage is more than the charge. More than dying or suffering the loss of a love in silence or being gallant. It is temperament and, more, wisdom. . . . It is more likely that men act cowardly and, at other times, act with courage, each in different measure, each with varying consistency. The men who do well on the average, perhaps with one moment of glory, those men are brave. . . . The bullets stop You tentatively peek up, wondering if it is the end The fright dies the same way novocaine wears off in the dentist's chair. You promise, almost moving your lips, to do better next time; that by itself is a kind of courage.³⁸

In Going After Cacciato, the protagonist Paul Berlin reflected thus:

Yes, the issue was courage. It always had been, even as a kid. Things scared him. He couldn't help it. . . . The real issue was the power of will to defeat fear. . . . Somehow working his way into that secret chamber of the human heart, where, in tangles, lay the circuitry for all that was possible, the full range of what a man might be. . . . There was a Silver Star twinkling somewhere inside him.³⁹

In The Thirteenth Valley, John Del Vecchio's soldiers sought meaning in the war diversely, even hazarding political explanations, though more typical was the comment,

³⁸ Tim O'Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone (New York: Dell Publishing, 1979), 141.

³⁹ O'Brien, Cacciato, 81.

"Our ultimate goal . . . is ta remain alive."⁴⁰ Del Vecchio frequently used a saltier version of the phrase Jack Fuller used in *Fragments*: "Fuck it. Don't mean nothin'." Del Vecchio called it the "mantra of the infantry."⁴¹ At his novel's end, though, the phrase and its message were challenged. When a soldier learned from his new company commander that the former commander and several colleagues presumed to be dead are considered missing in action, the soldier cynically and automatically said, "Fuck it. Don't mean" Whereupon the new commander cut him off with, "Don't say it, soldier."⁴² Del Vecchio did not offer an explanation of the war, but he did suggest meaning was not completely absent.

The film *The Deerhunter* seemed to suggest the same upon its release in 1978. The story focused on three steelworker friends from western Pennsylvania who enthusiastically went to Vietnam together. One was disabled, one killed himself playing Russian roulette, one was rendered emotionally withdrawn. Though the film was stark in its depiction of war, it ended on a faintly hopeful note. As the two survivors and friends gathered to eat after burying the dead

⁴⁰ Del Vecchio, 365.

⁴¹ Ibid., 476.

⁴² Ibid., 517.

man, one absentmindedly began humming God Bless America, and the others slowly followed with words, sung in haunting fashion. It was not a rousing finish, but it was enough to imply the three soldiers had not suffered meaninglessly. Released just three years after Saigon fell, The Deerhunter did not loudly proclaim duty and patriotism as the Vietnam War's meaning, or the meaning of war in general. But it may have suggested as much in a qualified way.

Personalizing The War

By looking inward for meaning, those who wrote about the Vietnam War naturally personalized their accounts. Instead of dwelling on causes or ideology, they dwelled on people, individuals. This tendency was explained by Phillip Caputo in A Rumor Of War, in a passage about a chaplain who was concerned about the casualty rate. Said Caputo to the chaplain, ". . . twelve KIAs [killed in action] in two

months isn't bad."

The chaplain answered emotionally, "That's twelve wrecked homes. Twelve wrecked homes, lieutenant. . . . Twelve KIAs is pretty bad for the families of those dead marines."⁴³

After the exchange Caputo considered the chaplain's words: "Twelve wrecked homes. I thought about Sullivan's young widow in Pennsylvania, and a chill passed through me."⁴⁴

At the beginning of his book Caputo gave his own personal history, telling how he was from suburban Westchester, Illinois, outside of Chicago, a place, he wrote, that had "everything a suburb is supposed to have: sleek, new schools smelling of fresh plaster and floor wax; supermarkets full of Wonder Bread and Bird's Eye frozen peas..."⁴⁵ Veteran Michael Anania gave a similar description of middle America in his poem A Second-Hand Elegy, about young men in their last idyll before going to Vietnam:

...riding through Dayton on a Saturday night
making the rounds, block by block,

⁴³ Caputo, 178.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4.

the car radio marking time--

Downtown Downtown--

the evening blush of neon blooming

into damp city air, the blue

clarity of mercury-lamp arcades;

four of them slouched in a Chevrolet

exhaust the evening, waiting for something to

happen.⁴⁶

Ron Kovic described his own prewar idyll in his nonfictional Born On The Fourth Of July, in which he lovingly spoke of his childhood in the suburbs of Dwight Eisenhower's and John Kennedy's America. He wrote of idolizing Mickey Mantle and the New York Yankees, watching Howdy Doody, Roy Rogers and Elvis Presley on television, firmly embracing his Catholic faith, seeing The Sands Of Iwo Jima and other John Wayne films, playing soldier with plastic guns and hand grenades, feeling shock and wounded pride when the Russians launched Sputnik. Said Kovic, "When the Fourth of July came, there were fireworks going off all over the neighborhood. It was the most exciting time of the year for me next to Christmas. Being born on the same day as my country I thought was really great. I was so

⁴⁶ Ehrhart, 1.

proud."⁴⁷

A book that personalized the war much as any was Friendly Fire, by C.D.B. Bryan. Friendly Fire was the true story of Gene and Peg Mullen, who ran a family farm near La Porte City, Iowa, and whose son Michael was accidentally killed by South Vietnamese artillery fire. Beyond describing Michael in all his shades, Bryan does the same for his parents to an even greater extent, telling how they raised their son, counseled him on going to Vietnam, reacted to the news of his death, conducted their own inquiry into the matter to discover the whole truth and later joined the antiwar movement. Generally speaking, Bryan told the tale of just one of Phillip Caputo's "wrecked homes" in studious detail. He delved into the family's history as far back as Gene Mullen's grandfather, saying a photograph shows not "a maudlin old man hugging his grandchildren; it is a photograph of a pioneer."⁴⁸ There was a passage about Gene's father, Oscar, revealing how he wanted to be a baseball player, not a farmer, and how he left the farm to become the groundskeeper for the Waterloo, Iowa, minor

⁴⁷ Ron Kovic, Born on the Fourth of July (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 36-45.

⁴⁸ C.D.B. Bryan, Friendly Fire (New York: Putnam, 1976), 31.

league team.⁴⁹ Gene Mullens was his father's seriousminded opposite, a quiet, sincere man who resuscitated the farm and sent Michael, his oldest son, to college so he could apply business theory to the operation when it someday became his.

Michael had the same love for the land that his father did. When Gene walks his fields, he will sometimes pause and wonder whether his great-grandfather might have walked that same section, or his grandfather. . . . it was that sense of continuity which was, perhaps, the strongest link between Gene, as father, and Michael, his son. Gene never felt Michael was to fall heir to acres only. He was to inherit all those generations of Mullins and Dobshires who would walk beside him each time he turned the soil. . . . Michael was always the one to have received the farm.⁵⁰

In writing of Michael Mullen's status and responsibility within his family, Bryan attempted to show the true human impact of a single death. There were countless other personalizations in the war's literature. In Winners And Losers, Gloria Emerson examined numerous people who were somehow touched by the war, for example, a veteran who went by the name Weasel and lived in a junkyard.⁵¹ Poet Bryan Alec Floyd wrote a series of poems named after fallen comrades: Private Ian Godwin, Sergeant Brandon Just, Corporal Charles Chungtu, Lance Corporal

⁴⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁵¹ Gloria Emerson, Winners and Losers (New York: Random House, 1976), 89.

Purdue Grace, Private Jack Smith, Captain James Leson, Corporal Kevin Spina, Private First Class Brooks Morgenstein.⁵² Writer Heather Brandon produced a book entitled Casualties which focused on families who, like the Mullens of Friendly Fire, lost sons and brothers in the war. In her introduction, Brandon wrote, "What America doesn't see are the surviving families that now dread the unspoken words and melancholy that surround their holidays. What America doesn't see are the 57,939 shrines of pictures and medals, in houses and apartments from Maine to Hawaii, Alaska to Puerto Rico, Chicago to New Orleans. . . . What America doesn't see are the 115,878 mothers and fathers, the 231,756 grandparents, the uncounted brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, friends and lovers. . . ." ⁵³ Lynda Van Devanter, a nurse in Vietnam, wrote A Piece Of My Heart, a book about nurses in the war. "I was amazed that fifteen thousand women had been in Vietnam," she wrote, "and yet I had heard nothing about them in the aftermath of the war."⁵⁴ Black journalist Wallace Terry wrote an oral history,

⁵² Ehrhart, 108-118.

