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The Meaning of the Soldier: *In the Year of the Pig* and *Hearts and Minds*

by

Laura Browder

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*In the Year of the Pig* (1968) and *Hearts and Minds* (1974)—the first an Academy Award nominee, the second an Academy Award winner—are the two best-known Vietnam War documentaries of their time. They are works that could hardly be more different—one a cool, intellectual take on the origins and then-current state of the war, and the second a highly emotional appeal to end the war. By viewing them together it is possible not only to connect the dots between the contrasting intellectual and filmic traditions from which each emerged, but also to see, through the viewpoints of each film, how radically the image of the American soldier in Vietnam had changed between 1968 and 1974—and why, politically speaking, this view mattered so much to both war opponents and war proponents.

*In the Year of the Pig* and *Hearts and Minds*, viewed side by side, offer a perfect lesson in Brechtian agit-prop (as seen in Emile de Antonio's film) versus the appeal to emotion (as seen in Peter Davis's film). Yet more than that, *In the Year of the Pig*, though made in 1968, is very much an old left documentary—with its roots in early Soviet film and the living newspaper tradition developed there in the 1920s, and then later burnished during the 1930s through the Federal Theatre Project productions. *In the Year of the Pig*, then, is Brechtian in its approach to history; yet it also connects to the popular front ideology that was formative to de Antonio as he

became a member of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) during the late 1930s—an act that served de Antonio’s conscious embrace of an American revolutionary tradition. In the case of *In the Year of the Pig*, this also expressed itself in De Antonio’s own perspective as a veteran of an earlier conflict: World War II.

In fact, both of these films have deep roots in the 1930s, at least genetically speaking—Peter Davis, who made *Hearts and Minds*, is the son of 1930s radical writer Tess Slesinger, who was best known for her 1934 novel *The Unpossessed*, which satirized leftist culture in the 1930s. While Davis, born in 1937, is the son of a 1930s radical, De Antonio was himself a 1930s radical, one who joined the Communist Party when the CPUSA was at the height of its strength and intellectual influence. And unlike many radicals from that time, de Antonio continued to describe himself as a Marxist in interviews and speeches throughout his life. Indeed, *In the Year of the Pig* draws strongly from leftist visual and dramatic techniques—both the collage techniques of Eisenstein and the Living Newspaper tradition—first developed in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and then honed by workers’ theater groups and the Federal Theatre Project of the Works Progress Administration during the time that de Antonio came of age intellectually.

The Living Newspapers were a form that first developed in the 1920s in response to the Soviet government’s need to disseminate propaganda and public information. At that time, the government had few sophisticated tools with which to convey important information to illiterate peasants. The theatrical approaches to agitation and propaganda, or agit-prop, that Soviet artists developed provided future generations of politically conscious artists with the means to transmit radical ideas via accessible forms of media. In their earliest form, the Living Newspapers were simple: literate members of Soviet workers’ clubs would get up on stage and read newspaper

articles to their illiterate comrades. The form progressed quickly, however, and in their most developed form, Living Newspapers incorporated mass spectacles (usually re-enactments of recent historical events), literary montages of poetry, slogans, and documents; theatrical trials, staged statistics, and mass declamations. The goal of the Living Newspapers was to educate audiences through exposing them to juxtapositions of current and historical facts and theories.

With the explicit support of the revolutionary government's policies on proletarian culture, the Living Newspapers became the most popular form within amateur proletarian theater between 1923 and 1928. Influenced by the cinematic techniques of Eisenstein and by modernist ideas of montage and pastiche, these early Living Newspapers soon spread to the workers' theatres of Germany, and finally to the United States, where the Federal Theatre Project commissioned and produced dozens of plays on subjects ranging from the problems of deforestation to the crisis in urban housing—plays that quoted the Congressional Record as well as articles from the *New York Times*. At their best, the Living Newspapers offered mass audiences not just a nuanced view of the historical struggles that continued to influence current events, but also the encouraging possibility that audience members could, through political action, change the course of future outcomes" (Browder 1998, 122).

De Antonio, when making *In the Year of the Pig*, drew heavily upon one of the most important elements of the Living Newspaper: collage—juxtapositions of images and text that emphasized the ways in which historical forces exercise great influence over individuals. As de Antonio said, "The early Soviets had a kind of collage technique. This is what Eisenstein was doing, although I don't think he ever used the word *collage*. But what the Russian theorists talked about is the thing that I feel I got out of strictly American roots: putting two elements together in the editing process, if you do it right, develops something greater than the sum of the

two parts” (De Antonio 2000, 13). The Soviets would come to call this process montage. De Antonio’s film achieves the effects of montage to a fault. “*In the Year of the Pig*,” he explains, “was meant to create a sort of historical intellectual perspective of the war that everyone was involved in emotionally. I wanted to do political history without narration as a film, and I wanted to convince people—give them information they didn’t have” (De Antonio, 2005). He used no narrator for the film and shot it entirely in black and white. Although there are segments that are beautiful, they are always unsensational. Likewise, when asked in 1978 what he liked best about his film, De Antonio responded: “Part of what works specifically for me in the film—and most critics have simply not commented on this—is the technique that I think I helped develop, which is the use of a collage of people, voices, images, ideas, to develop a story line or a didactic line, uninterrupted by external narration” (De Antonio 1978, 6).

