THE VIETNAM WAR IN THE AMERICAN ZEITGEIST: A STUDY OF THE VIETNAM WAR IN FILM

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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This Thesis examines and compares a series of movies and a game set in the Vietnam War as well as the cultural and political context around their release. Through these examinations and comparisons, each chapter attempts to track the position of the Vietnam War in the American zeitgeist, and it will reveal how that position changed over the decades up to the current day. This thesis demonstrates how the Vietnam War remained an emotionally charged and potent subject within American culture and politics. However, the thesis also shows that since the height of Vietnam War films in the 1980s the war has faded considerably in American memory.

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Introduction

On February 22, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine with the intent of at least annexing the Donbas and perhaps overthrowing the government of Ukraine. The event sparked worldwide debate over how to respond, and many Americans felt their government should aid the Ukrainian military in its struggle. However, some wanted to avoid American involvement. Before Russia actually invaded, many were skeptical of government intel based on lies about "Weapons of Mass Destruction" in 2003. After the invasion, Senator Bernie Sanders compared giving weapons to Ukraine to the Iraq War, and he came out against intervention in the conflict. What is important is that some blamed the Iraq War for the hesitancy to advocate for US power. Essentially, the bungling of the occupation of Iraq and its ongoing consequences has left both those in power and many Americans fearful of the use of American military power again. The current worries about reluctance to use American power are reminiscent of past foreign policy woes. Still, it is striking that it is now the Iraq War keeping politicians up at night.

If the invasion had occurred thirty years ago, pundits would have evoked "Vietnam Syndrome." Foreign policy in the eighties and nineties was entrapped by fears of another Vietnam and the widespread discontent the war created. Vietnam and its many mistakes once haunted American presidents, who avoided direct conflict to avoid the fate of Lyndon Johnson. The Vietnam War was a disaster for America. Apart from losing 58,000 young men, with 300,000 wounded and 60,000 post-war veteran suicides, the country was torn apart at home over protests against the war. However, those events occurred a long time ago, and that scar has been largely obscured by time. Politicians today fear replicating the image of George W. Bush in front of a "Mission Accomplished" sign. When Americans have reservations about military interventions, they less often invoke the quagmire of Vietnam, but its scar still remains.

A lasting example of the scar left by the Vietnam War has been its presence in American culture. In the nearly fifty years since the last Americans fled Vietnam, the war has been represented in every media, from movies to video games. Marvel even published a pulpy comic series about the war in the late eighties called *The'Nam*. However, the film has undoubtedly been the most explicit and successful medium at keeping the Vietnam War in America's collective conscience. Movies like *Apocalypse Now, Platoon,* or *Full Metal Jacket* have become must-watch classics with moments and lines that most Americans know through osmosis. Many of these films won major awards, were box office smashes or started acting careers. More importantly, they have shaped how generations of Americans view the war decades later, and they were shaped by how the war was perceived at the time of release.

When Americans picture the Vietnam War veteran, they imagine Lieutenant Dan from *Forrest Gump.* Of course, those Vietnam War movies have far more to do with the contexts in which they were made. Representing an event requires creators to choose how to create that representation. Examining the changing representations of the Vietnam War in their contexts will reveal the war's place in the American zeitgeist through the decades up to the modern day. These films reveal how Americans reinterpreted the war long after it ended.

Examining representations of the Vietnam War requires parameters to limit their scope as there are countless books, movies, television shows, and games about the conflict. This thesis will examine selected films and video games primarily. Some paring down of possible films is necessary as Hollywood released dozens of movies connected in some way to the war over the previous five decades. Even popular fare like *Star Wars* and *Predator* could be read as Vietnam War movies. Countless films are about the Vietnam War, like *Rambo,* but they may not depict the war itself or show soldiers in combat. This study will endeavor to stick to well-known films

that depict the war itself. Each chapter will briefly summarize the historical context of the set of films being explored and each film's plot. I also analyze the contemporary reviews of the selected films. Those reviews, from various national and local sources, paint the prevailing opinion about a film. Finally, each film's plot, themes, and characters will be examined and, to some extent, compared to pull out recurring elements and deduce the state of the Vietnam War in the American zeitgeist at the time.

Chapter one deals with the films that came immediately after the war ended in 1975. The history of the end of the war and the late seventies will need to be examined to contextualize those movies properly. The chapter examines 1978's *The Boys in Company C* and *Go Tell The Spartans* and 1979's *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* as the first films set in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War, as represented in the movies of the late seventies, depicts a disorienting war fought by men skeptical of authority and the purpose of the war. These films show a nation reeling from a confusing, unpopular war and a profound loss of trust in government and military.

The second chapter covers the Vietnam War films of the late 1980s, exploring the political, social, and cultural contexts of the decade as it is connected to the Vietnam War. The chapter focuses on four films: *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). These films reveal what Americans thought of the war more than a decade after the war ended, as the country underwent a conservative political shift. Ultimately, the films suggest a nation deeply concerned with the veterans of the Vietnam War and a fear that those veterans had never truly been welcomed home.

The third and final chapter examines the Vietnam War films and a major video game from the 1990s and 2000s. The chapter explores how the Gulf War and the War on Terror provided context to the films that came out during the period, such as *We Were Soldiers* (2002),

Tropic Thunder (2008), and 2010's major video game, *Call of Duty: Black Ops.* These films and video games demonstrate how depictions of the war have become parodied, clichéd, and products of pure commodification devoid of the feelings and concerns of previous representations, revealing that, for better or worse, Americans have moved on from the Vietnam War in the decades since the war ended.

This thesis will engage heavily with the scholarship on war films. One of the critical studies of the Vietnam War on film is historian Jeremy M. Devine's *Vietnam at 24 Frames A Second* (1995). Devine covers countless movies from the 1960s to the 1990s, set directly during the war or connected to the war somehow. Another important study is *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (1991), a collection of essays about the war in media, edited by professor of English Michael Anderegg. *Inventing Vietnam's* many essays generally cover a single movie or concept, but they can be beneficial for more meaningful information or analysis of specific films. Finally, Historian Andrew J. Huebner covers the changing portrayal of soldiers in *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (2008). While Huebner ends his examination in the 1970s, he comes to important conclusions about the changing vision of the American soldier, and he is unequivocal on the role of Vietnam in changing that view.[1]

Fully understanding the context of the decades in which these movies appeared requires engaging with academic histories of the 1970s--2000s. One good recent history of post-Vietnam War America is *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (2019), by Historians

[1] Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999); Michael Anderegg, ed., *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer. Kruse and Zelizer cover the contentious political and cultural debates of the last fifty years to contextualize the divides in American society. Historian and religious studies professor Philip Jenkins covers many of the cultural, social, and political changes that affected the country starting in the sixties in his book *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (2006). Jenkins attempts to describe why the many revolutions of the 1960s set up the more conservative movement of the late seventies and eighties, and Vietnam is an important catalyst in that reaction. Finally, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (2004), by professor of communication Daniel Marcus, describes how opinions and nostalgia for those decades shaped contemporary opinions and political actions.[2]

Several historians have examined the position of the Vietnam War in cultural thought. In *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (1995), historian Tom Engelhardt analyzes American culture regarding American military exceptionalism. While not minutely focusing on the Vietnam War, Engelhardt explains much of American history in the light of the war. The work of Vietnam War historian Christian G. Appy is also very important. In *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (2015). Appy explores the position of the war in American culture in the decades after America left. While Appy examines a few films, his book covers the cultural and political influence of the Vietnam War through the decades. Another essential work is Jerry Lembcke's *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1998). Lembcke covers the belief that there

[2] Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974*, Illustrated edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, 1st edition (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

were anti-troop sentiments in the anti-war movement and how the memory of Vietnam has changed.[3]

The first two chapters build off the work of historians and set up the context for how representations of the war have changed and the tropes they established in the decades after the war. While these chapters will make more explicit conclusions about the Vietnam War in America's zeitgeist based on these films, those conclusions are fairly in line with past interpretations. The third chapter will progress the discussion of Vietnam War films by pushing the discussion into the modern-day. For example, Devine's book, the most complete examination to this point, ends in the mid-nineties, and most of the essays and collections end with films from the eighties or early nineties. This examination will analyze works going up into the 2010s and how those representations changed, thus exploring a period of Vietnam War media that researchers have not studied in depth. The third chapter will also examine movies, and media researchers have not touched on yet. Where previous researchers, especially Devine, have thoroughly painted how Vietnam was displayed and perceived in media pre-2000, this attempt will examine post-2000 and the Vietnam War's cultural existence today.

This thesis concludes from the following films and video games that the Vietnam War once had a dynamic place in American memory. In the decades after the war America held a continuing dialogue about the war that was expressed on the big screen. Representations of the war changed along with American perceptions around the war changed. However, fifty years after the war's conclusion, the dialogue has ended. Decades of films have created a stereotypical vision of the war that is frozen in amber. Furthermore, political changes like the ending of the

[3] Thomas M. Engelhardt, *End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, 2nd edition (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007); Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015); Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

Cold War and the invasion of Iraq have pushed the war further away from memory. These films demonstrate that the Vietnam War left deep scars on the American psyche, but they also show that the scar may finally be fading.

Chapter 1:

Rough Beginnings

Almost since the last American boarded the last helicopter to depart from the Saigon embassy's roof in April 1975, the Vietnam War has been a popular topic for representation in film. However, Hollywood was less than eager to bring the war to the screen during the conflict itself. The war affected the film industry as a whole as the generational exploration and angst of the baby boomers leaked into film. The year 1978 would see the first wave of a tsunami of cinema to depict combat in Vietnam. In many ways, those first movies would be Hollywood's attempt to come to terms with the fact that America had lost the war. How films represented that loss grants insight into how Americans dealt with the ramifications of that war. Film historian Jeremy Devine claims that these films, "were important because they represented a renewed effort to deal with the traumatic conflict in a direct manner."[1] The grim final stages of the conflict and the many crises of the seventies provided the political and cultural contexts in which a hesitant Hollywood presented a very controversial war. As a result of the turmoil, the first films depicting the Vietnam War put the victimization of the soldiers and the country, as well as the cynicism around American institutions, at their center.

By 1970 the Vietnam War had become a quagmire, and much of the American public had lost faith in the fight entirely. In 1968 the Viet Cong launched a massive offensive in the South against American bases and civilian populations during the Vietnamese holiday of Tet. The Tet Offensive flew in the face of government claims that the Viet Cong were on the ropes and that victory was imminent. The offensive led many Americans to doubt both the government and the

[1] Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 130.

outcome of the war. President Lyndon Johnson became so distrusted and unpopular that he opted not to run for a second term.[2] At the same time, while the details would not come out for several years, several companies of American soldiers committed a massacre in a cluster of villages in Son Tinh province called My Lai. The military would convict only platoon leader Lt. William Calley, Jr. for the crime. News of the crimes would, for many Americans, shatter the belief the country was a force for good. Furthermore, the killings stained the perception of American soldiers back home. When Calley went to trial in November 1970, both sides of the political divide claimed Calley and his men were victims; conservatives argued they were doing their job, and liberals blamed the government's illegal war for putting the men in that untenable situation.[3]

In addition to the My Lai massacre, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, led by navy lieutenant John Kerry, would present to the media stories and accounts of numerous war crimes perpetrated by soldiers in what would be called the Winter Soldier Hearings in 1971.[4] Also, in 1971, *The New York Times* would begin to publish leaked documents from an internal Pentagon study on the war. They revealed the many ways the government had lied about the war and that the higher-ups themselves no longer believed in the war or the justifications they gave for it. Eventually, these papers would be released in full as *The Pentagon Papers.*[5] Dissatisfaction with the war was understandably high among the civilian population. By 1971, 58 percent of the public believed the war in Vietnam was not only lost but that the war was immoral.[6]

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[2] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd Revised ed. edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 559–81.
[3] Thomas M. Engelhardt, *End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, 2nd edition (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 216–27.
[4] Ibid., 233.
[5] Ibid., 228–32.
[6] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 229.

In 1968, Richard Nixon campaigned for president and won, claiming he had a plan to end the war. Rather than bringing the war to an immediate end, once in office, he escalated by launching a bombing campaign in Laos and Cambodia. Believing that presenting himself as a "madman" to Hanoi would hasten them to the negotiating table, Nixon tried to pose that he may use nuclear weapons to end the conflict. Instead of leading to peace, all of these decisions escalated the political and cultural divisions at home.[7] With the war remaining incredibly unpopular, Nixon and his administration actively worked to shift the broader impetus for the continuing conflict to honoring the sacrifices of the troops thus far and the rescue of prisoners of war in particular. The first came with Nixon's claims of fighting for “peace with honor.” For the prisoners of war, the Nixon administration helped found the National League of Prisoners and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia to campaign in favor of continuing the war until all the boys came home.[8] Throughout the 1970s, even after Nixon's resignation, the organization would further the belief that there were still POWs in Vietnam. The organization's black POW/MIA flag became a patriotic symbol to many.

Nixon also created a plan of "Vietnamization" in which the South Vietnamese military would take over the war. At the same time, Nixon negotiated a peace arrangement with the North Vietnamese while slowly withdrawing American troops from South Vietnam. The war ended in April 1975 with the North overtaking the South, though the last American troops had departed two years earlier. The fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Army would become famous as the last helicopters out of the American embassy were forced to leave many who wanted to flee behind.[9] In 1977 President Jimmy Carter pardoned those who dodged the draft during the war in

[7] Karnow, 592–627.
[8] Appy, 244.
[9] Karnow, 638–84.

hopes of moving the nation forward in healing. Instead, it reignited discussion of the war and the men who did fight.[10] In 1983, historian Stanley Karnow contended that by the end of the war, both the Right and Left agreed that the Vietnam War was wrong, just for different reasons. The Left saw it as a racist, immoral, and stupid war. The Right believed the war was wrong because the troops were not given the proper support to fight the Communists.[11]

Historian Tom Engelhardt perfectly summarizes the effect the war had on the American people. He writes:

> The war mysteriously robbed Americans of their inheritance. On-screen and off, they were transformed from victors into, at best, victims; from heros into, at worst, killers; their leader, a self-proclaimed madman; their soldiers, torturers; their democratic public, a mob of rioters and burners; their army, in a state of near collapse; their legislative bodies, impotent. They had become the world's most extraordinary (because least expected) losers.[12]

If Hollywood was going to make movies about the Vietnam War, then those films would be released to an American public dealing with the angst that Engelhardt describes. Thus, it is understandable that the film industry was hesitant to make any movies about the conflict while American soldiers were still in the country.

Outside of the war itself, the seventies were wracked by events that brought many American institutions into question. A sense of America's decline pervaded the decade even before the war ended. In the early seventies, the economic downturn was on the horizon as other countries began to catch up to and compete with American companies. The massive spending on the war set the stage for later economic problems. Nixon saw himself as preparing America for this loss in status as a global hegemon, which may have influenced his foreign policy of detente

[10] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 105–6.
[11] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 16–35.
[12] Engelhardt, 254.

with Communist countries. He also saw himself as building a new political coalition between Northern laborers and Southern Whites that could be a new base for the Republican Party. However, the discovery of the Watergate break-in and the subsequent investigation destroyed trust in politicians and government institutions and brought down Nixon's presidency. President Gerald Ford's pardoning of Nixon only further eroded confidence in the government and likely was the decisive factor that cost Ford reelection in 1976.[13]

As the seventies progressed, rising inflation coincided with a stagnating job market, once thought impossible by economists, resulting in "stagflation." The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) withheld oil from several countries (including the United States) in 1973 in retaliation for their support for Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. OPEC's embargo and the price hikes that followed caused gas prices to skyrocket, creating a major reason for inflation. Six years later, there was a second oil crisis following a significant drop in production after the Iranian Revolution, in which Iranian religious zealots overthrew an American-backed dictator and held a group of Americans hostage for 444 days.[14]

President Jimmy Carter attempted to tackle the economic and military decline. In a July 1979 speech (famously dubbed his "malaise" speech), he called on Americans to give up the consumerist materialism that defined the fifties and sixties. The government deregulated numerous industries, while Paul Volcker, Chair of the Federal Reserve, raised interest rates (until the prime rate had reached an astonishing peak of 21.5% in 1981).[15] For the hostages, Carter authorized the Navy Seals, themselves a military product of the Vietnam War, to attempt a rescue. However, the economic reforms were too little too late, and the rescue mission flamed

[13] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, And Politics*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 23–52.
[14] Ibid., 152-178.
[15] Ibid., 121–43.

out in the most spectacular failures in the history of the Navy Seals.[16] The decade would end with a presidential election in which Ronald Reagan, using the campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," crushed Carter.

It would be no surprise if the average American viewed the country as in crisis by the end of the 1970s. America had lost a war abroad, and it appeared 58,000 Americans had died in vain. The nation's highest elected official had resigned in the face of mounting criminal charges, betraying the people's trust. Numerous foreign countries were able to control America's economic destiny with the manipulation of oil. A seemingly insignificant nation that most Americans could not find on a map was able to hold 52 American citizens hostage for more than a year, and the president could do nothing to save them. It was at this time of perceived decline in American power that Hollywood started tackling the controversial Vietnam War. They would attempt to frame Vietnam's place in that decline, and they would capture the mood of a nation that seemed to be at the end of its best days.

