

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: VIETNAM VETERANS AND AMERICAN MASS  
MEDIA: THE POLITICS OF THE IMAGE

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This is an interdisciplinary examination of the image of the Vietnam veteran as contested cultural and ideological terrain in recent America. Drawing on Gramscian theories of ideology and hegemony, as well as conceptualizations of semiotic appropriation and bricolage employed in cultural studies, the study explores the complex manner in which print media and Hollywood film function as the primary discursive arenas wherein public images of the returned Vietnam veteran are constructed, contested and transformed in the Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras. The shifting nature of these images has had, and continues to have, a profound influence on public conceptions of the Vietnam war, the divisions, challenges and oppositions the war generated in American society, and the very nature of cultural myths of war and the returned warrior as consensual ideological dynamics in recent American culture. Specific attention is devoted to the veterans' antiwar movement of the 1970s, the ways in which this movement actively courted media attention to publicly project an oppositional antiwar image of the returned warrior, and the manner in which this antiwar image

was selectively appropriated and reconstructed by Hollywood accross three decades--from Billy Jack and Coming Home in the 1970s, Rambo and Born On the Fourth of July in the 1980s, to Forrest Gump in the wake of the Gulf War in the 1990s--with the ultimate implication being the assuaging of the ideological disruptions of the Vietnam era.

VIETNAM VETERANS AND AMERICAN MASS MEDIA:  
THE POLITICS OF THE IMAGE

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The processes of cultural and political change gathered intensity during the upheavals of the Vietnam war era. Indeed, as James Gibson has argued, America's war in Vietnam, and its aftermath in the wake of the fall of Saigon in 1975, constitutes an a "cultural crisis" of immense proportions and profound implications.<sup>1</sup> It is a watershed event in recent America which altered fundamental patterns of belief and behavior, which instigated major shifts in the nature of ideological discourse and influenced subsequent cultural patterns, especially in reference to the nature of the war itself, those who served in it, and the ostensible cultural purposes war is expected to serve in American society. It is a period in which the inner workings of dominant social institutions like the military and dominant cultural meanings of war were made starkly visible and subject to critical scrutiny. Moreover, some twenty years now after the fall of Saigon and the official end of the war itself, it is a period which continues to influence the dynamics of cultural memory and the ways meaning circulates and is expressed in the cultural forms of mass media. As this

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<sup>1</sup>See James Gibson, "Paramilitary Culture," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 6 (1989): 90-94.

study will explore subsequently, up to the present day these cultural forms constitute a complex field of discourses in which Vietnam, the war's veterans, and the very nature of war itself remain a locus of ideological struggle and political contention.

John Hellmann has claimed that the primary cultural legacy of the Vietnam experience is one that challenges the most fundamental of American myths. Hellmann contends that "Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations, that a story, a distinctly American story, would unfold." He continues:

When the story of America in Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the true nature of the larger story of America itself became the subject of intense cultural dispute. On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, the nature of this "cultural dispute" and the legacy of this "disruption" needs to be carefully specified and illustrated. As Raymond Williams has argued, in all historical junctures there exist dynamic tensions between "the official consciousness of an epoch--codified in its doctrines and legislation--and the whole process of actually living its consequences."<sup>3</sup> In the

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<sup>2</sup>John Hellmann, American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) x.

<sup>3</sup>Raymond Williams, Politics and Letters: An Interview With the New Left Review (London: Verso, 1981) 159.

Vietnam war era, as just noted, this process was intensified. For many, the focus, utility and direction of dominant ideologies of war and the warrior, magnified during the post-World War II Cold War period, became dysfunctional--they no longer provided reliable orienting principles to the actual world of lived experience, and in some cases were disgarded or reconfigured. Certainly one of the primary effects of this was the emergence of a prominent oppositional politics. What is interesting is the nature and form this oppositional politics took during this time. It is notable that many political opposition movements of post-World War II America displayed in their activities a penchant for distinctive visual and imagistic political expression. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 60s and especially the black power and antiwar movements of the late 60s and early 70s all waged political battles on the mass-mediated imagistic landscape of America. Indeed, most Americans during the turbulent years of the Vietnam War era encountered political dissent primarily through the mass media.

This type of media activism has nonetheless received a rather negative response from scholars of mass media and the Vietnam era. In his 1981 study A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America, David Armstrong remarks:

Realizing the centrality of media to modern life, social and political activists in the United States

made fitful attempts to gain access to commercial mass media, even as they developed their own. For the most part, activists' efforts to secure a large national audience through the mass media were self-defeating.<sup>4</sup>

A bit more to the point, historian Joseph Conlin directly attacks the mass-mediated political style of the New Left in the 1960s. In recounting Yippie Jerry Rubin's resistance to the House Unamerican Activities Committee in 1967, Conlin argues that, "HUAC like Rubin was a classic example of how Americans in the 1960s refused to deal with real political issues, and instead diverted themselves with symbols and shrieks." Conlin then goes on to dismiss the mass media activism of the 1960s as "largely symbolic."<sup>5</sup>

It is the major contention of this study, however, that the fundamental role that mass electronic media has come to play in American life especially since World War II has made struggle over symbols and images a real political issue of crucial importance. In order to substantiate this contention, in this study I will focus on a unique group within the broader antiwar movement of the Vietnam era that had a tremendous symbolic impact on the structure of beliefs and ideological code regarding

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<sup>4</sup>David Armstrong, A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America (Boston: South End Press, 1981) 24.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Conlin, The Troubles: A Jaundiced Glance Back At the Movement of the Sixties (New York: Watts, 1982) 16.

war in recent American culture. I will explore how the Vietnam veteran's antiwar movement, through the highly distinctive visual mode of mass media activism they developed during the early 1970s, made it possible for many Americans to more easily challenge the ideological underpinnings and rationalizations of the Vietnam war specifically, and the nature of war itself more generally. Moreover, the antiwar social image created and sustained by the veteran's movement provided substantial raw material for the Hollywood film industry in its representation of returned Vietnam veterans in productions of the 1970s and 80s. From the loss of the Vietnam war with the fall of Saigon in 1975 to America's ostensible "victory" in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the oppositional image of antiwar Vietnam veterans, or what I call the image of the "antiwar/warrior," was variously appropriated, reconfigured and deployed by mainstream cinema in order to assign meaning to the Vietnam experience and mediate the ideological contentions, contestations and heated oppositions which the antiwar opposition specifically, and more broadly the very nature of the Vietnam war itself, wrought on the American social landscape. From Coming Home in the 1970s, Rambo: First Blood, Part II in the 1980s, and finally Forrest Gump in the 1990s, the overall trajectory of Hollywood's

representation of the dissident Vietnam veteran was ultimately one of marginalizing the oppositional tendencies of the antiwar/warrior (and antiwar opposition of the Vietnam era generally) and projecting a rehabilitated hegemonic representation of war and the post-Vietnam warrior/hero--but not without ceding significant ideological space opened up by media activism of antiwar veterans. In focusing on veteran resistance to the war in Vietnam via mass media, and the subsequent appropriation and reconfiguration of the symbolic and imagistic nature of this resistance by the film industry in the post-Vietnam period, I will endeavor to provide a useful illustration of the complex manner in which the mass media serves as the central public arena wherein the boundaries of cultural and ideological hegemony are tested, challenged, and struggled over.

The study is divided into four chapters. Chapter I will be devoted to a three-fold task. First, I will discuss the way in which the concept of ideology has been theorized in media and cultural studies, devoting attention specifically to Louis Althusser's conceptualizations of ideology and especially Antonio Gramsci's influential notion of ideological hegemony. I will then provide a critique of the use of theories of ideology and hegemony by contemporary media scholars,

highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the theoretical framework to be employed, drawing on Gramsci's notion of hegemony as well as semiotic analysis, will be explicated as a productive mode of inquiry for the purposes of this study.

Chapter II will discuss the manner in which the cultural meaning of war in post-World War II America was constructed as hegemonic ideology in Hollywood war movies of the 1940s and 50s. Here I will argue that such war movies functioned as a socially sustained system of ideological signification which produced, reinforced and rationalized war and the figure of the American warrior/hero as glorious, invincible and benevolent. The manner in which such meanings of war and the warrior/hero were deeply internalized by Vietnam veterans in their youth and reinforced through everyday childhood activities such as "playing war" and actively imitating Hollywood warrior/heroes--thus assimilating them into a dominant cultural code for war and preparing them to initially accept and even welcome Vietnam service--will then be explored. Empirical evidence will be drawn from autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories of Vietnam veterans, as well as informal interview testimony.

Chapter III will begin with a discussion of the inversion and disintegration of the dominant cultural code

for war via the actual lived experience of serving in the Vietnam war. It will be argued that the nature of this experience prompted some veterans to critique and then actively oppose the war. The nature of this opposition will then be explored in detail, particularly in reference to the activities of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in the early 1970s. Through their self-conscious use of mainstream mass media coverage as a productive arena for public antiwar opposition, the VVAW was able to effectively contest the war as no other antiwar group of the era could. Through creative acts of semiotic bricolage, antiwar veterans appropriated and deconstructed what had previously been the unambiguous prowar image of the American warrior/hero, constructing in its place the potent social image of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior. By bringing the image of the antiwar/warrior to bear on the mass-mediated, imagistic landscape of America during the late years of the Vietnam war, the VVAW raised for public scrutiny the ideological underpinnings of the warrior/hero image and openly challenged the romanticization and celebration of war this image encouraged.

Chapter IV will offer a broad chronological survey of the image of the Vietnam veteran presented in Hollywood films from the 1970s to the Gulf War in the early 1990s.

Here it will be argued that Hollywood directly and indirectly appropriated elements of the antiwar/warrior image created by the veterans movement in reconfiguring and reconstructing a renewed hegemonic image of the warrior/hero suitable to post-Vietnam America. By the time of the public celebration of American "victory" in the Persian Gulf War--itself an attempt to finally reintegrate the ideological problematics of the Vietnam experience into a seamless narrative of American war mythology--such a reconstruction had been rather effectively rendered, but not without leaving residues of the oppositional meanings sustained by antiwar veterans through their mass media activism a generation before.