The film emphasizes the historical roots of the Vietnam War. Its assumption of an intellectual, rather than an emotional, approach to the Vietnam War is rooted in de Antonio’s background. His identity as a war vet himself is important to the film—but so is his past as a Communist. De Antonio came of age when the CPUSA’s slogan was “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism” and the party invoked an American revolutionary tradition both to contrast with the present day and to inspire current audiences. During the late 1930s, when de Antonio was at Harvard and joining the CPUSA, CPUSA general secretary Earl Browder would write:

We are celebrating several anniversaries. Two hundred years ago, in 1737, was born Tom Paine, destined to become the fiery tribune in our Revolutionary War of Independence. One hundred and fifty years ago we received our United States Constitution, product of the revolution which had stirred the whole world, and

representing a compromise between the conflicting interests which fought the war.

Eighteen years ago was born the Communist Party, the Party destined to carry on and complete the work begun by Tom Paine, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. (Browder 1938, 235)

In 1978, de Antonio would sound a similar note during an interview: “I think you could have a genuine Marxist revolution in the United States without scrapping the Bill of Rights” (De Antonio 1978, 10). The CPUSA’s linkage between contemporary world revolutions and the American revolutionary tradition is one that de Antonio would use to suggest not only that the aspirations of the Vietnamese people were not so different from those of freedom-fighting Americans from the revolutionary era—but also that the United States had an honorable democratic and revolutionary tradition upon which it had turned its back in order to support the corrupt South Vietnamese regime.

He would reference this visually in the first minutes of the film. *In the Year of the Pig* begins with a montage—images intercut with a black screen, with the sound of many helicopters together overlaying the images. First, we see an image of a carved stone soldier’s face on the right-hand side of the screen, then titles. The next shot is of text carved in stone—perhaps on a gravestone or other memorial, reading: “‘As soon as I heard of American independence my heart was enlisted.’ 1776. Joseph Angel”; a close shot of a Vietnam-era G.I.’s helmet, reading “Make war not love”; an image of war memorial from the American Civil War; an elderly Vietnamese man with small children. We see a monk’s body burning; a GI standing in a helicopter door wearing a belt of bombs; a little Vietnamese kid with cigarette. Over the images there is the sound of a helicopter’s rotors. We see a relief depicting Augustus Saint-Gauden’s stone relief

memorial to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw's African-American regiment in the Civil War. The helicopter noise throughout this montage keeps increasing in volume.

The beginning of the film was crucial to de Antonio, though he felt that no critic fully understood it. As he explained in an 1988 conversation,

I would like to talk about the first eight minutes of *In the Year of the Pig*, with that music and all that black leader and the statue of the American Civil War soldier. Nobody's ever asked what that fucking statue's doing there. The answer is that I was a soldier from Pennsylvania. That guy was the 163rd infantry. That was a just war. He was fighting for the Union army in a just war, and I was fighting in film, a pro-Vietnamese film in my time, and that's what that soldier meant. I meant it to be hard to get and special, but I had to put it in there. I was looking for some photographs and I found that photograph and I said, "Well Jesus, this is me in a sense, a hundred and some years before." (De Antonio 2004)

De Antonio had himself been a bomber pilot during World War Two, and those opening minutes of *In the Year of the Pig* stress the idea of the American Revolution and likewise reach back in time to that "just war," establish his subject as revolutionary, deeply American—and signal his empathy for the Americans fighting the war in Vietnam. We briefly see one of those soldiers with a belt of bombs, juxtaposed instantly with the image of a young Vietnamese boy smoking a cigarette. In his documentary, he draws a long line from the Revolutionary War soldiers, to the Civil War soldiers, and then the North Vietnamese fighters—and perhaps finally to himself, "fighting in film." All are soldiers; all are fighting for freedom.

The film is not just focused on the American policies that led to the Vietnam War, but also, very strongly, on the military implementation of the war. Even the soundtrack that covers the establishing shots is didactic. As de Antonio said in a 1978 *Film Quarterly* interview:

*In the Year of the Pig* opens with a concerto made out of helicopters because the helicopter was the quintessential difference between Vietnam and all other wars. We would not have fought that war at all without the helicopters. Our guys wouldn't have gone through the jungle; they would have been killed in massive quantities. We were able to leapfrog in with helicopters, bring in weapons and supplies, take out the wounded, take out the stuff we didn't want the enemy to have. So I took—in the mode of John Cage, who is a friend of mine—I took about ten or 15 different series of helicopter sounds and mixed them the way modern music is mixed. I said nothing about that. If people don't get it, they don't get it (De Antonio 2004).