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The film industry would only produce one movie about the war as it was happening, and it would be a rocky start to how Hollywood would represent the war on the big screen. Famous actor and right-wing hawk John Wayne offered his aid to President Lyndon Johnson to create a pro-war film. The result of Wayne and the government's collaboration would be 1968's *The Green Berets,* starring Wayne himself. This first attempt at presenting the war on film is both a throwback to older war movies and a response to the social and political currents the war created. The movie feels more like the World War Two era movies in which Wayne appeared, and like those older war movies, *Berets* attempts to sell the war with the updated logic of the Cold War.

[16] Appy, 232–35.

The movie portrays the Vietcong/NVA as monsters who decimate villages and murder children, while the Americans are kind and helpful to the Vietnamese. The American soldiers are straight-laced and deeply empathetic to the plight of the non-communist Vietnamese. The movie was made in response to some Americans' cultural and political opposition to the war, which was rising. Lambasted by many critics as boring, right-wing propaganda, the film nevertheless performed well, grossing $20 million at the box office. Many Americans likely saw *The Green Berets* as perfectly representative of what the war in Vietnam was like.[17]

After *The Green Berets* in 1968, a decade passed before the war reached the big screen again, but the war appeared allegorically in other movies. In the seventies, a slew of movies would come out influenced by the war in imagery, characters, and themes. These movies primarily find their Vietnam War influence in their reverence for soldiers and the military as an institution. The most apparent Vietnam War movie not set in Vietnam was Robert Altman's 1970 movie *M*A*S*H*. Being explicitly set during the Korean War, *M*A*S*He utilized* imagery that would remind viewers of the Vietnam War, like helicopters and jungles, without depicting the controversial war. To anyone who saw *M*A*S*H* in 1970, it would have been clear that the movie was not about the Korean War.[18]

Even World War Two movies would see Vietnam's effect while not involving the war itself. For example, 1967 already saw *The Dirty Dozen,* in which Lee Marvin led a gang of murderers and thieves to infiltrate a French chateau and assassinate German army personnel, challenging the image of American soldiers as virtuous, heroic stereotypes. Perhaps the most obvious example is 1970's *Kelly's Heroes* starring Clint Eastwood. While set in World War Two,

[17] Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 39–45.
[18] Ibid., 72–74.

the film featured a platoon of cynical misfits after a pile of Nazi gold and no higher motives. Donald Sutherland plays the bearded commander of a hippie tank crew that blasts rock music and fires paint shells at the enemy. The soldiers are not fighting for some greater good or ideals; they are motivated purely by self-interest, and they are implied to have gone AWOL with the gold at the end of the film.[19]

Outside of war films, even the old west could not escape the war in Vietnam. The seminal American film genre was dominated by strong white men who fought corrupt bandits and hordes of savage natives. John Wayne had become the king of the genre in films like *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Rio Bravo* (1959)*, The Alamo* (1960)*, McLintock!* (1963)*,* and countless others. However, by the 1970s, westerns had entered a revisionist period that challenged the tropes of previous decades. Movies like 1968's *Once Upon a Time in the West,* starring Henry Fonda and Charles Bronson as morally ambiguous gunslingers, or 1971's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller,* starring Warren Beatty as a degenerate gambler and whore house owner who fights not for honor but to defend his gold field claims from a wealthy gold mine owner. The Vietnam War directly influenced several revisionist westerns of the time like 1970's *Soldier Blue* which dramatized the horrific 1864 slaughter of peaceful Native Americans at Sand Creek by the US military. The Sand Creek Massacre and the barbarity of the American soldiers was a purposeful allegory for atrocities in Vietnam like My Lai, which had occurred in March 1968, but only became public knowledge in November 1969. Another example can be found in 1970's *Little Big Man,* in which a settler played by Dustin Hoffman experiences the old west throughout his entire life from boy captured by the Cheyenne to gunslinger to an old man. The movie portrays the Native Americans sympathetically, which depicting the United States military units as villains, led by

[19] Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 246–50.

incompetent officers. At one point in the film, Hoffman's character had to plead for his life and renounced his life amongst the Cheyenne to escape death when a bloodthirsty cavalry regiment attacked his village.

These films clearly deal with images of the American soldier deeply affected by Vietnam. The common factor in these films is prevailing cynicism about the military. They mostly depict anti-heroes or gangs of criminals who commit dubious acts. In the case of the soldiers in *M*A*S*H* and *Kelly's Heroes,* belief in some cause is nonexistent. When not showing war's explicit dark edges, movies like *M*A*S*H* and *Kelly's Heroes* portray war, trust in authority, patriotic duty, or heroism as a bad joke. *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue* both depict a savage US military slaughtering friendly or defenseless people. They place their criticism of the military in the past, where it would be more palatable. These films came out in an America that was less sure of the righteousness of its fighting men. Apart from the cynical feelings about the war, it is also clear that many Americans were particularly interested in returning veterans. That interest manifested itself in fear over what the veterans were capable of or concern for how their experience was affecting them long term.

Some films were more direct, with Vietnam War veterans as lead characters. These films touch either directly or indirectly on a returning veteran's trauma. Many times, the returning veteran is portrayed as deranged or hardened in some way by war. A slew of films depicted veterans who come home and have to deal with an opposing force like gangs, the cops, or corrupt officials. Perhaps the best example of this genre is Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* starring Robert De Niro as the mentally disturbed veteran and taxi driver Travis Bickle. While Bickle's veteran status is hardly the focus of the film, it is still clear that his past in Vietnam had some effect on his mental state, and Bickle wears his military fatigues when he

ends the movie with his violent rampage against the pimps to "save" a child prostitute. Some films depicted vets dealing with severe alienation from the nation to which they returned. The best example being 1972's *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* in which a gang of alienated vets goes on a wild road trip ending in a battle with the National Guard.[20]

Other films attempted to deal with the emotional trauma of a soldier's return from the war. The most famous of these, which dealt with veterans' feelings about the military and their masculinity, is 1978's *Coming Home,* starring Jane Fonda and Jon Voight. Voight plays a disabled returning veteran who woos another soldier's wife, played by Fonda, who is drawn to him by the experience war has left on him. Fonda's husband takes his own life after the horrors of war and his wife's infidelity with a disabled vet leaves his sense of self and masculinity spiraling. Voight's character ends the film with a speech against American militarism to a group of high school recruits. Overall, referencing the war seemed to have few adverse effects at the box office. Both *Taxi Driver* and *Coming Home,* in particular, were substantial hits.[21]

After a decade of avoiding direct representations of the fighting, 1978 and 1979 would be significant years for the Vietnam War in the movies. *The Boys in Company C, Go Tell the Spartans,* and *The Deer Hunter* opened in 1978 dealing with Vietnam, and all three of them would directly depict soldiers in the field and in combat. The much-anticipated *Apocalypse Now* arrived in 1979. These early films are attempts to come to terms with America losing its first war. Some of them are viciously cynical about the war, while others focus on its physical, mental, and emotional costs.

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[20] Ibid., 76–117.
[21] Ibid., 148–58.

The Boys in Company C actively advertised itself as authentic to the experience of fighting in Vietnam, with one ad claiming the film was "The Real Vietnam."[22] The movie does not have a singular star, instead following several walking stereotypes like the southerner, the sheltered academic type, the hippie, and the streetwise African American. Many reviewers praised Stan Shaw's performance as the black street kid, and R. Lee Ermey made his first film appearance. The movie would start at boot camp where Ermey whips the men into shape in scenes similar to Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket,* which appeared in 1987 and also featured Ermey in the role of a drill instructor. Dark comedy is mixed with the serious and the morbid as the men develop from civilians to soldiers, like when the men discover some boxes they are hauling are full of body bags which they confuse for sleeping bags or a scene where Shaw's character punctuates some friendly goofing off amongst the unit with the claim that they are all too soft and going to die in a real fight.

Once in Vietnam, the film really gets going with the company's idiotic commander happily claiming that only two men are likely to die based on statistics. He claims that learning soccer will help them beat the enemy. The action is almost constant; from the moment the men arrive off the boat in Vietnam, they are under attack by an unseen enemy. The company loses men to that unseen enemy on questionable and ridiculous missions. The most absurd moment occurs when the company is tasked with escorting supposedly important cargo, and they lose two men defending said cargo from a surprise attack. After the attack, it is revealed that the vital cargo is liquor, furniture, and a birthday gift trailer for some general.

The film shows high-ranking officers as generally incompetent, with the company's Captain repeatedly making choices that get men killed so that he can get a body count. The men

[22] Ibid., 136.

themselves are not much better. The soldiers in the film fight amongst themselves, do hard drugs, contract venereal disease, and attempt to frag their officers. The South Vietnamese are shown as laughably corrupt, with one official conspiring with Shaw's character to ship drugs made by the Viet Cong back to America in body bags. The final act has the company playing a soccer game against a South Vietnamese team with the opportunity to get out of the war if they throw the game, but to spite their officers, they win the game just in time for a massive attack that kills their captain. The movie ends with the naive would-be writer, whose journal has been the narration for the film, sacrificing himself on a grenade. As if to rub in the feeling of hopelessness, the film ends with post-credits claiming that most of the characters that survived the movie would end up dead, missing, or hospitalized afterward.

The Boys of Company C paints a grim portrait of the war. The enemy is barely noticeable to the Americans, who seem always to be ten steps behind. If the war was not already unwinnable, it would be lost by incompetent officers more concerned with body counts than their men's safety. The men fighting the war are on edge doing dope and are ready to kill their officers and maybe each other. The people for whom those soldiers are supposedly fighting seem to be just as much an enemy as the Viet Cong. The only glory given to these soldiers comes from maintaining a scrap of their pride against their own allies, and there is no triumphal return home as the film assures the audience that they will all either die or be left permanently broken by the war. *The Boys in Company C* feels like a direct stinging counter to everything in *The Green Berets* a decade earlier.

The overall reaction to the film was mixed. Some found the characters to be too stereotypical. Janet Maslin for *The New York Times,* claimed, “One reason you won't forget them is that they're already so familiar. In fact, they are so stereotypical, and hence so constricted, that

they don't seem to have any feelings of consequence about what they do or what happens to them."[23] Gary Arnold blasted the film for having an inconsistent tone that shifts between humor and self-righteousness about the war, writing in the *Washington Post, "*It's as if director Sidney Furie had decided that because the war in Vietnam was senseless, he would make a senseless movie about the war in Vietnam… The finished film has no thematic or emotional integrity. It flip-flops with desperate hypocrisy between clownish antics and indignant orations."[24]

Other reviewers were fairly positive about the film's depiction of the war. Michael R Pitts for the *Anderson Sunday Herald* in Anderson, Indiana, wrote, "`The *Boys in Company C'* shows all the horrors of war and at the same time condemns the US military system and our involvement in Southeast Asia."[25] Roger Ebert gave the film four stars and said, "I think the movie is, first and best, a thrilling entertainment that starts by being funny and ends by being very deeply moving. But I also think it reflects an attitude about Vietnam that wouldn't have been possible in a war movie of the early 1940s."[26] Ken McMillan for the *Chicago Heights Star* compared the movie to *M*A*S*H*,* writing, "this film is an involving, exciting, sometimes sad and often funny view of a war that continues to plague our attention and consciences even years after involvement in it has ended."[27]

Go Tell the Spartans, starring Burt Lancaster, is based on the 1967 novel *Incident at Muc Wa* by Daniel Ford. The movie follows a group of military advisors sent to Vietnam in 1964. Burt Lancaster plays a war-weary Major Asa Barker, who is in charge of an isolated outpost. The

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[23] Janet Maslin, "Screen: 'Company C':Five in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1978, sec. Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1978/02/02/archives/screen-company-cfive-in-vietnam.html.
[24] Gary Arnold, "'Boys in Company C,' First Bomb In Vietnam War Movie Cycle," *Washington Post*, February 9, 1978.
[25] Michael Pitts, "Current Cinema," *Anderson Sunday Herald*, April 23, 1978, 38.
[26] "The Boys in Company C Movie Review (1978) | Roger Ebert," accessed February 16, 2022, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-boys-in-company-c-1978.
[27] Ken McMillan, "Viet Version of 'M.A.S.H.' in 'Boys in Company C," *Chicago Heights Star*, February 26, 1978, 144.

movie starts with a general ordering Barker to move to an even more remote base near a central highway called Muc Wa, where a massacre of French forces occurred during the previous colonial war. Barker sends a mix of civilian soldiers and American advisors. Muc Wa is shown to be little more than scrub and sand outside of a haunting graveyard for the French with a sign referencing the three hundred Spartans. Eventually, the enemy arrives, and the small outpost loses its officers to the enemy and suicide. The movie culminates with the American soldiers at Muc Wa being ordered to evacuate once it becomes clear that it is not worth the effort. However, the young draftee, Cpl. Courcey decides to stay behind and help civilians evacuate, and Major Barker decides to stay behind and support. The film ends with the Viet Cong ambushing the group as they attempt to escape, and everyone but Courcey dies in battle.

Go Tell the Spartans shares many themes and beliefs with *The Boys in Company C*. Upper command is portrayed negatively as an out-of-touch general order the re-occupation of Muc Wa against the protests from Barker that they are already spread too thin. The South Vietnamese are portrayed as incompetent, with most of the men sent to Muc Wa being farmers with little training, vain and brutal like the sergeant Nguyen "Cowboy" who tortures and kills prisoners, or traitorous like the civilians at the end who turned out to be secret Viet Cong the whole time. Furthermore, the corruption of the South Vietnamese is once again on display with a major living in a mansion, needing to be bought off with military gear by Barker to get more troops.

Due to the early setting, the film looks more like *M*A*S*H* than *The Boys in Company C*, with men using World War Two and Korean-era weapons, and does not resemble the traditional vision of the Vietnam War. However, some similar images remain. The enemy is almost mystical for the first half, but their presence is constant at Muc Wa as the situation

becomes more desperate. The Americans range from the naive lieutenant who believes in the cause and dies first, to the jaded sergeant, who eventually takes his own life when the pressure gets too great. Even a drug-abusing doctor dies by mortar fire in a drugged haze.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway from the film is impending loss and a sense of weary hopelessness. Even this early in the conflict, the movie claims the war is already lost. The clearest example of impending loss is the juxtaposition between the dead French and the Americans fighting just across from their graves. The juxtaposition is clearest when the leading lieutenant claims, referring to the dead French, "We won't lose because we are Americans." Barker sums up the film's gloomy vision when he laments to the draftee, Cpl. Courcey, they could not have shown him a better war, most likely referencing World War Two as the "better war." Barker calls Vietnam "a sucker's tour"—there is no honor in risking their lives in this war.

Go Tell the Spartans would receive praise from critics, but like *The Boys in Company C,* the lower-budget movie would largely go overlooked due to the highly anticipated, big-budget films, *Coming Home, The Deer Hunter,* and *Apocalypse Now.* As a result, it underperformed at the box office.[28] One review by Catherine Chapin in the *Charlotte Observer* claimed of the movie, "Although there are moments when the movie goes for cheap emotion, and others which are out of sync with the way the military works, the bulk of "Go Tell the Spartans" is painfully realistic. It conveys the overwhelming feeling of futility in the face of nameless powers dictating colossal blunders in a war that, from the beginning, was out of control."[29]In the *Cincinnati Catholic Telegraph,* a reviewer would claim that the film "is a picture of merit. And it is

[28] Devine, 148.
[29] Catherine Chapin, "21 Oct 1978, 25 - The Charlotte Observer at Newspapers.Com," Charlotte Observer, accessed February 16, 2022, http://charlotteobserver.newspapers.com/image/623539627/?terms=Go%20Tell%20The%20Spartans&match=1.

furthermore the first American film, with the exception of documentaries, to confront head-on the contradictions, futility, and pathos of our struggle in Vietnam."[30]

The Deer Hunter was one of the biggest movies about the Vietnam War in 1978. Along with *Coming Home, The Deer Hunter* dominated that year's awards ceremonies, and it performed exceptionally well at the box office. Both movies deal with the similar topic of how war affects the men who fight. Both depict men that have been permanently damaged by the war, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Some of the most harrowing and well-known scenes from *The Deer Hunter* would become associated with Vietnam for decades and would make their way into other media.

The long film (with a runtime of 183 minutes) begins with an extended setup period. The movie follows steelworker friends --Mike Vronsky, played by Robert De Niro; Steven Pushkov, played by John Savage; and Nick Chevotarevich, played by Christopher Walken-- in 1968 on the eve of beginning their service in Vietnam. Most of the first hour is taken up by the wedding of Stephen to his fiancée Angela, and it sets up the normality of the characters' lives before the war. Once in Vietnam in 1969, Mike is reunited with Nick and Stephen, but the Viet Cong captures them. Like prisoners, they are subjected to horrific conditions. They are forced to play Russian Roulette, a game of chance in which a round is placed in a revolver, and participants put the gun to their head and pull the trigger while their guards make bets on who will die. After many rounds of the game, Stephen gets a live round which he fires into the ceiling. As punishment for breaking the rules, he is put into a separate cage immersed in a river full of dead bodies. Mike eventually convinces Nick to attempt to escape, which they accomplish by goading their captors

[30] "Cincinnati Catholic Telegraph, Sep 29, 1978, p. 11," September 29, 1978, https://newspaperarchive.com/cincinnati-catholic-telegraph-sep-29-1978-p-11/.

to load more bullets into the revolver when they play Russian Roulette; then, they use the gun to escape.