CHAPTER I  
THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Ideology has become a crucial concept in critical analyses of mass media and popular culture, and at the most fundamental level refers to cultural processes which involve the reproduction and legitimation of unequal social relations as natural or normal; the terms naturalization and normalization refer to the ways in which people come to conceive of certain conditions upon these relations as "naturally" true, as "common sense" and "the way things are." In this respect, forms of knowledge, and ways of portraying and embodying aspects of human life and experience through modes of cultural representation function to produce and reproduce forms of consciousness which allow people to understand and construe themselves and others in ways which are complexly determined by the power relations operating in society. Ideology functions through representation--that is, through ways in which social experience is constructed and represented to us, which allow us to readily assimilate into the systems of shared meaning and belief that constitute culture. As Bill Nichols writes,

Ideology is how the existing ensemble of social relations represents itself to individuals; it is the image a society gives of itself in order to perpetuate itself. These representations

serve to constrain us (necessarily); they establish fixed places for us to occupy that work to guarantee social actions over time. Ideology uses the fabrication of images and the processes of representation to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us is the place we ought to have.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, through processes of representation, ideology informs and saturates our daily existence and our relations to the entire social formation in which we live. And in this respect, echoing Nichols, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner argue that "cultural representations not only give shape to psychological dispositions, they also play an important role in determining how social reality will be constructed [and] what figures and boundaries will prevail in the shaping of social life and social institutions."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Bill Nichols, Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) 1. To put this yet another way, Graeme Turner states that while there "is no incontestable definition of ideology," nevertheless it can be said that "...implicit in every culture is a 'theory of reality' which motivates its ordering of that reality into good and bad, right and wrong, them and us, and so on. For this 'theory of reality' actually to work as a structuring principle it needs to be unspoken, invisible, a property of the natural world rather than human interests. Ideology is the category used to describe the system of beliefs and practices that is produced by this theory of reality..." Graeme Turner, Film as Social Practice (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 131.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 13.

Theoretical conceptualizations of ideology in media and cultural studies draw primarily on the work of two European Marxists, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. Gramsci's theory of ideological hegemony has been of enormous influence over the past ten to fifteen years. However, another theory of ideology that was appropriated somewhat earlier, and which to a great degree has laid the foundation for much of the direction ideological analysis has taken in critical studies, is articulated by Althusser in his 1971 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."<sup>8</sup> In this essay, Althusser develops the concept of ideology through what he terms Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs, in contrast to Repressive State Apparatuses, or RSAs. According to Althusser, RSAs are mechanisms whereby the state controls people directly by virtue of force through established and institutionalized means such as the police, penal system, armed forces and so forth. ISAs differ in that they are not directly or externally imposed forms of ideological coercion, but rather arise from within society. They include such things as religion, the legal system, and the educational system, but the mass media and the various forms of mass-mediated popular culture are especially

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<sup>8</sup>Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

potent in this regard. The difference between RSAs and ISAs is that the latter operate by consensus--that is, they appear to be "natural" and freely chosen, possessing what Althusser calls "relative autonomy" from the state ruling elites. Indeed, it is argued that as systems of social control and regulation ISAs like the media are far more effective than direct coercion because they induce people to willingly participate in their own subordination and the maintenance of the status quo. ISAs are in fact very much resonant with societal stratifications along the lines of class structure, gender, and race. The commercial mass media of Hollywood film and television, for example, very often represent unequal class, gender, and racial relations as natural, or neutral, implying that in various ways people are treated equally, or have equal access to power, thus disguising or ignoring ways in which people are denied equality and power through social and economic circumstances endemic to the structure of society. Althusser contends that human consciousness is constructed through ideology, but emphasizes the ways in which ideologies offer systems of meaning and belief which allow people to construct imaginary relations as distinct from the actual social relations and/or conditions in which they live. Along these lines, Althusser's major thesis is that ideology constructs people as "subjects"--

in other words, people are "interpellated" or positioned by forms of communication such as film and television to construe events in a certain way conducive to the maintenance of unequal social relations, and to think of themselves as free agents in this process, unified individuals able to read and interpret as they wish but who are in fact manipulated and restricted by the codes and representational strategies of media texts, whether it be through a film, television show, advertisement, book, or newspaper. By interpellation, Althusser refers to the manner in which people are transformed into "subjects" via the ways in which a text locates or "hails" them, and are therefore induced into assuming a particular identity or subjectivity favorable to the maintenance of power.

Antonio Gramsci, writing in the 1930s while imprisoned under the Mussolini regime, anticipated some of Althusser's theories of ideology in The Prison Notebooks<sup>9</sup>, although his work was not made widely available until about the same time as Althusser's in the early 1970s. Like Althusser, Gramsci argues that historically the ruling classes and elites exercise power not through direct coercion per se but by indirect means, through what he defines as the concept of "hegemony."

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<sup>9</sup>Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

Under hegemonic control, the subaltern actively work towards their own subordination which coincides with the continuation of unequal power relations; thus, as with Althusser's ISA people essentially become conspirators in their own exploitation and subordination. In particular, Gramsci emphasizes the role of culture as central to ideological hegemony so that a whole range of communication phenomena contribute to the process whereby people "make sense" of themselves and the social relations in which they live in ways which reinforce and perpetuate the dominant power relations of society. Such communication phenomena convey meanings which are constantly circulating in society so that people are constantly immersed in ideology. Indeed, as Raymond Williams argues in Marxism and Literature, hegemony constitutes "a saturation of the whole process of living," purveying a

...lived system of meanings and values--constitutive and constituting--which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a "culture," but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of

particular classes.<sup>10</sup>

Although it can be argued that Althusser's theory maintains a specificity regarding the actual workings of ideology upon the individual that Gramsci's does not, hegemony theory offers more fruitful possibilities for analysis, ones which are more sensitive to the wobble and warp of social change. Essentially, the notion of hegemony offers a more dynamic and less mechanistic view of ideology in that it is an approach that acknowledges the possibility of ideological struggle and contestation, and moreover foregrounds the possibility of change over time in terms of the effectivity of ideology. In this conceptualization, film and other mass-mediated cultural forms constitute what Graeme Turner calls the ideological "battleground" upon which dominant views seek to secure hegemony; in the media-saturated cultural landscape of post-World War II America, they have been, and continue to be, the primary arenas wherein the powerful endeavor to win the consent of the subordinate to their rule, wherein

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<sup>10</sup>Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 110. What Williams emphasizes here is that culture is intimately and inexorably involved in the ideological nature of the social production of meaning, and thus ideology cannot be separated from culture. Catherine Belsey underscores just this point when she writes that ideology is not "an optional extra, deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals," but is "the very conditions of our experience of the world." Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (London: Methuen, 1980), 5.

the unequal social relations advantageous to the dominant are naturalized and accepted by the subordinate as "common sense." However, as Turner notes, it needs to be emphasized that this ideological battleground is a "permanent one," and is constantly shifting and dynamic, in that the struggle to win the consent of the subordinate is ongoing.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, hegemonic ideology can be stronger or weaker to various degrees at different times under different social conditions. For example, one of the broad contentions of this study will be that the efficacy of hegemonic ideologies of war and masculinity-- particularly regarding the image of the masculine American warrior/hero--were weakened and challenged for a period of time during the late 1960s and early 70s during the intense conflicts over the Vietnam War; with the rise of the New Right in the 1980s, efforts were made in the commercial mass media to reconstitute such ideologies, in part through reconfigured representations of male Vietnam veterans. In this respect, however, the important notion that hegemony theory highlights, and which makes it a useful analytic tool, is that the configuration (and reconfiguration) of hegemonic ideology through mass media

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<sup>11</sup>Graeme Turner, British Cultural Studies: An Introduction (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 211.

is never achieved without concession on the part of the dominant and is not achieved by simply manipulating the worldview of the masses, no matter how strong the allure of ideology nor its power in constructing subjectivity. As Turner continues, for some form of cultural hegemony to be achieved via popular culture,

the dominant group has to in some fashion engage in negotiations with opposing groups, classes, and values--and that these negotiations must result in some genuine accommodation. That is, hegemony is not maintained through the obliteration of opposition to dominant interests, but rather through the articulation of opposing interests into the political affiliations of the hegemonic group.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, there must be some accommodation of subordinate elements by the dominant group in order to induce the subordinate to consent to dominant leadership. In this fashion, commercial media texts must contain elements which resonate with the desires and concerns of subordinate and less-powerful groups, and must at times foreground characters and themes which might be seen as critical to a greater or extent of the status quo, perhaps providing room for the depiction of injustice, exploitation, and even contestation to the system, thus opening up the potential for the generation of possible dissenting and/or oppositional meanings. Of course, commercial offerings disseminated by the corporate culture

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<sup>12</sup>Turner, British Cultural Studies 211-212.

industries are rarely totally oppositional in nature, and what potentially subversive thematics and characterizations there are usually contained, marginalized, and/or naturalized in some way. Indeed, as film scholar Jackie Byars argues, while "discursive struggle is inherent in the hegemonic process...the distribution and the deployment of power at various levels of the making and manipulation of meaning make some outcomes (far) more likely than others."<sup>13</sup> Yet, as Byars concedes, such outcomes "are not givens," and the fact that the dominant must accommodate and negotiate dissonant voices and values points at the very least to a potential, a potential for both subversion of and accommodation to the social order by audiences.

We need to add here that the production and dissemination of mass-mediated popular culture in America is at the most basic level a business attuned to reaping the greatest profit for the multi-national corporations that own and/or control the major Hollywood studios and television networks.<sup>14</sup> In America, commercial mass media

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<sup>13</sup>Jackie Byars, All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 55.

<sup>14</sup>See Walter Powell, "The Blockbuster Decades: The Media as Big Business," in American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 54-63 and Herbert Schiller, Culture, Inc. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). These studies provide

is one of the crucial fields upon which dominant or elite groups attempt to organize and naturalize consent to their dominance via ideology. But at the same time, the media, in order to maintain popularity and thus reap the greatest amount of monetary return, must constantly negotiate both the interests of the dominant and the discourses of the subordinate. Hollywood films, network television programming, and news features (both television and print) must resonate with people's actual experiences and concerns and the given historical moment. Unless an audience can recognize themselves, their needs, their desires and dreams on the movie or television screen, or in magazines or newspapers, it will mean nothing to them. Thus, as the theory of hegemony recognizes, the nature of media texts--and the ideological meanings they purvey--must shift according to the actual and/or perceived changes in the social milieu in order to mobilize the consent (and dollars) of the largest number of people. Therefore, the ideological meanings circulating via commercial media are always constantly shifting,

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useful discussions of the vast degree of multi-national corporate control over public mass media in the U.S.. They are limited, however, in their assumption that such corporate control necessarily precludes any possibility of consumer opposition and resistance, or any notion of ideological complexity in corporate media products. According to Powell and Schiller, commercial mass media function exclusively to maintain the economic power of elites.

constantly trying to accommodate and appropriate the challenges, contestations, and perceived concerns and desires of the day. Film, television and journalism must be "relevant" and up to date, and must in some fashion be resonant with the issues and problems of the historical moment of their production. Gramsci's theory of hegemony takes account of this in a way that Althusser does not. While Althusser illuminates the way in which the mass media locates people within the purview of dominant ideology, hegemony theory takes this a step further by conceptualizing ideology as an ongoing, dynamic process undergoing constant change in relation to social and political ferment.