The linkages that de Antonio makes in the establishing shots—between self-immolating monks and revolutionary war slogans—are made even more explicit seconds later with the first interview footage of Senator Thruston B. Morton, R-Kentucky, who is quoted as saying:

The thing that I think we fail to recognize is that Ho Chi Minh, communist or whatnot, is considered by the people of Vietnam—and I'm speaking now of millions in South Vietnam—as the George Washington of his country. He's the one who threw off French colonialism. Just as we had ours in 1776, they had theirs in the 1940s. Whether we like him or not, whether we like the particular economic system or social system that he

develops or not, we must consider that he is considered by many peasants in South Vietnam and North Vietnam as the George Washington of his country.

By having an establishment figure acknowledge Ho Chi Minh's role as "the George Washington of his country," de Antonio is able to establish this idea not as a fringe one embraced only by leftists, but as something much closer to a universally acknowledged truth.

Throughout the documentary, de Antonio constantly invokes earlier American wars and asks viewers to identify the Vietnamese, and their cause, with earlier generations of Americans fighting for justice. For example, in the film the *New York Times* journalist David Halberstam, discussing the Vietnamese who sided with the Viet Minh against the French in 1945-1946, tells de Antonio that "all the best and most talented Vietnamese of a generation had faced the alternative of the French or Viet Minh, the best of a generation, the kind of young men who would join up the day after Pearl Harbor. So the best of a generation signed up, and they won the war...." The film constantly compares North Vietnamese forces to the best in an American military tradition, all the while maligning U.S. policy as being un-American. The film features footage of Senator Wayne Morse, Democrat of Oregon, talking about how the free elections mandated by the 1956 Geneva agreement were sabotaged by the United States, "and about how our country, that boasts about believing in self-determination, used its power and its prestige and its influence, really to get our first puppet government." The promise of American idealism, de Antonio argues, has been cynically betrayed.

More damning still is a scene focused on the pacification programs that became U.S. military policy in Vietnam, in which villages were searched and villagers removed from their homes and kept under surveillance overnight or longer while this process was taking place. In

this scene, an ABC journalist interviews a G.I. who explains the program in which Vietnamese villagers who are suspected of knowing Viet Cong are removed from their homes and are taken to detention centers so “we teach them propaganda for three months.” Cut to Senator Thruston Morton: “We’ve put over three million of them into what I would call a concentration camp.” The idealistic Vietnamese, whom Halberstam earlier compared to the best and the brightest, are now being herded by the American government into concentration camps, an even greater betrayal of the United States role in World War Two. Later, we hear the voiceover of Colonel William R. Corson, a retired U.S. Marine employed by the CIA at the time of filming. While Corson explains how unfortunate it is that villagers have to be taken from their homes in order to clear the area of Viet Cong, we see network footage of an elderly Vietnamese woman crawling from the burning wreckage of her home, while GIs look on, laughing. To have Corson then refer to this as a genocidal policy—“this is what search-and-destroy becomes, in a very practical sense,” he states—further aligns U.S. policy with Nazism. The American soldiers who carry out these tasks are presented as vapid: The footage of a search-and-destroy mission shows bombs exploding, fires breaking out, Armored Personnel Carriers driving through villages, and soldiers talking as they walk through burning fields. We see soldiers destroying tons of rice in villages, and a gum-chewing soldier looking on at the destruction of a village’s entire food supply. The television news interview with a G.I., included in the sequence, reinforces the impression of soldiers who are either mindlessly obeying orders, or worse, taking pleasure in the destruction. When an ABC interviewer comments to a G.I. that “You look like you enjoy your work,” the G.I. confirms this. We then see more footage of villages being destroyed.

General William Westmoreland, standing at a podium flanked by American flags, explains, “When a captive is taken by United States or free world forces, he is, following

interrogation, turned over to the Vietnamese authorities. These prisoners are not being mistreated. They are being handled in accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Conventions.” Yet while the general’s voice continues his explanation, the film cuts to footage of Vietnamese prisoners being shackled repeatedly kicked by in the stomach by an American captor. The scene ends with an execution of a Vietnamese prisoner. The next interviewee, David R. Tuck, a former Army soldier, states that in his unit prisoners were routinely executed as standard policy—that his C.O. had explained that “we weren’t going to take any prisoners.” Former Green Beret John Toller, in the process of deserting the Army, introduces himself before we cut back to Westmoreland at the podium extolling the soldiers in Vietnam for their “traditional American initiative and ingenuity.” Next, cutting back, Toller explains how the American soldiers are incapable of communicating with the Vietnamese: “The only way they can communicate is with money or through a gun.” Similarly, David Tuck sees his military leadership reinforcing racism—a practice expounded upon by soldiers on R&R at a beach. During an interview conducted by an American television journalist, one of these soldiers complains about the beach lacking American girls. The journalist points out that there are girls at the end of the beach, the soldier responds, “Gooks, slant-eyed, they’re no good.” The perky American music playing during this scene reinforces the banality of both the racism and the journalist’s reaction to it—which is no reaction at all.