⁵³ Heather Brandon, Casualties (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), xviii-xix.

⁵⁴ Lynda Van Devanter, A Piece of My Heart (New York: Beaufort Books, 1983), 2.

Bloods, about black soldiers during and after the war.⁵⁵

In the main, the few Americans who truly remembered the Vietnam War, most of them veterans, did so personally, subjectively, shunning political abstractions. In most of these accounts neither the Vietnamese nor the war's history was forgotten. Vietnamese soldiers and villagers were fully dimensional characters in both the fiction and nonfiction. In Going After Cacciato there was even a North Vietnamese draft resister, whose words had a familiar ring: "A whole future destroyed. . . . Ruined by a war I never cared about, never even thought about."⁵⁶ Nearly all the writings, including the most personalized, were informed by politics and history to some degree. But the literature tended to look inward, for after all, the writers were telling their own stories. They concentrated on what the war did to themselves and their comrades, on how Americans were affected. By and large this was honest self-reflection, not xenophobic self-absorption. The veterans who put pen to paper were searching for meaning in a cause the American public had laid aside after 1975, or perhaps after 1973.

⁵⁵ Wallace Terry, Bloods (New York: Random House, 1984).

⁵⁶ O'Brien, Cacciato, 96.

CHAPTER 3

THE PUBLIC REMEMBERS THE VETERANS

From Scapegoats To Romantic Heroes

The frosty, sometimes harsh reception of veterans returning from Vietnam had by the late 1970s become a well-known tale. Most veterans quietly re-entered society, their service neither honored nor openly scorned, but some remembered moments of contempt or abuse. As one writer said, they had been "tarred with the brush of My Lai," collectively blamed for atrocities and other dark aspects of the war, or simply for losing it.¹ Ron Kovic, who was disabled in the war, remembered being neglected in a Veterans Administration hospital.

"I'm a Vietnam veteran," he told an aide. "I fought in Vietnam and I've got a right to be treated decently.

"Vietnam," the aide said loudly. "Vietnam don't mean nothin' to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass."²

Vietnam veterans were not completely forgotten in the

¹ Tracy Kidder, "Soldiers of Misfortune," Atlantic Monthly (March 1978), 43.

² Kovic, 116.

early and mid-1970s. Occasionally a story would appear in the media about the plight of veterans, and as early as 1971 a writer named Murray Polner wrote a book entitled No Victory Parades, a study of nine veterans from low and middle class backgrounds.³

The same year, folk singer John Prine recorded two songs sympathetic to veterans. Sam Stone was the story of a veteran who could not adjust to civilian life and eventually overdosed on heroin.⁴ In Take The Star Out Of The Window, Prine sang this:

Hello California, hello Dad and Mom
Ship ahoy, your baby boy is home from Vietnam
Don't you ask me any questions
about the medals on my chest
Take the star out of the window,
let my conscience take a rest."⁵

According to several studies, the majority of Vietnam veterans fared reasonably well upon returning home, in contrast to their image as violent, drug-ridden outcasts.

³ John Newman, ed., Vietnam War Literature: An Annotated Bibliography (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarcrow Press, 1982), 75.

⁴ John Prine, Sam Stone, Atlantic Publishing Company, 1971.

⁵ John Prine, Take The Star Out Of The Window, Atlantic Publishing Company, 1971.

Journalist Tracy Kidder cited a Veterans Administration study that showed only one veteran in five having had serious problems with marriage, employment, drugs or the law.⁶ A study in 1985 by the Washington Post and ABC News showed that more than half of all veterans had gone back to school after leaving the service; a veteran was more likely to have attended college than most his age. Only seven percent were unemployed, roughly the national average. Seventy-five percent made over \$20,000 a year in salary and seventy-eight percent owned homes. Most were married and had children. When asked if they had benefitted from their service in Vietnam, 56 percent said yes, 29 percent no. Combat veterans, however, had met with a harder time. Forty-one percent had been divorced, 44 percent claimed to have suffered a drinking problem.⁷

The larger problem for Vietnam veterans, it seemed, was not so much social status as it was a feeling of not being recognized for doing their duty and fighting in an unpopular war. A veteran who referred to himself as "more conservative than liberal" told a journalist, "Understand me, man, I went in as GI Joe, hot to save America from the Communists. I spent 11 months in 'Nam and got the Bronze

⁶ Kidder, 44.

⁷ Washington Post, 14 April, 1985, section I, p. 11.

Star. Now I'm back and I find I've been had. I've got no job and I'm nobody's hero. Sure I'm bitter. Shouldn't I be?"⁸ Another veteran told his psychiatrist, "They think you're crazy or a fool for going in the first place. Look, we all know what the outcome of all that fighting was. . . . I thought when I went it was for the country. But it was for nothing and all those guys got killed and shot to pieces and there's no monuments. Nobody remembers or says anything about them."⁹

Still another veteran said, "If we weren't failures, why aren't there any monuments? Can you name any of the Marines who, in another war, would have been heroes? Do you remember any celebrations when we got back? How come I feel like I did something wrong, like holding up a bank, when someone asks about my shrapnel wound? How come I can't tell anyone I am proud to have fought for my country without wondering what they will think of me?"¹⁰

In one of the most anthologized Vietnam War poems, Relative Thing, W.D Ehrhart addressed the matter bitterly:

We are the ones you sent to fight a war

⁸ Eldson McGhee, "Home From Vietnam--The Plight Of A Vietnam Veteran," Crisis (June 1976), 220.

⁹ Jeffrey A. Jay, "In Pursuit Of Scapegoats," Harper's (July 1978), 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

You didn't know a thing about. . . .
We have seen Democracy on Zippo raids
Burning hooches to the ground,
Driving eager Amtraks through a farmer's fields.
We are the ones who have to live
With the memory that we were the instruments
Of your pigeon-breasted fantasies. . . .
Those of us that lived
Have tried to tell you what went wrong.
Now you think you do not have to listen.
Just because we will not fit
Into the uniforms of photographs
Of you at twenty-one
Does not mean you can disown us.
We are your sons, America,
And you cannot change that.
When you awake,
We will still be here.¹¹

In late 1978 and early 1979 the nation began to recognize and honor the Vietnam veteran. While a greater number of media stories on veterans may have then shown that the recognition was inevitable, several developments hastened the process. In April 1979 The Deerhunter won a

¹¹ Edelman, 231-233.

number of Academy awards, including Best Picture. Its chief competition was seen to be another Vietnam War film, Coming Home, which starred former antiwar activist Jane Fonda as the wife of a gung-ho Marine officer, who fell in love with an embittered veteran confined to a wheelchair.

Simplistically, Coming Home was seen to be critical of the war and those warriors who believed in it, The Deerhunter less so, or perhaps even laudatory. As fate would have it, the presenter of the Best Picture award was John Wayne, Fonda's opposite number in the Hollywood war debate and star of the 1968 film The Green Berets, a positive depiction of America in Vietnam. Dying of cancer, Wayne was spared one last agony when Fonda's film did not win. Afterwards, Fonda called The Deerhunter "racist" in its portrayal of the Vietnamese, and a debate ensued among intellectuals and movie critics. Gloria Emerson said the film's director, Michael Cimino, had "cheapened and degraded and diminished the war as no one else has." Fellow war correspondent and author Ward Just called it "a slick and disgraceful failure."¹²

Emerson's and Just's criticisms were aimed at the film's historical inaccuracies, such as the Vietnamese being

¹² Lance Morrow, "Vietnam Comes Home," Time, 23 April, 1979, 22-24.

shown as devoted to Russian roulette. Others overlooked the flaws or were not aware of them and were moved by The Deerhunter's tale of redblooded Americans shattered by the war. John Ketwig was reminded of his own experiences in Vietnam and ". . . started shaking uncontrollably, and then I was crying, and I had to leave the theater for a cigarette."¹³ Ironically, The Deerhunter and Coming Home shared something significant: in different ways, they were sympathetic towards veterans and put them in the national spotlight.

The other main development in recognizing Vietnam veterans was the Iranian hostage crisis of November 1979, which sparked a resurgence of nationalism and a kinder view of the military. Angry demonstrations against Iranians took place across the country, with 1,500 Texans marching in front of the Iranian consulate in Houston and a crowd in Springfield, Massachusetts, throwing rocks, bottles and eggs at Iranian students who marched against the Shah of Iran. George Ball, Undersecretary of State for John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and a famous early critic of the Vietnam War, said, "In terms of domestic politics, this has put an end to the Vietnam syndrome," the national self-doubt over

¹³ Ketwig, 32.

