The Vietnam Veteran:
A Victim of the War's Rhetorical Failure

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In March of 1981, James Hopkins, an ex-Marine, crashed his Jeep into
the lobby of a West Los Angeles veterans hospital. With shards of glass fly-
ing and people scurrying for cover, he began firing at the walls with a pistol
and a rifle screaming that he was a victim of Agent Orange, a herbicide that
American planes had dropped on the jungles of Vietnam in order to wipe out
the enemy’s hiding places. Two months later, Hopkins was found dead in his
apartment, having taken his own life by swallowing a lethal combination of
pills and alcohol.¹

In the wake of the Hopkins incident, veterans across the country were
stirred into action. While some Vietnam era veterans had been active in pro-
test movements in opposition to the war, this marked the first time that most
of the veterans had joined in the same cause. Whether the Vietnam vets had
favored or opposed the war, they were in agreement that their service in
Vietnam had never been properly acknowledged by the American people. Hopkins
became an instant celebrity to scores of other Vietnam veterans, and his act
of protest came to express the frustrations that many of them also felt. Vet-
erans camped outside the VA hospital in West Los Angeles and in other American
cities, many beginning hunger strikes in an attempt to capture the attention of
the American people.²

While Hopkins’ protest and death helped motivate the veterans, it was not
the sole cause for their protests. The return of the American hostages from
Iran also angered the vets and helped prompt them to make public their anger
over the lack of public recognition for their problems. As Time magazine de-
clared:

The extravagant, even slightly hysterical, welcome home that
American proffered the hostages from the embassy in Tehran
filled many vets with a sense of maddening frustration. . . .
The 52 hostages, after 444 days of captivity, got lifetime
passes to baseball games; thousands of Vietnam vets, who spent
years in a form of internal exile, had been rewarded with either
contempt or oblivion.³

While it is difficult to assess what the veterans may have gained during
their Summer of 1981 protests,⁴ there were indications that six long years
after the last American troops were airlifted from Saigon, Americans were at-

1
tempting to understand their Vietnam experience. In the past few months, numerous books, essays, and television specials have all devoted attention to the Vietnam War. The war, which most Americans had tried to forget ever existed, is reemerging as an important aspect of the American social and cultural experience.

The Vietnam War gave life to a whole range of emotions, sensory experiences, and ideological convictions that divided the American people deeply and that continue to influence their social reality. The war was waged in the jungles of Southeast Asia but was brought into living rooms from Maine to California by the ever-present cameras of network television. The Vietnam War was a confrontation of words as well as weapons, with pitched battles fought on the floor of the Democratic National Convention, on American college campuses, and in many homes. While the American Civil War has been described as a confrontation that pitted brother against brother, the Vietnam War had a similar effect on the American family, as it pitted the younger generation against their elders. With the collapse of the American war effort in Vietnam, the people and the politics of the United States changed profoundly. The chauvinistic patriotism and sense of confidence in the moral righteousness of American foreign policy had been shaken. Likewise, the widely held conviction that our nation could triumph over any adversary was shattered.

It is now apparent that the Vietnam War will never be completely understood until Americans can reconcile their own uncertainties about the war, those who fought it, and those who protested it. The dominant explanation for why the public withdrew support for the war suggests that the people simply tired of sending American youth into battles where they might be maimed or killed for a lost cause. This explanation suggests that people saw American lives as too precious to be callously wasted. While this explanation might account for the feelings that many Americans had about the war, it seems unable to account for the way the veterans have been treated since the war's end. The veteran has come home to a hostile American public who seem to hold the soldiers responsible for our failed Vietnam policy. To the hawks, who supported the American involvement, these feelings are attributed to hostility because the veterans failed—they were members of the first delegation of American troops unable to return home from foreign conflict victorious. To the doves, who opposed the war, these feelings are attributed to the fact that the veterans were willing to serve in the army rather than take the more courageous stand of refusing to fight. This essay will suggest another alternative explanation, however, namely
that the Vietnam veteran has been made a scapegoat for society's guilt feelings over the way in which the war in Vietnam was conducted.