All of the men escape, but the experience cripples Stephen, and Nick, traumatized mentally by captivity, remains in Vietnam AWOL from the military. Only Mike returns home unscathed, but even he finds that he no longer relates to his old friends and the people of the town. They just cannot understand his experiences. Stephen is permanently disabled and in a spiraling depression. Eventually, Mike returns to an even more chaotic Saigon in an attempt to find Nick. Finding underground Russian roulette competitions, Mike decides to compete. Mike finds himself facing Nick, who has become a champion, is addicted to heroin, and is so mentally lost that he does not recognize Mike. Mike desperately and emotionally tries to bring Nick back from his state, but he does not respond, so Mike decides to play with him. During the game, Mike reminds Nick of their time hunting together, and Nick remembers Mike killing a deer with one shot and smiles before pulling the trigger and killing himself. In the next scene, Mike and the remaining characters attend Nick's funeral; their bartender friend John begins to sing “God Bless America,” and everyone else joins in.

The major theme of *The Deer Hunter* is loss and victimization. All of the men are victims of the war physically and mentally. More important is how the film frames that experience and its aftermath. The beginning of the film depicts life for the boys before the war as near perfect. All the characters are happy with promising futures, and their time hunting is idyllic. But the war takes everything away, and it does so violently. The movie hits the men hard with hellish imprisonment and a sadistic and mentally taxing torture scene that victimizes the characters. The victimization continues after they leave the war with Nick spiraling into drug abuse and depression before taking his own life for others' entertainment, and Stephen is left permanently

crippled with an uncertain future and a wife that no longer recognizes him. Mike may have escaped death, but his relationship with the community and his remaining friends is permanently changed. He no longer relates with his non-veteran friends or his community. In a sense, double victimization occurs in the film. First, the men were victimized in both body and mind, and then the country itself was victimized when the damaged men came home changed. While the film ending with “God Bless America " could imply potential healing it comes after clear damage has been done.

Even some historians have bought into this reading of the film as a depiction of victimization. Historian Rick Berg writes of the men in the film in his article, “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in the Age of Technology” "Like the Vietnamese, they are the ignorant and innocent victims of a war being waged against exploited people by exploited people."[31] It is hard to disagree with this takeaway completely. All three of the principal characters are horribly affected by the war. It is clear that the film wants to see its characters and the home front as victims of the war. Unfortunately, the film falls short of actually portraying the Vietnamese as victims when some of the few Vietnamese characters in the movie are monstrous, torturing guards.

Historian Jeremy M. Devine argues in *Vietnam At 24 Frames A Second, "*Ultimately antiwar in its harrowing depiction of the tragic effects, *The Deer Hunter* is not overly so. By reaffirming basic American values, the film is the opposite of most signs of the times films' desecration and rejection of institution and ‘establishment’ values."[32] *The Deer Hunter* is not really about the Vietnam War so much as the effect of war on those who experienced it. It is a

[31] Rick Berg, “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 61.
[32] Devine, 170.

melodramatic tragedy, and the ins and outs of the war are not what the movie attempts to understand. There is no moment where the politics of the war are explored or even discussed. The closest the movie comes to making a statement about the war is its extremely racist depiction of the Viet Cong, who behave like disgusting beasts.

The Deer Hunter would ultimately gross $60 million; it would be nominated for nine Academy Awards, winning five of them, including best picture in 1979.[33] Critics would be generally favorable. Roger Ebert would give the movie four out of four stars and would write of the film: "it is a heartbreakingly effective fictional machine that evokes the agony of the Vietnam time."[34] Frank Rich of *Time Magazine* wrote, "Though imperfect, Michael Cimino's The Deer Hunter is as powerful as those bombshells of the early '70s. This excruciatingly violent, three-hour Viet Nam saga demolishes the moral and ideological clichés of an era: it shoves the audience into hell and leaves it stranded without a map."[35]

Not everyone accepted what *The Deer Hunter* was claiming about Vietnam. In particular, some reviewers criticized the way the movie depicts the Vietnamese people. Peter Arnett would claim in a review, "'The Deer Hunter' is no more a historically valid comment on the American experience in Vietnam than was 'The Godfather'' an accurate history of the typical Italian immigrant family in the United States." He would make an even more prescient claim about representation in the film writing, "Most upsetting is the callous disregard of the war's

[33] Ibid., 170–71.
[34] Roger Ebert, "The Deer Hunter Movie Review & Film Summary (1979) | Roger Ebert," https://www.rogerebert.com/, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-deer-hunter-1979.
[35] Frank Rich, "Cinema: In Hell Without a Map," *Time*, December 18, 1978, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,916555-2,00.html.

impact on the Vietnamese…Cimino seems to be saying: Yes war is hell, but especially for young white Americans."[36]

The film *Apocalypse Now* almost has a history as troubled as the conflict it attempts to represent. The documentary about its production is nearly as famous as the film itself. Its increasingly troubled production became a news item leading up to the movie's delayed release in 1979. The movie was going to be the first by Francis Ford Coppola's indie production company American Zoetrope. Written by John Milius as an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* with a dash of *The Odyssey*, the original plan was for George Lucas to direct the movie and for filming actually to take place in Vietnam during the war. However, other projects and objections to filming in a war zone delayed production, and *Star Wars* would force Lucas to leave and put Coppola into the director's chair. The war was over by the time production got underway. Coppola decided to film in the Philippines, where the jungle could be confused for Vietnam. Overall the production was a nightmare: a typhoon destroyed sets, the lead actor Harvey Keitel was replaced by Martin Sheen, shooting took ten times longer than anticipated, and general headaches occurred attempting to work around Marlon Brando's schedule and eccentricities (he showed up overweight and never fully learned his lines). Sheen famously even suffered a heart attack during production. Coppola would risk everything with the movie, putting all of his personal wealth into its production. As a result of all the trouble, Coppola would directly relate his experience with making the movie to the experience of America's road through Vietnam.[37]

The film follows the general story outline of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* The military sends Martin Sheen as Captain Willard on a mission to kill a rogue Colonel Kurtz, Marlon Brando. The movie shows Willard's journey on a patrol boat going upriver into

[36] Peter Arnett, "'Deer Hunter': Fiction Wrapped in News Footage," *Charlotte Observer*, April 14, 1979.
[37] Devine, 182–86.

Cambodia and madness. The diverse crew of the Patrol boat and Willard encounter a series of strange or surreal events. Willard meets a deranged helicopter commander obsessed with surfing. He witnesses a bizarre USO-style show with Playboy bunnies. The crew encounters a deranged watch post where men are firing randomly into the jungle while music blares. The madness culminates when the boat, short of several crew members, arrives at Kurtz's compound, surrounded by zombie-like natives and AWOL soldiers. Kurtz is insane, beheading one of the most normal crew members from the boat, but in his rants, he also has a convincing clarity that unnerves Willard. The film crescendos with Willard giving in to his orders and the madness. He rises from the river looking like some primal hunter and kills Kurtz, who utters his book counterpart's famous line, "the horror, the horror."

Apocalypse Now is a more mythical epic than a war movie. The movie reaches for lofty themes and portrays those themes with striking imagery. Perhaps Coppola expressed what the movie was trying to say about the Vietnam War itself. He said of the film, "The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of the film was to create a movie experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam War." Coppola even claimed to President Carter, "I'm cauterizing old wounds, trying to let people put the war behind them. You can never do that by forgetting it."[38]

In general, the feelings of *Apocalypse Now* are one of rising bewilderment and madness. The movie shows Vietnam as a strange space that seems to send everyone a bit over the edge. The characters behave as if contact with Vietnam drives them insane. The initial mission given to Willard already starts the movie as a man who has been driven to the edge, presumably by his experience in the war. On a journey that already starts weird with Robert Duvall's over the top

[38]Ibid., 195.

Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore demanding surfing in the middle of a battle, the world only grows stranger as Willard and his crew go further up river. Some lose themselves more readily than others, like Lance, the pro surfer on the boat crew who willingly joins Kurtz's insane militia at the end. However, everyone is put on edge, like the character played by a young Laurence Fishburne, who guns down a group of civilians with little prompting other than one of them moving suspiciously. A good example is Kurtz who was a well-respected soldier before he went to Vietnam, but he goes rogue in Vietnam and assembles a cult-like militia. The ultimate example is Willard himself who tries very hard in the face of the growing absurdities and horrors to remain collected, but in the end, he has to give in to the madness to kill Kurtz and leave Vietnam. Ultimately the film insists, just as Coppola claims of the war, Americans went into Vietnam and they lost their minds in the jungle.

The public seems to have approved of *Apocalypse Now.* It grossed well, even if the high production costs meant it took a while to make up the cost. It somewhat lost out to the previous year's slew of movies about the Vietnam War. While it was nominated for many academy awards, it would only win two for best cinematography and best sound.[39] However, the film has become a classic of filmmaking. For example, the American Film Institute in its list of the 100 greatest films in 100 years of film listed *Apocalypse Now* at 28 on their list.[40] *The Hollywood Reporter,* after polling industry insiders like producers, directors, and studio heads, placed the film at 17 in its top 100 movies of all time. The film remains extremely popular.[41]

The reaction of veterans was mixed. An article in the *Charlotte Observer* quoted several veterans who took issue with some of the depictions of Vietnam. All of the veterans did agree

[39] Ibid., 194–95.
[40] "AFI's 100 YEARS…100 MOVIES," American Film Institute, https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-movies/.
[41] "Hollywood's 100 Favorite Films," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 25, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/100-best-films-ever-hollywood-favorites-818512/.

that the combat was true to the war. In particular, they all recognized the "Last Outpost" scene in which drug-addled soldiers fired off into the jungle with no clear targets. One veteran claimed, "That was the most believable thing I saw…People firing in the darkness. When you see the faces go by and you step on somebody. The scene was real to me." Another scene that rang true was the civilian murder scene. The same veteran claimed, "That's the kind of thing that happened over there. You think something is about to happen, and you start firing. A lot of civilians got killed that way. A lot of our own troops got killed that way."[42]

Film critics praised *Apocalypse Now* for its depiction of the war and the feelings it evoked. Clair Goodwin for the *Joplin Globe* in Joplin, Missouri claimed, "Apocalypse is a kaleidoscope of surrealistic images and colors, fraught with strong symbolism, and but brutally realistic; frightening and violent, yet mystical and even lyrical. It is a traumatic experience."[43] Roger Ebert wrote,"'Apocalypse Now' achieves greatness not by analyzing our 'experience in Vietnam,' but by re-creating, in characters and images, something of that experience."[44] Even reviewers with less stellar things to say about *Apocalypse Now* believed it to represent the war well. Vincent Canby would write, "When it is thus evoking the look and feel of the Vietnam War, dealing in sense impressions for which no explanations are adequate or necessary, 'Apocalypse Now' is a stunning work."[45]

The first set of Vietnam War films is a collage of depictions stressing different aspects of the war in the American zeitgeist. While Hollywood stumbled to produce films about the war in the early seventies, the industry did begin to produce a kind of perception of the war. Before

[42] Catherine Chapin, "Vietnam Then Different From 'Apocalypse Now,'" *Charlotte Observer*, October 13, 1979, 10.
[43] Clair Goodwin, "'Apocalypse Now' Powerful," *Joplin Globe*, December 2, 1979.
[44] Roger Ebert, "Apocalypse Now Movie Review & Film Summary (1979) | Roger Ebert," https://www.rogerebert.com/, accessed February 16, 2022, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/apocalypse-now-1979.
[45] Vincent Canby, "Stunning 'Apocalypse' Is Anticlimactic," *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, October 14, 1979.

actually depicting the conflict, Hollywood created an image of Vietnam veterans who are violent and disconnected from home due to their experiences. Feeling the influence of the fallout of the war and general decay of America, the whole industry was shaped by a newfound cynicism towards traditional concepts like honor or authority, with a particular cynicism towards the US military. The first actual depictions of the war late in the decade do not express a singular theme but rather the films explored and represented numerous aspects of the war that went into later depictions and shaped how the war would be perceived in the culture going further.

The films have overlapping themes and concepts but a few stand out. One overwhelming theme is cynicism about many things. There is plenty of cynicism about heroics, commanders, and the war in general. None of these movies depict the heroes of *The Green Berets* who fight against savage Communists for the poor people of South Vietnam. In fact, when the locals are depicted beyond vague background figures, they are untrustworthy, unhelpful, and generally derided. *The Boys in Company C* may be the most over the top in displaying a kind of rage about the war. The film shows soldiers dying for a commander's junk and being ordered to sacrifice their dignity by losing a soccer game to some South Vietnamese soldiers. It expresses a wave of intense anger at leaders who have betrayed those they lead. *Go Tell The Spartans* expresses more of the hopelessness of the war. The heroes try their best but everything is inevitably doomed. “It's a suckers tour,” as Lancaster’s character glumly says, and just like the long-dead French in the graveyard, the Americans are destined for the same fate.

The other clear theme of these films is victimization brought about by the war. *The Deer Hunter* very directly depicts the pain and trauma of the war. All of the characters, and the nation itself, are victimized by the conflict in some way and even those with no physical damage are free of the war's long-term influence. No one back home can ever truly understand the men who

fought. This was not a unique question to ask, but *The Deer Hunter* places the physical and emotional scarring the war caused at its center, where the damage is more implied or subtextual in movies like *Taxi Driver* when vets commit violent acts. Finally, *Apocalypse Now* expresses the confusion and ambiguities of the war. Vietnam is a bewildering dark place where the line between enemy and friend is blurred, and maintaining one's sanity is difficult. The movie makes this clear with the very journey of the boat and its crew. The deeper into Vietnam the men go, the more strange and harrowing events they experience, culminating in the arrival at Kurtz's camp and his crazed militia.

While cynicism and victimization would purvey these late seventies movies and the decade in general, change was already on the horizon. The first explosion in Vietnam War movies occurred just before the end of the decade and set a baseline for how Vietnam was depicted, and big shifts in the country were about to take place that would influence the next big boom in movies a decade later. The biggest change would be the rise of former actor and California governor Ronald Reagan to the presidency in the 1980s. Reagan would urge Americans to maintain a positive and simplistic image of America. Furthermore, the American people would begin to seek a reintegration of the Vietnam veteran back into the pantheon of American valor. A wave of commemoration and memorialization would sweep the country as citizens felt the soldiers had been shunned after the war. Thus, films about the war in the Eighties would become less focused on the loss of the war and more interested in the veterans' place in the war. Jeremy Devine argues, "Eventually, despite widespread disagreement about the war, its motivations, its conduct, and so on, The American public would at least coalesce in a united

assumption that the overriding lesson of the war was that if Americans are going to fight, Americans should fight to win."[46]

[46] Devine, 131.

Chapter 2:

Welcoming the Grunts Home

On November 13, 1982, a new monument was unveiled in Washington DC, consisting of a 246-foot long wall of black granite engraved with 57,939 names; others would be added over the years. While controversial at the time, the wall would become a pilgrimage site and America's most famous monument to the soldiers of the Vietnam War. The wall is also a perfect representation of Vietnam in the eighties in general and the films of the decade that attempted to represent the war. As the Vietnam generation grew up and the war moved further into the background, the nation tried to grapple with the cold shoulder veterans received upon coming home. At the end of the seventies, the first run of movies expressed complex feelings about America's first lost war and the decade's general decline. The Vietnam War films of the eighties would adopt many of these same tropes and themes but also tried to memorialize the war and come to terms with the veterans. If the war remained controversial, citizens could still rally around the soldiers who served. Like the wall on the National Mall, Vietnam War movies of the eighties attempted to memorialize the sacrifices of the Vietnam veterans and finally give the men the honor they failed to receive at the time.

By the end of the seventies and throughout the eighties, the Baby Boom generation, which fought and experienced the war, was coming to full adulthood. Boomers, now adults, wanted to see and produce media relevant to their experiences and memories. Movies on Vietnam tapped into this mentality, but one does not need to stick to war movies to see this. The late seventies and eighties were full of nostalgic returns to the fifties and sixties, often with a

more jaundiced eye of hindsight. TV shows like *Happy Days* and *The Wonder Years* reference the "innocent," happier childhoods of the Boomers. Movies like *American Graffiti* and *Dirty Dancing* express more complicated feelings by depicting the supposed innocence of the time as a delusion or at least backgrounded by upheaval and violence. Of course, *National Lampoon's Animal House*, based loosely on Harold Ramis's time in college in the early sixties, skewers an up-tight pre-Vietnam War America. The generation also directly addressed their youth's more political and turbulent aspects with movies like *JFK, Mississippi Burning,* and *The Long Walk Home.* Even sixties music revived in the eighties with bands and singers like Cher, Steve Winwood, Tina Turner, and The Grateful Dead experiencing a revival.[1]

The films discussing and depicting the Vietnam War existed in a shifting zeitgeist. The move towards authenticity and the focus on the soldier experience come from broader American politics and cultural forces. The intense focus on the soldier's personal experience could have its roots well before the eighties. It matched a rising conservative discourse about the war and the natural feeling on the part of Americans during the decade. Prisoners of War (POWs) are one significant carry-over from the previous decade that remained on American minds in the eighties. A 1991 *Wall Street Journal/NBC* poll would find that 69% of Americans believed Vietnam still held American prisoners. The media and Hollywood gave credence to the idea, with multiple movies like the second Rambo being all about freeing secret POWs. Senator Bob Smith passed around photos of men he claimed were still captive POWs, and Reagan would criticize Vietnam several times for not giving a "full accounting" of POWs.[2]

[1] Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 92–110.
[2] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 243–50.