America's role in world affairs.¹⁴ John White, national chairman of the Democratic Party, said, "We may have reached a turning point in our attitude toward ourselves, and that is a feeling that we have a right to protect legitimate American interests anywhere in the world."¹⁵

When the crisis ended in January 1981 and the former hostages were welcomed as returning heroes, Vietnam veterans noted the contrast between their own reception and the one unfolding. Said one veteran, "When I got back from Vietnam with shrapnel in both of my legs I was considered a drug-crazed babykiller. When the hostages come back they get a giant applause--for what? For getting caught, that's what. It's damned unfair."¹⁶ Other veterans voiced the same sentiment in the media, and sympathy for them steadily mounted. Robert Muller, a founder of the Vietnam Veterans of America, called the hostages' return "'the single most important event to benefit Vietnam veterans.'"¹⁷

Observers noted the change in public attitude toward veterans. Myra MacPherson said she was "stunned at how the

¹⁴ Hedrick Smith, "Crisis Alters Attitudes In U.S.," New York Times, 29 November, 1979, section I, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Washington Post, 31 January, 1981, section I, p. 9.

¹⁷ MacPherson, 56.

public's awareness of Vietnam veterans had changed dramatically in less than two years--from 1979 to 1981."¹⁸ James Webb, veteran, war novelist and later Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Navy, recalled two different tours he made in promoting his books:

I did a hardback tour in the fall of '78 and a paperback tour in in the summer of '79. . . . And the difference in one year was phenomenal. I was lucky to get out of Boston alive in '78. I was called a murderer. I was asked if I shot heroin, the whole bit. In 1978 in Milwaukee I was doing a call-in show and a guy actually stopped the show and broke for a commerical and turned around and said, 'Do you realize you're the first guy who ever came in here without first apologizing for having been in Vietnam?' That was in 1978. Yet by 1979, the mood was different. The whole attitudinal referent was different."¹⁹

In June 1979, the nation celebrated Vietnam Veterans Week. President Jimmy Carter spoke to a gathering of veterans at the White House, saying the United States was "ready to change its heart, its mind and its attitude about the men who fought the war. . . .We love you for what you were and what you stood for--and we love you for what you are and what you stand for." The commemorative week was the work of nineteen Congressmen who served in Vietnam.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Horne, 152.

²⁰ Time, 11 June, 1979, 21.

By the spring of 1981, after the return of the hostages in Iran, the honoring of Vietnam veterans was in full swing. On April 26, a national day of recognition was proclaimed by President Ronald Reagan after veterans had complained about their treatment in comparison to the hostages'.²¹ In October a number of rock and roll performers, including the enormously popular Bruce Springsteen, donated the proceeds of a concert in Los Angeles to the Vietnam Veterans of America.²² Half of the December 14 issue of Newsweek formed a 20,000-word special report on the survivors of an American unit in Vietnam, Charlie Company, recounting their experiences during and after the war.²³ Noted the New Republic, "In the press, concern over indifferences toward the Vietnam veteran has reached epidemic proportions."²⁴

Samuel Freedman wrote an article in the New York Times which examined the Vietnam veteran's transformation in the public eye, from war criminal in the 1960s to gun-toting drug addict in the 1970s to romantic hero in the 1980s. Freedman noted that many of the movies, novels, plays and

²¹ Washington Post, 27 April, 1981, section III, p. 1.

²² Steve Pond, "Rock Stars Rally To Help vets," Rolling Stone, 15 October, 1981, 68.

²³ Newsweek, 12 December, 1981.

²⁴ Timothy Noah, "The Vet Offensive," New Republic, 1 August 1981, 23.

poems about the war were produced by veterans and virtually all of the art concerned them. By the early eighties the veteran was even a sex symbol in such successful commercial ventures as the television show Magnum, P.I., starring heartthrob Tom Selleck, and the Missing In Action movies of karate showman Chuck Norris. The most common portrayal of veterans, said Freedman, was the "survivor as hero," a man who had fought a senseless war in Asia and returned home to an ungrateful, sometimes hostile America. He was grim but proud, and Freedman quoted Harvard historian Alan Brinkley in underscoring the appeal of such a figure for Americans. Said Brinkley, "'He's someone who's been through the fire and come out stronger, someone who's been tested by failure, someone who's been betrayed--either by his leaders for not being allowed to fight without restraints or, more moderately, by his country for being sent at all. That's a theme in a lot of the literature.'"²⁵ John Milius, who co-authored the script for Apocalypse Now, predicted the Vietnam veteran would become "the most romanticized war hero in American history."²⁶

Freedman believed the newfound respect for Vietnam veterans was the one point of consensus Americans had on the

²⁵ Freedman, 51.

²⁶ Ibid., 52.

war.²⁷ Max Cleland, an amputee veteran who directed the Veterans Administration under Jimmy Carter, alluded to the same general idea when he noted, "Within the soul of each Vietnam veteran, there is probably something that says, 'Bad war, good soldier.'"²⁸ Americans at large seemed to agree. A Harris poll conducted for the Veterans Administration in 1979 showed that 62 percent believed the veterans "were made suckers" and were victims, not perpetrators, of the war. The war itself was repudiated by better than a three to one margin.²⁹

One veteran may have spoken for many of his comrades in an unsigned letter left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Addressed to those in his unit who were killed in combat, the letter was a mixture of pride, profanity, confusion and cynical acknowledgement.

A 'Nam vet is in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the 101st Airborne built a monument paid for by the alumni association. On it are names like Lam Son 719, Bong Ap, Ripcord, Hamburger Hill, Ashau. . . .

They make dumb movies about the war--one guy wrote a book about the 13th Valley--Texas Star. . . . At first it was like some bum trip and never happened. Now they have parades and shit. Guess time does that. . . .

Can't think of you guys as angels. More like Valhalla, drinking beer, pissing foam, counting days 'til we go home. Sometimes I sit in the dark and smoke--I see you in the smoke not like ghosts, but

²⁷ Ibid., 51.

²⁸ Time, "A Homecoming At Last," 22 November 1982, 44.

²⁹ New York Times, 11 November 1979, 30.

sitting calm--waiting to move out. . . .

People ask if it was worth it? No one really knows. Would we do it again? Hell yes, don't ask why. We were the best infantry company in the fucking world. . . .

I went to this deal with my boss--A guy wrote a book about Bloods--at the end they asked Viet vets to stand up--I did--I did for all of us--people clapped--what the fuck--I think they meant it--wish you were there--maybe you were.

I feel better writing this--remember June 6? Why don't you shitheads ever write?³⁰

Personalizing The War

(The Vietnam Veterans Memorial And Other Tributes)

In 1979 a 29-year-old veteran named Jan Scruggs saw The Deerhunter and could not sleep that night. He stayed up in his kitchen with a bottle of whiskey, replaying the war in his mind. Scruggs kept thinking that nobody remembered the names of all the fallen American soldiers. The next morning he told his wife he was going to build a memorial to them. "It'll have the name of everyone killed," he said.³¹ Thus began the creation of the national Vietnam Veterans

³⁰ Edelman, 236-239.

³¹ Scruggs, 7.

Memorial.

The non-profit Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund was established in April 1979 by Scruggs, Washington attorney and fellow veteran Jack Wheeler and another veteran and attorney, Bob Doubek. Relying solely on private contributions--no government money was used--they set out to raise funds and found the going slow. To hasten progress, Scruggs called on one of his senators, Charles Mathias, Jr., a Republican from Maryland, who would lend his support in crucial ways. First, he proposed a bill which would designate a specific site for the memorial. Second, he met with Interior Department officials and helped pick the site. According to legend, Mathias scanned a map of Washington and put his thumb on a spot he liked.

"How about this?" he asked a senior Interior Department official.

The official gulped. "Sure is a good site, Senator." It was on the Mall, in a place called Constitutional Gardens, right next to the Lincoln Memorial.³²

Mathias's bill was co-sponsored by liberal George McGovern and conservative Barry Goldwater and later passed the Senate unanimously. President Carter signed it into law on June 31, 1980. Noting the symbolism of the memorial

³² Ibid., 12-16.

site, Mathias said, "A location on the Mall is symbolically appropriate. We can all recall when the Mall was the battleground of opinion and dissent regarding the American role in Vietnam. Its proximity to the Lincoln memorial is also fitting, for not since the Civil War had this nation suffered wounds and divisions as grievous as those endured over Vietnam."³³ Senator John Warner, a Virginia Republican, assisted in the fundraising, and eventually a National Sponsoring Committee was formed that included the likes of First Lady Roslynn Carter, former President Gerald Ford, retired General William Westmoreland and entertainer Bob Hope.³⁴ The idea of a memorial was widely touted.