With this in mind, the mass media can be conceptualized as the shifting terrain of push and pull betwixt and between ruling and subordinate interests, between dominant and oppositional meanings, as opposed to the static mechanism whereby dominant ideology is merely imposed. Gramsci's notion of hegemony thus implies a degree of praxis that Althusser's formulations do not. The latter's conception of the ideological functions of mass media is rather static and unyielding. Processes of change and opposition are not acknowledged--in the end, mass media and social institutions are conceived as merely functional supports for a system of dominant social

arrangements. The utility of Gramsci, on the other hand, lay precisely in his provision for processes of social change, and in his acknowledgement of the always tenuous nature of ideology.

Hegemony theory has been appropriated by many critics and scholars of mass media, and has become one of the chief theoretical engines driving critical media studies. One of the first American scholars to draw on the concept of hegemony in the analysis of media texts was Todd Gitlin in his 1979 article "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment."<sup>15</sup> In this essay Gitlin seeks to delineate the hegemonic processes whereby divisive social issues and elements of oppositional social movements were appropriated by commercial television in the 1970s and in turn domesticated into compatibility with the needs of dominant ideology and corporate capitalism. He focuses on the format, genre, setting and character type, slant, and narrative solutions of popular television shows in order to demonstrate how these work as devices whereby potentially subversive themes and elements gleaned from contemporary social conflict are ultimately contained and rendered impotent my mainstream commercial media.

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<sup>15</sup>Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment" in Television: The Critical View, 4th edition, ed. Horace Newcombe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 507-532.

Gitlin's use of hegemony theory here is illuminating and provocative, yet also somewhat limited as to the possibilities for analysis the theory affords. He goes to great lengths to acknowledge that hegemony constitutes an ongoing process of negotiation between the dominant and subordinate, stating that "cultural hegemony [is not] a closed system...it is not cut-and-dried, not definitive. It has continually to be reproduced, continually superimposed, continually to be negotiated and managed, in order to override the alternative and, occasionally, the oppositional forms."<sup>16</sup> Yet Gitlin in the end elides these important aspects of hegemony. In arguing that hegemony is a process whereby alternative and/or oppositional meanings are ultimately, and inevitably, contained and naturalized by dominant ideology, Gitlin transposes the limitations of Althusser's and earlier Marxist base-superstructure models onto hegemony theory. Ideology is still conceived as a more or less monolithic, static, and totalizing force.

In a later book-length study, The Whole World Is Watching<sup>17</sup>, Gitlin again employs the theory of hegemony, and again his arguments are provocative yet hampered by

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<sup>16</sup>Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology" 526-27.

<sup>17</sup>Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

similar limitations. In this work, Gitlin explores the relationship between New Left social movements and mainstream American news media in the 1960s by focusing on the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the news coverage they received in the mass media, and the consequences of that coverage for the organization. According to Gitlin, the formative period of the SDS in the early to mid 1960s was in some ways a pristine time. Leaders and rank-and-file members shared an "organic" relationship. Common struggles made these groups closely associated, and the responsiveness of leaders to the membership was roughly democratic. However, as SDS attempted to engage the commercial mass media in order to reach a broader mass audience, the internal relationships within the organization became fractured and distant. The more the movement played to the mass media, the more mainstream journalists, working in the corporate bureaucracy of the news industry, could define, "frame," and eventually domesticate the oppositional messages of SDS and render its activities into mere spectacle.

Newsworthiness became the paramount concern of the organization's leaders, since that was the surest way of attaining mass coverage and attention. As Gitlin argues, "news" in an advanced capitalist society is determined by the processes of commercialization and commodification of

a news program or newspaper. As a result, the processed image of SDS became the movement, causing a deep polarization within the organization. This polarization made the movement "exist in a relation to media, more or less parasitically, but in no actual, active, reciprocal relation to constituencies."<sup>18</sup>

The argument that Gitlin makes here, using the notion of hegemony, has strong and weak points. On the one hand, he considerably illuminates the ideological processes whereby commercial news media "frames" political events and social experience so that it reflects its own corporate interests. On the other, however, his overall thesis, and its theoretical grounding in hegemony theory, remains essentially reductionist. It is one thing to argue that the mass has the power to take advantage of and play a part in the polarization of oppositional movements. But it is quite another thing to suggest, as Gitlin does, that media coverage caused the polarization.<sup>19</sup> This

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<sup>18</sup>Todd Gitlin, "Spotlights and Shadows: Television and the Culture of Politics" College English 38 (April 1977): 796.

<sup>19</sup>It is doubtful that the commercial media created the polarization that erupted in many New Left organizations in the 1960s. The fact is, the New Left was polarized long before they garnered extensive media coverage. See Peter Clecak, Radical Paradoxes (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). Clecak explains that the New Left from its inception began repeating the errors that had split asunder the Old Left in the 1930s. As he states on page 5, "The return to a crude Marxism [by the New Left] in the middle of the sixties only

proposition portends an extreme manipulationism in terms of the influence of mass media. Overall, there seems to be very little "give" in Gitlin's conceptual framework. We are left to assume that the news media, at all times, knew precisely what to cover, what to frame, and how to get the optimal ideological advantage out of every media event. In short, Gitlin's use of hegemony lacks a historical dimension that could reveal how framing may work to the advantage of dominant corporate interests at one historical moment, and be turned against it at another.

In Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film, Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan use a version of hegemony theory to explore connections between Hollywood movies of the 1970s and 80s and the broad social and political shifts that characterized this period. They are concerned to illumine popular film as a complex ideological terrain which negotiated, assimilated, and accommodated the diverse, divergent issues and interests of a period of rapid social change. The conflicts and changes of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, they argue, "produced significant shifts in national mood and national self-image which register in popular

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reactivated old diseases of the Left: sectarianism, isolation from the main currents of American life, and in the end organizational collapse."

films of the period."<sup>20</sup> In particular, Kellner and Ryan discuss the manner in which Hollywood responded to the myriad social and cultural changes manifest during the Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras by accommodating and articulating elements of the myriad social crises and challenges to dominant authority catalyzed by the activities of the youth counter-culture, the black and brown power movements, anti-war and environmental activism in the late 60s, and the loss of confidence in dominant institutions wrought by revelations of governmental and elite corruption in the 70s. They also discuss the manner in which many Hollywood films of the 1980s mediated a pronounced reaction to and backlash against the challenges and changes of the 60s and early 70s, and played a significant part in renewing and reconstituting a militarist/masculinist cultural hegemony during the Reagan/Bush years.

Kellner and Ryan provide compelling analyses of Hollywood films of several genres released during the past twenty-five years, as well as a productive survey of the ideological trajectory of Hollywood as it can be revealed through readings of individual films. However, while they afford attention to the ways in which Hollywood assimilated the social crises and political challenges of

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<sup>20</sup>Ryan and Kellner, Camera Politica 7.

the 60s and 70s, and the manner in which it buttressed an emergent conservatism in the 1980s, they are unable to account for the ways in which the meanings, images, and representational forms of Hollywood films are accommodated, incorporated, and possibly transformed, by individual spectators, audiences, and collectivities. Kellner and Ryan imply that commercial media texts such as Hollywood movies are relatively stable and static repositories of ideological meaning. They cannot account for historical variabilities and instabilities of hegemonic ideologies over time--the manner in which media representations and images (and their associated ideological discourses) can attain hegemony through the assimilation and consent of an audience in one historical period and context, while being reappropriated and radically transformed by audiences and collectivities in another different historical period and context.

Like the work of Gitlin and Ryan and Kellner, Susan Jefford's The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War is centrally concerned with issues of ideology and power, but with a more specific focus on gender issues in representations of Vietnam in film and literary texts. Jefford's basic contention is that the reconstruction of unequal gender relations and patriarchal masculinity constitutes the major imperative of these texts, and that

such cultural forms have therefore served as "the springboard for a general remasculinization of American culture."<sup>21</sup>

Jeffords endeavors to explain how this project of remasculinization was initially structured around the "mythos" of masculine bonding, in which the male experience of warfare transcends class and race differences, while suppressing and excluding all traces of femininity. This arena of "masculine self-sufficiency," she argues, was of only limited patriarchal utility when confined solely to Vietnam. The next stage was to "bring the war home" in the form of the returned Vietnam veteran who was portrayed in films like Rambo: First Blood, Part II and Missing In Action as having been victimized by a "feminized" government bureaucracy, which is condemned in these films for negotiating with and appeasing the Vietnamese enemy when it should have been fighting the war to "win." With no help from officialdom, and often acting outside the law, the Vietnam veteran in popular culture, according to Jeffords, returns a weakened, destabilized and "feminized" America to its proper place in the global order--that is, an America which stands tall and implacable in foreign policy while insisting on order,

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<sup>21</sup>Susan Jeffords, The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 169.

discipline and deference to authority in domestic affairs. That this ideological trend sank deep roots in the America of the 1980s, Jeffords argues, was "evidenced in the popularity of figures like Ronald Reagan, Oliver North, and J.R. Ewing, men who show an open disregard for government legislation and legal decisions and favor images of strength and firmness with an independence that smacks of Rambo and confirms their faith in a separate culture based on the mythos of masculinity."<sup>22</sup>

The Remasculinization of America is a productive work in that it alerts us to the manner in which commercial media representations of the Vietnam war and Vietnam veterans, especially those of the Reagan era, are imbued with the reassertion of patriarchal masculinity, and she provides a useful analysis of the political and ideological implications of these representations in reference to issues of sexual difference and culturally constructed gender roles. Nonetheless, Jeffords' study is problematic in that, like that of Gitlin and Ryan and Kellner, she embraces a rather unyielding conceptualization of the ideological workings of the texts she analyzes. There seems to be little room in her approach for alternative or oppositional readings of Vietnam texts nor for any notion of ideological

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<sup>22</sup>Jeffords, The Remasculinization of America 168.

complexity. She treats films and literary works as static entities with a seemingly innate capacity to reinscribe patriarchal tendencies, and to purvey an image of restored masculinity that is everywhere triumphant and unopposed.