Furthermore, in the 1980s, a slew of revisionist interpretations of Vietnam encouraged people to reassess their positions on the war. Guenter Lewy's book, *America in Vietnam* (1980), was a significant piece of revisionist history in particular. Lewy massively downplayed atrocities committed by soldiers as fabrication and claimed the absolute atrocity was the way reporters and politicians attacked the South Vietnamese as dysfunctional and not worth defending. These revisions obliterated the experience of veterans that did not jive with the reinterpretation. However, they would allow a certain number to more comfortably celebrate the war and its heroes.[3]

The idea that America had failed to properly honor and welcome home the Vietnam veterans shaped public perception. The best example is the rising legend entering cultural memory of female hippie protesters spitting on returning veterans. This narrative became so entrenched in popular memory of the war that many actual veterans would claim that they had experienced that homecoming by the nineties. However, as Jerry Lembcke would discover in *The Spitting Image,* there is no evidence that such an event ever occurred, and researchers recorded such accounts years after the end of the war. A protester could have spit on a veteran at some point, but if it had been happening as much as claimed, there would have been some kind of evidence in pictures or newspaper accounts.[4] However, the myth of spat-upon veterans and unredeemed POWs demonstrates there was public guilt over protesting the war and concern for veterans.[5]

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[3] Haines, "They Were Called and They Went: The Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran," 86.
[4] Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York:NYU Press, 2000), 76–82.
[5] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 105.

While the anti-war protesters were hardly the enemy of returning vets, there was much truth to the idea that veterans received a cold homecoming. There was no grand parade or celebration of the war's end as in World War Two. Veterans also felt natural alienation after experiencing military life and then returning to civilian life, where few understood their experiences. The federal government also failed to provide special medical and psychiatric services to returning Vets. There was a stigma and fear of "crazed" veterans who may lash out violently at random, and that fear was only made worse by films like *Taxi Driver* that depicted unhinged vets becoming violent. It makes sense that many vets would develop a feeling of rejection by their fellow citizens. That feeling even led to the forming of the Vietnam Veterans of America in 1978 to advocate for the political interests of veterans.[6]

Several historians argue that the intense focus on Vietnam veterans and attempts to make up for their unwelcoming return started with the Iran hostage crisis in 1979. In the hours after Iran freed the hostages on January 20, 1981, Bobby Muller, leader of the VVA, received countless calls asking how they could help Vietnam Veterans. Even Muller's mom complained that one hostage received a car while her veteran son got nothing for his service. The clearest example of attempts to reconcile with veterans occurred with the commemoration of the Vietnam War Memorial in 1982. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund pushed the Vietnam War Memorial as an apolitical monument that would "separate the warrior from the war."[7] Following the memorial commemoration, numerous other celebrations of the veterans occured. In 1984, the remains of a Vietnam soldier were interred in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery. In 1985, numerous "Coming Home" parades were held around the nation to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the war's end. In 1987, a "Thank You Vietnam Veterans"

[6] Appy, 238–39.
[7] Ibid., 240.

parade was held in Los Angeles, and by 1989, 143 memorials to the war and veterans had been built or were under construction around the United States.[8]

The war remained a concern in the world of politics. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president, at least in part by engaging with the Vietnam War. The raging cultural debate over the sixties, in general, had become an issue Reagan actively exploited. Reagan himself was always a hawk and had supported the war at the time. During his 1980 run for president, he proclaimed at a meeting of the Veterans of Foreign Wars his belief in the rightness of the war. He gave specific praise for the troops claiming, "We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned. They fought as well and as bravely as any Americans have ever fought in any war. They deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern."[9]

Reagan and Republican congressional candidates campaigned on the idea that under Democratic rule, America had become weak in the face of threats from the Soviet Union and that America was afraid to use its power or intervene when needed. The oil crisis, economic recession, and various diplomatic crises were all tied to the decline in American power that seemed to start with the loss in Vietnam. Both sides (but particularly conservatives) operated under the belief that the American people had become weary of foreign engagement and the loss of American blood for non-Americans. Many pundits referred to this weariness as "Vietnam Syndrome." The last straw was the Iran hostage crisis. Enough Americans could see a clear example of weakened American influence in which the government could not rescue citizens

[8] Keith Beattie, *The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 91–92.
[9] Ronald Reagan, "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety" (Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, Chicago, Illinois, August 18, 1980), https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/peace-restoring-margin-safety.

from some backward country. It is no surprise that Reagan defeated President Jimmy Carter by promising to make America great again and end the Vietnam Syndrome.[10]

Reagan would be the first president to mention Vietnam in an inaugural address. When speaking of Arlington cemetery, he intoned, "Their lives ended in places called Belleau Wood, The Argonne, Omaha Beach, Salerno, and halfway around the world on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Pork Chop Hill, the Chosin Reservoir, and in a hundred rice paddies and jungles of a place called Vietnam."[11] He was effectively tying the sacrifices of soldiers in Vietnam with the patriotic sacrifices of all other American wars. In contrast, President Reagan had no problem referring to Vietnam vets being rejected by their country while affirming that things had changed. He claimed to soldiers stationed in Korea in 1983, referencing grateful Korean young people, "And only ten years ago, youngsters of that age in too many places in our country were throwing rocks at men in uniform. Well, there's a different attitude now. And when you're rotated, and you're back home, I think you're going to find out how proud the American people are of you."[12]

Mentioning this political and cultural drift towards acknowledging the troops demonstrates the country's mood in the eighties. There was a genuine belief that the country had left returning Vietnam veterans behind, and it was time to honor them. This desire left little room for exploring the war as an event with causes, rationals, and actors. As historian Christian Appy wrote of the decade, "Vietnam veterans were unjustly spurned by their fellow citizens and now deserved unconditional respect and honor. Whatever anyone might think of the brutal and unpopular war these soldiers were sent to fight, all Americans should applaud their willingness

[10] Marcus, 49–51.
[11] Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address 1981” (Washington D.C., January 20, 1981), https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/inaugural-address-1981.
[12] Ronald Reagan, “Remarks to American Troops at Camp Liberty Bell, Republic of Korea” (1983), https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-american-troops-camp-liberty-bell-republic-korea.

to serve."[13] The veterans themselves were caught up in this mood. In 1980, 90 percent of veteran respondents to a Harris poll claimed they were happy to have served, and 80 percent denied the government took advantage of them. Of course, this was only a sample, and only a small percentage of soldiers saw combat, but it is still a striking percentage.[14] Hollywood created the many Vietnam War films of the eighties in the context of this concern for veterans.

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This examination will only lightly touch on movies that connect to the war but do not depict it, like *Rambo: First Blood Part II.* Many films throughout the eighties referenced or had characters connected to the Vietnam War, but only a few movies depicted the war itself. While films like *Rambo, Uncommon Valor,* and *Missing in Action* may not have taken place during the war, they kept the war in the cultural zeitgeist between the first boom in war movies at the end of the seventies and the second boom late in the eighties. These movies also share the feature of being about the difficult coming home experience of veterans and rescuing prisoners of war who were secretly being held by the Vietnamese. A prevailing theme from these films is a feeling of abandonment or betrayal from those back home, best summed up by Rambo in the second film when he asks, “are they going to let us win this time?” The themes of betrayal and abandonment would carry over throughout the other films of the decade.

A slew of Vietnam War movies that focused keenly on the experience of soldiers in combat began to come out in 1987. While previous films showed some kinds of combat, these scenes mostly amounted to brief moments of soldiers shooting at unseen foes. Previous films were also inventions or fictionalized, but this new set tried to create authentic stories or at least

[13] Appy, 241.
[14] Peter Rollins, ed., *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past* (New York:Columbia University Press, 2006).

sell themselves as authentic with actual stories being adapted or veterans participating in the production. Oliver Stone's *Platoon* would be the first of this new genre. Unlike *The Deer Hunter, Platoon* would depict combat, and soldiers fighting and dying in battle became a key focus of the movie. The authenticity of the film was also a major selling point as its author/director Oliver Stone was a decorated combat veteran. Stone was a private in Vietnam and served multiple tours, being wounded twice. The second time left him in a military hospital during Tet, in which his old battalion was decimated in battle.[15] The film was sold as a memoir of sorts, based on Stone's experience in Vietnam.

The film follows the personal experiences of army volunteer, private Chris Taylor, played by Charlie Sheen, in 1967 Vietnam. Chris finds himself in a dysfunctional unit led by an incompetent commanding officer and composed of two different groups led by clashing sergeants. On the one hand, there is the hardened, cynical Staff Sergeant Barnes, played by Tom Berenger; on the other is the sensitive, dope-smoking Sergeant Elias. Chris quickly bonds with Sergeant Elias and his band of quasi-hippie soldiers. The movie's key conflicts get going when the platoon is sent on patrol, and hidden explosives kill three men. On edge, the group investigates a Vietnamese village believed to be hiding munitions for the Viet Cong in which they discover a weapons cache. Barnes then violently interrogates the village chief and murders the chief's wife in a fit of rage before threatening to murder his daughter while Chris looks on in horror. Back at base, the company commander threatens a court-martial if an illegal killing is proved, making Barnes afraid that Elias will report him.

In the next battle, the inexperienced commanding Lieutenant of the unit becomes overwhelmed and calls an airstrike on his own men leading to chaos. In confusion, Barnes finds

[15] Oliver Gruner. "Vietnam and Beyond: Rethinking Oliver Stone's Platoon (1976-2006)." *Rethinking History* 16, no. 3 (2012): 359-376.

and shoots Elias, but as the unit extracts via helicopter, the wounded Elias emerges from the trees too late for rescue. Elias is gunned down in a Christ-like pose in the film's most evocative scene. Chris concludes that Barnes wounded Elias and attempts to convince the other men to kill Barnes, but the sergeant overhears his plans and threatens him with a knife. The film's denouement arrives in a massive final battle in which many men die. Chris awakes at the end of the battle to a wounded Barnes, who, after Chris refuses to get him a medic, orders Chris to shoot him, to which Chris complies. The film ends with Chris being airlifted out and weeping as he looks down at craters full of the dead. As he looks down in voiceover brooding over the central conflict, he claims, "I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves – And the enemy was in us ... The war is over for me now, but it will always be there – the rest of my days. As I am sure Elias will be – fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called possession of my soul ... There are times since I have felt like a child born of those two fathers."

Platoon like *Apocalypse Now* and *Deer Hunter* depict Vietnam as a space that changes and corrupts men who come into contact with it. Chris is the key instrument of that change as he goes from a fresh-faced recruit, vomiting after a standard march through the jungle, to a hardened warrior who kills his own officer. When Chris claims they fought each other, he clearly refers to the conflict between Elias and Barnes and the culture war the two men represent. Elias represents the anti-war forces of America that became terrified of the conflict and the suffering it unleashed upon the Vietnamese and Americans. Barnes represents pro-war America and is willing to bend the rules and use extreme violence to accomplish the mission. He disdains men like Elias, who won't let him do what he feels is necessary. Both representations are a little flat, with Elias and his crew being the rock-loving dope smokers and Barnes men being beer drinkers

with a Confederate flag in their barracks. However, flattening was bound to occur with only so much time to set up the complex conflict.

Chris claims he is a child of both men as he first embraces Elias and joins in with his pot-smoking crew, but at the end of the movie, he embraces Barnes's use of violence to, like Barnes, kill a fellow soldier. The audience is meant to love Elias and his empathy for his men and cynicism about the war. While Barnes is clearly the bad guy, it is also clear that it is the war and situations it creates that push Barnes to the edge. The two men clash because of their outlooks on how the war should be conducted, but they both care deeply about their men, and both feel their way is the best way to protect their men.

Platoon is also profoundly concerned with representing an authentic experience of a soldier. The film opens with the most common experience of most soldiers, humping gear around. The movie is also about a normal group of soldiers just trying to survive the next battle. Most scenes outside of battle deal with the men hanging out back at base. Furthermore, the depiction of combat is very different from previous films like *The Boys in Company C*. Combat in *Platoon* is hectic and personal as the camera follows individual men as they struggle and die. The film is shot in such a way as to convey what it may feel like to be under heavy fire. It is impossible to come away from *Platoon* without a sense of empathy for the soldiers who fought, as the film humanizes the common struggle of the enlisted man.

Some reviewers considered the film anti-veteran for depicting soldiers killing civilians, burning a village, and killing officers. In particular, Stone's own commanding officer, Robert Hemphill, wrote a narrative of their time in combat to refute Stone because *Platoon* depicted, "the average American soldier in Vietnam as a cruel, racist, potheaded malcontent."[16] However,

[16] Rollins, 99–100.

this feeling does not fully play out in the film's text. *Platoon* does depict some very controversial actions. The most controversial is the "My Lai" inspired scene in which Sergeant Barnes brutally murders the wife of a village chief and prepares to kill more before Elias stops him. The platoon's commanding officer is an incompetent fool who calls an airstrike on his men. There are even “fraggings” —or killing of fellow Americans—with Barnes shooting Elias and leaving him dead and Chris himself killing Barnes at the film's end.[17] However, the framing of the conflict and horrors of the film revolves around the conflict between Barnes and Elias and the horrifying acts committed within that conflict. The My Lai scene, for example, is not presented as coming about as a result of broader military policy or battle strategy.[18] Stone frames the desire to murder civilians as both the influence of emotional rage after losing a comrade and the spiritual conflict with the cruel sergeant Barnes. Ultimately the film is more about lost innocence than examining those struggling moments as part of a wider critique or examination of the war.[19]

Far from anti-veteran, the film is deeply concerned with soldiers' military experience and their heroic sacrifices. The film was actively sold on authenticity and approval from veterans.[20] One veteran felt the film was incredibly realistic, writing in *The Houston Chronicle*, "I felt like I was back there, humping up the mountains. I felt like I was on the screen too…I laughed at some of it; the guys rolling down the hill. I did that too. During the village scene, I cried. I participated in something like that and it was wrong."[21] *Platoon* can best be described as an elegy to the soldiers of Vietnam. The film lingers on death and wounds, with the opening scene showing

[17] Ibid., 98–99.
[18] Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, Reprint edition (New York: Picador, 2013), 1–23.
[19] Michael Klein, “Historical Memory, Film, and the Vietnam Era,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 28–29.
[20] Ibid., 25.
[21] Carlos Byars, “Vietnam Veterans Struk by Stark Reality of ’Platoon’- Some See Film as Therapeutic,” *Houston Chronicle*, February 15, 1987.

body bags. Multiple times the camera fixes on the eyes of the men when they die, and it is not afraid to show the bloody injuries of the wounded. The death of each American is portrayed in a wrenching fashion. The effect certainly horrifies, but it also pushes the viewer to have a deep empathetic reaction to the characters who experienced these horrors.[22] While not glorifying the war, *Platoon* validates the sacrifices of men who felt they had been forgotten.

The idea of presenting the war as it was and doing the enlisted men justice is a clear desire of Stone. A Jeep ad that played before the movie in its home video release had then CEO Lee Iacocca claim, "This film *Platoon* is a memorial, not to war but to all the men and women who fought in a time and in a place nobody really understood, who knew only one thing: they were called, and they went."[23] Reviewers also picked up on the theme with one review (in *Mademoiselle* of all things) noting, "It's not about whether this war was right or wrong….. It's about the texture of the experience. What it was like to be there."[24] Perhaps the clearest testament to the authentic feeling *Platoon* gave to viewers comes from an article in the *Houston Chronicle,* which documented veterans who were so impacted by images from the movie that they sought counseling; the paper reported that one veteran was so shaken he threatened suicide. The *Chronicle* article continues with veterans claiming that civilians should see the film to understand what the war was like. One veteran claimed it could help civilians empathize with their experience, "People should see the film and discuss it. This is a way of healing the wounds and bringing people together."[25]

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[22] Ibid., 92.
[23] Ibid., 81.
[24] Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films About the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 252.
[25] Ibid., 252.

Platoon was a financial success. At the end of its domestic run, the movie had grossed $138 million, making it the second highest-grossing film of 1987 (behind only *Beverly Hill Cop II*). The film would be nominated for eight Academy Awards and win four, including best picture and best director. Noted film critic Roger Ebert would give the movie four stars and call *Platoon* "A film that says - as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington says - that before you can make any vast, sweeping statements about Vietnam, you have to begin by understanding the bottom line, which is that a lot of people went over there and got killed, dead, and that is what the war meant for them."[26] The hype around the film was driven by the belief that the film was presenting the reality of Vietnam and was created by a veteran who was imparting the genuine experience of what it was like to be there. *Platoon* was the most commercially successful war movie of a year full of Vietnam War movies. The year 1987 would see *Hamburger Hill, Hanoi Hilton, Good Morning Vietnam,* and *Full Metal Jacket* come to the big screen.[27]

Full Metal Jacket Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film was, in ways similar to *Platoon,* deeply concerned with Vietnam's effect on soldiers. Kubrick splits the film into two sections, one set during basic training and another set in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive. The viewer follows the perspective of private, later sergeant, J.T Davis, played by Matthew Modine. The viewer follows Davis as a private in boot camp at Parris Island under the intense tutelage of drill instructor Gunnery Sergeant Hartman played by real-life Vietnam veteran R. Lee Ermey. In the most memorable scene, Davis and the other recruits are dressed down by Hartman, who personally insults most of the men and gives them demeaning nicknames. Hartman would nickname Davis “Joker” because he heard Davis impersonate John Wayne during his

[26] Roger Ebert, “Reviews: Platoon” https://www.rogerebert.com/, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/platoon-1986.
[27] Devine, 252.

performance. Hartman mainly focuses on the dopey and slow-witted private Leonard Lawrence, played by Vincent D'Onofrio, naming him “Gomer Pyle.”