Turning to the memorial's design, the Memorial Fund decided to hold an open competition and let a carefully chosen jury, including prominent sculptures and landscape architects, select a winner to be approved by the Fine Arts Commission, the National Capital Planning Commission and the Secretary of Interior. The contest's rules were simply that the winning design must feature the names of American soldiers killed in Vietnam, Jan Scrugg's original idea; that it must be horizontal, so as not to clash with the Lincoln memorial; that it must be landscaped to suit its garden

³³ Ibid., 23.

³⁴ Ibid.

setting; and that it must make no political statement whatsoever. The contest drew 1,421 entrees. It was won, to everyone's surprise, by a 22-year-old student from Yale University who was born the year of America's first casualty in Vietnam. Her name was Maya Lin.³⁵

While there had been no controversy over the idea of a memorial to Vietnam veterans--indeed, little ever passed Congress so quickly--there was a firestorm over Maya Lin's design. It provided for two long walls of black granite, buried in a glen on the Mall, the walls meeting and sloping downward, each forming a point on the ground. One wall pointed toward the Washington Monument, the other toward the Lincoln Memorial. The names of the 57,692 Americans killed in Vietnam were to be inscribed on the walls in the order they fell. At its center, where the walls would meet, the memorial would be ten feet high. The granite would be finely polished, so visitors could see their own reflection.³⁶ The strong objections to this unusual design were summarized by the National Review:

Okay, so we lost the Vietnam War. Okay, the thing was mismanaged from start to finish. But the American soldiers who died in Vietnam fought for their country and for the freedom of others, and they deserve better than the outrage that has been approved as their

³⁵ Ibid., 49-66.

³⁶ Washington Post, 3 January 1982, section VI, p. 9.

memorial in the nation's capital. . . .

Our objection to this Orwellian glop . . . is based upon the clear political message of this design. The design says that the Vietnam War should be memorialized in black, not in the white marble of Washington. The mode of listing the names makes them individual deaths, not deaths in a cause: they might as well have been traffic accidents. The invisibility of the monument at ground level symbolizes the 'unmentionability' of the war. . . . Finally, the V-shaped plan of the black retaining wall immortalizes the anti-war signal, the V protest made with the fingers. . . . If the current model has to be built, stick it off in some tidal flat, and let it memorialize Jane Fonda's contribution to ensuring that our soldiers died in vain

Secretary of the Interior James Watt was thought to be displeased with the memorial design, and he had the authority to delay its construction. In January 1982, Watt sent the Memorial Fund a letter saying, in effect, that construction was on hold until a compromise was reached on the design. Watt wanted to add two elements: a statue of American soldiers and an American flag. After much wrangling, the compromise was struck.³⁷ Construction resumed and the memorial was ultimately finished on schedule and dedicated on Veterans Day in November 1982.

Over 250,000 people descended upon Washington for the dedication ceremonies. Some 15,000 marched in a parade through the capital's streets, grouped by state in alphabetical order. Alabama was first, led by General

³⁷ National Review, 18 September 1981, 1064.

³⁸ Scruggs, 85-101.

Westmoreland himself, who carried two small American flags. Veterans of other wars cheered from the roadside. With many of them wearing blue jeans and old fatigues and other assorted casuals, the paraders more resembled Coxey's Army than any official military review. As the parade spilled forward, strangers walked up to veterans and shook their hands, or waved flags and appreciative signs from the sidewalk. Herbie Petit, a machinist and Marine veteran from New Orleans, told a reporter how he and some former Marine colleagues were cheered in a restaurant by a group of college students. "The whole week," he said, "it was worth it just for that."³⁹

From Wednesday, November 10, to Friday the twelfth, volunteers at the National Cathedral read the names of the 57,939 Americans known to be killed or missing in Vietnam. The names were read alphabetically, by candlelight. Each volunteer read for half an hour. President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy attended the name-reading ceremony for 20 minutes, and as he left Reagan told reporters in a choked voice, "The names that are being read are of men who died for freedom just as surely as any men who ever fought for this country. . . . We're just beginning to appreciate that

³⁹ Washington Post, 14 November 1982, section I, p. 10.

they were fighting for a just cause."⁴⁰ At the official dedication ceremony, Jan Scruggs read aloud a letter from Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger which said, "When your country called, you came. When your country refused you honor, you remained silent. With time, our nation's wounds have healed. We have finally come to appreciate your sacrifices and to pay you your tribute you so richly deserve."⁴¹ Most high-ranking military officers did not attend the dedication ceremonies. The local Mount Vernon chapter of the retired officers' association, one of the largest chapters in the country, could send only six of its more than 600 members.⁴²

The generally positive feelings about the memorial's dedication did not extinguish the debate over its design. In building his own case against it, writer Tod Lindberg quoted architect and fellow critic of the memorial William Hubbard:

The objections to the monument were, in essence, that it did not glorify the war in ways that other monuments had--the Iwo Jima Monument being one frequently cited example. Now clearly a monument equating Vietnam with World War Two. . . would have been a sham, a lie. But behind the call for glorification is the assumption that a monument--any monument--should make concrete some shared idea about the thing it

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

commemorates. In short, a monument should speak. In that sense, the objections stand unaddressed: The Vietnam monument does not speak.⁴³

Lindberg himself said the memorial did speak. Whereas the Iwo Jima memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier depicted anonymous men, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial depicted individuals, the emphasis being less on the cause and more on the people. Lindberg believed this was an extension of the personal manner in which the war was reported, noting a belief had grown that to fully understand war one must see it from the common soldier's perspective, which was a "truer" one than the more abstract perspective of generals or politicians. This was the same idea that lay behind so much of the war's literature, written for the most part by common soldiers. Lindberg pointed to the example of a well-known article in the New Yorker magazine by Jonathan Schell, "The Village of Ben Suc," a graphic, personal account of efforts to rid a riverside village of Viet Cong. Life magazine, with its riveting photography, was another example. Lindberg called such an approach the "radical personalization" of war and said--correctly, if the Vietnam War literature was an accurate measure--that it had come to

⁴³ Tod Lindberg, "Of Arms, men And Monuments," Commentary (October 1984), 51.

dominate American discussion of war in general.⁴⁴

Lindberg further stated that the personal approach was an apolitical one:

. . . an attempt to sever the soldier from any connection with his nation's purposes and policies. In the new understanding, soldiers are no longer agents of their country but simply individuals caught in extremely trying circumstances. If they fight, they fight to stay alive, or perhaps, at best, to keep their friends alive. If they kill, they may justly be called murderers . . . or, perhaps, victims of a higher senselessness. If they die, they die for nothing, victims again. . . . without the context supplied by political understanding, no moral credit can in fact attach itself to the soldier's efforts.

. . . one can explain how and why such violence is necessary, and thereby help to restore the soldier to his proper status as an agent, sometimes a heroic agent, of broader political and moral principles.⁴⁵

Lindberg concluded that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial said the war was meaningless, senseless. In his view, it should have said the war was fought for the defense of freedom, the containment of Communism and the loyalty of allies.⁴⁶

Essayist Charles Krauthammer had similar criticisms. After visiting the memorial, he said, "the feeling of waste and emptiness would not leave me." He elaborated:

The Vietnam memorial filled me with an overwhelming feeling of desolation. I had come prepared for the funereal black; I had come prepared for the fifty-seven

⁴⁴ Ibid., 52-53.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 54-55.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 56.

thousand names, that inconceivable ocean of suffering. I had not come prepared to find myself, with them, below the earth. . . . I had the feeling of being before a vast, open grave containing not bodies but names.⁴⁷

Krauthammer clearly received from the memorial a message of death, which appeared to be what the designer wished to communicate. Maya Lin admitted to a fascination with death, partly a result of reading existential philosophy. She once remarked, "Everyone knows I'm morbid."⁴⁸ When living in New Haven as a student at Yale, one of her favorite retreats was the Grove Street Cemetery, a place she found peaceful. Interestingly, she had never had an experience with death, had not closely known anyone who died. "We are supposedly the only creature that realizes its mortality," she said. "Man reacts to that by denying its existence. . . . That's always disturbed me."⁴⁹ As for the American dead in Vietnam, "They died: You have to accept that fact before you can really, truly recognize them and remember them."⁵⁰

Naturally, Krauthammer and other critics found the memorial not just unglorious but discomfoting. Its starting

⁴⁷ Charles Krauthammer, New Republic, 6 December 1982, 42.