An approach that more fully embraces the possibilities of hegemony theory, and more fully acknowledges the contentious and historically dynamic nature of mass media ideology can be provided by semiotic methods of analysis and interpretation. In his article, "Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Semiotic Analysis,"<sup>23</sup> sociologist Mark Gottdiener emphasizes that ideological meanings are the result of social relationships, the product of lived social interactions and conditions. These relationships constitute a "socially sustained system of signification," made up of three essential components: producers, objects/images and users.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the semiotic analysis of the ideological imperatives of mass media must specify, first, the manner in which social meaning is produced, second, what the social meaning of the object/image is at a particular historical juncture, and third, how the audience either absorbs or alters the meaning. At no point in the analysis should one assume

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<sup>23</sup>Mark Gottdiener, "Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Semiotic Analysis," American Journal of Sociology 90 (Spring 1985): 990.

<sup>24</sup>Gottdiener, "Hegemony and Mass Culture" 991.

complete ideological unanimity between the producers of the object/image and consumers. The lived social and material conditions of the audience must be considered to have an influence on the way they interpret the social meaning of the object/image. Moreover, when ideological concordance can be specified at a given point in history, this does not necessarily mean that it will remain constant and immutable, since the social and material conditions of consumers can change. As Gottdiener argues, "the semiotic perspective explicitly recognizes that any given cultural event or object can mean different things to different people. The task of ideological control becomes one of controlling the semiotic processes of meaning production themselves."<sup>25</sup> To this we need to add that any given cultural event, object, image, or representation can mean different things at different times, depending on who is influencing the semiotic processes of meaning production. This affords semiotic analysis a useful historical dimension in addition to the sociological one outlined by Gottdiener. A historical tracing of ideological signs enables us to scrutinize the contentious and historically variable nature of mass media representations and images.

Gottdiener also develops the notion of

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<sup>25</sup>Gottdiener, "Hegemony and Mass Culture" 989.

"transfunctionalization." Transfunctionalization is predicated upon the assumption that "any material commodity can assume a multiplicity of meanings through social interaction,"<sup>26</sup> and takes place at two distinct levels--it can occur when objects/images that have no inherent representational meaning, become charged with connotative significance through patterns of consumption and usage. Secondly, transfunctionalization occurs when objects that have a specific sign value have that sign value appropriated and altered by individuals, subcultures, and social/political movements. This latter concept can be fleshed out through reference to the notion of "bricolage." As John Fiske argues, bricolage consists of "the means by which the subordinated make their own culture out of the resources of the 'other....[It is] at work in the...mingling of mass with oral culture, of cultural commodity with the practices of everyday life."<sup>27</sup> Thus, objects/images that are taken from the cultural industries can be transformed into semiotic tools of political opposition, by "placing them in a symbolic ensemble which [serves] to erase or subvert their original

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<sup>26</sup>Gottdiener, "Hegemony and Mass Culture" 992.

<sup>27</sup>John Fiske, Understanding Popular Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 150-151.

straight meanings."<sup>28</sup> The essence of transfunctionalization and bricolage consist of the dynamic working up and re-working of social meanings through acts of appropriation and reappropriation. Appropriation is the key concept to indicate that the relationship between subordinate groups and the dominant culture is not in terms of straightforward transmission, nor of the imposition of dominant ideological meanings, but is rather a dynamic process wherein subordinate groups and political movements engage in cultural struggle with the cultural industries to make and remake the public culture. This can be grasped by looking at a hypothetical, yet plausible example which glosses matters that will be taken up in detail in this study. As stated before, in America the primary means of mass communication are owned by corporate capitalists who control the major movie studios, television networks, and print media. Their fundamental interest is in maintaining and expanding the profit margins of their corporations, which they do by producing and disseminating cultural commodities like Hollywood movies, TV shows, and newspaper/magazine stories, and in the process of seeking profits, they consciously and unconsciously attach ideological meanings

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<sup>28</sup>Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London: Methuen, 1979) 105.

to their products. For example, Warner Brothers might want to increase their profits by producing a war film. During production they seek military assistance in the form of script advisement, equipment and even personnel. Once in the can, the studio might attach advertising logos to its film announcements in newspapers, magazines, and billboards.

At each stage in the process of getting the film to the public, ideological are ascribed and inscribed. As the film is viewed by the public these meanings may be absorbed, enhanced, or even altered, depending on the ways the films representations are decoded. For example, the film might be viewed by antiwar veterans embittered by their own wartime experiences. They quite possibly might appropriate elements of the film and mockingly use them to express hostility towards war, thus altering the inscribed meanings again. This is an example of the processes of transfunctionalization and bricolage, where one representational meaning is appropriated and altered to serve the interests of a political movement with its own social and material reality. Finally, the film industry can reappropriate these altered meanings and reconstruct them so that they reinforce the industry's own economic imperatives and ideological interests towards war. In short, the ideological significations at one end of the

social relationship between producers and users becomes the raw material for the appropriation and alteration of the significations at the other, and vice versa. In a capitalist society such as the U.S., the corporate culture industries have a distinct advantage in this relationship in that they control an overwhelming share of the means of producing and disseminating social meanings and thus their hegemonic interests can be more readily achieved. However, the semiotic model of analysis outlined here emphasizes the fact that the establishment and maintenance of ideological hegemony is far more problematic, contentious, and historically variable than that assumed by Jeffords, Gitlin, or Ryan and Kellner. Commercial mass media and mass cultural forms thus open up as arenas for opposition and resistance, as well as assimilation and acquiescence, to dominant ideology.

CHAPTER II  
HOLLYWOOD AND THE MASS MEDIA SOCIALIZATION OF  
VIETNAM VETERANS

This chapter will examine a specific historical period focusing on the relationship between commercial mass media producers, the cultural commodities they produced and the social users of those commodities. In particular, the chapter will analyze the manner in which the Hollywood film industry and the films they produced aided in the dissemination and transmission of America's dominant ideology of war to Vietnam veterans during their youth in the 1950s and early 60s. The film industry will be discussed as part of a socially sustained system of ideological signification that produced and reinforced dominant cultural constructs of war's meaning, or what might usefully be referred to as a cultural code<sup>1</sup> for war. Selected films of the World War II combat genre will be briefly analyzed so as to scrutinize the representational signs, symbols, and images activated by a

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<sup>1</sup>Cultural codes refer to the fundamental manner in which meaning is organized and structured in texts and in language more generally. According to Michael Real, codes "[identify] the structure of linguistic and other sign systems used for expressing and communicating. Codes organize signs into systems--for example, when grammar organizes words into sentences." Michael Real, Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989) 107.

hegemonic ideology of war and the figure of the masculine warrior/hero. Finally, Vietnam veterans in their youth will be analyzed as audience decoders of the ideology of war projected by the war films. What we will find is that these individuals so assimilated the Hollywood cultural code for war that its structure of meanings became part of their "common sense," and thus became hegemonic in that the veterans readily consented to it in their youthful everyday lives. As a result of being ideologically integrated into the dominant cultural meanings of war, many young men of the 1950s and early 60s were psychologically prepared to either enlist in the military or accept induction during the Vietnam era.

War is perhaps the most highly mass-mediated activity Americans encounter. By this I simply mean that, for most Americans, the meaning of war comes from sources other than first hand experience. Although America has been involved in countless military adventures throughout the twentieth century, from the Philippines early in the century to the recent Gulf War, the vast majority of Americans have come to know war's meanings via mass media forms, and have been kept at a safe distance from the actual lived experience of war. Most Americans have experienced war through news reports, novels, biographies, memoirs, war stories from relatives, and more

recently through commercial film and television. In other words, war in America is a highly structured, mass-mediated and mass cultural event. In this respect, those in control of the major means of meaning production (i.e. the corporate owners of the major mass media) have a decided, although not immutable, advantage in producing, representing, and disseminating dominant ideological meanings with regard to war.

Until the late 1920's, the major mass media used to establish and transmit a cultural code for war was popular literature. Indeed, many of the American literary giants of the twentieth century established themselves via war novels.<sup>2</sup> With a few notable exceptions, the assumptions that emerged from these novels posit war as a pragmatic extension of an American foreign policy based on moral rather than material principles.<sup>3</sup> Also, war was engaged in only for national defense, or in defense of the weak struggling against stronger "evil" enemies. To be sure, such ideological positions had deep roots in

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<sup>2</sup>Peter Aichinger, The American Soldier In Fiction, 1880-1963: A History of Attitudes Toward Warfare and the Military Establishment (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1976) 106-108.

<sup>3</sup>Exceptions would include John Dos Passos' Nineteen-Nineteen (1932) and Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell To Arms. These authors produced their anti-war novels in the aftermath of World War I. Following World War II, Norman Mailor's literary career was launched with the classic anti-war novel The Naked and the Dead (1948).

political rhetoric and pronouncements dating back to the founding of the United States. However, by the 1920's these assumptions began to inform the narrative foundation of a newer, more visual medium--the Hollywood war movie. The imagistic version of American foreign policy found in war films of the period from roughly the end of the 1920's to the early 1960's activate the representational meanings of the warrior/hero, the enemy, and the experience of war itself. In other words, the dominant ideology of the society, transposed to Hollywood film, provided the context in which a cultural code for war was developed and sustained.