The movie's first half would follow Joker and the other recruits as they were broken down by Hartman physically, through drills and courses, and mentally, through insults and indoctrinating songs. Throughout this half, Hartman grows increasingly harsh in his insults towards Pyle, pushing him to his physical and mental limits and punishing the entire group for his failures after finding a jelly doughnut in Pyle’s locker. The first half climaxes with all of the recruits, including Joker, beating Pyle with soap bars in socks for constantly getting them all punished for his mistakes. Eventually, Pyle finds a talent for marksmanship. The first half ends with Joker on guard duty finding Pyle with a rifle in the bathroom going through the drills. Hartman, hearing Pyle yelling, entered the bathroom to confront the now insane Private. The scene ends with Pyle killing Hartman and then turning the gun on himself while Joker watches, horrified.

The second half opened in Vietnam on the eve of the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Joker is now a sergeant and a war correspondent for the military magazine *Stars and Stripes* alongside photographer Private First Class Rafterman. Joker is poked fun at by other soldiers for claiming to have seen combat because he does not have the "thousand-yard stare" that combat veterans have. The magazine sends the two to join the “Lusthog” squad in the battle for Hue. Joker has reunited with Cowboy, a fellow recruit from his class at Parris Island, and meets the rest of the rowdy squad, including the foul-mouth heavy gunner Animal Mother. The rest of the film follows Lusthog through Hue during both downtimes in between skirmishes and heavy combat. In the final act, a sniper attacks the company and violently wounds one soldier and the medic who attempts to rescue him. The squad is helpless while watching the two die leading the

squad to assault the sniper. Eventually, the sniper kills Cowboy leaving Animal Mother in charge. The movie ends with the squad wounding the sniper and discovering it was a woman. Joker finishes off the wounded women on the orders of Animal Mother and finally has the thousand-yard stare. The last scene shows Lusthog moving out while collectively singing the song to the Mickey Mouse Club.

Like many of the Vietnam War films before it, *Full Metal Jacket* is, at its core, about the effect war has on the men sent to fight it. Both halves of the film depict the shaping of a soldier. The first half depicts how men learn to kill through dehumanization in the military and are damaged by that training. The men are drilled with a near-constant barrage of shouting and demeaning psychological jabs by their trainer who speaks favorably of Lee Harvey Oswald for his impressive, Marine-taught, marksmanship. Ermey inculcates the trainees into Marine culture with chants that often connect the violent acts the men are training for with sex and masculinity. There is no place for soft boys like Pyle as all the men need to be hardened killers. Those who fail to live up to the standards are brutally signaled out and punished. The recruits are essentially brainwashed into a death cult and turned into machines who are “not allowed to die without permission” as Ermey says. Private Pyle is a macabre success story for that death cult as he eventually memorizes all the lessons he is taught, and he becomes a good killer. Pyle simply kills the wrong people.

In Vietnam, the theme continues more subtly through Joker's eyes. Several soldiers describe how real veterans of combat develop the thousand-yard stare. Joker witnesses a fair amount of death in the Vietnam portion, with one of his first sights on assignment being a mass grave. However, Joker has never killed someone personally in combat. Through his time with Lusthog, he sees numerous soldiers die and is forced to actually participate in combat. Finally, at

the end of the film, Joker puts his training to use when he kills the young female sniper and finally gets the thousand-yard stare. The stare for the second half signifies the change in Joker after seeing actual combat and taking a life. His transformation into a killer has finally been completed, which could be one reading of him and the unit all singing the Mickey Mouse Club March at the end as a sign of their unity of being bloodied in battle.

A key part of this hardening into killers is the rejection of all that is female. The men are trained in boot camp with creeds and chants that reduce women to sexual objects, and they are made to sleep with their rifles as those guns are their partners now, and they give them female names. There is both a desire for women in their sexualization as well as a fear of women perhaps best represented by the first scene in Vietnam in which Joker is robbed as a prostitute distracts them all while "These Boots Were Made for Walking" by Nancy Sinatra, a song about an empowered woman, plays. This song being the sound of transition to the first scene in the war could even be an association of a dangerous feminine with Vietnam itself. It is no coincidence that of the few female characters in the movie one is a prostitute and the other is the sniper Joker kills. Women are either sexual objects or dangerous, untrustworthy mercenaries. The military and the all-male killer cult have no place for women.

The movie received mixed reviews overall. Roger Ebert would give the film two and a half stars (out of five), writing, "Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" is more like a book of short stories than a novel. Many of the passages seem self-contained, some of them are masterful, and others look like they came out of the bottom drawer."[28] Pauline Kael, the film critic for *The New Yorker* magazine, called it Kubrick's worst movie, accusing it of having bland characters and a confusing plot. Kael writes, "It's very likely that Kubrick has become so

[28] Roger Ebert, "Full Metal Jacket Movie Review (1987) | Roger Ebert," https://www.rogerebert.com/, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/full-metal-jacket-1987.

wrapped up in his 'craft,' which is often called his 'genius,' that he doesn't recognize he is cut off not only from America and the effects the war had on it but from any sort of connection to people."[29] The film would perform reasonably well with an initial domestic box office gross of $46,357,676.[30] The movie was nominated for an Academy Award, and Ermey was nominated for a Golden Globe, but neither would win. However, in retrospect, *Full Metal Jacket* has become a classic, with it being placed 103 in IMDB's top 250 films, and it has become tied to many American views of the Vietnam War.[31]

Another major release from 1987 was *Hamburger Hill,* a recounting of an actual 1969 battle. Like *Platoon,* the director of the film, John Irvin, emphasized the movie's authenticity and how it would be true to how the war really was. In an interview, he claimed:

> In 'Hamburger Hill,' for the first time, I think you see just how young the grunts were. No other film has stressed as much as we have that these were 19-year-old kids fighting the war, and I think we've expressed, much more poignant than in any other film, the camaraderie, and love that these guys had for each other. It's a film made with love. Our squad does not take potshots at each other. They don't take dope. They do what soldiers always have had to do, which is to get in the mud and tackle the enemy.

Irvin was in Vietnam and fairly close to the actual battle in 1969; however, he was not a soldier but a filmmaker working on a documentary at the time. Irvin claimed, "I made the film for veterans. As long as they come, I'll be happy,"[32]

The movie opens with a compelling scene of the Vietnam War memorial and images of helicopters superimposed over the names on the memorial. The visions of the memorial blur eventually into the gritty realism of a bloody firefight where medics are evacuating gruesomely

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[29] Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker*, July 13, 1987, 75–76, https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1987-07-13/flipbook/076/.
[30] "Full Metal Jacket," Box Office Mojo, accessed November 23, 2021, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl39159297/weekend/.f
[31] "Top 250 Movies," IMDb, accessed July 13, 2022, http://www.imdb.com/chart/top.
[32] Michael Spies, "'Hill' Director Tries to Show Youth of Soldiers," *Houston Chronicle*, August 28, 1987.

wounded troops as one attends to a dying soldier. The entire movie, after the opening scene, takes place in Vietnam, and like *The Boys in Company C*, many of the characters are stock or clichéd. A large part of the first half covers a series of characters at the base as the tension of the oncoming attack foreshadowed at the opening pervades every scene. The film introduces the general group dynamics in a series of scenes at the base. The men build defenses, talk about women, and visit the local brothel. Mostly these early scenes portray the men in downtime and learning the ropes as new soldiers. The calm is punctuated by a bombing that kills one of the recruits and a fight between the new men and the black doctor of the squad after a white soldier takes offense to the doctor's suggestion black soldiers were there because they were black.

The rest of the film occurs after the men are airlifted to their new defensive position. The group is ordered to take the enemy-held hill 937. The rest of the movie is a series of intense battles for the hill. The doctor is wounded and has to be drugged to stop him from trying to save a dead soldier, but he later dies of his wounds in the white commander's arms. The movie culminates in one final assault up the hill in which most of the men die. Only three survive unscathed at the end of the movie. The final piece of the movie is an address by Major Michael Davis O'Donnell from 1970, which calls on Americans to hold a place for the soldiers of Vietnam even if they are against the war.

Hamburger Hill, like *Platoon,* is centered around authenticity and the humanizing of soldiers. The first half of the film spends most of its runtime personalizing the new recruits that join the unit and the old-timers. The film attempts to capture the average existence of being an American soldier in Vietnam. Race also plays a role in authenticity. In *Hamburger Hill,* unlike so many other films that lightly touch on the subject, the racial tensions of the time and the war is directly represented. Also like *Platoon,* it accomplishes authenticity through the realism of the

combat and the sacrifices of the soldiers. The action is incredibly violent and gory. Men crawl through mud and rain and the camera is often placed close enough to see the fear in the men's eyes.

Along with the combat being authentic, there is a clear depiction of the sacrifices of Vietnam soldiers. The battle takes up a majority of the film as the men make repeated attempts to take the hill, losing men with every attempt. Only a handful of the protagonists actually reach the top. One of the more wrenching scenes occurs when the “Doc,” who has acted as an anchor for the group, weeps and cries out as one of the new men dies before he can help him. Even once they have taken the hill there is little celebration from the few men who remain exhausted, bleeding, and covered in muck. Apart from the drive for authenticity and focus on sacrifice, a major theme is resentment of the lack of support from back home.

The film explicitly claims that the anti-war movement loves the Viet Cong more than the troops. *Hamburger Hill* has a deep venom for both the anti-war movement and regular civilians back home. In between battles one of the men is devastated to receive a letter from his girlfriend that she is breaking up with him as she has been told by her college friends that dating a soldier is immoral. The movie goes even further by having the sergeant discuss how his marriage fell apart and his alienation from home when he got leave; he even claims that a friend whose son died in the war was receiving calls from ant-war protesters mocking his son's death. The sergeant claims that the anti-war protesters love their enemy more than them. Whether or not that is true historically is less important than what it says about feelings long after the war. The movie expresses guilt about the anti-war movement, and sends a message that soldiers were not supported enough for their sacrifices. The poem at the end of the movie by Major Michael Davis

O'Donnell, who later died in Vietnam, makes the sentiment that the soldiers of Vietnam should be remembered very clear:

> If you are able,
> save them a place
> inside of you
> and save one backward glance
> when you are leaving
> for the places they can
> no longer go.
> Be not ashamed to say
> you loved them,
> though you may
> or may not have always.
> Take what they have left
> and what they have taught you
> with their dying
> and keep it with your own.
> And in that time
> when men decide and feel safe
> to call the war insane,
> take one moment to embrace
> those gentle heroes
> you left behind.[33]

Reviews of the movie were generally positive, with the realistic violence being a noted feature. Pauline Kael was incredibly positive about the film writing for the *New Yorker,* "the movie is a scrupulously honest memorial. It has great decency; it joins together terror and thoughtfulness."[34] Jeff Millar in *The Houston Chronicle* claimed of the war itself, "The dominant image of Vietnam, remembered by many of us from newscasts, is of foot soldiers being choppered in and then choppered out after a 'pacification' or two." Further, Millar writes, "After a brief passage in which the young men suffer the tedium and seize some of the desperate pleasure of soldiering in smelly fleshpots; Irvin sends them off to the slaughter. They and their

[33] Michael D. O'Donnell, "If You Are Able," 1970.
[34] Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker*, September 7, 1987, 97–98, https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1987-09-07/flipbook/098/.

enemy die in the most specific of ways - entrails shining, skulls shattering, mouths screaming. Irvin pounds away—but he pounds too hard too long."[35]

A few other movies about Vietnam would be released before the eighties ended, but perhaps the best known and relevant for this discussion would be 1989's *Born on the Fourth of July.* The movie is based on veteran Ron Kovic's 1976 biographical account of the war, his personal experience returning home disabled, and his work for Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Kovic's book is an extremely poignant expression of his personal feelings about the war, the things he did, the experience of being disabled from the waist down, and the peace movement. The book proved to be a big hit, and there had already been several attempts to make a movie version in the seventies but financing fell through. Instead, *Platoon* Director Oliver Stone directed the film version of the story and co-wrote the script with Kovic. A young Tom Cruise, having won great fame from his 1986 role in *Top Gun,* would play Kovic. Stone was adamant about portraying the homecoming from Vietnam, calling it "the second war." In a telephone interview, Stone described his coming home experience: "It slammed so many of us right in the back of the neck. For months over there, you would count the days you had left, and then finally it would come Liberation Day, and you'd be aboard that big Freedom Bird feeling life would never be so happy again. Then WHOOM! Another war, right in your back. It wasn't the hostility that hurt. It was the indifference. And we all came to feel we had made a terrible mistake."[36]

[35] Jeff Millar, "`Hamburger Hill' Film Makers Go for Grinding Reality of Vietnam War," *Houston Chronicle*, August 28, 1987.
[36] Paul Chutkow, "The Private War of Tom Cruise," *New York Times*, December 17, 1989, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/17/movies/the-private-war-of-tom-cruise.html.

The movie starts with scenes of Kovic's life before the war in an idyllic American town with an all-American upbringing. A young Kovic plays war with his friends, and he marvels at the wounded veterans of past wars in an all-American Fourth of July parade. Kovic's idyllic childhood ends with him deciding to join the Marines to fulfill his childhood dream. The movie fades to Vietnam, bathed in a hellish orange sun. The movie immediately shows Kovic and his squad fire into a village they suspect to be full of Viet Cong, only to discover that they had killed women and children. Then in a Viet Cong attack, Kovic accidentally kills one of his own men. In the following scene, in what would be the big heroic moment in any other war movie, Kovic is wounded in battle and sent home to a veterans care facility. Paralyzed from the waist down, Kovic finds that the facility is a disgusting nightmare where the orderlies barely attend to the patients and rats infest the hallways. Back at home, he finds that all his friends but one had died in the war, and few people care about his service; even his brother is against the war. Kovic finds that his childhood sweetheart is involved in anti-war politics and his views start to turn when the protest she organized is broken up violently by the police.

Kovic eventually spirals into drunken depression, coming home drunk to his parents and disillusioned with America, the war, and his own disability. After a harrowing scene in which Kovic wakes up the whole neighborhood screaming invectives against the war, he goes to find himself in Mexico. At a community of disabled veterans in Mexico, Kovic meets a fellow disabled vet named Charlie, played by Willem Dafoe. While he thinks he finds some happiness with women that pretend to love him, it again spirals out of control until he and Charlie get into an emotional fight over their experience. The remainder of the film covers Kovic's return home, in which he tries to make good with the family of the man he may have killed and his experience

protesting the war. The movie's denouement shows Kovic and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War's famous protest of the 1972 Republican National Convention.

Kovic's story represents many of the themes and beliefs about the war that the previous films also display, almost as a culmination of them. *Born on The Fourth of July* is, first of all, overwhelmingly concerned with how the war affected the veterans who fought. The most obvious way is physical with Kovic being confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life and rendered impotent. The film shows the viewer all the most difficult aspects of disability. Kovic has to be carried numerous times in the film and he can't clean himself or use the restroom properly without some help. However, *Born on the Fourth of July* is most concerned with the psychological victimization of war on the veteran and the home front.

Like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket, Born on the Fourth of July* is very invested in the ways the war warped young men, turning them into killers, and how that affected them. *Born on the Fourth of July* also goes further. The victimization and alienation of the soldier upon returning to the home front is the real focus of the movie. The movie is clear in depicting Kovic as a normal kid by showing his childhood which makes his victimization by the war all the more heartbreaking as he accidentally kills children and his own men. That experience cripples him far more than his actual disability. Once at home, he can no longer relate to his normal family or town as he is a different person. Kovic fights his family and goes on drinking sprees, eventually leading to him running away to Mexico to an enclave of disabled veterans. But that ultimately proved to be toxic, and it is only once he confronts and seeks forgiveness that he actually begins to heal.

Kovic has many of his beliefs about his country challenged first by the war and then upon his return home. Killing women and children was clearly not what he expected from his

childhood war games. The sheer terror is clear on Kovic's face as he has to be forced away and told it was not his fault, and he seems more horrified after killing a fellow soldier. After killing and losing his legs for his country Kovic learns that everything he did in the war seems to amount very little to his country. He finds himself in a disgusting veteran hospital back home where the orderlies care little and the patients live in filth with rats. He openly rages that there are Americans against the war he sacrificed so much in exclaiming that they can leave if they don't like it. At home his relationship with his family decays as he is full of anger and guilt his family is ill-equipped to deal with. His mother openly laments that she wants her son back as she can no longer recognize him. Just like at the hospital he finds he gets no special treatment as the only job offer he has is from a friend to work fast food. Despite doing as President Kennedy commanded and paying every price, Kovic gets nothing for his belief in America but a broken body and a country that does not seem to understand him, but the story does not end with Kovic's spiral into despair.