⁴⁸ Washington Post, 3 January 1982, section VI, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

point for remembering the Vietnam veterans was not a grand cause or such qualities as sacrifice, bravery, duty, honor. It was simply death with no meaning supplied, though the memorial's unimposing and easily overlooked inscription did pay homage to traditional soldierly virtues: "Our nation remembers the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty of its Vietnam veterans."⁵¹ Maya Lin had originally wanted no inscription whatsoever.⁵²

W.D. Ehrhart put his own objections to the memorial in verse:

I didn't want a monument
 not even one as sober as that
 vast black wall of broken lives. . . .
 What I wanted was a simple recognition
 of the limits of our power as a nation
 to inflict our will on others.
 What I wanted was an understanding
 that the world is neither black-and-white
 nor ours.
 What I wanted
 was an end to monuments.⁵³

⁵¹ Scruggs, 80.

⁵² McConnell, 75.

⁵³ Ehrhart, 103.

Later, Ehrhart would say about the memorial, "What does it reveal in terms of the veterans experience? In my opinion, I would honestly have to answer, nothing."⁵⁴ Peter Marin quoted Roland Barthes in expressing his own skepticism. Barthes had said that cultural myths ". . . serve two functions at once: they commemorate the past but also disguise it, they make it both more and less than what it was. . . ."⁵⁵ Marin's point was identical to W.D. Ehrhart's, that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial did not convey the war as harshly as it was. Marin recognized that this would have been impossible: "one can hardly expect images of napalmed children and weeping parents" Yet, he said, "it would be unfortunate for all of us, including the veterans, if the memorial had the effect of closing the door on the past or trying to heal the wounds it left behind--as if, in the words of a veteran I met recently, 'everything was all right now, all hunky-dory, we're all friends again . . . and the war itself will be forgotten."⁵⁶ Marin touched upon two important points in the postwar debate, or the non-debate, as some would have

⁵⁴ Lomperis, Reading The Wind, 30.

⁵⁵ Peter Marin, "What The Vets Can Teach Us," Nation, 27 November, 1982, 54.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 54.

said. First, if the memorial did begin to close the door on the real past the irony would have been rich, for Jan Scruggs said repeatedly that the memorial would serve as an initial step toward remembering the war. Second, the war itself, the complex political drama that siezed the nation's attention as it claimed thousands of American lives, seemed to have been forgotten well before the memorial was built.

A few suggested that the memorial's ambiguity, or its lack of stated theme, might leave the door to the past open. An anonymous poet left this seemingly sympathetic bit of verse at the wall:

Understand
That if the time comes
When you must kill
It will destroy you
For all of this life.
This is the horrible legacy
of glorifying war
Which no one escapes
Who is the deadliest
Adversary;
The soldier
The truth

or the monument?⁵⁷

Robert Brugger, a former Marine captain, was cautiously optimistic in a letter to the Washington Post:

Monuments are useful because they help to place ourselves on the historical landscape and somehow thank the dead. But they may also hinder our view of what has gone before. As symbols that simplify, they have the power to distort as well as to inspire. Perhaps memorial architect Maya Lin's call to memory will prove an exception--offering a chastened conception of war, inviting us to remember the actual tragedy of this war of doubtful ends and horrendous means. Maybe its message of muted bravado will sink in, and all of us, like the men and women matured by the Vietnam experience, will stand the better for it.⁵⁸

For all the barbs it drew, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial seemed to have been a critical and popular success. Within several years it became one of the most visited attractions in Washington. One editorial said, "This austere jumble is extraordinarily personal, it appears. Some have said they think the memorial is too negative; perhaps they have spoken before seeing its powerful effect on visitors."⁵⁹ Scenes of visitors crying and veterans embracing became commonplace, and remarkable was the quickly established custom of leaving writings and mementoes at the

⁵⁷ Laura Palmer, ed., Shrapnel In The Heart: Letters And Remembrances From The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (New York: Random House, 1987), section I, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Washington Post, 17 November, 1982, section I, p. 18.

⁵⁹ New Republic, 6 December 1982, 39.

wall, making it, in the technological parlance of the information age, an interactive memorial. The custom began when a veteran dropped his purple heart into wet cement as the memorial's foundation was being built. At last count, more than 6,000 offerings had been left, each completely personal: snapshots, poems, flags of all description, teddy bears, packs of cigarettes, harmonicas, cans of C-rations, playing cards, Bibles, a blue high heel. It was all collected and preserved in an Interior Department warehouse, every item tagged and dated.⁶⁰

A half-sized replica of the memorial was brought to cities around the country, and in Eugene, Oregon, a woman named Carole Page left a note at the replica in memory of a former boyfriend. Several days later she returned to the site and found an unsigned note addressed to her:

Dear Carole,

I did come home in the hearts and minds of each of the living. Every man and woman that came back brought a part of me. I have talked to you with their voices and loved you with their hearts. Don't be scared for I am always with you. I will always be there in the still of the night. Be still, you will hear my voice.⁶¹

In the New Yorker magazine's Talk Of The Town section, an unnamed writer called the memorial "an excerpt from reality":

⁶⁰ Palmer, xvi-xvii.

⁶¹ Ibid., 96.

. . . pure data that haven't been tampered with . . . candid and free of emotional clutter. . . In a way, we [Americans] wish to believe that our own perceptions are sufficiently good, clear-eyed and sound, that our interpretation of the data, not someone else's, is what matters, and the closer we are to the unmanipulated, undoctored source the better--the greater the likelihood that some truth will be obtained. This is democratic. It's American to distrust incantations and obscurities, to want to go straight to the heart of the matter.⁶²

Bruce Weigl, a Vietnam veteran and poet, wrote of "the terrible grace of Maya Lin's wall" and added, "in the cold wind blowing off the reflecting pool beyond Maya Lin's wall, you could pick up your head again; you could believe that you had finally come home."⁶³ Another veteran said upon visiting the memorial, "Until today, it [leaving the war] was like walking out in the middle of a movie. A day like today makes you feel it's over."⁶⁴ Conservative columnist James Kilpatrick believed the memorial would be "the most moving war memorial ever constructed," offering "none of the bombast" seen in others.⁶⁵ He said further:

This memorial has a pile driver's impact. No politics. No recriminations. Nothing of vainglory or of glory either. For 20 years I have contended that these men died in a cause as noble as any cause for which a war

⁶² New Yorker, 18 March 1985, 35-36.

⁶³ Bruce Weigel, "Welcome Home," Nation, 27 November, 1982, 549.

⁶⁴ New York Times, 11 November 1984, section I, p. 28.

⁶⁵ James J. Kilpatrick, Washington Post, 11 November 1981, section I, p. 27.

was ever waged. Others have contended, and will always contend, that these dead were uselessly sacrificed in a no-win war that should never have been waged at all. Never mind. The memorial carries a message for all ages: this is what war is all about.⁶⁶

The memorial in Washington was hardly the only tribute to the Vietnam War and its veterans. By 1986, 143 memorials had either been built or planned. In New Castle, Delaware, there was a statue of a black soldier carrying a dying white comrade. In Kansas City, Missouri, there was a series of pools arranged in ever-growing size to symbolize the gradual growth of America's involvement in Vietnam. In Cushing, Minnesota, a veteran planted a forest of 25,000 trees in commemoration. Some of the memorials, such as the one in Delaware, spoke of the civil rights movement as well as the war. A proposed memorial on the Mississippi River in Memphis, Tennessee, would show an ethnically mixed squad in combat. According to the Project on the Vietnam Generation, a nonprofit group studying the men and women who came of age during the war, the memorials were mostly the work of Americans between the ages of thirty-two and forty-nine.⁶⁷

Some tributes were even more personal than the Washington memorial. In 1971 Victor Westphall, a retired

⁶⁶ Ibid., 21 September 1982, section I, p. 19.