While this essay does not presume to "make sense" of the Vietnam War, it does hope to explain the reasons for the veteran's current plight by examining the public's opposition to the war. The essay begins by tracing the development of the rhetorical motive that identified American beliefs, values, and feelings in support for the war. Understanding this rhetorical motive for the war and why the motive failed to convince Americans to continue the fight will illuminate not only the collapse of the war effort, but also the confusion and lack of consensus that continues to exist regarding the Vietnam veteran.

The Developing Motive for American Involvement

Kenneth Burke, writing at the onset of the Second World War, declared that "Democracy," as a key term in the present structure of symbolic action, would seem to be a different sort of motive from the motives of war or business.\(^5\) In his important article "War and Cultural Life" he then went on to talk about the important rhetorical process of uniting these motives in the consciousness of the American people. What most interested Burke was the way in which the nation's entire social and intellectual climate changed to involve the citizenry in the war effort.\(^6\)

Motives do not merely exist, they become. As public events are encountered they must be given meaning by rhetoric which can transform them from single/episode symbols of ideology that shape the long-term curve of cultural history. Motives are thus socially shared attitudes that exist within the rhetorical milieu of a culture. Because motives are symbolic and shared, rhetorical analysis focuses on the strategy through which rhetoric encompasses the situation.\(^7\)

American motives for war begin with our shared view of our national image. As Robert Tucker declared:

Every nation is disposed to interpret the world in the light of the interpretations it has given to its domestic experience. America has been no exception to this pattern. Our interpretation of the world beyond our borders is clearly a reflection of the interpretation we have given to our rise and development as a nation.\(^8\)
Our national self image is that of a nation given life by the strength of character of our colonial forefathers who protested against the tyranny of a distant and superior power, and who managed to assert our national independence only through grave sacrifice. It is not difficult to discover this critical aspect of our national image, for it runs continually through the rhetoric which expresses American motives. Robert Ivie, in his seminal study of American war rhetoric, discovered that this national self image was ever present in American war messages and synthesized a vocabulary of value terms including: rights, law, democracy, and freedom.\(^9\) Ivie also identified a genre of war rhetoric which began with an identification of a crisis, and was followed by an attempt to blame the crisis on enemies, and finally, a declaration that no solution short of armed conflict could be effective.\(^10\)

Americans believe that war must be a noble cause, and that our participation in war can come about only if some greater good can be accomplished only through violence. Because our rhetoric stressed that our soldiers fight for moral causes, it is necessarily assumed that our soldiers will fight in moral ways, reluctant participants in conflicts not of our own making.\(^11\)

The rhetoric that motivated the American involvement in Vietnam was clearly consistent with earlier war rhetoric. The crisis was characterized as a challenge to the freedom of the people of Vietnam and all of Southeast Asia. The blame was placed on the North Vietnamese who acted as agents of the international Communist conspiracy. The United States was dragged into the conflict because it was the only means available to protect the "free" people of South Vietnam. As President Johnson declared in a 1965 speech:

> The Central cause of the danger there is aggression by Communists against a brave and independent people. . . . The people who are suffering from this Communist aggression are Vietnamese. This is no struggle of white men against Asians. It is aggression by Communist totalitarians against their independent neighbors . . . . The United States seeks no wider war. We threaten no regime and covet no territory . . . . The United States looks forward to the day when the people and governments of all Southeast Asia may be free from terror, subversion and assassination.\(^12\)

The Communist actions in Vietnam were characterized as the burrowing and tunneling of an international conspiracy which threatened not only the "free" people of Vietnam, but in an indirect way the "free" people throughout the
world. Vietnam was depicted as a scene in the ongoing Cold War, another domino precariously teetering in danger of falling into darkness. The rhetoric of Vietnam thus identified the United States with the South Vietnamese and defined our mission as helping them to defend their freedom. Our shared goal was the protection of South Vietnamese life and liberty. Presidential advisor William Bundy explained in December, 1968:

"In a word, we are assisting the Government and people of South Vietnam to defend themselves against an attempt to impose on them by force a Hanoi-dominated government. We believe that the great majority of South Vietnamese people reject such a solution, and that the South Vietnamese people should be permitted to work out their own political future without external political influence."