Born on the Fourth posits a positive end and reconciliation. While Kovic finds some comfort among his fellow disabled vets in Mexico he eventually grows frustrated as it clearly becomes a kind of limbo where he cannot fully escape his memories. It is only once he comes back home and truly reckons with his life that he heals. Kovic comes clean to the family of the soldier he killed, and with their forgiveness, Kovic truly begins to heal and really comes home from the war. Once his experiences are validated and his sins partially forgiven he is able to start reconciling with America. He heals further by joining in the struggle against the war as a leader in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. With Kovic being accepted to speak at the Democratic National Convention in 1976, there is the implication of acceptance from his fellow countrymen, and Kovic's remark in that moment that he finally feels like he is home implies that the

alienation caused by the war had been healed. At the end of the eighties, this movie suggests some form of closure on the collective mental, physical, and societal scars caused by the war. In the context of the eighties, perhaps that sense of closure is appropriate.

Born on the Fourth Of July was critically and commercially successful. The reviews of the movie were very positive. *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby would compare it favorably to Stone's other Vietnam War film writing, "Oliver Stone has made what is, in effect, a bitter, seething postscript to his Oscar-winning "Platoon." He particularly praised the depiction of disability, writing, "No other Vietnam movie has so mercilessly evoked the casual, careless horrors of the paraplegic's therapy, or what it means to depend on catheters for urination, or the knowledge that sexual identity is henceforth virtually theoretical."[37] A writer for the *Austin Daily Texan* would praise the film claiming, "Though the genre of the Vietnam War film is as saturated now as it was barren only five years ago, *Born* will definitely go down as one of the best, if not the most important, of the lot for its intelligent and long-overdue examination. Rather than merely take one aspect of the conflict, *Born* looks at a myriad of elements from an undeclared conflict that still polarizes people more than 20 years after Vietnam"[38] Roger Ebert would give the film five stars claiming, "A film like Oliver Stone's "Born on the Fourth of July" is an apology for Vietnam, uttered by Stone, who fought there, and Ron Kovic, who was paralyzed from the chest down in Vietnam."[39]

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[37] Vincent Canby, "Review/Film; How an All-American Boy Went to War and Lost His Faith," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1989, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/20/movies/review-film-how-an-all-american-boy-went-to-war-and-lost-his-faith.html.
[38] Bobby Ruggiero, "Cruise's Prestige 'Born' in Vietnam Anthem," *Austin Daily Texan*, January 9, 1990, 9, https://newspaperarchive.com/austin-daily-texan-jan-09-1990-p-9/.
[39] Roger Ebert, "Born on the Fourth of July Movie Review (1989)" https://www.rogerebert.com/, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/born-on-the-fourth-of-july-1989.

The second wave of Vietnam War films came about during a period when the country had begun to re-evaluate its veterans. With Americans exiting a period of great uncertainty around American power, both economic and military, there was a general attempt to reclaim American pride and place. Part of bringing the pride back involved embracing the Vietnam veteran, whom many Americans recognized to have come home with little fanfare or support. The many films of the late eighties fit into the nation's attempt to honor its veterans and honor their sacrifice. While films like *The Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now,* and *The Boys in Company C* of the first wave in the seventies examined the effect of war on men to a limited degree, the films of the eighties center on those sacrifices.

Platoon, Hamburger Hill, Full Metal Jacket, and *Born on the Fourth of July* all highlight the sacrifices both mental and physical of soldiers as characters are slaughtered in violent combat, and the survivors are disabled and have their perspectives changed forever. Just as the country was building memorials to the Vietnam veterans, Hollywood produced movies that dramatized the gory sacrifice of veterans. Unlike previous movies about the Vietnam War, these films place the audience directly in action. Battle takes far more of center stage as the camera repeatedly joins the men at their level during fights, and these battles take up whole scenes or, in *Hamburger Hill's* case, half the film. They all depict average American boys shoved into horrible and bloody combat. If the death of men is not depicted with literal Christ-like poses as in *Platoon* or showing men weeping over their lost comrades like Doc in *Hamburger Hill,* then it lingers on their dead bodies or the gory wounds of the suffering wounded. Men writhe in pain, covered in blood. The soldier becomes sanctified through thankless struggle that is implied to go without support from back home.

All of those new films further explored alienation from home. A part of the nation's desire to validate the sacrifices of Vietnam veterans came from the belief that those veterans had been spurred by their nation and not properly welcomed back. These films still depict the controversial horrors of Vietnam as civilians are killed, and plenty of GIs directly question the honor and rightness of the war, but frustration with the home front takes up more space in these films compared with the films of the previous decade. In every film some character expresses discontent with those back home whether it is the men of *Hamburger Hill* believing that the hippies love their enemies more than them or Ron Kovic discovering his sacrifices only gave him a broken body and a stay in a rat-infested hospital. These films shift the mistakes of the war onto an American public that failed to accept its Veterans.

In a time when Americans wanted to honor the sacrifices of veterans, if not the war itself, these movies, some made by veterans, offered that validation. American soldiers could be heroes through their sacrifices. These films, as well as the more traditional outpourings of appreciation and memorialization, allowed Americans to celebrate or valorize their veterans. If the end of *Born* is any indication, this validation suggests a form of public healing of the jagged scar of Vietnam, if only amongst Americans. By finally accepting the veterans of the Vietnam War and honoring their experience, the country could heal from the very real trauma the war caused to American society. The social, cultural, and political rifts ignited in the sixties and seventies could be healed in the eighties by Americans coming together in agreement that veterans got a raw deal and should be honored now.

However, some historians have expressed concern for the validation and reconciliation of the veteran. Historian Harry Haines wrote an article about the changing representation of soldiers in 1990. He claimed, "Given the marginal position of Vietnam veterans in American society

following the war, their need for acknowledgment and acceptance is understandable. Nevertheless, the current reintegrative phase unfolding in mass media assigns an extraordinarily narrow meaning to the broad range of American experience in Vietnam and requires veterans to abandon their historical position in favor of an ahistorical pose."[40] Christian Appy summed up the Vietnam veteran in public consciousness writing, “American veterans could now be portrayed as the primary victims of the Vietnam War. By the 1980s, mainstream culture and politics promoted the idea that the deepest shame related to the Vietnam War was not the war itself, but America’s failure to embrace its military veterans.”[41] In essence, these historians fear that the public was replacing the true history of Vietnam with a healing fiction. These may have been exaggerations, but the fear that Americans would lose their sense of the Vietnam War may hold some truth in light of the paradigm shifts to come in future decades.

[40] Harry Haines, “They Were Called and They Went: The Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 94.
[41] Appy, 241.

Chapter 3:

Fading Memory

Vietnam War historian Marilyn B. Young claimed in *Vietnam And America,* a 1995 collection of essays, that the controversial war still haunted America decades after its conclusion. She wrote, "More divisive than any conflict Americans engaged in since the Civil War, the Vietnam War raised questions about the nation's very identity. These questions have not been settled. The battle over interpreting the Vietnam War is a battle over interpreting America, and it continues to this present day."[1] The discontentment is evident in the American films that contemplated the effect of the war on the boys that fought and American society. Political pundits believed that a "Vietnam Syndrome" haunted foreign policy and prevented America from using its military power for fear of protests back home. However, Young's contention that the war remained an ever-present part of American thought may have weakened even as she wrote it in 1995. As America entered the new millennium, changing political realities and the ineluctable passage of time would cause the Vietnam War to fade in cultural consciousness until the memory of the war outside those who experienced it became little more than an event from movies.

If Vietnam War movies in the 1970s were about coming to terms with America's military loss during a decade of decline and the films of the 1980s were about reintegrating the Vietnam veterans back into the mainstream of society, the last thirty years are far more opaque in what they say about Vietnam in modern America. After the late eighties boom, the Vietnam War

[1] Marvin E. Gettleman et al., eds., *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War*, 2nd edition (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 516.

mostly disappeared from the screen until the 2000s, and unlike in previous decades, there was only a trickle of new films. As America entered the early twenty-first century, depictions of the Vietnam War would become self-referential to the point of parody and slip from the big box office and critical appeal than they had in previous decades.

Politically the world at the end of the eighties experienced explosive change that likely played a role in the decline of the Vietnam War on the screen. The first earth-shattering change was the fall of the Soviet Union. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989 as then-Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev began a series of reforms to change the Soviet government and society. The Soviet Union opened up to the west, and even Bruce Springsteen toured the Soviet bloc. In 1991 compounding internal economic issues and dissent led to the Soviet Union's dissolution.[2] Even Vietnam witnessed the arrival of capitalism and normalization with America by the 1990s.[3] For almost fifty years, the geopolitical status quo of the world had been the Cold War between the United States and USSR. The entirety of American defense and foreign policy was built around the colossal struggle between the two nations. America operated in opposition to a hostile Communist state which sought their destruction and, through nuclear weapons, had the power to do so. American involvement in Vietnam was primarily predicated on Cold War assumptions about communism and Soviet intentions. The end of the Cold War brought the end of the dreaded "Vietnam Syndrome," and American fear of military intervention.

While President Ronald Reagan would approve the use of troops in Grenada in 1983, the eighties saw little use of military force in overseas deployments. It would take a war in the Middle East to restore America's sense of military superiority. Saddam Hussein, the dictator of

[2] Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 165–70.
[3] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd Revised ed. edition (New York, N.Y: Penguin Books, 1997), 35–59.

Iraq, had been left broke after years of costly war with Iran and looked upon the neighboring petrostate of Kuwait with greed. In August 1990, after falsely claiming that the Kuwaitis were digging into Iraq's oil fields. Hussein ordered Iraqi soldiers to invade and annex Kuwait. While the George H.W. Bush administration initially claimed that they had no position on the invasion, Bush sought and received authorization from Congress to use force against Iraq. The Senate narrowly approved military action in January of 1991.[4] Vietnam was very much on people's minds leading up to the war. A 1991 survey of a random group of 257 Denver residents asked if the residents believed George H.W. Bush's statement that the Persian Gulf War would not fail as troops would not have to fight with "one hand tied behind their back," a reference to how many viewed the way the government had handled the Vietnam War. Seventy-nine percent of those questioned agreed with that sentiment.[5]

It only took forty-two days for the multinational coalition forces, led by the United States, to route the Iraqi army. The Americans only lost 148 soldiers compared to the around 20,000 Iraq soldiers lost, the exact number being hard to know due to inflated troop estimates at the time. Saddam Hussein was allowed to remain in power as the government limited the military mission to simply removing his army from Kuwait. The war would be an overwhelming success for the administration, which felt they had defeated the fear of using force instilled by the loss of Vietnam. Bush would claim after the war, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!" Americans also seemed to widely approve of Bush's actions, with his approval rating going from 58% to 86%. Through CNN, in particular, Americans were able to get almost constant updates on the war far beyond the coverage of Vietnam, which had been famous for the amount of coverage it received. Americans generally supported the president in the war.

[4] Kruse and Zelizer,185–86.
[5] Appy, 242.

However, the support would not last long enough, or survive the coming economic recession, to keep Bush in office. Many conservatives felt Bush had not finished the war since Saddam Hussain had been left in power and would quickly violate UN regulations to kill local enemies.[6]

In a show of the healing nature of the Gulf War for the Vietnam Syndrome, *Time* magazine described several tales of how the war expelled the haunting of Vietnam, like that of a Marine in Iraq writing, "He carried with him an old American flag, which he left at the gate of the embassy compound. Asked why by an Associated Press reporter, the Marine said the flag had been given to him 23 years earlier by a dying comrade in Vietnam. For the Marine in Kuwait City, and for many Americans who took justified pride in the US's military performance in the gulf, a circle had been completed, a chapter closed."[7] The article continued with the words of Pat Durham, whose husband was killed in Vietnam. She recalled how after her husband's death their son Billy claimed, "my dad died for nothing." However, Pat was confident that this war would be different for her son, who was then serving with the 1st Infantry Division in Saudi Arabia. She claimed, "This country can be very proud…I don't think we could have had a better cause to fight for."[8] Clearly, to at least some Americans, victory in the gulf meant closure in Vietnam. However, the ghost may have been stronger than anyone realized; the deaths of 18 American soldiers in Somalia in 1993 pushed President Bill Clinton to remove troops from the region. It would take a far more serious shift to kill the Vietnam Syndrome fully.

Of course, America's true shift in perspective came on September 11, 2001, at the hands of Islamic extremists funded by Osama Bin Laden. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were broadcast live on cable news, and images of the dust-covered

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[6] Kruse and Zelizer, 185–92.
[7] Stanley W. Cloud, "The Home Front: Exorcising an Old Demon," *Time*, March 11, 1991, 1, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,972502,00.html.
[8] Ibid., 2.

aftermath deeply pierced the minds of Americans. Congress almost immediately authorized the use of force against any who committed or aided the attacks. The American military, led by President George W. Bush, soon invaded Afghanistan in the name of a "War on Terror." American forces overthrew the Taliban government that had been hosting Bin Laden. America and a small coalition would continue to occupy Afghanistan until 2021. In addition to the invasion of Afghanistan, the Bush administration began to push the idea that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction. After Secretary of State Colin Powell threw his credibility behind "evidence" that Saddam had WMD at the UN, the Bush administration was able to put together a small coalition of nations, and Congress passed a resolution allowing the use of troops. Along with its few allies, America invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003.[9]

Initially, the war went well, with Saddam's regime collapsing in less than six weeks. On May 1, 2003, President Bush famously delivered a speech on the deck of the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* in front of a massive “Mission Accomplished" banner. However, signs of trouble began during the occupation as looting and insurgency began to take shape. Furthermore, investigators could find no weapons of mass destruction and concluded that the "evidence" the administration used had been misleading or false. Further revelations about the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison further soured the public on the war, dredging up memories of abuses and atrocities committed by American soldiers in Vietnam. Bush's successor, Barack Obama, finally withdrew all combat troops in 2011, and US Special Forces killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan that same year. Still, the War on Terror continued as other militant groups, namely the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS), arose in the Middle East. In both the scope of its

[9] Kruse and Zelizer, 249–66.

influence and its effect on the American population, the War on Terror is easily comparable to the Cold War.[10]

With America going through so much change, in foreign relations in particular, it only makes sense that movies would change how they depict conflict in general. The war on terror would be the subject of numerous films (like *American Sniper,* or *The Hurt Locker*) and television shows (like *24* and *Homeland*). The Vietnam War would also get some new representations in the new millennium. These depictions of Vietnam would be affected by the end of the Cold War and new military operations. Namely, these new films, and video games, would lose the emotional edge of their predecessors as Vietnam faded from public concern.

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We Were Soldiers was not the only early 2000s Vietnam War movie, but it may be the biggest and best known. Like *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill,* the film had claims to authenticity based on the book, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young* by Hal Moore and Joseph Galloway. The book centers around one of the earliest engagements between American soldiers and the North Vietnamese Army at the Battle of Ia Drang as America began to move from advisory to combat roles. Randall Wallace, the writer of *Braveheart*, directed the movie version of *We Were Soldiers,* which came out in 2002 between the invasion of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq. Wallace heavily marketed the film based on a complaint from the book itself that "Hollywood got it wrong." He sold it on the idea that this would be the actual Vietnam War instead of movies like *Platoon* or *Apocalypse Now.*[11]

The film opens in 1954 with French soldiers in Vietnam ambushed by the Viet Minh led by a commander who leads the attacks later in the movie. It then cuts to, eleven years later, in

[10] Ibid., 267-269,285-288.
[11] David Sterritt, "A Fake Picture of War's Stark Reality," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 1, 2002.

1965, to Fort Benning, Georgia, with America beginning to engage further in Vietnam. The movie follows the main character Lt. Colonel Hal Moore, played by Mel Gibson, and his family at the base before Moore learns that he is about to be sent to Vietnam in charge of a battalion of mostly fresh recruits. The movie moves to Vietnam, where a critical airbase has come under attack; Moore and his 400 men are ordered into the Ia Drang Valley to engage the enemy. Unfortunately for Moore and his men, they quickly discovered that they were essentially dropped off in the middle of an enemy base camp, and over two thousand North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers already surrounded them. The rest of the movie covers the pitched battle over several days as the enemy attacks the outnumbered Americans, who have to rely on artillery and airdrops. Back at Fort Benning, Moore's wife is the center of a group of wives whose husbands are in the fight, and the movie is interwoven with scenes of yellow cab drivers delivering death notices to the wives of those men slain in previous scenes.

Eventually, after numerous smaller attacks, the NVA commander ordered a massive assault on the American position on the second day of battle. Just before the enemy overran his troops, Moore called in a "Broken Arrow" strike, which was an airstrike on his own men's position. Planes then drop napalm on the frontline halting the enemy's advance and killing many NVA soldiers and Americans. Before the stunned enemy could organize another attack, Moore and his men overran the NVA base and forced their soldiers to retreat with the support of helicopter gunships. Moore only left the scene after all his men, living and dead, had been taken from the field. After the Americans departed, the NVA returned to the area to remove their dead, and their commander claimed that the war was now an American war. The film's final image is a modern scene of Moore looking at the names on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC.