⁶⁷ "Vietnam Memorials Underway Nationwide," ibid., section I, pp. 8-9.

building contractor with a Ph.D. in history, finished his own memorial in the barren hills of Eagle Nest, New Mexico. The creation was primarily for his son, David, but was for all others slain in Vietnam as well. The Vietnam Veterans Peace and Brotherhood Chapel was two long, low triangles, side by side, looming over the Moreno Valley as if wings come to rest. A small chapel sat between the wings. Inside the chapel were photographs of dead soldiers, with popular music of the war years piped in. At night the chapel was floodlit. Victor Westphall built the memorial largely with his own hands and money. He lived alone, in a small cabin on the hillside beneath his creation.⁶⁸

Ben and Miriam McDermott of Nashville, Tennessee, paid tribute in a manner that may have been common among the families of dead soldiers. The McDermotts converted their back porch, where their fallen son Ben, Jr., used to sleep, into a sort of family museum. It contained Ben, Jr.'s Marine saber, some of his military emblems mounted and framed, the flag which draped his coffin, his karate belts, snapshots of him in Vietnam, a picture of him in his football jersey. "We just kind of dedicated the room to him," said Ben, Sr. "I don't know if other families do

⁶⁸ New York Times, 13 November 1982, section I, p. 8.

this, but sometimes we kind of feel like he's here."⁶⁹

Thus in countless ways the Vietnam War was personalized in memory. Jan Scruggs was not alone in insisting that the names of the dead be remembered. Among many others of like mind, Michael Norman, a veteran and a reporter for the New York Times, said:

I wanted to forget almost everything else, but never, never the names. They stayed with me--long after the smell of the field and the echo of the guns, long after that moment when a rainstorm was finally just a rainstorm and not the assault of a jungle monsoon. My uniforms lost their fit. My rifleman's eyes took on glasses. But I always remembered the names.

. . . I came home quickly from the war--no drinks with the boys down at the Legion Hall, no parades or veterans' protests in the streets. But I tried, tried often during the last 16 years, not to forget the names. . . . Jim Payne of Glendale, California. Jim Parsons of Warsaw, Missouri. Tommy Gonzales of Beeville, Texas. It was, in part, a matter of duty, one marine keeping alive the memory of others--semper fidelis.⁷⁰

Like the literature of the veterans, the nation's remembrance of the Vietnam experience was personal. The monuments and other expressions remembered the men and women touched by the war, not the cause itself.

⁶⁹ Palmer, 23.

⁷⁰ Michael Norman, "For Us The War Is Over," New York Times, 31 March, 1985, p. 64.

CHAPTER 4

A LESSON IS DRAWN

Various Early Lessons

Because the Vietnam War was for the most part remembered personally instead of politically, it may have seemed as though no national lessons were drawn from the experience. Referring to the war's portrayal in fiction, Samuel Freedman asked whether "the totality of individual artistic responses . . . amounted to a national response."¹ The veterans who chronicled their own experiences tended to be wary of lessons. Tim O'Brien referred to the war as "simple event. . . . A war like any war. No new messages."² He also wrote, "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories."³ Of his book Rumor Of War, Phillip Caputo said, "It might, perhaps, prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war. But I

¹ Freedman, 55.

² O'Brien, Cacciato, 288-289.

³ O'Brien, Combat Zone, 23.

don't think so."⁴

But even though the American public did not truly debate the Vietnam War after 1975, even though the war's political history and the Vietnamese were largely forgotten, numerous lessons were drawn and some applied. For President Jimmy Carter, elected the year after the war ended, the American role in Vietnam offered guiding ideas about foreign policy. Carter promised to conduct foreign affairs more openly and morally, with a stronger commitment to human rights than to containing Communism at every turn. Military adventures were not in favor. As a presidential candidate, Carter referred to "the quagmires of Cambodia and Vietnam" and said, "I would never . . . openly or covertly, legally or illegally, support nations who stand for principles on which their own people violently disagree and which are completely antithetical to what we believe in."⁵ In a televised address in 1979, President Carter cited the war as a major cause of America's "malaise," saying, "We were taught that our armies were invincible and and our causes always just, only to suffer the agony of Vietnam."⁶

⁴ Caputo, xix.

⁵ Gaddis Smith, Morality, Reason and Power (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 30.

⁶ Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 120.

Carter seemed to believe the Vietnam War was a profound moral mistake, not only a strategic one. He was reluctant to intervene militarily overseas, though in 1980, his last year in office, he unsuccessfully sent forces to free the hostages in Iran and proclaimed the Carter Doctrine to defend the Persian Gulf oil lanes. Critics termed such reluctance the "Vietnam syndrome," saying Carter and his like were traumatized by the Vietnam War and indecisive in conducting foreign policy. One such critic, Robert Tucker, said, "So long as the nation's collective memory of Vietnam is determined by the conventional view of this war [Carter's contrite view], it will be difficult for us to act with the pride and assurance we require. In a word, the rehabilitation of American foreign policy depends on the rehabilitation of Vietnam."⁷

Carter was joined by many others in seeking lessons from the war. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 there ensued a debate on whether they had entered their own Vietnam.⁸ When the Reagan Administration in 1981 increased military assistance to the government of El Salvador, which was fighting Communist guerillas, critics compared the scenario to the early days of American

⁷ Robert Tucker, "Spoil of Defeat: Rationalizing Vietnam," Harper's, 11 November, 1981, 87.

⁸ Time, "Kabul Is Not Saigon," 10 March 1980, 32.

involvement in Vietnam. Clarence Long, a Democratic Congressman from Maryland, said, "This administration is making the same kinds of mistakes that an administration of my own party was making 18 years ago."⁹ In 1982 Congressman Bill Alexander, an Arkansas Democrat, said, "Most people don't know where El Salvador is, but the ghost of Vietnam hangs over every instance of military support or action in a foreign country."¹⁰ When an American advisor was reported carrying a rifle in El Salvador--only pistols were permitted--the story made headlines across the nation and President Reagan was forced to bring the man home. When an American intelligence ship was reported off the Salvadoran coast, comparisons were made with the Gulf of Tonkin incident.¹¹

In 1983, the Vietnam War was invoked as reason to withdraw troops from Beirut, where they were stationed to enforce an elusive peace. Congressman John McCain, an Arizona Republican and former prisoner of war in Vietnam, said, "The longer we stay in Lebanon, the harder it will be for us to leave. We will be trapped by the case we make for

⁹ National Review, "No More Vietnams," 17 April 1981, 403.

¹⁰ New Republic, "The Vietnam Analogy," 17 March 1982, 7.

¹¹ Ibid.

having our troops there in the first place."¹² Conservative Democratic Senator John Stennis of Mississippi intoned that he had supported his leaders for too long during the Vietnam War and that this time we would not "go for it."¹³ The lessons of the war briefly became an issue between Senator Gary Hart and former Vice President Walter Mondale during the 1984 Democratic primaries. Hart said his own foreign policy views were formed during the war, signifying a generational divide between himself and the older Mondale, whose views were formed during World War Two and the early Cold War. Hart criticized Mondale for favoring the continued presence of American advisors in Honduras and for being late in calling for the withdrawal of the troops in Beirut. Mondale responded by saying Hart had learned the "wrong lesson" from the Vietnam War, the idea that any American intervention was foolish. According to Mondale, the right lesson was that there were limits to American power, but that the United States still needed to play a strong international role.¹⁴

It was common for someone of Hart's generation to cite the war as the major influence on their foreign policy

¹² MacPherson, 609.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ New York Times, 4 April 1984, section VIII, p. 9.

thinking. Mike Synar, a Democratic Congressman from Oklahoma who admitted the war had made him suspicious of military actions, said, "We learned that anything military has to have the support of the American people. I come from a hawkish state where you'd think people really would look at Central America as a place where we draw the line, but I don't think they're buying the president's rhetoric."¹⁵

Another young congressman, Republican Newt Gingrich of Georgia, said, "Our generation is much more fascinated with foreign policy than our elders were. From my bias, I feel that many members of Congress on the left were 'vaccinated' by Vietnam. The driving moral argument for antiwar Democrats is still Vietnam. . . ."¹⁶

The Weinberger Doctrine

In a campaign speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars in August 1980, Ronald Reagan said of the Vietnam War, ". . . it's time we recognized that ours, in truth, was a noble cause. We dishonored the memory of 50,000 young

¹⁵ Washington Post, 15 April 1985, section I, p. 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Americans who died in that cause when we gave way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful."¹⁷ To reporter Elizabeth Drew in a private interview, Reagan, in reference to his opponent Jimmy Carter's description of the war as "moral poverty," said, "When fifty thousand people, young Americans, give their lives to protect the people of a small country, a defenseless country, against godless Communist tyranny, I think it is an act of collective courage, not moral poverty."¹⁸

Reagan's remarks were treated in the media as gaffes, for no serious candidate for national office since 1975 had uttered such sentiments, but Reagan did not apologize for them. To the contrary, he held fast to his belief in the Vietnam War's justness. In 1985 Reagan was asked for his thoughts on the tenth anniversary of the war's end and he said, ". . . the truth of the matter is that we did have victory. We continue to talk about losing that war. We didn't lose that war. We won virtually every major engagement. . . . When the North Vietnamese did violate the treaty and the then-administration asked Congress for an appropriation to keep our word, Congress refused."¹⁹

¹⁷ New York Times, 19 August 1980, section I, p. 1.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Drew, Portrait Of An Election (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 175.