The social processes involved in constructing a Hollywood cultural code for war included crucial institutional linkages between the film industry and the military. These linkages began developing in the earliest days of American narrative cinema. In his history of Hollywood war films Guts and Glory, Lawrence Suid chronicles this fledgling relationship between filmmakers and the War Department. For example, early films such as D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation (1915) and King Vidor's The Big Parade (1925) made extensive use of equipment, technical advice, and in some cases manpower from the

military.<sup>4</sup> From Suid's account of the early years of the relationship, War Department assistance was sought primarily for financial and aesthetic reasons. Filmmakers wanted their war films to have "authenticity," and the military could provide the necessary essentials in terms of uniforms, equipment, and manpower. In addition, studio producers sought to save production costs by using ready-trained military personnel as extras. In 1927, cost effectiveness, aesthetic authenticity and ideology coalesced in the production of Wings by Paramount Pictures. The film's producer, Jesse Lasky, facing high costs for an air combat film, reasoned that if the film could be shown to have mutual interest to the nation, the film industry and the military's own image of itself, assistance would be more quickly forthcoming. As Lasky stated:

We all take pride in our Army, our Navy, and our Air Forces. Suppose we present a really fine war picture, a picture of historical significance, of national interest, of military importance. Suppose the picture reflects the practice, spirit, and tradition of American aims. Why shouldn't the War Department go hand-in-hand with us?<sup>5</sup>

When the script for the film was shown to officers in the War Department, they gave it their quick approval and

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<sup>4</sup>Lawrence Suid, Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1978) 15-33.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Suid, Guts and Glory 26.

assistance was granted. The film industry's relationship with the military continued to mature over the next decade.

Interestingly, by the early 1940's, as the level of institutional linkages and America's involvement in the European war grew, isolationists in the Senate became alarmed. Senators Champ Clark and Gerald Nye felt that the films coming out of Hollywood were more than just innocent entertainment aimed at turning a profit for the studios. They believed that studio heads were surreptitiously trying to conceal their pro-war ideological commitments behind the veil of merely presenting entertainment. During September, 1941, a senate sub-committee hearing was convened by the Interstate Commerce Commission to determine the precise nature of Hollywood's product: entertainment, or propaganda?

In testimony given to the sub-committee, the giants of the Hollywood industry insisted that they saw no clear distinction between entertainment and overt ideological propaganda with regards to war films. Wendell Wilkie, chief council for the film industry during the hearings, stated that, "the motion picture screen is an instrument of entertainment, education, and information," and that the films under investigation "do portray nazi-ism for

what it is--a cruel, lustful, ruthless, and cynical force."<sup>6</sup> Nicholas M. Schenck, president of Loews, Inc. added,

I do know that I don't believe that the pictures of this sort can do anything but good, because they enlightened the people, who knew all about it, and they just help them understand it a little bit more. That is about all. It is pure entertainment.<sup>7</sup>

One day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor catapulted the United States into World War II, the Senate hearing was dissolved, and direct linkages between Hollywood and the government became pronounced. In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt actively solicited Hollywood's help in keeping the public "entertained, educated, and informed" on a variety of war-related topics. Through the Office of War Information, Roosevelt instructed Hollywood to produce films with the following themes: "why we fight" films, films about the enemy, films about American fighting forces, and films on American war production.<sup>8</sup> With Administration sanctioning, Hollywood

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<sup>6</sup>Senate Sub-Committee Hearings, Congressional Record September, 1941, Senator Gerald Nye, Chairman, 9972 and 70. For more information on the hearings, which turned out to be a disaster for Clark and Nye, see Gregory D. Black and Clayton R. Koppes, Hollywood Goes To War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 40-47.

<sup>7</sup>Senate Sub-Committee Hearings 333.

<sup>8</sup>Hollywood Goes To War 67-69.

executives became far more vocal about the specific forms that war films would now take to accomplish its nationalistic task. Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America boldly declared,

The motion picture can be...a vehicle of emotional surcharge and inspiration...by making heroism of their characters reflect the highest values which Americans can respect, [and] by forcing the climaxes of their plots upon the actions of events which command admiration.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Hays believed that the ideological and entertainment value of war films could be more fully realized if screenwriters, producers, and directors took, "their fictional materials from past or current history."<sup>10</sup>

It is in this manner that we can see the developmental stages of ideological semiosis--of ideological meaning constructed in a mass cultural, mass-mediated setting. Reality, or "current history," provides the raw materials from which dramatic narratives are fashioned into mass media cultural commodities. This fashioning takes place within a powerful corporate structure whose major decision makers are the owners and

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<sup>9</sup>Quoted in David E. Meerse, "To Reassure a Nation: Hollywood Presents World War II," Film and History 5 (1975): 80.

<sup>10</sup>Meerse, "To Reassure a Nation" 81.

controllers of the industry. Their class and ideological sensibilities often aligned with other powerful individuals in the military, and during World War II, with the Executive Branch of government. These filmic narratives, as we shall see, reinforce the ideological positions that characterize the institutional apparatus out of which they are produced. Ideological meaning continues to be encoded prior to and during release via advertising blitzes, reviews by critics, and even the pictorial logos employed by theater owners to entice patrons into the movie theater. These other areas within the process of ideological signification will not be discussed here, since the youth of the 1950s and early 60s viewed these films in a different social setting, and, to some extent, via a new medium of communication (i.e. television).

In his analysis of Hollywood war movies produced during the 1940s and 1950s, Lawrence Suid outlines their fundamental ideological ingredients:

Hollywood combat films always end in an American victory with the American fighting man running faster than his enemy--whether German or Japanese. These screen victories reinforce the image of the American military as all-conquering, all powerful, always right. Hollywood war films have, therefore, helped justify war and the use of violence to achieve national ends.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Suid, Guts and Glory 7.

Bearing this in mind, we need to move to an abbreviated yet pointed discussion of Hollywood war films of the pre-Vietnam period to show how the above statement provides the thematic context out of which the figure of the masculine warrior/hero and war achieve their symbolic/imagistic power via mass media.

Film scholars like Suid have noted that Hollywood war films are in many ways undifferentiated from the classic Hollywood western genre.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, there are several striking similarities that can be discerned. In both genres, a strong heroic figure must protect the weak from a variety of "frontier" villains. Whether that frontier is situated in the wild west of the 1880s or a Pacific island or small French village during World War II essentially matters little. Also, the figure of the villain in westerns and in war films are similar in their behavioral aspects. There is ample evidence from both genres that villains are characterized as greedy, fanatical, and quite often racially inferior. Also, the kinds of nationalistic enterprises represented in each type of film are portrayed as benevolent and benign. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the

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<sup>12</sup>Suid, for example, argues that "...probably the only significant difference between war films and westerns is that victory is more compelling in the latter, because the future of the nation is at stake rather than a mere wagon, or town." Guts and Glory 8.

western and the war film that might help to explain why the latter, as popular myth, was overall more consistent with the overarching social structure of post-World War II America in the 1950s.

What makes the war film appreciably different from the western is the specific manner in which war films represent the hero as the locus of a social and institutional collectivity. In the classic Hollywood western, it can be argued that the hero displays more fully the "single-handed" entrepreneurial qualities of competitive market capitalism. Within this context, the hero is capable of "single-handedly" saving the day. Also, in the western, the hero is portrayed as being largely free of cumbersome institutional constraints.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the figure of the military warrior/hero is constrained by the collective nature of the military enterprise in war. Of course, the figure of the warrior/hero as a potent social symbol is one found in almost all human cultures dating back to ancient Greece and before. Since ancient times, and depending on different cultural and historical contexts, he has been variously configured to fit the changing contours of the society he represents. Indeed, as social psychologist

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<sup>13</sup>Will Wright, Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) 130-153.

Robert Jay Lifton states, warrior/heroes are "readily absorbed by specific societies to be reinforced and created in their own hierarchical power-centered image."<sup>14</sup> It is notable that post-World War II America saw a tremendous emphasis placed on the "organization man" and the "other-directed" personality as the corporate phase of American capitalism reached a new zenith. Intellectuals such as sociologist Peter Drucker and economist John Kenneth Galbraith sang the praises of this structural transformation, and their optimism for the matured corporatism of the post-war period carried over into cinematic representations of war. War movies in general articulated these changes in social organization, as well as the general optimism regarding the success of corporate endeavors. More crucially, the figure of the male warrior/hero served as a representational focus of these changes within the war film genre.

A notable feature of classic Hollywood war films is that key ideological "lessons" are projected through oppositions structured into their narratives. One of the key oppositions is that of individualism vs. collectivism/corporatism. The classic warrior/hero figure is either the primary agency through which the proper code

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<sup>14</sup>Robert Jay Lifton, Home From the War: Veterans Before and After Vietnam (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) 27.

of corporate behavior is delivered and reinforced, or the very personification of the change himself. For example, the John Wayne character Wedge Donovan in The Fighting Seabees (1944) represents the personification of the transformation from individualist to corporatist. As the owner and director of a maverick construction company assisting the war against the Japanese on an isolated island in the South Pacific, Donovan seeks Defense Department approval to arm his workers and fight the Japanese "his own way." When the Navy turns Donovan's request down because he refuses to submit to Navy training and discipline, he arms his men surreptitiously. Ordering a premature ambush on advancing Japanese troops, Donovan succeeds only in getting many of his men killed. Having thus learned his lesson, Donovan submits to requests made by the Navy, and his submission is rewarded with a Navy commission to the rank of Lt. Commander. He is given authority to recruit and militarily train Navy personnel, and is ultimately placed in command of the Navy's new construction battalions, the Seabees. In the final sequence of scenes, Donovan and his men save the day, heroically blunting a Japanese assault on their island by using bulldozers and other heavy equipment. It is only within the changed behavioral and institutional setting that Donovan could redeem himself and become the films

warrior/hero.

In Sands of Iwo Jima, a very similar social lesson is emphasized. In this famous film, the John Wayne character of Marine Sergeant Stryker is the agent of the change. As a platoon Sergeant and veteran of Guadalcanal, Stryker is in charge of transforming raw Marine recruits into a disciplined combat unit. In the first briefing to his men Stryker informs them in flat drill sergeant tones: "Alright men, listen up! From now on you will act like one man, and think like one man!" When the film's doubter-of-the-hero Private Thomas gives in to a crude individualistic whim during a battle, two of the platoon's men are killed. Sergeant Stryker is then called upon, by his sense of duty and responsibility to his men, to teach Private Thomas the value of military corporatism. Once the lesson is learned, and the unit "acts and thinks like one man," they are capable of battling the Japanese at Iwo Jima.