The neutrality and the banality of network news, in fact, is a major theme of *In the Year of the Pig*, one to which the film and the filmmaker return again and again. As de Antonio said in 1971:

There is nothing as bad that's happened concerning the war as the networks' coverage of it, because it seems as if they're covering the war whereas in fact they're not. The networks have made the American people, in a final way, comfortable with the war—because it appears between commercials, every day; it's become part of our quotidian existence, like armpit commercials. There's never the question asked, “Why are we doing this? What is this war about?” It's never suggested by anything that occurs on television that we should even be interested in that type of question (De Antonio 1971, 7).

While the film focuses on the failures of television news in reporting the war, it never loses sight of its essential goal, which is to remind viewers of American revolutionary ideals and then to demonstrate how U.S. policy has undermined a developing nation's assumption of these same ideals during the Vietnam War. This entire irony is made eminently clear in a section of the film that explores American-backed South Vietnamese elections. David Werfel, a professor of political science at the University of Missouri who spent seven years in Asia studying elections, talks about the fraud and corruption in the 1967 Vietnamese elections. In a clip from a television interview, a South Vietnamese Army official explains why the free press should not be allowed during elections in 1967: “This is our formal policy.” Werfel explains that in these same 1967 elections, a wide range of people were excluded—at least a third of the population. This undercuts LBJ's statement, immediately following this, insisting that it is the Viet Cong who are responsible for preventing free and fair elections from taking place. Johnson, as Professor Werfel points out, was extremely concerned about how the American people would interpret these elections, and saw that it was necessary to appoint an official observer team. However, almost none of these observers had even been in Asia before, let alone had any contacts in

Vietnam. Those who did speak to Vietnamese did so only to the Vietnamese individuals to whom embassy staff introduced them. They left Vietnam within 24 hours after the polls closed and did not speak to a single Vietnamese person after they closed. The problems that Werfel describes from his own observation of the 1967 elections—including polling places with no ballots—make the Johnson administration’s endorsement of the elections seem hollow.

The speaker who follows the section on the election, Harry S. Ashmore, the chairman of the Center for Democratic Institutions, ultimately lauds the Viet Cong as having the potential, through their actions, of forcing America to recognize how far it has come from its ideals. The “stubborn little guerillas out there, who sawed off the American giant at the knees and brought him down almost like David versus Goliath, will have done a great service not only to their own cause,” Ashmore says, “but perhaps to the cause of world peace and perhaps most particularly to the colossus himself. Maybe we needed to be brought up short.” The Viet Cong, in other words, can bring the United States back to its ideals—ideals that the American government has negated through its actions in Vietnam: election-rigging, torture, and a policy of interning Vietnamese in concentration camps.

How the National Liberation Front achieves this is finally spelled out by French journalist Olivier Todd, *New York Times* assistant managing editor Harrison Salisbury, and Father Daniel Berrigan. The extensive U.S. bombing raids on North Vietnam are demonstrated through these three men’s testimony, as well as film footage of the destroyed villages, to have killed many civilians (although we do not see graphic footage of dead Vietnamese—we see one woman’s back, riddled with shrapnel). The focus, rather, is on the military prowess of the NLF in their anti-aircraft strategies, which Todd delineates. He specifies the weapons used—from SAMs to rifles—as well as their success against American bombers. Todd, Berrigan, and

Salisbury all talk about how many Vietnamese civilians, including women, are armed, and Berrigan talks about how this fact is proof that the NLF is supported by the people. The Vietnamese are represented as a people fighting hard in defense of their country—as soldiers, not as victims. Ultimately, Berrigan says, “The war is not working.”

Although American ugliness and racism is on full display, it is against the background of American idealism. Thus, when the film ends it is with an image that evokes Mathew Brady’s photographs of the American Civil War—the camera pans over a landscape littered with corpses, through which eventually we see dogs, people walking by. G.I.s, some wounded, walk through the landscape. We finally hear a kazoo-like rendition of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” as wounded G.I.s are loaded into transport. The final shot is of the same statue of the Civil War soldier—de Antonio’s stand-in, according to his interview statement—as we saw at the film’s beginning. De Antonio’s admiration for the Vietnamese as military strategists—from Dien Bien Phu to their efforts against the American bombers in 1967—shines through. But finally, the film’s American audience is never allowed to forget the connection de Antonio wants to make between what America has been and should be, and what America has become, in part through its prosecution of the Vietnam War.

While de Antonio refers to American ideals in his film, Davis’s documentary, *Hearts and Minds*, takes a very different point of view. This is apparent from the opening shot, in full color, of daily life in Hung Dinh village, accompanied by a soundtrack of traditional Vietnamese music. And even Truman advisor Clark Clifford, discussing U.S. power in the wake of the Second World War, is immediately rendered kitschy by the quick cut to a large-scale choral number of marching World War II soldiers singing about American military might—a clip from the 1943 morale-boosting motion picture *This Is the Army*.