The most important instrument in this confrontation between the forces of freedom and the forces of tyranny was the American GI. As President Johnson declared: "The true peacekeepers are those men who stand out there on the DMZ at this very hour taking the worst that the enemy can give. The true peacekeepers are the soldiers who are breaking the terrorist's grip around the villages of Vietnam." Thus, the soldiers became the important symbols that defined American involvement in Vietnam. The GI "peacekeeper" contrasted with the Communist "terrorist."

The American GI was inextricably linked to the American motives for participating in the war. Americans were encouraged to view the soldiers not only as instruments for achieving our objectives, but as expressions of the sacrifices Americans must be willing to make in the interests of world peace. Through their heroic sacrifices the American GIs were proving the moral propriety of our actions. As an illustration of this rhetoric, the Johnson administration released a letter from a soldier fighting in Vietnam:

"We are fighting for the freedom of these people, as we once fought for our own. Of these thousands of young Americans over here, we all take pride in fighting for the principles that made our country the greatest on earth."

Changing perceptions of these warriors led to, and resulted from, changing perceptions of the war. The situation the combat veteran faced after the war was thus caused by the failure of the war rhetoric to sustain public support for American intervention. The reasons for the collapse of the rhetorical motive for American participation will now be considered.
The Collapse of a Rhetorical Motive

The public decision to reject the war in Vietnam was not made spontaneously. At no point did the American people collectively decide that the war was wrong and must end. Instead, the decision was made by different people at different times, in response to very different events. While some Americans protested the war as early as the time of passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964, others supported the war until its end. The ultimate causes for the failure of the war rhetoric are thus difficult to pinpoint. There was probably no single reason for rejecting the war even in the minds of individuals. Instead, there were many reasons, which when taken together led to the collapse of the motive for war. This situation can be likened to what Ernest Bormann has described as a failure to "corroborate" a rhetorical vision. A time when there exists so many apparently contradictory events that they appear "out of synch" with the rhetorical explanations offered to give them meaning.  

The rhetoric used to motivate American involvement in Vietnam stressed that the United States military was in Vietnam to preserve the freedom of the "brave and independent" South Vietnamese people. The GIs were cast as liberators, noble American warriors, prompted to fight by the Communists' outrageous and immoral affront to freedom.

As the war ground on, it became increasingly more difficult to corroborate rhetoric characterizing our actions as noble. While many potential explanations could be offered for the failure to maintain public support for the war (including the fact that the South Vietnamese regime we were supporting was spectacularly corrupt and undemocratic, and that television was bringing home the war in a way not seen in previous conflicts), at least one key factor in the diminishing support for the war was the conduct of the American military.

The rhetorical myth of the heroic American soldier was challenged in several ways. One factor was that this was a war fought by a different kind of GI than had fought in previous American wars. The most apparent difference was that this was our first teen-aged war (average age of combatants 19.2 years). Another difference was that the draft was conscripting thousands of young men into the Army, and the lower and lower-middle class youths were far more likely to be called to serve, leaving the children of the upper classes in college, training to take their places in the professions. Blacks were drafted at a rate that was almost twice that of whites. Not only were Blacks more likely to be drafted,
however, they were also more likely to see action. At one point in the war
Blacks composed 20 percent of the front line forces and consequently a dispro-
portionate share of Blacks were injured or killed in action. 20 The draft was
not solely responsible for the class distinctions in the Army, however, the
Pentagon actually recruited people from the lower social economic classes.
Charles R. Eisendrath declared:

In December 1966, Mr. McNamara Secretary of Defense announced
the "liberalization" of qualifying mental aptitude scores for
induction into the Army. Thousands of low-income Negroes pre-
viously protected by their own ignorance now felt the weight --
and learned of the opportunities -- of the New Kind of War in
Vietnam. The raising of the Black Hessians was underway and
continues. 21

The soldiers in Vietnam tended not to be the "boy next door" unless you lived
in a small rural town, an inner-city ghetto, or a blue collar neighborhood. And
as can be detected from Eisendrath's statement, there was a certain estrangement
between middle and upperclass Americans and their new military.