¹⁹ New York Times, 19 April 1985, section I, p. 9.

Judging from the election results, Reagan's remarks during the 1980 campaign did not greatly offend the public. Indeed, his subject was not whether to fight such a war again but whether Americans should feel ashamed of their role, or their motives, in Vietnam. Coming in the midst of the Iranian hostage ordeal and the surge of nationalism it generated, Reagan's moral defense of the war may have actually helped his cause. But it was a moral defense only, not a strategic one. It was, in general, of the same variety as Norman Podhoretz's and Richard Nixon's arguments. When Elizabeth Drew asked Reagan about the strategic wisdom of fighting the Vietnam War, Reagan replied, "I was one who never believed we should have gone in. I've always believed in the [General Douglas] MacArthur dictum that you don't get involved in a land war in Asia. But the troops were sent in; once we sent them in, then you have made a commitment to the men you're asking to fight that you are going to give them every resource to win this thing and get them home as soon as possible."²⁰

This post-war assessment of military interventions, emphasizing the need to strike forcefully and win quickly rather than allowing events to be prolonged, was put into policy by Reagan's Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger,

²⁰ Drew, 118.

in November 1984. The so-called Weinberger Doctrine set conditions for deploying troops abroad: the public must clearly understand and support the action, so the nation could muster the will for a decisive victory. Said Weinberger, "Before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress. We cannot fight a battle with the Congress at home while asking our troops to win a war overseas or, as in the case of Vietnam, in effect asking our troops not to win but just to be there."²¹ Weinberger later elaborated on his doctrine, noting, "There's still a very strong feeling against any kind of United States involvement in actions that require military force. That's one of the legacies [of the Vietnam War]. To my mind the principal lesson learned is that we should never go into combat if it isn't important enough to our national interests."²²

In a speech eleven days after Weinberger's pronouncement, Secretary of State George Schultz replied to it skeptically, saying, "There is no such thing as guaranteed public support in advance."²³ President Reagan

²¹ David Fromkin and James Chase, "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam?", Foreign Affairs, (Spring 1985), 730.

²² Willenson, 393.

²³ Fromkin and Chase, 730.

did not publicly comment on the policy, but his actions seemed to endorse it. During eight years in office his only deployments of American troops were of a relatively small scale, sending several hundred Marines to Beirut and then invading the tiny island of Grenada, both in 1983. Reagan also retaliated against various Middle Eastern terrorists with swift, surgical strikes. When the Beirut adventure soured, over 200 Marines being killed by a suicide car bomb, Reagan quickly withdrew the remaining forces. In Grenada, the odds for success were great and the victory accomplished in a matter of weeks. To contain Communism on a larger scale, Reagan relied on foreign soldiers, supplying substantial anti-Communist movements in Nicaragua and Afghanistan. Americans did not play a combat role in either war.

This strategy had roots in the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, which was tied to Nixon's policy of Vietnamization, or turning the fighting back over to the South Vietnamese while gradually withdrawing American forces. In his book No More Vietnams, Nixon wrote, "I realized that after our experience in Vietnam the American people would be very reluctant to commit American forces to another war in the Third World We should provide military and economic aid to the target countries equal to that provided to the insurgents by the Soviet bloc, but the country under attack should have

the responsibility for providing the men for its defense We should never again make the mistake we made in Vietnam."²⁴ Caspar Weinberger apparently felt the same way. Richard Holbrooke, a former executive aide to Ambassadors to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge and Maxwell Taylor, noted that Weinberger's insistence on political support and fast, effective force "come precisely out of his understanding of Vietnam. He wouldn't have thought of those two things twenty or thirty years ago. Now they carry great weight and he raises them to argue for limits on involvement."²⁵

Journalist Robert Wright commented on the Weinberger Doctrine cynically: "Reagan, we are told, showed in Grenada and Libya [in response to alleged terrorism] that he was willing to see tens of Americans die for American ideals, and he showed in Afghanistan and Nicaragua that he was willing to pay tens of thousands of foreigners to die for them."²⁶ Writing in Harper's, Jonathan Schell struck a similar note:

To be sure, whenever apparent toughness could be demonstrated without paying a high cost--as it could, for example, in the invasion of Grenada, or in the bombing of Libya in response to terrorist attacks allegedly planned in or supported by Libya--the administration acted, and the public applauded. But

²⁴ Richard Nixon, No More Vietnams (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 217-218.

²⁵ Willenson, 398.

²⁶ Robert Wright, New Republic, 9 January 1989, 6.

when intervention clearly had a high cost attached . . . the administration held back, and the public made no complaint. The line that the public did not wish to cross was clearly, if not nobly, drawn: the expenditure of the lives of people from other countries was acceptable; the expenditure of American lives was not

Strangely, after ten years of fighting in Vietnam and political turmoil at home, the war remained undigested in public opinion. The public was left in a state of unresolved ambivalence--repelled by the tangible prospect of any more Vietnams yet still attracted to the policies that led the United States into Vietnam. [1972 presidential candidate George] McGovern's political mistake had been to begin to articulate a picture of the world that reflected only one side of the public's ambivalence. President Carter, straying further down this path, won a McGovern-like reputation for weakness. . . . Reagan was politically wiser. He followed to the letter the public preferences revealed in the latter days of the Vietnam War: he gave the public McGovernite decisions accompanied by Nixonian talk, and the public returned him to office in a landslide.²⁷

Both Wright and Schell noted the importance of sparing American lives in pursuing a post-Vietnam foreign policy. While a majority of the voters may have supported Ronald Reagan's assertive policies, few were willing to have American troops used in large numbers, a reluctance that did not escape the attention of Caspar Weinberger. According to him, America should avoid conflicts like the one in Vietnam unless they were truly important to the national interest. In forgetting or never even learning the Vietnam War's political history, Americans silently commented on how

²⁷ Jonathan Schell, "Talk Loudly And Carry A Small Stick," Harper's (March 1989), 46-47.

important Vietnam was to them. They remembered instead the war's effects on their countrymen, a personal rather than a political memory. But on a national scale, personal remembrance made a political imprint. The emphasis on what the war had done to individual Americans was a restraint on policymakers in Washington.

CONCLUSIONS

In the American mind from 1975 to 1985, the Vietnam War was half a memory. The war's effects on Americans, their nation's foreign policies and prestige were remembered, its political history and the nation of Vietnam were not. The war's tangible purpose of preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam was quickly forgotten, though the abstract purpose of containing Communism was remembered and preserved, witness the policies of Ronald Reagan, who modified containment to avoid any high cost in American lives. While it would seem as though containment in general had been important, Vietnam in particular was not truly so. Thus, the loss of Vietnam was easily forgotten, as was the political history of American efforts to prevent it. Americans wanted to forget the war because it was an unpleasant, complicated affair. They were able to forget because not only did the distant war fail to touch most of them indelibly, many seemed to consider its goal unessential. A small nation--on the other side of the world, with no ties of culture, language or geography to the United States--was lost to Communism and Americans got on with their lives. Their concerns tended to be immediate and

personal.

It is the conclusion of this study that Americans remembered the Vietnam War as well as could be expected, or perhaps even better. Since Vietnam was not dear to the hearts of most Americans, naturally the history of America's involvement there was forgotten or never even learned by most. In fact, it was probably no more forgotten than were earlier wars fought for reasons other than national survival, for example, the Korean War. Indeed, since the Vietnam War was controversial and lost, certain of its aspects may have been remembered with unusual clarity, humanitarian ones, especially. The war was remembered in a strongly humanitarian way because the few who remembered--most of them Vietnam veterans, the bulk of the minority touched by the war--did so personally, avoiding political abstractions. In most of the veterans' written accounts neither the Vietnamese nor the war's political history was forgotten, but these writings tended to look inward. Alienated from politics and global strategy, the authors told their own stories with an emphasis on concrete detail. They were intent on showing the war as it really was, for themselves, anyway. Such personalized history was not new, having had roots in previous modern

wars, the First World War most prominently, but it struck a chord after the Vietnam War because the war's political history was not much recounted and so there was a void to fill. Mainly, the personal approach was honest self-reflection, not xenophobic self-absorption. It did, however, set a pattern for remembering the war. Americans looked in the mirror, not across the Pacific and into the rice paddies.