The difference between de Antonio's images of the U.S. military in the first few minutes of *In the Year of the Pig* and Davis's in *Hearts and Minds* illuminates the gulf between the two films. De Antonio's images call on viewers to remember American ideals and to remember the soldiers who fought in earlier just wars. De Antonio's opening shots come from traditional war memorials—statues that exist in the context of small American towns to valorize the men who lost their lives in the Civil War, and to remember the reasons for the American Revolution. Davis's image of soldiers, on the other hand, is pure kitsch. De Antonio's audience is invited to remember an American revolutionary tradition and then to see the gap between those ideals and the current war. By contrast, Davis presents American military might as Hollywood spectacle—a lavish revue taking place beneath a giant, vaguely fascistic-looking statue of an eagle. Rather than looking back at World War II as a just war, Davis's imagery mocks the unthinking patriotism and smug imperial ambitions of the G.I. chorus line: it is an image celebrating American military might, rather than mourning the costs of war and un-ironically invoking the ideals of the American Revolution.

The G.I. at the center of *Hearts and Minds* is George Coker, a downed Navy pilot who spent seven years as a POW, and he is portrayed as a simple-minded exemplar of smug American military ambition. We first see the preparations for Coker's arrival at a homecoming event in his home town of Linden, New Jersey: There are plenty of American flags, cheering crowds, and Lieutenant Coker's arrival and march down the red carpet. The speech he gives outside city hall is all about the faith that enabled him and his buddies to stay alive during their years in captivity: "Faith in my family, my God, and my country." He invokes the slogans of his high school coach: "Winners never quit, and quitters never win." Coker talks about his reasons for going to Vietnam—to fight Communism. And then there's another cut—to Kennedy and

Johnson aide Walt Rostow, asserting that most Vietnamese do not support Communism. In contrast to *In the Year of the Pig*, most of the talking heads here are government officials who are presented as lying—there are few academics with authority, few journalists with credibility. Rather than the black-and-white images of Civil War soldiers fighting for justice and freedom, we are presented with a color image of a freed POW uttering one patriotic or religious cliché after another, all of this bracketed by American officials lying about conditions in Vietnam. Immediately prior to Coker's homecoming we have seen Nixon talking about how American restraint in Vietnam has been unprecedented in the annals of war. Coker, thus, is presented as a figure of fun.

When we next see Coker, still at his homecoming, he is talking about his willingness to return to Vietnam if necessary; he tells his audience,

You must have the political, economic, and philosophical courage to send me, or do whatever you think is necessary. I must be ready to go. If I did well, it is only because Linden did well in bringing me up and making me into a man. If I served the military well, it is only because the military trained me to be a good officer. If I am a good American, it is only because America brought me up to be a good American.

The terms that Coker uses during his speech—*manhood, faith, courage, patriotism*—will all be revealed to be hollow signifiers, laughable clichés or worse, throughout the course of the movie. The ending of the scene, in which we see a team of producers in an editing suite watching a news feed of Coker's homecoming, only reinforces the stagey, packaged nature of his presence.

In current times, when we have all become accustomed to seeing “support the troops” magnetic decals on cars and in which airline pilots announce the presence of recently deployed soldiers, to a big round of applause from other passengers (and often an offer from someone in first class to give up his or her seat for the soldier), it is somewhat startling to see Davis’s treatment of Coker. Yet *Hearts and Minds* appeared at a moment in American history when the figure of the G.I., and especially the POW, was a flashpoint for political debate and a symbolic pawn in discussions of the Vietnam War.

In many ways, the symbolic value of George Coker to both the Nixon administration and to Davis as a filmmaker would never have been possible without the public’s understanding that it had been lied to about the origins and current realities of the Vietnam War. As H. Bruce Franklin points out, “By 1969, millions of Americans had learned that they had been deceived about when, why, and how the war had begun, who was fighting on each side, and even who was winning” (Franklin 1993, 40). And much as de Antonio may have despised the television news coverage of the war, it is hard to deny that images of cheerful G.I.s torching the thatched roofs of people’s homes with their Zippos, wounded soldiers screaming in agony, Vietnamese prisoners being tortured, as well as the nightly body count on the TV news helped to expose the vast gulf between official slogans and on-the-ground realities. Into this gulf, the Nixon administration introduced a new movement: the POW/MIA campaign, which served to build popular sympathy for captured soldiers and to provide an alternative image of the American G.I. in Vietnam.

Popular cultural understandings of post-traumatic stress disorder and of the combat experience have shifted radically since Davis’s film was released nearly four decades ago. Yet Coker returned home from captivity at a moment when the image of the American soldier in Vietnam was hotly contested by left and right, used by the Nixon administration as a way of

depoliticizing the war, occasionally used on the left as a way of putting an ugly face on the war effort—but far more often used by the news media as a way of caricaturing the anti-war efforts. As Jerry Lembke has documented, as early as 1969, the Nixon administration, in its efforts to discredit the anti-war movement, faced the political problem of the anti-war veteran:

What the administration needed was an embraceable Vietnam veteran, a “good” veteran, a veteran faithful to the ideals of American foreign policy and the image of male military prowess. But very few Vietnam veterans fit the bill. Research done by the Veterans’ World Project at Southern Illinois University found it “difficult if not impossible to find a ‘hawk’ among Vietnam veterans.” “Very few,” the researchers reported, “finish their service in Vietnam believing that what the United States has done there has served to forward our nation’s purposes” (Lembke 1998, 53).