The Vietnam GI was also far more likely to have other problems that would
make him an unlikely hero to upper-middle class Americans. The GI was criticized
for having a low aptitude, for being undisciplined, and for using illegal drugs.
Dr. Joel Kaplan, a psychiatrist-in-charge of the Army's anti-drug program in
Vietnam reported that "70 percent of all out-patients and 50 percent of inpatients
in the two northermost corps areas were users of marijuana, opium-dipped joints,
opium, or methedrine, called 'opium-speed.'" 22 During one two year period
(1969-1970) more than 16,000 American servicemen were discharged for drug use. 23

The use of drugs was reported to have negatively affected the troops in the
field, as stories of "doped-up" soldiers with slowed reaction times, cases of
mistaken identity, and the accidental killings of other Americans received much
attention at home, and influenced the public's perceptions of the troops. 24

While the social background of the troops and the fact that they used drugs
(and acquired a reputation for drug abuse) was a contributing factor in tarnish-
ing their image as heroes engaged in a moral confrontation between the forces
of good and evil, the GI also had problems which were beyond his control --
problems caused by the very nature of the war. As Time magazine observed:

Vietnam was different from other wars... There were no front
lines. Reality tended to melt into layers of unknowability. The
same person could be a friend and an enemy -- the smiling laundress in the morning carried a VC satchel charge at night. The enemy might even be a child with a basket. The ambiguity made Americans twitch.  

The inability to recognize the enemy and the constant fear that the enemy was in their midst, often caused the troops to fire at anyone who seemed suspicious. This increased the level of violence and caused the soldiers to seem less than ever like the heroic American GIs who had fought in previous wars. The soldier's failure to distinguish between enemy soldiers and civilians led to opposition to the war at home. As Peter Marin wrote:

What marked the war in Vietnam and what made it different from previous American wars was our conscious and systematic refusal to distinguish between combatants and innocents, our programmatic attempt to destroy the enemy by destroying the country it inhabited. Atrocities have been a part of all American wars; but these have ordinarily been mainly accidental, inadvertant, or sporadic. . . . Though some of our professional soldiers tried to maintain a distinction between civilians and combatants, many did not; we as a nation did not.  

The inability or unwillingness to separate civilians from combatants in Vietnam was worsened by the absence of clearly established military objectives in the war. A "total war" for all-out military victory was seemingly out of the question, and war for political objectives seemed beyond the understanding of the soldiers or the people at home. One problem that was apparent was that there existed no real standard for victory. The soldiers fought in places unknown to most Americans, hills and hamlets that they had never before heard of were taken by day only to be lost to the Viet Cong by night. Without the benefit of stated military objectives or recognizable geographic landmarks it was essential to find some other way to gauge the soldiers' effectiveness. The goal became the "body count," the number of enemy killed each day. The pursuit of the body count thus made the Vietnam GI primarily a killer -- his progress was not marked by the towns that he "liberated," but rather by the lives that he had taken. Such a goal caused the soldier's mission to be denigrated to "individual survival for one year the average tour of duty -- the soldier's obligation pared down to an irreducible cynicism."  

The inability to define objectives in the war and the emphasis on the body count had negative consequences for the soldiers and for the people at home.
Anti-war sociologist Peter Berger expressed these sentiments declaring:

One of the important criteria of a "just war" is that there be a reasonable chance of success; otherwise the sacrifices imposed by the war are wanton. Since it was very unclear what an American "success" in Indochina would look like, it was difficult to agree in a justification for the war. 29

The impact of the body count had an even more dramatic effect on the GI, however, the goal of killing dehumanized him and helped create atrocities like My Lai. Alexander Kendrick, in an account of the My Lai slaughter observed:

No 'VC' forces were seen at My Lai, only old women and children. No shots were fired at Americans. But from Calley's superiors came questions over his field radio. "What is wrong with your platoon? Why aren't you shooting anybody?" All officers knew that at least two thousand 'VC' had to be listed as Killed in Action weekly. When Charlie Company left on the evening of March 16th, My Lai 4 had been wiped out, with its four to five hundred inhabitants. No hut was left standing, no animal left alive, no well unpolluted. ... My Lai was reported as an important victory and Calley and his superiors received official congratulations. 30

When news of the carnage at My Lai finally leaked to the press, it created a firestorm of protest against the war. As the Winston-Salem (NC) Journal editorialized following Calley's court-martial:

"It wasn't a real big deal." Said Lt. Calley on the stand. And Lt. Calley is a normal American.