Perhaps the most explicit depiction of the transformation from individualism to something more attuned to a modern corporate capitalist setting is seen in Flying Tigers (1943). In this film, John Carrol plays the character of Woody, a likable, but completely self-interested entrepreneurial utilitarian. As a mercenary pilot attached to an American fighter squadron in China

before Pearl Harbor, Woody is in the war "strictly for the monthly paycheck." At first, his crass individualism remains undaunted, even after a savage attack by Japanese fighter planes on defenseless Chinese women and children. Only after Woody's attempt at "single-handed" heroics results in the death of fellow pilots during a skirmish with the Japanese, does he become riddled with guilt. At the behest of the film's true warrior/hero--again played by John Wayne (it is interesting that Wayne's Hollywood World War II warrior/hero characters seem to have fought primarily in the Pacific theater), Woody learns his lesson and redeems himself. During the most crucial battle scene of the film, Woody makes the ultimate sacrifice by flying his plane directly into a Japanese supply train, saving the day and thwarting the enemy threat.

It should be noted that the narrative thrust of the classic Hollywood war film does not allow the structural opposition of individualism/corporatism to entirely obliterate the essence of warrior heroism. "Single-handed" individualism exists within the narrative of many films and develops through the opposition of the good guys/bad guys. Significant battlefield confrontations between the good heroes and the bad enemy serve as the nexus out of which a reformulation of the "single-handed" individual hero emerges. Again, Sands of Iwo Jima

provides a good example. A key battle between the Marines and Japanese forces is going badly for the good guys. From a well-armed and fortified bunker position atop a hill, the Japanese have Stryker's squad pinned down and unable to advance beyond the exposed beach. Unless the Japanese bunker can be destroyed, the Marines will lose the battle for the island. At a critical moment in the battle, Sgt. Stryker bolts from behind safe cover, dodges intense machine gun and mortar fire, moves up the hill to the face of the bunker, tosses in a hand-grenade, and silences the enemy bunker.

This scene, and countless others like it demonstrates the condensation of elements of single-handed individualist heroics with the reformulated individualism of the corporate era. Sgt. Stryker's men--who are shown providing a substantial base of fire to cover his assault on the bunker--are simply the extension of the hero himself. It was Stryker's tough disciplinary training that prepared the men for combat. Thus, "single-handed" accomplishments characteristic of the western hero are established and reinforced via a more indirect corporate process. A line from the Audie Murphy film From Here to Eternity sums up the changed social setting explicitly: "Maybe in the days of the Old West a man could do what he pleased, but today you've got to play ball."

There are other ways in which the essentials of the male warrior/hero are established and projected in Hollywood war films of the 1940s and 50s. Warrior/hero characters are invariably loners existing, to some extent, outside the social worlds presented in the films--they are in their military units (squadrons, squads, platoons, etc.) but not of them. An aura of mystery surrounds the warrior/hero, and this serves as the special quality that often becomes the object of his men's attention. Private Robert Pruitt in From Here to Eternity is unique in his steadfast moral conviction not to box for the company boxing team. In Sahara (1942) Humphery Bogart has a special ability to make his tank "Lulubelle" function under the adverse conditions of desert warfare by, among other things, "treating her like a dame." And all of John Wayne's warrior/hero characters are portrayed as above and apart from their supporting characters by a variety of audile and visual signifiers, from Wayne's stoic facial expression and "swagger," to the authoritarian cadence and tone of his speech. Moreover, these representational sign systems orbit around the warrior/hero's most important special quality--his emotional quality. The warrior/hero figure is essentially an emotional mutation. He can be heard on occasion admitting fear of death in battle, or sorrow over a fallen comrade, but never with a facial

expression, posture, or body language. In contrast, supporting characters are not only heard admitting of fear and sorrow, but are visually portrayed as being shaken or immobilized by fear. In short, as projected in Hollywood war films of the pre-Vietnam era, human emotions are inappropriate behavioral modes for the warrior/hero.<sup>15</sup>

As the 1950s drew to a close, the classic Hollywood warrior/hero was a "professional soldier," by and large, an "organization man" to use sociologist William Whyte's influential term.<sup>16</sup> In many films up to this time, the hero had embraced the standards of military discipline as a career choice. Devotion to duty and an unemotional approach to warfare are portrayed as the only legitimate behavioral modes from which heroic status can be attained. Thus, the Hollywood warrior/hero during the 1940s and 50s was represented and culturally coded as a brave, virtuous and righteous individual utterly devoted to the moral

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<sup>15</sup>For a more extended discussion of emotional stoicism as a key feature in the representation of male warrior/heroes in Hollywood war films, see Ralph R. Donald, "Masculinity and Machismo in Hollywood's War Films," in Men, Masculinity, and the Media, Steve Craig, ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992) 130-134.

<sup>16</sup>In his famous 1957 book, Whyte defines the ideology of the "organization man" as the notion of the individual male who, "of himself, is isolated, meaningless; only as he collaborates with others does he become worthwhile, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps to produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts." See William H. Whyte, The Organization Man (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957) 7-8.

principles of American foreign policy. Moreover, these filmic representations embodied the essential qualities of individual heroism within the corporate structure of the military establishment. Few commercial films during this period attempted a critical approach to the imagistic symbolization of the warrior/hero.<sup>17</sup>

To employ an overworked but nonetheless useful cliché, it is often stated that "war is hell"--yet hell has never been so alluring as when it takes on the glamorized and spectacularized form of a Hollywood movie. The cultural codification of war itself, as projected through war films, can be seen as the ultimate, most adventuresome form of competition strikingly parallel to the essential nature of market capitalism. In war, certain ratios of labor (i.e. soldiers and servicepeople) and capital (i.e. war machinery and technology) are combined in the most efficient manner directed at producing "victory" on the battlefield. The battlefield serves as the military equivalent of the market where competitors "trade" their wares. Indeed, real wars can be examined in precisely this fashion. However, when war is

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<sup>17</sup>Notable, but rare, exceptions to this overall ideological thrust in the construction of the warrior/hero in Hollywood war films of the 1940s and 50s might include Paths of Glory (1957) and Hell Is For Heroes (1962), a film released in the immediate period before the escalation of the Vietnam War that served as the direct progenitor of the 1960s television series "Combat."

represented within the medium of commercial film, entertainment-value is combined with the economic parallels just noted. There are several ways in which the production of war films during the 1940s and 50s glamorized and glorified war. Employing the combat setting to develop a representational code for war itself, battle scenes and sequences spectacularized and aestheticized the experience of war. Representations of combat are made suspenseful and exciting by the narrative structuring of life-threatening situations involving characters already known in depth by the audience, by the technical proficiency Hollywood employed to represent war experience both visually and audibly (i.e. the sound of machinegun and small arms fire, the look of fiery explosions, the excitement of watching fighter aircraft strafe enemy positions, or the quiet of ocean silence punctuated by the rhythmic knocking of a submarine poised to attack). Through the use of camera angles, Hollywood directors could transport the spectator into the world of war. In one scene the audience might observe a battle scene that depicts the hero and his men engaged in a combat exchange with the enemy. In the very next scene the audience views the fighting from the position of the hero, creating a quick identity with the "feel" of battle. Via these cinematic machinations, the audience is

practically transported from its objective social existence as observer, to participant.

The glamorization of war's technology gained further assistance in the 1950s with the improved technology of cinema. Cinemascope and technicolor became formidable vehicles to portray, and display, the latest Pentagon weapons in films like Strategic Air Command (1955), and Battle Hymn (1957).

Beyond the explicit technical aestheticization of battle, war is implicitly inscribed ideologically as a type of contest that serves an essential function as proving ground for masculinity, and such qualities as bravery, loyalty, and obedience to authority. Also, Hollywood's version of war not only pitted the good guys against the bad guys in violent contest, but also presented the battlefield as a crucial location for redemption. Performance in battle would often cleanse a character of a social stigma developed earlier in the film. For example, in Beyond Glory (1948), the main protagonist is a West Point cadet brought up on charges of mistreating an under-classmen. Moreover, he doubts his own courage when in a battle against the enemy, his cowardice causes the death of one of his close friends. In a later battle, the character redeems himself and recognizes that he is not a coward after all. In Sands of

Iwo Jima one of Sergeant Stryker's men also doubts his bravery in battle until he gains the approval of the film's hero. The situation of Pvt. Conway, however, is confounded since his father is a decorated Marine Colonel who fought gallantly at Guadalcanal. Conway's disinterest in a career as a Marine has removed him from the favor of his father, but his brave action on Iwo Jima restores his place of family honor, as well as his own self-image. In Run Silent Run Deep (1958), Clark Gable, as commander of an American submarine in the Pacific, carries with him the stigma of losing another vessel and crew to the Japanese due to his indecision in battle. Placed in command of another sub, Gable is able to regain his honor and status by being victorious in another dramatic showdown with the enemy.

In sum, throughout many Hollywood war films of the pre-Vietnam period, the experience of war is coded as an adventuresome, though deadly, form of masculine contest. It provides an essential arena for a man to prove his loyalty to a human community and set of social relations he has come to see as valuable. In turn, war is also an activity that can redeem an individual whom society, for one reason or another, has withdrawn its recognition and approval.

It should be emphasized that, regarding the pre-war

socialization and enculturation of Vietnam veterans during their youth, Hollywood war movies did not in and of themselves singularly initiate a psychological willingness to accept war, and to allow one's self to be sent to war. The ideological influence of mass media images dealing with the warrior/hero figure and the nature of war itself develop not only from the ideological proclivity of those who produce those images, and the manner in which they are constructed and represented, but also from the social context in which they are consumed. In this sense, the Hollywood warrior/hero image becomes potent when it corresponds, in a multi-faceted way, to other everyday social and cultural experiences of the audience. An orthodox decoding and assimilation of mass media representations depends upon how consistent they are with other related ideological locations in an audience's everyday life--class, education, family, and broad community environment. When it can be demonstrated that mass media representations of war are in accordance with the ideological signification of other areas of social existence, and that an audience actively consents to these representations, it can be argued with plausibility that the society is overdetermined with the unifying elements that constitute a hegemonic code for war. As will be discussed presently, this is precisely the case with the

social and cultural lives of many who fought in Vietnam.

There is enough statistical information on Vietnam veterans to draw an abstract, but accurate demographic picture. For the most part, they were born between 1944 and 1951 to fairly stable working class families. In the mid-1960s, their fathers earned from between seven to fifteen-thousand dollars a year. Fifty-five percent of the fathers of Vietnam-era veterans had less than a high school education, and some sixty percent of the fathers were, themselves, veterans of either World War II or Korea. A large majority of Vietnam-era veterans felt positively about military service prior to their enlistment or registration for the draft.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, they came of age in a Cold War ideological environment overwhelmingly fearful of the outside threat of the former Soviet Union<sup>19</sup>

As Lloyd Lewis argues, "More than any other single

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<sup>18</sup>All statistics used here are drawn from Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative Adjustment of Veterans and Their Peers (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1981) Vol. I 99-100. For further demographic information and analysis on Vietnam servicemen and veterans, see Shelby L. Stanton, Vietnam Order of Battle (New York: Galahad Books, 1986) 346-349 and Chistian G. Appy, Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) Chapter I.