On the left, a different image of what soldiers were doing in Vietnam closed the gap between American and enemy behavior. As early as 1968, a group which called itself the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam (U.S.) published *In the Name of America: The Conduct of the War in Vietnam by the Armed Forces of the United States As Shown by Published Reports, Compared with the Laws of War Binding on the United States Government and on Its Citizens*. As the title suggests, this chronicle of American war crimes in Vietnam—including the torture, mutilation, and killing of both civilian and combatant prisoners—demonstrated just how far the U.S. government and troops had strayed from the tenets of the Geneva Conventions. In May of 1968 came the first published reports of the My Lai massacre, during which hundreds of men, women, and children were slaughtered by American soldiers. The court martial of 14 officers

involved in the massacre took place in late 1970 and early 1971 and once more brought the graphic details of the horror before the public eye. The acquittal of all but one officer, Lt. William Calley, who ended up serving a term of three-and-a half years under house arrest, further contributed to the public's perception that American soldiers in Vietnam were behaving monstrously—and were not being held accountable for their conduct.

Simultaneously with the My Lai court martial, anti-war veterans were holding their own investigation to shine the spotlight on American atrocities in Vietnam. These anti-war veterans organizations adopted the rhetoric of De Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig*, which, itself, drew on an earlier radical tradition exemplified by the CPUSA in the 1930s. The "Winter Soldier Investigation," convened by Vietnam Veterans Against the War in Detroit between January 31 and February 2, 1971, took its name from Thomas Paine, "who had dubbed those who, in the winter of 1776, would shrink from the crisis facing the country 'summer soldiers' and 'sunshine patriots'" (Lembke 1998, 59). The testimony offered by Vietnam vets during the hearings—graphic accounts of hideous war atrocities committed by G.I.s—may have been largely ignored by the news media, but its implications were deeply troubling, and those on the left were well aware of it. As Lembke writes, "The picture that the Winter Soldier Investigation painted of 'our boys' was not pretty. These were not embraceable 'good veterans.' And because they weren't, the picture painted by Winter Soldier closed the gap between 'us,' the good guys, and 'them,' the evil-incarnate Asian other" (Lembke 1998, 61). Although the Winter Soldier Investigation and the resulting documentary film were largely ignored by the American media outside of Detroit, the film was well-received in Europe, where it was shown at the Cannes and Berlin film festivals as well as in French and English theaters and on German television (Halbfinger, 2005). Given the fact that anti-war veterans such as those belonging to the VVAW were representing G.I.s as

guilty of horrific war crimes, the Nixon administration needed to do something to create a more palatable face of the troops.

Nixon's efforts were not the first, but they were the most effective. As Roger Stahl has written, by 1967 the Johnson administration "organized demonstrations and letter-writing campaigns to "'Support Our Boys in Vietnam.'" These efforts represented an initial step toward refocusing public attention on the soldier in the interest of rallying a public no longer responding to the standard external justifications for war, such as containing communism" (Stahl 2009, 536). In 1973, a year before the release of *Hearts and Minds*, the U.S. government established the official designation of the POW/MIA as a military status category—one that conflated the huge number of troops missing in action with the relatively small number who were being held as prisoners of war. In that same year, all 56 of these official POWs were released as part of "Operation Homecoming," and it was to this group that Coker belonged. Yet as Stahl writes, "This impression that Vietnam still held thousands of live servicemen breathed new life into the war effort and aided the administration in prolonging military operations well into the 1970s amid massive public disillusionment" (Stahl 2009, 538). The armbands, POW/MIA flags, and other emblems of the movement soon became ubiquitous.

The Nixon administration began its launch of the POW movement with a press conference by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird on May 19, 1969, by staging a massive Veterans Day counter-demonstration to the planned anti-war moratorium that same year—an event that would highlight veterans of all American wars who supported the current war. By November, H. Ross Perot had formed his United We Stand organization, which ran advertisements featuring the children of captured servicemen and even flew 152 POW wives and children to Paris during the peace talks there. By the end of 1970, as H. Bruce Franklin notes, "President Nixon had changed

the official name of Veterans Day to Prisoner of War Day, the *Ladies' Home Journal* had published an article with a tear-out letter for readers to mail, and the U.S. Post Office, amid special fanfare by the president, had issued 135 million POW/MIA postage stamps" (Franklin 1993, 54). By the time George Coker was released, between four million and ten million Americans were wearing POW/MIA bracelets, each linked to a specific missing or captured soldier, which they had vowed never to remove until his or her POW/MIA was either returned home or determined to be dead (Franklin 57).