Perhaps there is something in this for all good normal Americans to think about.

Of course, Calley is right: it really wasn't such a big deal. For we normal Americans through our good normal American boys have killed at least 150,000 Vietnamese civilians, according to the best figures available to our government. And we have permanently maimed or wounded 350,000 more.

We have shot them down like rodents in "free-fire zones," where our soldiers have authority to kill anything that moves. We have blasted them with "saturation bombing" -- six million tons of bombs, just three times the quantity dropped on Europe and Japan in World War II. 31
Soon after the news of the events at My Lai, the press was reporting scores of other incidents of American brutality which indicated that My Lai was "not an aberration." The New York Civil Liberties Union, in preparing a defense for an Army officer who was court-martialed for refusing to train special forces agents on moral grounds, cited several incidents including: "mutilation of the dead, using weapons that cause unnecessary suffering, forcible removal and transfer of civilians, assassination teams, placing a bounty on enemy heads, wanton destruction, summary execution of prisoners and torture." The NYCLU further declared that all of these actions represented violations of the Hague Convention of 1907, in other words, they asserted that the United States was systematically committing war crimes.

The criticisms of My Lai soon broadened into a wave of criticisms about the nature of the war itself. The Buffalo Evening News observed:

In a war in which a sniper shot from a village brings a napalm strike that wipes out 30 men, women, and children -- all counted as enemy dead -- what is a GI to think? To those who measure a war by body counts, Lt. Calley's fault might seem mainly one of over-enthusiasm.

The Miami Herald editorialized that the events at My Lai were only part of the ongoing "pattern" of the conflict:

There have been other massacres in this war. We are told that at one time US soldiers were paid a $25 bounty for killing Viet Cong, any age and sex, and that proof of being a Viet Cong consisted of being killed.

While the horrific events at My Lai led to the conviction that there was something terribly different about this war, the use of chemical defoliants to wipe out the enemy hiding places proved just as important as a symbol of the corruption of American military policy. The Milwaukee Journal editorialized against the spraying declaring:

The consequences of our military program to defoliate jungles, destroy crops and make land uninhabitable have been evident for several years. Scientists have coined a name for this type of war -- ecocide. It is a strategy aimed at destroying the environment which supports not only the enemy but the people of the countryside.
The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot concurred, and editorialized that the defoliation of the jungles of Vietnam had continued even though the military had seen solid evidence that the chemicals used would have lasting and devastating effects upon the people in South Vietnam. They declared:

Defoliation is grimly symbolic of the destruction that has been visited upon South Vietnam. We have sought to fight a jungle war by leveling the jungle, and it sometimes seemed that we have tried to eliminate enemy sympathizers among the civilian population by eliminating the population. Of all the dehumanizing episodes in this wretched war, defoliation is among the most stupid and wanton.

Thus, the public confronted evidence that suggested American soldiers who had been identified in the rhetorical motive for the war as unselfish protectors of the freedom of the South Vietnamese people, were instead guilty of slaughtering them. The GI who was named a hero by the pro-war rhetors could just as readily be seen as a social misfit: a lower class, poorly educated, degenerate drug abuser, and a cruel killer, being used in an orchestrated plan to "make an example" of the people of Vietnam.

While many factors doubtlessly contributed to the collapse of the rhetorical motive for the war, there is little question but that the nature of the war itself contributed to the public disgust for continuing the fight. As Peter Berger declared:

What . . . bothered me about the American conduct in the war was the exceptional cruelty of the methods of warfare and of the repressive apparatus. The atrocities stemming from these methods, I thought, were not isolated or accidental but systematic and intrinsic to this war. Free-fire zones, napalm bombing of villages, the "generation of refugees," defoliation and kindred destructions of the countryside, the torture of prisoners, the assassination of political suspects -- all these were endemic to this war, and I found it morally intolerable that my country should be engaged in them.