When the American public finally remembered the Vietnam experience at the end of the 1970s, prodded by veterans demanding recognition, the focus was on the warrior, not the war. Again, the fate of Vietnam was not foremost in the national memory. Again, political history was shunned. Personal remembrance took its place, most notably in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, a sort of expense statement of American lives. It is probably true that a political memorial could not have been built, for agreement on its message could not have been reached, but more telling is that an apolitical memorial was in fact built. In other words, the nation was able to remember the war with an official expression that avoided politics. A Vietnam War memorial was never built; a memorial to veterans was. Surely this indicates how little Americans truly cared about the tangible political purpose of the war--preserving South

Vietnam. On this point semantics are important. Americans cared about the Vietnam War because it was a battleground in the larger effort to contain Communism; it was a test of American will and prestige and it claimed so many American lives. But Americans did not seem to care so much about the nation of Vietnam, the human reality versus the political abstraction.

Ironically, perhaps, the abstraction of containment was not forgotten or abandoned after 1975, but rather modified to lower the cost in American lives. Richard Nixon began this modification in 1969 with his Nixon Doctrine and it reached full flower under Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, as evidenced by the Weinberger Doctrine. American lives would not be expended in great numbers for anything less than a vital cause, one which enjoyed full public support. As Caspar Weinberger noted, after 1975 Americans were loathe to commit troops overseas, an acknowledgement on his part that the manner in which the war was remembered had much to do with official policy. Personal remembrance, its attention to individual lives and sufferings, acted to restrain policymakers from foreign adventures.

This particular legacy of personal remembrance would seem to refute the criticisms of people like W.D. Ehrhart, who found the Vietnam Veterans Memorial too vague and

ambivalent, not a strong enough warning about war, and Tim O'Brien, who wrote, "Fuzzily, we recall the outlines of and the bare silhouettes of the issues, but we do not, I fear, recall much of the detail. . . . The national memory, like the memory of soldiers, is too damn short."¹ As reflected in the Weinberger Doctrine, memory had a concrete effect. It is important as well in answering the conservative case that the memorial, and the war's "radical personalization" in general, was inappropriate. The opposite of radical personalization would be radical "abstracting," a description some might apply to the thinking which led America into Vietnam in the first place. In remembering the Vietnam War, Americans did not abandon containment in the abstract, but they were unwilling to secure it with American blood, for it was not the abstraction which made the war such a grim memory, it was the reality of over 57,000 American deaths. Jimmy Carter was wary of containment and did not pursue it forcefully for most of his term, but Ronald Reagan was determined to resuscitate it. In doing so, he was forced by the public's memory of the war to be imaginative, to choose his battles wisely and keep the costs low. There is a case to be made that Reagan succeeded, playing the role of post-Vietnam Commander in Chief skillfully, with prudence.

¹ Horne, 206.

Certain of Reagan's fellow conservatives, Norman Podhoretz most notably, did not seem to share his realism and political instincts. Even after the war they continued their radical abstracting by saying that although the war was strategically unsound, it was a moral and noble undertaking and thus a good idea. To them, it seems, the thousands of names on Maya Lin's wall were the true abstraction, while notions of containment and dominoes were as real as flesh.

Both the political right and left remembered the war in moral terms. The left's moral argument was expressed by, among others, a writer and Vietnam veteran named Daniel Swain, who was scathing in his words:

I know, I know, I'm being insensitive to those poor Vietnam vets who have to live with the terrible guilt of what they did. I've read the stories about the poor SOB who can't look at his darling children without wanting to break into tears because he blew away a little Vietnamese child about the same age so many years ago. Perhaps part of the reason I don't sympathize is that I am one of those vets. But the fact is, isn't that what we should feel, mind-torturing guilt for the rest of our lives? Can't anyone see that we deserve to feel guilty? Doesn't anyone see that the entire ball of rationalization that we built for ourselves--we were only nineteen, we thought we were fighting a war of liberation, we believed in our country--is just so much bullshit? Nineteen or not, we made a choice that revealed to us our basic inhumanity, and even if we never willingly killed little kids, in the final analysis we participated in an enormously immoral act, and the guilt we feel is a reasonable response to our acts. We should be forgiven, but we shouldn't expect to hear 'that's okay,' because the fact is it wasn't and

never should be 'okay.'"²

In the New York Times, Adam Clymer wrote, "We seem to be inclined to forgive ourselves for having gone there, inclined also to say if things didn't work out, it wasn't our fault."³ Clark Clifford, Secretary of Defense for Lyndon Johnson, said as much in a 1981 interview:

"Countries, like human beings, make mistakes. We made an honest mistake. I feel no sense of shame. Nor should the country feel any sense of shame. We felt that we were doing what was necessary. It proved to be unsound."⁴ As Saigon was falling in April 1975, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger sent a message to members of the American armed forces, saying, ". . . our involvement . . . was intended to assist a small nation to preserve its independence in the face of external attack and to provide at least a reasonable chance of survival."⁵

Norman Podhoretz put the conservative moral argument thus: "Why did the United States undertake these burdens and

² Daniel Swain, "Brothers In Arms: The Death Of An Antiwar Veteran," Unwinding The War, Reese Williams, ed. (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1987), 108.

³ Clymer, 42.

⁴ Timothy J. Lomperis, The War Nobody Won (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1984), 20-21.

⁵ Emerson, 36.

make these sacrifices of blood and treasure and domestic tranquility? What was in it for the United States? It was a question that plagued the antiwar movement from beginning to end because the answer was hard to find."⁶ He added, "Imprudent though it might have been to try to save South Vietnam from Communism, it was also an attempt born of noble impulses. The same cannot be said of what the United States did in abandoning South Vietnam to Communism in 1972."⁷

Very generally, the left and the right said the same thing: America had treated Vietnam shabbily, immorally. According to the left, America had entered Vietnam arrogantly, deluded by notions of global mission and ignorant of the people she was supposedly trying to save. In the course of trying, unspeakable damage was done. According to the right, America had made a solemn vow to save South Vietnam and then abandoned her in her hour of need. Both versions implied that mighty, western America was unkind to her frail Asian ally.

Whether the Vietnam War should have been remembered as a moral failure is a question for other studies to answer. Relevant to this study is that while most Americans seemed

⁶ Podhoretz, 196.

⁷ Ibid., 172.

to have had some moral qualms about the war--a survey in 1982 showed that 72 percent felt the war was "more than a mistake" and was "fundamentally wrong and immoral"⁸--a national debate on the episode's morality never took place after 1975. At a roundtable discussion of the war in 1985, Peter Marin said the war as a "moral event" had been lost in memory. "That's an immense waste," said Marin. "We could perhaps have become a wiser people. But the war is an experience that is not becoming part of the collective wisdom." To which conservative economist George Gilder pointedly replied, "Americans are getting on with their lives, in other words."⁹

Both Marin and Gilder were half right. Marin was right in noting how the morality of America's relationship with Vietnam was not much remembered. If America had mistreated her ally, the public memory of the war did not clearly reflect it, just as it did not reflect the war's political history. Gilder was right in implying that after 1975 Americans avoided recriminations, ideological battles and self-flagellation, though some believed the latter flourished, witness Ronald Reagan's stinging response to Jimmy Carter's description of the war as "moral poverty."

⁸ MacPherson, 27.

⁹ Harper's, (April 1985), 44.

However, Marin failed to mention that in remembering the war personally, in focusing so intently on what it did to individuals, Americans showed a moral side, one which duly considered the horrors of war. For his part, Gilder failed to mention that in "getting on with their lives" Americans forgot about their lost ally, an amoral reaction at best. The American memory was for the American experience, not for that of the Vietnamese.

This amorality would seem to have been the least defensible part of the war's memory. Again, it is the conclusion of this study that Americans remembered the war reasonably well. Despite forgetting its history and the people it was fought to save from Communism, Americans did remember the war's costs vividly enough to inhibit national leaders from launching similar adventures. Realistically, perhaps reflecting upon what the war had done to their own kind was a sufficiently moral beginning for Americans to make. If it was an act of self-absorption, it probably said more about human nature in general than about the American character in particular. Judgment on this, it seems, would depend on one's moral expectations.

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