The POWs, almost all of them captured pilots, were career officers rather than draftees, and so both their politics and the images they projected were very different from that of the majority of the veterans. Coker is shown as a cardboard character, echoing the Nixon administration's line on Vietnam—that the war was a success—and, in addition, making derogatory comments about the Vietnamese people. In one scene in which a nun introduces Coker to a classroom full of schoolchildren, he talks about what it is like to be at war: "Life becomes very simple. Because the only thing you're concerned about is living and dying. Everything else is unimportant." When one boy asks, "How did you feel when the war was over?" Coker responds: "I felt real good, real good. It was a long war, and a very difficult war to understand. But the reason we went there was to win this war. I volunteered to go, I'd go again if I had to, and we wanted to win.... We wanted to win this war and when it was finally over and we knew that we had won, we felt great." Of course, most Americans in 1973 would not say that the United States had won the war. And when a girl asks, "What did Vietnam look like?" Coker responds: "If it wasn't for the people, it was very pretty. The people there are very backward and very primitive, and they just make a mess out of everything." In response to a question about how he feels about people who went to Canada to avoid the draft, Coker is surprisingly

non-judgmental—but then says he is opposed to amnesty for them. Cut, then, to the Congressional hearings on amnesty, and a very sympathetic deserter testifying about the anti-Vietnamese racism he saw while deployed.

Coker's comments, of course, make him sound both ignorant and prejudiced, if not delusional. But it is hard to imagine that someone who has been a prisoner of war for seven years would not want to find some meaning in the experience—some sense that his country had won the war for which he had sacrificed so much. And it is easy to imagine, as well, that someone in Coker's position might have extremely negative feelings towards the Vietnamese people. Yet Davis never takes a step back to consider what Coker has been through. He simply chooses the most damning clips to portray Coker as the ultimate ugly American. A scene of bombs falling on the Vietnamese jungle is followed immediately by Coker, in his uniform, talking about what flying meant to him: "You're up there, doing something mankind has only dreamed of, the flying, especially at night...it's definitely the ultimate in aviation." Bombs fall, Coker talks about having a "real good mission where you get in there, you hit your target...it's fantastic." We see planes overhead, and then a close shot of a Vietnamese man standing in the rubble of his house. There is a scene with two elderly Vietnamese women, who cry as they talk about the death of their sister, killed by bombs, and light incense for their dead sister. "I am so unhappy," one tells us. "My sister died and I have no home left. I've been wounded. Can't do anything for a living now. I am old and weak. I've got nothing to sell, nothing to do." The camera rolls in silence as the elderly woman cries. And then we cut back to Coker: "You really don't have time for personal thoughts when you're up there flying around at five, six hundred miles an hour.... I didn't have time to think about anything else. If you wanted to later, you might. But it was all business. It's just strictly professionalism, we had a job to do and we went

out and we did it.” Anyone who has ever interviewed bomber pilots knows that this is not a particularly unusual attitude. I once spoke with Air Force Major Veronica Hutfles, who expressed regret that she had not been able to drop more bombs during her sorties over Afghanistan: “A challenge was to feel like you were still contributing in some way.... The weapons we dropped, whether it hit anyone or did anything, I honestly couldn’t tell you. I just know that we put them where we were asked to put them, and hopefully it was helpful, you know?” (Browder 2010, 39). Hutfles’s focus, and presumably Coker’s as well, was her comrades-in-arms, and getting the job done that she had been trained to do.

The final POW event we see in *Hearts and Minds* is the May 1973 White House dinner for returned P.O.W.s—an event complete with Bob Hope telling corny jokes and Nixon asking for a round of applause for the B-52 flight crews that had carried out the infamous Christmas bombing of Hanoi, a twelve-day campaign known as Linebacker II. From the standing ovation of the POWs the film cuts to scenes of the bombing and its resulting human devastation.

Emile De Antonio was vocal about his hatred of *Hearts and Minds* when it appeared. As he said in an interview:

As somebody who has fought in a war, I cannot be very sympathetic to the treatment of that pilot from Linden, New Jersey. We see a sort of mocking Beverly Hills view of his mother, his family, that little schoolroom sequence, and the stupidity of the guy who said that he would go back and bomb Vietnam again. That sequence to me betrays the political emptiness and the human emptiness of the whole enterprise. There is not one ounce of understanding of that person which means that you have no political understanding of this country. That person was a prisoner of the Vietnamese for seven

years, which ain't exactly apple pie, and the fact that he was a full lieutenant in the navy, equivalent of captain [in the Army or Air Force], was a big class rise for him. We need to understand the nature of what we are involved in—and to laugh him off, to tick him off the way he was, is to avoid the real politics of what was in the film. (De Antonio 1978, 11)