It can thus be argued that the American people simply lost their appetite for continuing the violence in Vietnam when confronted by the evidence of their own atrocities. We were no longer able to believe in the characterizations of our troops as heroes participating in a "just war."
The Flight of the Vietnam Veteran

The veterans of World War I and II, and to a somewhat lesser extent of the Korean War, were welcomed home with parades and celebrations. The Vietnam veterans were often met by open hostility. The effects of the war and of the lack of public support for their sacrifices have left many vets scarred. One study reports that more than a third of those who saw action in Vietnam suffer from what is known as "post-traumatic stress disorder." Its symptoms ten and even fifteen years after the vets' return, are rage, guilt, flashbacks, nightmares, panic, depression and emotional numbing. Another study reports that Vietnam vets had a suicide rate that was 23 percent higher than non vets in the same group.

The Vietnam vets represent the tangible evidence of our involvement in a war that is now seen as too sordid and unpleasant for our moral sensibilities. The excesses of the Vietnam War were in part the excesses of these troops, but it was our nation which drafted youths and sent them into a war without formulating reasonable objectives or standards for success. Our society must share in the guilt of Vietnam and not attempt to pass the guilt for the senseless killings or the ultimate moral shortcomings of our policy onto those compelled to fight the battles. As Peter Marin wrote:

No people wants to see itself in the wrong; no nation, as convinced as is our own of its own moral superiority, wants to understand that its behavior is no better and probably worse, than its enemies. But whatever the justice or injustice of our cause, we must consider our shared guilt in this regard if we are to regain the human decency that gives us the right to lay claim to the future.

In the jungles of Vietnam we confronted the "dark side" of our human nature. Blind faith in the moral righteousness of our cause convinced us to give the military license to commit acts of violence that we as a society always presumed only our enemies could commit. While the soldiers often "pulled the trigger," none of us could plead ignorance of the events in Vietnam. The napalming of villages, the forced relocation of villagers, and the killing of civilians were reported in the United States as early as 1966, yet the war ground on for several more years.

The Vietnam veteran has been forced to shoulder most of our national guilt. Perhaps in the coming years more Americans will come to recognize that it was not just the soldiers in Vietnam who carried on these horrific acts of
violence. It was our society which condoned and sought to ignore these acts. The lessons of Vietnam are still being learned, as Americans struggle to give meaning to the war. The Vietnam veterans will never be perceived as heroes by most Americans, and perhaps they should never be so perceived, but there is some reason to hope that they will at least be accepted as our equals -- which they most certainly are.

The Vietnam War was rejected when the motives expressed in the official rhetoric urging support for the war no longer seemed able to explain press reports of the actual conduct of the war. While it would take hundreds of pages to trace the anti-war rhetorical messages and to adequately explain the rejection of the war, that was not the purpose of this essay. Hopefully the Vietnam veteran's plight can be better understood when he is examined as a fallen hero -- an actor unable to live up to the expectations of his role.
Endnotes


7.Rhetorical analysis reveals motives because they are symbolic. Burke writes, "Motives are distinctly linguistic products. . . . Our minds, as linguistic products, are composed of concepts (verbally molded) which select certain relationships as meaningful. . . . These relationships are not realities, they are interpretations of reality -- hence different frameworks of interpretation will lead to different conclusions as to what reality is." *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 35.


10.Ivie.

11.For an excellent discussion of the concept of the "just" war see Robert W. Tucker's work, previously cited.


Kendrick, p. 307.

Kendrick, pp. 307-08.


Senator Barry Goldwater, during his campaign for the Presidency in 1964, had urged the consideration of a "total war" in Vietnam rather than a "pseudo-war." He also pressured President Johnson to declare that our objective was indeed "victory." Goldwater was instantly characterized as a "hawk" who might involve us in nuclear conflict. See: Thomas Powers, The War at Home (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), p. 3.


33. Glasser, p. 20.

34. Glasser.


39. Peter Berger, p. 31.


41. Jeffrey Stein, p. 10.

42. Peter Marin, P. 10.

43. In December of 1966, New York Times columnist Harrison Salisbury began filing stories indicating that the United States was bombing civilian targets in the center of the city of Hanoi, and were causing heavy civilian casualties. For a discussion of the effects of these dispatches see: Thomas Powers, The War at Home, pp. 171-78.