The film reviews seem mixed, with some reviewers like Roger Ebert liking the film and being particularly impressed with the honor the film gives to the Vietnamese troops of the NVA.[12] A.O. Scott for *The New York Times* praised the brutal honesty of the combat: "Like the best war movies -- and like martial literature going back to the Iliad -- it balances the horrid, unassuageable cruelty of warfare and the valor and decency of those who fight. That this is only part of the story -- that there can be cruelty without decency, violence without valor -- does not make it untrue."[13] Mick LaSalle for the *San Francisco Chronicle* has the highest praise claiming "We Were Soldiers" is one of the best war movies of the past 20 years."[14]

Others, however, were not as impressed by the film. Some reviewers saw *We Were Soldiers* as glorifying war. Scott Tobias wrote for *AV Club,* "Like a cut-rate John Milius [who wrote *Apocalypse Now*], Wallace fetishizes the men and machines without giving a thought to the world outside his field of vision or inside his characters' heads."[15] Some like David Denby for *The New Yorker* criticized the movie for its uncomplicated, heroic characters and the complete lack of perspective on the war, writing, "Its point of view is simply that a fight is a fight and never mind whether the victory is worth an enormously high casualty rate." He wrote, "Yet as art, this revisionist movie, grimly effective as some of it is, doesn't hold a candle to the remarkable cycle of pictures in the late seventies and the eighties which captured the discordant character of a tragic war." *Houston Chronicle* reviewer Eric Harrison concurred, "We watch

[12] Roger Ebert, "We Were Soldiers Movie Review (2002) | Roger Ebert," https://www.rogerebert.com/, accessed March 31, 2022, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/we-were-soldiers-2002.
[13] A. O. Scott, "FILM REVIEW; Early Vietnam, Mission Murky," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2002, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/01/movies/film-review-early-vietnam-mission-murky.html.
[14] Mick LaSalle, "They Were Heroes / 'We Were Soldiers' Shows the Full Horror of Vietnam and the Full Humanity of Those Who Fought It," SFGATE, March 1, 2002, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/They-were-heroes-We-Were-Soldiers-shows-the-2868519.php.
[15] Scott Tobias, "We Were Soldiers," AV Club, March 29, 2002, https://www.avclub.com/we-were-soldiers-1798196014.

bodies being pierced, burned, and blown up. We have a visceral reaction, but we feel nothing because the script hasn't bothered to invest these men with humanity. They're just fodder."[16]

We Were Soldiers is the apotheosis of the eighties' trend toward honoring the sacrifices of the soldiers. It arguably goes further by removing much of the political nature of the war. Director Randall Wallace said in an interview, "I think it's vital that we all hate war but be able to embrace soldiers,"[17] Like the films of the eighties, *We Were Soldiers* revels in the bloody sacrifices of its characters. The movie spends a lot of time setting up the moral character of the people it depicts. Just as wrenching, every death is punctuated by scenes of the soldier's family getting the notice that their loved one has died. The film's events occur early in the war, before our traditional view of the drug-using, rock-listening, officer-fragging soldier. In the words of *New Yorker* reviewer David Denby, "the kind of Americans who loved their God, revered their wives, and honored the Asian enemy."[18] *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill* problematize their heroes; they fight with each other, partake in local whores, do drugs, and kill civilians. While those eighties films were concerned with soldiers and memorializing their sacrifices and hardships at war and home, they never forgot the deep controversies of the war; in fact, part of their narratives is the divided feelings of the returning veterans and civilians. We Were Soldiers depicts none of those negative tropes.

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[16] Eric Harrison, "The Valley of Death. Talented Filmmakers Fail to Give 'Soldiers' the Power It Deserves," *Houston Chronicle*, accessed April 6, 2022, https://houstonchronicle.newsbank.com/doc/news/0F2093CAEA4191E7?search_terms=We%2BWere%2BSoldiers&text=We%20Were%20Soldiers&content_added=&date_from=&date_to=&pub%255B0%255D=HCBF&pdate=2002-03-01.

[17] Mick LaSalle, "A Remembrance of War / 'We Were Soldiers' Director Randall Wallace Drawn to Themes of Idealism and Heroism," SFGATE, February 23, 2002, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/A-remembrance-of-war-We-Were-Soldiers-2870318.php.

[18] David Denby, "Good Guys," *New Yorker*, March 11, 2002, 92, https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/2002-03-11/flipbook/092/.

In fact, for all of Wallace's desire to represent the "real" war, his choices are fairly dishonest. Wallace only adapts part of the book which covered all of Moore's experiences in Vietnam, and he chooses to adapt the Battle of Ia Drang, which was a fairly conventional battle between two armies that is not really representative of the rest of the war. In many ways, Ia Drang has more in common with the Battle of the Bulge than other firefights in Vietnam. Choosing this battle in the war allows Wallace to avoid both the later years of the war in which the draft and increasing protest kicked up the storm of controversy around the war, and he can avoid the less savory war full of "Zippo Raids," Agent Orange, and endless patrols. Maybe Wallace just wanted to copy the fairly recent hits of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001). He wanted a big, gory battle like those movies and left out the less glamorous bits. However, his insistence that this was the "real" Vietnam implies he wants to portray a particular version of the war. Maybe he was influenced by the mood in post-9/11 America, which saw heightened patriotism and support for the Army at an all-time high. Perhaps Wallace was influenced by personal politics as many Americans did and still do dispute the less savory actions of Americans in Vietnam. Whichever it is, the result is clear. *We Were Soldiers* presents a very pro-military vision of the war.

It is no wonder that several reviews actively compare the movie to *The Green Berets* as it feels like propaganda. The soldiers in *We Were Soldiers* do not kill civilians or question their orders. They are just good American boys sacrificing their lives for their country. One dying soldier even claims that he is proud to die for his country. While the film shows the French losing at the beginning and condemns their imperial war as hubristic, it goes on to show the Americans winning the battle and Moore fulfilling his promise to be the last to leave with the rest of the war left out. Ironically, for any who actually know the history of the war, the battle is

won with a massive display of American air power. That massive show of airpower was very much part of the actual war in campaigns like Operation Rolling Thunder that led to America dropping more tons of bombs on Vietnam than in all of World War Two. Famously, unlike in the movie, this bombardment achieved nothing strategically, and, unlike in the film, America eventually lost. The movie's assessment of the conflict goes no further than the heroic sacrifices of some men on the battlefield.

Devoid of context around its release, *We Were Soldiers* could be about any tragic battle lacking partisan emotions which is what Wallace wanted to tell. Reviewers seemed split on whether or not that removal is positive or not. Some seemed to view the non-political nature of the film and the way it honored both sides as a sign of healing from the war. The reviewer for the *New York Times* viewed this as positive writing:

> In the years since the fall of Saigon, movies have treated Vietnam as a continuing trauma that needs to be confronted, wished away or avenged…"We Were Soldiers" may be the first Hollywood movie plausibly to suggest that they have at least partly healed.[19]

However, this void could also be seen as a negative, as David Sterritt wrote:

> The films about Vietnam that most Americans remember are positively soaked in physical and emotional torment - from "Platoon," with its grunt's-eye view of combat, to "Apocalypse Now," with its exploration of war's dehumanizing insanity. Today, the pendulum has swung back again. If filmmakers with politically twisted knives once sliced away guts-and-glory clichés, their current equivalents hack away all significant concern with moral and political questions.[20]

Ultimately Sterritt is correct that, despite Wallace's claims, the film is very political. It is impossible to create a film about war that is not. *We Were Soldiers* still has heroes. While the Vietnamese are not outright stigmatized, it is the Americans who get to be the most human. More importantly, *We Were Soldiers* is most political in what it does not say. Wallace shows a battle

[19] Scott, "FILM REVIEW; Early Vietnam, Mission Murky."
[20] Sterritt, "A Fake Picture of War's Stark Reality."

where overwhelming American force is victorious. The Vietnamese soldiers are depicted being slaughtered in waves. Wallace seemed to understand that Americans would be less comfortable with lingering depictions of American boys being similarly treated. He falls right into the trap that led to failure in Vietnam and would lead to failure in Iraq in the years after the movie's release--that American grit and technology would win the day and only the enemy is butchered. Outside of the film's hubris, Wallace uses the troops as pawns.

By avoiding why war happens and focusing on the heroism of the soldiers Wallace is implicitly silencing dissent. The troops become martyrs in *We Were Soldiers*. To question the war is also to question that martyrdom. Even if a viewer finds the war to be tragic the film wants them to support the troops, if not the war. But how can someone support the troops while being neutral about the war? Wallace's choices are perhaps made clear by the fact that the film came out in 2002 with Americans already in Afghanistan and the government slowly building its case for invading Iraq a year later. Wallace may have been prepping for another unpopular war the same way Nixon attempted to use POWs. He demands viewers focus on the sacrifice and not on the reasons for that heroic sacrifice.

We Were Soldiers is a serious war movie that stresses authenticity, but as with any subject that has many representations, a set of tropes is bound to develop. Like the western, the Vietnam War had, by the early 2000s, gathered a collection of tropes that lent themselves to satire. The 2008 film comedy *Tropic Thunder* attempts to be the *Blazing Saddles* of Vietnam War movies. Strictly speaking, *Tropic Thunder* is not a movie about the Vietnam War; it is a satire about the making of a Vietnam War movie that falls apart. Directed by Ben Stiller, the reference to previous Vietnam War movies is entirely intentional and part of the inspiration for the film. Stiller claimed in an interview about the development of the movie, "Those iconic war

movies like ‘Apocalypse Now’ or ‘Deer Hunter,’‘Platoon,’ even ‘Born on the Fourth of July’ and ‘Hamburger Hill,’ were very affecting at different times in my life."[21]

The movie starts with helicopters soaring over the jungle into a hot landing zone as American soldiers hold off attacks by the Viet Cong. However, the scene's comedic nature comes out as an officer is shot in the head, a fountain of blood sprays men in the face, and a radio operator is gutted in a way that is so over the top it’s a parody. As the soldiers prepare to extract, they watch as the final man is gunned down in a shot-for-shot remake of Willem Dafoe's dramatic death in Platoon. A gruff black character then rushes to save him and nearly succeeds, but an enemy grenade stops him and almost knocks a helicopter out of the air. The two men then hold on to each other and discover one has lost his hands to the grenade. The scene then reveals that the whole thing was part of a film, and the director calls it a cut. The previous scene was all a part of a film being made by a hack director with a washed-up action star, played by Ben Stiller, a tired comedian, played by Jack Black, and an Academy Award-winning method actor doing black face, played by Robert Downey, Jr. All involved are attempting to revive their careers or be taken seriously by being in a serious war movie adaptation of a grizzled, hook-handed veteran’s memoir.

The rest of the movie gets going when, under pressure from a Hollywood producer played by Tom Cruise, the veteran author/advisor named Four Leaf, played by Nick Nolte, suggests that the director drops the actors in the jungle for a while to better get into their characters. After the director is killed by an old landmine from the war, the actors, believing his death was a trick, wander the jungle assuming they are being filmed. Meanwhile, a heavily armed Vietnamese drug operation near the production decides to deal with the movie crew while

[21] Michael Cieply, “New Film Tests Crudity’s Limits,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2008, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/02/movies/02trop.html.

the actors spend most of the time assuming it is all a part of the movie. The drug makers capture Four Leaf and the pyrotechnic movie expert, and it is revealed that he never served in Vietnam and that his "memoir" was a fictional tribute. The film culminates with the actors launching an assault on the drug operation in the mold of *Rambo: First Blood.* The movie ends with all of the actors escaping in a helicopter and the footage of their escapades being turned into a critically acclaimed film.

Tropic Thunder is a satirical movie that revolves around meta jokes at the stereotypes and genre conventions of previous films. The movie's humor revolves around the idea that Vietnam War movies became so commonplace that the genre's themes and concepts became tropes worth lampooning. The creators assume that the audience will recognize the tropes, like the scenes where napalm is being dropped, and the characters are running for the safety of helicopters or wandering through the jungle. Subversion of those tropes creates humor. A great example is the way the movie makes fun of the desire for authenticity in previous films about the Vietnam War. The character Four Leaf, played by Nick Nolte, is depicted as the stereotypical Vietnam War veteran. He always wears a military camo vest and bucket hat, both covered in army patches, and he is a double amputee with two hooks for his hands. Of course, he also produced a harrowing memoir of the war that is supposedly inspiring the film. Four Leaf clearly mirrors Ron Kovic with his similar disability and memoir--turned--film. *Tropic Thunder* subverts this familiar archetype by revealing that Four Leaf was in the Coast Guard in Vietnam, never leaving the country, and his "memoir" was just a tribute.

Apart from spoofing the basic imagery and characters of Vietnam War movies, *Tropic Thunder* also mocks the melodrama and violence of previous films. The most obvious example is the scene lifted directly from *Platoon,* where Stiller copies Dafoe's Christ-like pose as he is

gunned down. The scene was already a bit exaggerated in *Platoon,* but *Tropic Thunder* extends the scene by several minutes as Stiller is shot an absurd number of times in slow motion. The movie further lampoons the tendency of Vietnam War films to linger on or over-dramatize death and gore. Where *Hamburger Hill* opens on a scene of men with their guts in their hands as a genuine depiction of combat, *Tropic Thunder* has an extended scene of a soldier being disemboweled that produces mountains of guts and goes on and on as a joke. Where *Full Metal Jacket* shows a sniper blowing gory pieces out of wounded soldiers, *Tropic Thunder* shows a man shot in the head, and a perfect, eternal fountain of blood shoots from the wound and splatters Jack Black's face. However, spoofing how films depicted the war is only the surface level of *Tropic Thunder's* joke.

At its heart, *Tropic Thunder* is really a spoof of the movie industry as a whole rather than one of Vietnam War films in particular. The best examples are the main characters. Stiller's character Tugg Speedman is a clear parody of a washed-up action star hoping to revive his career as a serious actor first by portraying a mentally disabled character and now by being in a war movie. Jack Black's character, Jeff Portnoy, is a clear parody of Eddie Murphy and Tyler Perry films that had become hack by the 2000s, where one actor plays a dozen characters. Robert Downey, Jr's character, Kirk Lazarus, is the most over the top example of an actor so obsessed with getting into his character that he undergoes surgery to darken his skin. The satire of the industry as a whole is punctuated best by the character of a foul-mouthed movie producer comically named Les Grossman, even more comically played by *Born On The Fourth Of July* star Tom Cruise, whose concern about budgets kick-starts the plot.

While the film is making fun of the whole film industry, the fact that Stiller chose Vietnam War films as the base for his spoof speaks to the place of Vietnam War films in wider

film culture. By the turn of the century, numerous Vietnam War movies had not just been financially successful but critically acclaimed, and many of the films had attained classic status. *The Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now,* and *Platoon,* in particular, all consistently make lists of the best movies of all time. The film within the film is clearly meant to be the product of an industry geared towards chasing awards. All of the actors in *Tropic Thunder's* fake war film are involved because of the perceived prestige that comes with a Vietnam War movie. The reason the film is being made has little to do with exploring the conflict or even depicting a soldier's story. Rather, the actors and crew are banking on the prestige and awards that come with melodramatic depictions of the Vietnam War as well as the massive box office such films received. Where previous films were at least partially attempts to express the complex feelings surrounding the war experienced by the creators and audience of those films, the filmmakers in *Tropic Thunder* purely hope to win awards and revive dead acting careers.

Tropic Thunder was fairly well-received for its over the top humor, with the *San Francisco Chronicle* writing that the comedy, "desecrates pretty much all that is holy, including Vietnam veterans who write books, recovering drug addicts, pandas, Russell Crowe, the overweight, the flatulent, small Burmese children and whoever currently owns the rights to "Run Through the Jungle.'[22] They got the references and the point of the film as the *Time* magazine reviewer writes, "The early effusion of blood (which geysers out of a hole in a soldier's helmet) and guts (a wound in Speedman's stomach spills a sausage factory's worth of entrails) cues you to the objects of Stiller's burlesque: jungle war movies from Apocalypse Now to Apocalypto,

[22] Peter Hartlaub, "Movie Review: 'Tropic Thunder' Offensive, Funny," SFGATE, August 13, 2008, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Movie-review-Tropic-Thunder-offensive-funny-3200764.php.

from Platoon to a raft of Rambos."[23] However, some reviewers complained that the action overwhelmed some of the comedy to feel like a straightforward action movie.[24]

One of the clear themes that reviewers picked up on was the movie making fun of how Hollywood commodifies the experience of war. One reviewer claimed, "'Tropic Thunder' isn't about the morality of war. It's about the sour taste of producing certain war movies, the hubris not to take us to war, per se, but to repackage it as an adventure."[25] Another reviewer argued much the same: "Stiller and his gang happily take potshots at the war-is-hell realism of movies like 'Saving Private Ryan' -- the point being that movie realism may be dramatically effective, but it isn't in itself heroic."[26]

Just as Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* made fun of the western genre, *Tropic Thunder* makes fun of the prestige Vietnam War movie. The Vietnam War films of the seventies and eighties used melodramatic moments and bloody gore to both express the pain the war inflicted as well as to lionize the sacrifice of veterans. But by the 2000s the war was decades in the background, and that melodrama and gore had lost its punch. Americans had seen multiple movies with helicopters, napalm explosions, soldiers trudging through jungles, and dramatic death scenes over the last twenty years. Audiences had seen grizzled veterans in wheelchairs with claims of authenticity. By 2008 Hollywood was willing to produce comedies about the Vietnam War, and more importantly, the public was ready to accept a comedy about Vietnam. The most controversial aspects of the movie were not its spoof of combat but rather Robert

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[23] Richard Corliss, "Tropic Thunder Brings Jungle Fever," *Time*, August 7, 2008, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1830412,00.html.
[24] Miami Staff, "Tropic Thunder (R) **½," Miami Herald, August 12, 2008, https://www.miamiherald.com/miami-com/things-to-do/article225891265.html.
[25] Wesley Morris, "A Big-Budget Journey into the Jungle of Hollywood," *Boston.Com*, August 13, 2008, http://archive.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2008/08/13/a_big_budget_journey_into_the_jungle_of_hollywood/?page=2.
[26] Stephanie Zacharek, "Tropic Thunder," Salon, August 13, 2008, https://www.salon.com/2008/08/13/tropic_thunder/.