If the film's portrayal of Coker is without nuance, its portrayals of G.I.s in Vietnam are painted with an equally broad brush. There are scenes of G.I.s in Saigon walking around and haggling with prostitutes and children. Perhaps most problematic of all is a sequence in which Davis brings together his most simplistic theories about the war, which begins with an audience full of young guys in suits listening to a coach giving a pep talk to his players about football and God—"That's religious and God cares about that. We're concerned about the big game but we're also concerned about the bigger game, the biggest game that surrounds us, the game that surrounds us, the game of life. May you be winners in the big game, but more importantly, in the biggest game....let us pray." Cut to football game, with cheerleaders, marching band, bright red white and blue star spangled banner. Following this patriotic pastiche, we move to a staged scene in a Saigon brothel, in which we see two soldiers behaving badly with two prostitutes: beer cans are everywhere, and one soldier tells his friend, "You should check out the hickies I gave this chick, man. It's a place where she can't hide them." He goes on to slap the woman's breasts "to wake them up." The scene continues: "Hey Charles, you getting any out of yours." (Pinching nipples hard)—followed immediately by a scene of a gum-chewing soldier torching a village with a Zippo lighter while residents stand by. We see the burning village from overhead, the helicopter's beating rotors revealing a terrified Vietnamese child hiding in grass, followed by a

television news interview with a soldier, who tells the interviewer: “Some people enjoy it, some people just go out and do it as a job, the daily grind.” Interviewer: “What is it for you?” GI: (smiles) “I enjoy it”—and then cut again to Coker talking to those Catholic schoolchildren. All of this behavior is deplorable in some stereotypical American fashion—yet none of it puts the Vietnam War in any kind of political or historical context. Rather, it just lumps together a mindless conflation of football and religion with insensitive sexual behavior with the destruction of Vietnam. As de Antonio said,

The rigged scenes in *Hearts and Minds*, like the whorehouse scenes, are just cheap. It's the old network mentality to manipulate people rather than film. In the football sequence, for instance, the coach and the players had no idea they were going to be used in a film about the war. They thought they were going to be used in a film about high school football. Well, they are not the methods I would use, nor do I think they are particularly effective (De Antonio 1978, 11).

While de Antonio approached his Vietnam documentary from the perspective of a war veteran, Davis chose a viewpoint that was rooted neither in combat experience nor in the Popular Front-era impulse to reach deep into the roots of American history. When he does refer to the Revolutionary War, it is through a cheesy reenactment in Croton, New York (which follows a Vietnamese editor talking about the Vietnam War as a war for independence). The re-enactor interviewed by Davis talks about the purpose of the re-enactment: “What we are trying to put across here this afternoon is to get you to realize that these weren't mythical, hazy people from the past, these were very real people. When they rose up against the most powerful army in the

world, they were actually putting everything on the line that they had. Their homes, their wealth, their past and their future.” The implied parallel seems pretty heavy-handed, yet when the filmmakers ask a re-enactor to make that comparison, he responds: “Well, men are getting killed, men are killing. That’s the parallel. As far as politics, are you kidding? Oriental politics—don’t put me on, man.” Cut to muskets firing against a backdrop of the American flag—and then to a scene of a wounded, half-naked Vietnamese man being held on the ground at gunpoint by a group of American soldiers. Here the American Revolution is presented as entertainment, rather than ideal (there are lots of shots of crowds watching the spectacle)—and the re-enactors themselves are exposed as racists. There is no American ideal here to fail, since all is kitsch.

As for the Vietnamese, they are presented essentially only as victims, rather than military strategists in their own right. Watching *Hearts and Minds*, it is hard to remember that the NLF won the war. We see shot after shot of dead Vietnamese children, a coffin-maker constructing tiny coffins, Vietnamese villagers watching their homes destroyed, and prisoners tortured by American soldiers. All of this is historically accurate, of course, but what is missing is any sense that the Vietnamese were historical actors, and extremely successful ones at that. There is very little sense in this film of the history that led up to the war, and even less sense of why the guerilla warfare of the Viet Cong was so successful. Watching *Hearts and Minds*, it is almost impossible to reconcile this portrayal with the stories of the Vietnamese guerillas, some of whom spent twelve years living in the tunnels, as recounted in Christian Appy’s oral history masterwork about the war, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*. (Appy 2003). When there are no American ideals that matter, no political history worth recounting, and no Vietnamese military strategy and endurance, only personal loss, the war has been reduced to

American boorishness and Vietnamese victimhood. And this is a portrayal that ultimately tells us nothing new about the war.

The “real politics” of the war, to use de Antonio’s phrase, have not only to do with the historical pressures bearing down upon all of the actors, but with the complex motivations of all of those involved, from George Coker to the Vietnamese people fighting hard in defense of their country—as soldiers, not as victims. Even though de Antonio may show us the horrible behavior of individual G.I.s engaged in the Vietnam War, he never uses those soldiers as cardboard characters representing American military might, and never lets his audience forget that the United States was founded on much greater ideals.

While Davis seems to present the Vietnam War as an exposé of what America truly is, at its core, de Antonio shows us the vast gulf that exists between what America is meant to be and what the country, through its prosecution of an unjust war, has become. Yet the figure of that Civil War soldier whose image begins and ends the film is an emblem of what it means to fight for justice, no matter what the sacrifice—and a reminder to the audience of American ideals still worth remembering.

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