<sup>19</sup>Indeed, as historian Godfrey Hodgson has noted, by 1959 the most important problem Americans believed they faced was "dealing with the Russians." Godfrey Hodgson, America In Our Time (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) 68.

factor ...the media (especially motion pictures) served to initiate young American males into the mysteries of making war, the purposes that war is intended to accomplish, and the role one is expected to adopt within war."<sup>20</sup> In analyzing the autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories of Vietnam veterans as they discuss their cultural integration into overarching societal values about war, frequent references to movies and movie characters are strikingly apparent. The Hollywood warrior/hero image, especially in reference to John Wayne, seems to have had special currency to many veterans in their youth. In his 1973 study Home From the War, social psychologist Robert Jay Lifton noticed the same constancy in his encounters with Vietnam veterans, and offered this insightful explanation:

Always the men came back to the John Wayne thing, sensing that it had to do with psychological matters at the core of their struggle. Around that phrase they could explore a whole constellation of masculine attitudes encouraged or even nurtured by American culture, contributing to war-making: being tough (even brutal), tight-lipped, fists ready (or quick on the draw), physically powerful, hard, ruthlessly competitive, ...and above all unquestionably loyal to one's nation to the point of being ever willing and ready to kill or die for it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Lloyd Lewis, The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1985) 22.

<sup>21</sup>Lifton, Home From the War 238.

This "John Wayne thing" employed by veterans as a reference point for discussing their cultural orientation toward the military and war in general, highlights the extent to which mass media representation had situated itself into the developmental processes of ideological integration in the lives of Vietnam veterans during their youth in the 1950s and early 60s. In a passage from his acclaimed memoir Born On the Fourth of July, Marine Corps veteran Ron Kovic delineates the tangible allure of the mass media and the Hollywood warrior/hero image during his childhood:

Every Saturday we'd go down to the movies...and watch war movies with John Wayne and Audie Murphy...I'll never forget Audie Murphy in To Hell and Back. At the end he jumps on top of a flaming tank that's just about to explode and grabs a machine gun blasting into the German lines. He was so brave I had chills running up and down my back, wishing it were me up there...It was the greatest movie I ever saw in my life.<sup>22</sup>

Another Vietnam veteran confirms the mythic status war attained in his childhood via Hollywood. In a recent television interview, author Phillip Caputo stated, "I grew up with it as a kid. I grew up with the mythology of World War II, the popular mythology, the movies. This was a grand and glorious experience. It was John Wayne and

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<sup>22</sup>Ron Kovic, Born On the Fourth of July (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) 68.

Aldo Ray, and music played in the background."<sup>23</sup> In his memoir A Rumor of War, he again makes pointed reference to the influence of war films on his youthful imagination:

...the heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary...I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in Sands of Iwo Jima, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest.<sup>24</sup>

Yet another Marine Corps veteran of Vietnam relates similar sentiments regarding the impact of war films in his youth growing up in a working-class neighborhood of

Boston: Yeah, definitely, I'm sure all those war movies I watched when I was a kid softened any resistance I might have had to joining the Marines. I joined the Marines because I thought they were the toughest, and I liked to fight, every guy had to fight in my old neighborhood. I was running around in the streets, I was in the local Golden Gloves, so when it came time to fight in a war, I figured it was just a natural extension of the fighting I did as a kid...and in a lot of ways I guess it was. Besides, my father was a career Navy enlisted man and all my uncles were vets of World War II. With everything society in general was saying about war, it seemed like just a natural part of

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<sup>23</sup>Quote from interview with Caputo on "The Charlie Rose Show," PBS, October, 1993.

<sup>24</sup>Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977) 6.

growing up, a natural thing to  
do...<sup>25</sup>

This veteran touches on an important element in the ideological integration into America's cultural code for war--the military background of family members and relatives. Vietnam veterans close exposure to World War II veterans underscored and reinforced their assimilation of mass media representations of war. And enlistees were not the only individuals to express belief in the power of mass media regarding their eventual acceptance of military induction. A veteran who was drafted in the 1960s recalls how his initial fear of induction was assuaged by thoughts of warrior/heroics: "With all my terror of going into the army--because I figured I was the least likely person to survive, there was something seductive about it too. I was seduced by World War II movies and John Wayne movies."<sup>26</sup>

Watching war movies was a popular activity for working class youth during the 1950s. However, the film images, and their ideological implications, were enhanced and reinforced by other activities embarked upon by the

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<sup>25</sup>Informal interview with Vietnam veteran at 20th Anniversary Conference of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Washington, D.C., April 20, 1991.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Marc Baker, Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Soldiers Who Fought There (New York: Berkley Books, 1981) 15.

young male audiences viewing them--i.e., playing war with siblings and neighborhood friends. Of course, playing war was not an activity divorced from the influence of mass media; indeed, the two were intimately intertwined with one another.

Hollywood war movies are rich in what semioticians call signifiers: uniforms, military insignia, and perhaps most crucially, weapons. Not surprisingly, movies that are so rich in signifiers are favorites of toy manufacturers. The duplication and production of film paraphernalia is enormously profitable. The plethora of "spin-off" items aimed at children from Jurassic Park (1993) and Terminator II (1992) are recent examples. Likewise, in the 1950s the toy industry kept America's young playground warriors well equipped with facsimile uniforms and weapons. These military facsimiles were part of every red-blooded American boy's toy collection. In this regard, Roland Barthes has made the astute observation that "toys literally prefigure the world of adult functions...[and] cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers...Toys reveal the list of things the adult world does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy,

ugliness."<sup>27</sup>

Semiotically, in terms of construction and "use-value" among young consumers, war toys of the 1950s and 60s referred to World War II, Korea, and the Cold War, and paralleled Hollywood representation of war. Indeed, there existed a symbiotic relationship between mass media's representational code for war, playing war, and the military toys used in these games. In his memoir Vietnam-Perkasie, former Marine Corps enlistee W.D. Ehrhart illuminates this relationship:

Playing war we would always argue over who would be the Japs or the Krauts or the Commies, always forcing the least popular playmates to be the bad guys, and my favorite Christmas toy was a "real" .30 caliber machine gun mounted on a tripod stand, battery powered, with simulated sound and flashing red barrel. I mowed down thousands with it. Everyone wanted to be on my side, until I broke my miracle hitting the dirt too realistically. For a long time afterwards, I was regularly appointed a dirty Commie. It was unbearable.<sup>28</sup>

Ron Kovic also remarks on the manner in which the mass media, toys, and war games congealed into unified reinforcing elements:

We'd go home and make up movies like the one's we'd seen or the one's that were on TV...We'd use our Christmas toys--the Matty Mattel machine guns and grenades. The little green plastic

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<sup>27</sup>Roland Barthes, Mythologies (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957) 53.

<sup>28</sup>W.D. Ehrhart, Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1983) 9.

soldiers with guns and flamethrowers in their hands....On Saturday after the movies all the guy's would go down to Sally's Woods with plastic battery operated machine guns....We turned the woods into a battlefield. We set ambushes, then led gallant attacks, storming over the top, bayoneting and shooting anyone who got in our way. Then we'd walk out of the woods like the heroes we knew we would be when we were men.<sup>29</sup>

Playing war, then, structured itself in ways similar to the mass media representations of the period, complete with a rudimentary narrative, the element of contestation, individual heroes, and a highly symbolic value for the toy weapons used. The good guy/bad guy opposition was also duplicated in the daily play activities of these individuals as they would make "the least popular playmates be the bad guys."

These fundamental elements of a cultural code for war--the figure of the warrior/hero, the "bad guy" enemy, and war as adventure, contest, and escape, had a profound impact on the imaginations of Vietnam veterans during their youth. The hegemony of this code saturated their daily lives in that they readily assimilated and consented to it in their everyday activities, not just in the mass media they were exposed to, but also in other mutually reinforcing spheres of activity like childhood games. The family backgrounds of these individuals also suggests that

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<sup>29</sup>Kovic, Born On the Fourth of July 37.

the hegemony of this code derived through the mass media gained even deeper resonance when adult family members were veterans of World War II or Korea. Indeed, having a "real" warrior/hero in the family or even in the same community served as an enhancement of the ideological inscriptions of war served up by Hollywood. From his working class community of Perkasio, Pennsylvania, W. D. Ehrhart's immediate surroundings made the media images of the warrior/hero consistent with his childhood reality:

Once Jeff Allison and I sneaked into his father's bedroom and found the Silver Star cradled in a black box with felt trim. When we finally screwed up enough courage to ask how he'd earned it, his modestly vague response fired our ten-year old imaginations to act out the most daring and heroic deeds.<sup>30</sup>

Medals for heroism and other war memorabilia stored like family heirlooms indicated war's legitimacy--war was a part of the family heritage, an extension of family life. All these images combined into a mental montage with any specific image equivalent to all others. The image of one's father as a rough equivalent to John Wayne, or vice-versa, instilled in young boys the total naturalness of eventually fighting in a war. Upon reflection, many veterans even view their ideological integration into war as a form of brainwashing, as suggested by the following observation:

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<sup>30</sup>Ehrhart, Vietnam-Perkasie 6.