Downey Jr. wearing black face for his role and the way it depicted intellectual disabilities.[27] Based on the *Christian Science Monitor* comment, the imagery of dying soldiers in Vietnam may have become too cliché to make much impact.

After *Tropic Thunder,* few big-budget Vietnam War films would be released as the genre seemed all but dead. However, the war would see a fairly big budget depiction in a different medium altogether. The video game *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) depicts the Vietnam War in some notable ways. While video games have different medium based design choices, many video games, shooters in particular, borrow story structures from film with a story linking various scenes involving action; many video games take scenarios and scenes directly from films. Modern video games even feature movie actors like Gary Oldman and Ed Harris and have budgets to rival blockbusters. This game, in particular, is very clearly inspired, in some cases to the point of plagiarism, by Vietnam War films of the past. *Call Of Duty* is a long-running first-person shooter video game series. The series places players in the shoes of characters fighting in various conflicts ranging from World War Two to future high-tech disputes, and it regularly sells millions of units.[28] The player actively participates in the action, shooting enemy combatants. *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* is the first game in the *Black Ops* spin-off series, which generally covers parts of the Cold War period. The *Black Ops* series also presents a relatively "Gonzo" depiction of the past with heightened elements like, for example, having a mode where John F. Kennedy, Robert McNamara, Richard Nixon, and Fidel Castro fight zombies together in the Pentagon.

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[27] Alana Robson, "Was Robert Downey Jr. Doing Blackface In 'Tropic Thunder' As Bad As Jimmy Fallon?," TheThings, June 4, 2020, https://www.thethings.com/was-robert-downey-jr-doing-blackface-in-tropic-thunder-as-bad-as-jimmy-fallon/.; Michael Cieply, "Groups Call for Boycott of 'Tropic Thunder' Film," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2008, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/movies/12boycott.html.

[28] "Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War Sold 5.7 Million Digital Units in November," *GamingBolt* (blog), accessed March 21, 2022, https://gamingbolt.com/call-of-duty-black-ops-cold-war-sold-5-7-million-digital-units-in-november.

The first *Black Ops* puts the player in the boots of a CIA operative named Alex Mason, who, throughout the game, is being questioned about events from the past which operates as a framing device to jump from event to event. The game's overall plot is classic eighties action movies. A rogue Russian agent wants to use Nazi chemical weapons to upset the balance of the Cold War and Mason has answers on how to catch said agent because of his imprisonment at the hands of the agent. The game follows Mason delving through his memories trying to remember enough information to help stop the Russian agent from awakening an army of sleeper agents and launching a massive chemical attack on the United States. Those memories take him from a failed attempt to kill Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion to a long stint of his time in Vietnam searching for Russian agents and weapons. On those missions Mason is usually joined by Sgt. Woods and CIA handler Jason Hudson. The game, of course, ends with Mason killing the evil Russian agent and his Nazi scientist accomplice, and saving America.

First and foremost, examining the game for some philosophical, political, or even thematic stance on Vietnam is difficult as, on the surface, it is a black hole of perspective. At best, the game has little to say about the war and the actions of the U.S. government in the sixties. At worst, it tacitly accepts their actions as justified. Mason and his compatriots are in the CIA in the sixties, and the game is aware of the unsavory things the CIA was doing in that decade. The first mission has Mason and Woods infiltrating Havana to aid The Bay of Pigs Invasion, and Mason kills a Castro body double. That is almost the kind of scene Oliver Stone would put in a conspiracy film, but in *Black Ops,* it's an over the top shoot out with a plane chase at the end. In Vietnam, Woods directly notes that they are using Khe Sanh to cross the border illegally into Laos and Cambodia. In fact, the game directly implicates the player in possible war crimes. The patrol boat mission has the player firing into villages along the river, and a later

mission in a helicopter encourages the player to blow up villages from the air. Of course, people are shooting from those villages or the docks next to them, but the game is still encouraging purposeful destruction of ambiguous targets. The only hint of the outside political debate around the war in the game is a few scattered peace signs on flags and armored vehicles.

While devoid of explicit stances on the Vietnam War and the use of illegal military force *Black Ops* is very clear in its implicit stance. By putting the player in the role of a special operative who violates borders, tortures people, and bombs villages the game presents an argument in favor of those actions. At no point in the game does blowing up countless villages or shooting through city streets blow back on the protagonists. *Black Ops*, as does all of the *Call of Duty* games, paints the world as a dangerous place full of threats requiring drastic actions. The world of *Black Ops* needs men like Mason and Woods to do less than legal or morally dubious things to keep the world safe. The game implies the world would be in danger without soldiers given tacit permission to bend the rules to get what is needed. Essentially, the work of the military and government, including their involvement in Vietnam, is justified in the game's twisted logic.

When it is not tacitly supporting the excesses of the military industrial-complex, Black Ops is derivative to extremes, and its vision of the Vietnam War is just a copy of previous representations of the war to the point of cliché. In some ways, it is subtle, like using color pallets similar to *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now.* However, many times the game copies scenes in their entirety. The Vietnam part starts with the battle to defend Khe Sanh in a heavy conventional firefight with scenery reminiscent of Hamburger Hill in the landscape of orange clay and the air full of dust and smoke as the Viet Cong charge American fortifications. Another mission lightly references *Apocalypse Now* as Mason and Woods ride a patrol boat upriver, fighting various

enemies on the shore as the Rolling Stones song “Sympathy for the Devil " blares on the boat's radio. The game also directly recreates a very famous scene from *The Deer Hunter.* Mason and Woods are captured by the Vietcong in a mission and forced to play Russian Roulette with other prisoners, leading to a side character very graphically dying in front of the player. Then Woods, who in the game is starting to look like Christopher Walken's *Deer Hunter* character with the iconic red headband, and Mason use the gun to kill their captors and make a daring escape through the jungle.

A decade later, nothing has changed. In 2020, Activision released a sequel to *Black Ops, Call of Duty: Cold War.* The game only has a few sequences in Vietnam, which show that the war remains little more than an event represented by stereotypes and clichés in the near-decade since the first game. The one level that takes place in Vietnam is essentially every American’s quintessential vision of that country. The unnamed main character is led through an American forward base full of sandbag bunkers and soldiers working on various tasks. The culmination has the player loading into a helicopter and flying over a mountings bay and upriver into the jungle as Steppenwolf’s “Magic Carpet Ride” plays over a radio. Activision’s picture of the Vietnam War is a copy of a copy of a movie version of the war.

Worse than its void of perspective and its derivative set pieces is *Black Ops’s* crass gamifying of the Vietnam War. A game built around violence and the act of killing in war has to build situations around that violence. The developers did that by creating many missions where violence occurs in ambiguous combat zones. Staying true to its name, many of the missions in the game take place in clandestine civilian-heavy environments; in fact, very rarely does the game set an event on an honest battlefront. The main campaign seems afraid to let five minutes go by without shooting and explosions. Gameplay is a frenetic and near constant shoot out with

countless enemies dumping endless rounds and throwing countless grenades like the game is jangling keys in front of a toddler. Game reviewer Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw sums up the combat well, claiming, "Because the thing about all the *Call of Duty* games I've played lately is that they all seem to be hooked up to IV drips full of Pop Rocks. *Black Ops* just can't calm the fuck down. If 5 seconds ever passes without a gunshot or an explosion, then it's probably because you just passed out from an epileptic fit."[29]

Outside of the main missions in multiplayer mode, the game produces numerous maps of the Vietnam War where players compete in Vietnamese villages and the city of Hue. In fact, in an unexplainably crass decision, there is also a multiplayer map of Hanoi that includes the infamous Hanoi Hilton prison, with bloody torture rooms included. Game modes turn violence into a competition where KGB, NVA, and CIA teams fight over information, flags, or just the most kills. The game actively systematizes killing as it displays a player's kill-to-death ratio after every game with the obvious goal of encouraging players to get more kills than deaths in the game (eerily similar to Robert McNamara's Body Count strategy in the war). Players are rewarded with ever increasing ranks the longer they play. One dark example is killstreaks in which the players are rewarded with devastating attacks like a napalm strike or a bombing attack named "Rolling Thunder." *Black Ops* has perfected an addictive formula for multiplayer that they utilize to hook players.

Black Ops was highly successful, selling 5.6 million units, and would earn $360 million in its immediate release, massively out earning the movie *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows:*

[29] Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw, "Call of Duty: Black Ops (Zero Punctuation), Zero Punctuation, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eP-OLKkbiBc.

Part One, which came out that year.[30] Overall reviews were positive for the game, with the primary campaign being considered a strong point. However, few of the reviewers commented on the depictions of the Vietnam War; instead, they focused on the gameplay and multiplayer functions.[31] Perhaps this is merely the product of immaturity or misplaced goals in video game reviews of the time. Players want to know if a game is fun to play after all. On top of that, online competitive multiplayer has become the true bread and butter of first-person shooters, with some games ditching a single-player campaign altogether. Only one reviewer, Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw, makes any examinations about how the game represents the war arguing, "Tellingly, the game features the Vietnam War and the Bay of Pigs invasion, both for the longest time avoided by video games because the United States went into them for slightly cunty, unheroic reasons. But I guess *Black Ops* means we've stopped giving a shit."[32]

However, this also speaks to Vietnam being merely instrumental to the game. Vietnam is a setting to stage gameplay scenarios rather than an emotion-laden event. It also makes sense that the game copies parts of movies in that context. The game came out thirty-five years after the war ended. These games are not created in response to the feelings of Americans about the conflict. Instead, these games are for audiences with a general understanding of the war based on classic movies, not personal experiences. One review starts to get at this point: "To be clear, Black Ops is *not* a Vietnam game. But the middle of it most definitely is, complete with cliched

[30] Andy Robinson, "News: Black Ops Annihilates Record Harry Potter Weekend - ComputerAndVideoGames.Com," accessed April 6, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20101124024147/http://www.computerandvideogames.com/article.php?id=277090.
[31] Nate Ahearn, "Call of Duty: Black Ops Review," IGN, accessed April 6, 2022, https://www.ign.com/articles/2010/11/09/call-of-duty-black-ops-review-3.
[32] Croshaw, "Call of Duty: Black Ops (Zero Punctuation).

examples of licensed music from the era… and makes you feel like the game is trying too hard to be compared to Vietnam-era films."[33]

It seems clear, at least based on these more recent depictions, that the Vietnam War does not haunt the American people in today's society. Perhaps it is impossible to understand where Vietnam sits in the current American psyche. However, these modern films and video games lack much of early cinema's intense emotions and themes. The films of the seventies and eighties addressed how Americans felt about losing an unpopular war and how that war changed Americans. The depictions of Vietnam in the new millennium lack that raw nerve, or they even poke fun at those old feelings. When watching Robert Downey Jr., in black face, weeping over Ben Stiller's comically blown-off hands while Jack Black hangs from a chopper, it's hard to argue that it is haunting. If anything the crass celebration of the violence of the war in *Black Ops* speaks to a serious change in perception. The teenagers that play *Black Ops* have little understanding of how controversial the war was, or if they do, it is intellectual rather than experiential. Even *We Were Soldiers,* as a serious depiction of the war, reflects the politics of its time more than the war itself, as it celebrates the strength of American arms and patriotic sacrifice as America prepared for a new generation of war post 9/11.

One easy explanation for this emotional disconnectedness from the war is the simple passage of time. At the time of writing, the average Vietnam veteran is around seventy years old. Many movies of the seventies and eighties were products of nostalgia. Many of the Vietnam War movies of the eighties were products of actual veterans' creators and stories. It makes sense then that so many decades later, as the generation that experienced Vietnam and was the audience for Vietnam War movies aged out of Hollywood's prime demographic, the emotions around the war

[33] Jeff Gerstmann, "Call of Duty: Black Ops Review," Giant Bomb, accessed March 29, 2022, https://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/call-of-duty-black-ops-review/1900-341/.

would also fall away. New generations have new concerns, and the connection to past events has dropped away. On the one hand, this means that Hollywood lost an incentive to appeal to the experiences of an aging generation when there are new ones to make money. On the other hand, even if Hollywood produces something about Vietnam, it will still release it in the context of an America that had moved on.

In *American Reckoning* (2015), Vietnam War historian Christian G. Appy claims that the Vietnam War prompted Americans to question the righteousness of America. Still, the country had forgotten or drowned out those questions over the decades. In other words, the war in American consciousness became less about American power or what was done to Vietnam and more about veterans and soldiers damaged and betrayed.[34] A lot has changed since the eighties boom of movies, both culturally and politically. The Soviet collapse bolstered America with the knowledge that their system and way of life had won out against communism and lowered fears of atomic destruction. Since the very logic of the war in Vietnam was to contain the spread of communism, the end of the critical communist state greatly reduced that fear.

Even Vietnam fell in line with American hegemonic power at the end of the Cold War. In an updated edition of his 1983 classic, historian Stanley Karnow spends a good deal of the first chapter of his history of the war enumerating the many ways the Communist regime had impoverished the country and repressed the people. He further writes of how American culture, capitalism, and consumer products washed over the country after the party loosened its grip on control. Even Americans returned to Vietnam in the 1990s as the two nations normalized relations.[35] While America lost the shooting war, the social, cultural, and economic war seemed to have been overcome as democratic capitalism triumphed over communism.

[34] Appy, ix–xvii.
[35] Karnow, 35–59.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, America and its military garnered a big win that eliminated the hesitancy for war. While the Gulf War of 1991 was incredibly short, it was a victory for the American army with very few casualties. America used its military to fight a war with generally clear motives. America got to be the good guy fighting for the sovereignty of another nation against a clear despot, and at least some Americans were more than willing to connect and compare the victory to America's failure in its previous war. One journal even published an article that declared, "Hello Kuwait, Goodbye Vietnam."[36]

Of course, even if the end of the Cold War and victory in Iraq failed to slay the Vietnam Syndrome, the new war on terror did. For twenty years, the reality for young Americans has been one of slow-burning conflict in the Middle East. If they were to join the military, they would have served in Afghanistan. For Millennials and Gen Z, 9/11 and the war on terror have been the defining events of their lives, not Vietnam or Woodstock. For members of the recent generation, the embodiment of government malfeasance and lies is not Vietnam but the invasion of Iraq and decades wasted in Afghanistan.

New conflicts have usurped Vietnam, and Hollywood has provided this generation with a slew of films about those conflicts in the past twenty years. *The Hurt Locker* (2008)*, Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)*, Lone Survivor* (2013*), American Sniper* (2014)*,* and *12 Strong* (2018) are all movies about the War on Terror and detail the themes and feelings of those wars. Video games are the same, with titles like *Call of Duty's Modern Warfare* trilogy or *Battlefield* putting players in conflicts set in the war on terror and beyond, with the Middle East being an essential destination. For many young Americans, the War on Terror is their war. Most of the movies about Vietnam are more than thirty years old. So it stands to be considered if younger

[36] Cloud, “The Home Front.”

generations even watch those movies. Generation Z may not even get references to films made in the 1990s, much less Vietnam era films of the seventies and eighties.

In light of these changes, it makes perfect sense that Vietnam had slipped from the zeitgeist. All of these depictions represent Vietnam in American consciousness through the decades. In the late seventies, Americans felt the sting of a lost war and a decade that felt like the end of the nation's prosperity. The decade of the eighties was a time of returning expectations and returning international power, and Americans looked back on the lost war, its veterans in particular, from a different perspective. The last thirty years have seen American victory over enemies in the actual war with Iraq and societal war with the Soviets. The nation entered a new era of conflict that pushed the old one into the rearview window.

None of this means that Vietnam has become unimportant. Ultimately Marilyn Young is correct in her assertion that it sparked continuing debates around American identity and changed how citizens relate to their government and each other. The loss in Vietnam changed how the government engaged with armed conflict, directly leading to an all-volunteer force and the modern reliance on special forces. Americans' pronounced distrust of their government began during the conflict. These films make it clear that the Vietnam War left deep scars on the bodies and minds of Americans. They depict the psychic pain of a confusing war, a betrayed trust in institutions, and a seeming betrayal of Americans against Americans. Those pains affected a generation, and that generation expressed those pains on the screen. Vietnam's place as a critical turning point in American political, social and cultural history remains, but its contemporary relevance is much more muted. Hollywood or the gaming industry will continue to produce titles about the war from time to time. Still, it is highly doubtful that they will ever make any like *The*

Boys in Company C or *Platoon,* as those films were products of a time when Vietnam had ruptured the nation.

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