I had been brainwashed since I was a kid. My father had been a Marine in the South Pacific during World War II. Although he never talked about it all that much, when I was in the second grade I had his web belt and his Marine Corps insignia. I always thought the Marines were elite.<sup>31</sup>

Two items are of significance in these last two quotes. First, adults close to these individuals served, inadvertently, as agents of cultural integration into the ideology of war. America's cultural industries like Hollywood were so able to saturate the population with its code for war and warrior/heroics, that youth developed an interpretive mechanism that allowed them to transfer their admiration for the representation of the warrior/hero to the adults in their everyday lives. Conversely, the presence of war veterans in the family and community of these youth served to make the media representation of warrior/heroics all the more plausible. The adults need not have overtly promoted strong patriotic/nationalistic sentiments in their children, although some certainly did. Most often, via the influence of mass media, youth developed and sustained their own meaning to the war experiences of their relatives. Secondly, the combat medals, web belt and other military insignia functioned as tangible signifiers of being part of the American warrior/hero myth. Via these signifiers, Vietnam veterans

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<sup>31</sup>Baker, Nam 9.

in their childhoods could feel that the "good war" and their father's or neighbors participation in it was a source of family pride and personal identity. The war status of one veteran's father led him to believe that of all the adults he encountered as a child, only war veterans had any claim to admirability:

Like my father, the people that were very assertive, self-assured and everything had been the people that went to World War II and went overseas. They'd seen actual combat and they had gotten medals....The people who tended to be quieter and less respected were people who had been rejected by the draft or who had missed out on the war for whatever reason.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, not all heroic figures in the eyes of young people in the pre-Vietnam period were war heroes. Nevertheless, the other cultural heroes of the period seemed to easily connect with the qualities of the warrior/hero. It can be argued that the influence of heroic figures lay, to a large extent, in the interchangability of signification from one cultural form to another. Ron Kovic comments on how easily and efficiently Hollywood movies made for the interfacing of a variety of heroes within the number of popular cultural forms:

I remember that I loved baseball more than anything else in the world and my favorite team was the New York Yankees. Every chance I got I watched the games on TV in my house with

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<sup>32</sup>Baker, Nam 10.

Castiglia, waiting for Mickey Mantle to come to the plate....Mantle was our hero. He was like a god to us, a huge golden statue in center field. Everytime the cameras showed him on the screen I couldn't take my eyes off him.<sup>33</sup>

While clearly establishing the Yankee super-star as a hero of unqualified attraction to Kovic, the following comment reveals the ease with which the athlete/hero interchanges with the warrior/hero in his childhood imagination:

Castiglia and I saw Sands of Iwo Jima together. The Marine Corps hymn was playing in the background as we sat glued to our seats, humming the hymn together and watching Sergeant Stryker, played by John Wayne, charge up the hill....And then they showed the men raising the flag on Iwo Jima with the Marines' hymn still playing....I loved the song so much, and every time I heard it I would think of John Wayne and the brave men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima. Like Mickey Mantle and the fabulous New York Yankees, John Wayne in Sands of Iwo Jima became one of my heroes.<sup>34</sup>

What is notably absent from veterans' youthful integration into the cultural code for war is even rudimentary knowledge of the issues involved in the war in Southeast Asia in which they would soon be involved. They consented to the signification of the signs, symbols, images, and representations of America's ideology developed by the confluence of social forces that drew them in. One veteran gives a sense of the absence of

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<sup>33</sup>Kovic, Born On the Fourth of July 37.

<sup>34</sup>Kovic, Born On the Fourth of July 36.

knowledge prior to his enlistment into the military:

Before I went to war, I just never thought about politics...I always liked to play soldier; what American boy doesn't? I was in boy scouts. I played in the school marching band, our country, right or wrong was taught to me in a hundred different ways....My father's store had an American flag decal on its door. It was all very natural with us.<sup>35</sup>

Another veteran also notes that he was ignorant of any indepth understanding of what Vietnam was all about prior to his enlisting: "Our fathers fought fascism, and I'm not sure they knew what that meant. Now here we were being asked to fight communism, and I know I had absolutely no idea what that was. But when my country called I and hundreds like me answered."<sup>36</sup>

The agenda of this chapter has been to demonstrate that the mass media, especially Hollywood film, was a dominant part of the ideological processes of construction, maintenance, and reproduction of an overarching American cultural code for war during the pre-Vietnam period. The ideology inscribed within this code derived in part from the institutional linkages and ideological positions of those in power positions within these institutions. Many Vietnam veterans in their youth

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<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Murray Polner, No Victory Parades (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) 104.

<sup>36</sup>Informal interview with Vietnam veteran, Washington, D.C., April 20, 1991.

assimilated and actively consented to this ideology since it was reinforced in cultural locations outside of, but subtly related to, mass media. This quality of American culture, with its dominant code for war and warrior/heroics made Vietnam veterans in their youth psychologically prepared for accepting and embracing war.<sup>37</sup> However, as this study will discuss subsequently, this hegemonic code for war would turn out to be a fragile and problematic interpretive frame as it encountered the reality of Vietnam. Indeed, the very images, symbols, and representations that constituted this hegemonic code would ultimately, in a different historical and political context, become the raw materials that anti-war Vietnam veterans would appropriate and use to effectively

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<sup>37</sup>A striking expression of the overall constitution of the American cultural code for war as discussed in this chapter is found in the following opening monologue, framed by the background of an enormous American flag, by George C. Scott in the 1970 film Patton:

Men, all this stuff you've heard about America not wanting to fight, wanting to stay out of the war, is a lot of horse dung. Americans traditionally love to fight. All real Americans love the sting of battle. When you were kids you all admired the champion marble shooter, the fastest runner, the big league ball player, the toughest boxers. Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time. I wouldn't give a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed. That's why Americans have never lost, and will never lose a war, because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.

communicate their opposition to the Vietnam War via the mainstream mass media.

## CHAPTER III

## VIETNAM VETERAN ANTIWAR ACTIVISM AND THE MASS MEDIA

The previous chapter sought to demonstrate how commercial mass media--especially many Hollywood war movies of the 1940s and 50s--in combination with other cultural locations, functioned as a socially sustained system of ideological signification. This system of ideological signification constructed and sustained a representational framework regarding the meaning of war and the nature of the American warrior/hero. In this, images and objects of a military, and even non-military nature (i.e. weapons, medals, uniforms, cultural heroes, the opposition between "good guys" and "bad guys," war itself) were assigned meanings consistent with the underlying ideological rationales accorded to military service and the acceptance, even welcoming, of war. In addition, it was observed how Vietnam veterans in their youth during the 1950s and early 60s readily assimilated and embellished these images and objects within the experience of their everyday lives, thereby reinforcing a hegemonic discourse of war and warrior-heroics within the range of "normality" and "common sense." As a consequence, in their youth these individuals were psychologically and ideologically prepared to accept eventual participation in

the Vietnam War.

Once in Vietnam, however, this dominant cultural code for war would function as an interpretive frame, but a fragile one, one that for many who served in Vietnam would rarely endure the average twelve or thirteen month tour of duty. Along these lines, in June, 1967 J. William Fulbright, then Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, read the following statement into the Congressional record, gleaned from a letter written by an American soldier writing from Vietnam who understandably wished to remain anonymous:

I went into Vietnam a hard charging 2nd Lieutenant sure that I had answered the plea of a victimized country in their struggle against communist aggression. That belief lasted about two weeks. Instead of fighting communist aggression, I found that 90% of the time our military actions are directed against the people of South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

Whether it took two weeks, two months, or two whole tours of duty, the belief systems of American servicepeople in Vietnam were deeply and fundamentally challenged, leaving confusion, disillusionment and as in no other war in America's history, active dissension both within the military, and organized anti-war resistance by veterans. The process by which one made the transformation from "hard charging" soldier to antiwar G.I. and veteran began

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<sup>1</sup>Congressional Record. June 16, 1967 1614.

most tangibly with what might be termed the ideological dissonance catalyzed by lived experiences in Vietnam. Ideological dissonance refers to the manner in which the set of cultural expectations about war sustained by the systems of ideological signification discussed previously came to be undermined and inverted as participation in the actual war began.

Interviewing several Vietnam veterans in his 1974 study Spoils of War, psychologist Charles Levy was one of the first to recognize the inversionary qualities of the Vietnam war. Integration into the cultural code for war taught essentially simple lessons. Aggression by the warrior/hero brought victory and glory in the cultural code. Moreover, as Levy notes, aggression further reinforced in basic military training brought praise from drill instructors and their promise that similar behavior in Vietnam would, likewise, bring victory. Passivity, on the other hand, was discouraged with epithets of weakness and defeat, reinforcing a fundamental opposition in which aggression came to signal victory, and passivity, defeat. However, veterans in Levy's study show how the aggression/victory, passivity/defeat axiom came to be inverted:

When I got there, two VC held down the whole platoon just by firing over our heads. Then word was passed out, "Stay down. Don't waste rounds. They'll just do this for fifteen minutes and leave." And being a new guy and thinking how the marines are supposed to be so

tough, I said, "Why don't we go get them?" But, of course, they knew what they were doing. We probably would've went and got them. There would've been booby traps all over the place. And we would've probably lost another twenty guys getting two.<sup>2</sup>

In Vietnam, American patrols would often be out for days without any "contact" with the enemy. American soldiers thus found themselves being cut down by booby traps or sniper fire, or even by their own explosive devices. The elusiveness of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, coupled with the sheer volume of American aggression, often led to situations where the U.S. war effort appeared to devour itself.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, the cognitive elements of aggression and passivity were ripped from the cultural moorings of what American G.I.s had come to expect them to signify (i.e. victory and defeat, respectively). Aggression and passivity thus became signs in search of new meanings to inform them, since the old meanings were completely out of synch with daily experiences of the war. Aggression was not the sign of victory, but rather of the frustrations of taking casualties and not being able to get the

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<sup>2</sup>Charles Levy, Spoils of War (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 55.

<sup>3</sup>See Christian G. Appy, Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), chapters 5 ("The Terms of Battle") and 6 ("Drawing Fire and Laying Waste").

enemy to stand and fight in a set-piece battle. In this sense, even if no American casualties were incurred on operations, one could not interpret this to mean the war was being won. The U.S. military's central rubric in Vietnam was "search and destroy." If the enemy could not be easily found or engaged, he could not be easily destroyed. Just as crucially, the "search" part of the equation required that American forces transform themselves into living targets to attract Vietnamese contact. Ironically, the aggressive "search" resulted in the vulnerability anticipated by passivity, while the passivity of the Vietnamese became a form of aggression.

Victory in Vietnam was not signified by aggression, battles won, or territory taken and held. Rather, victory for the U.S. military came to be represented by the number of dead Vietnamese quantified under an ominous category known as the "kill-ratio" or "body count." With very few exceptions, all tactical and strategic goals were directed at increasing the body count. As a former Army officer confided:

In my division the body count was everything....Our operations were designed to clear out enemy positions in a specific location. One battalion commander, I remember, was such a hardass about body count--you see, promotion in the officer corp hinged upon consistently high body counts--he'd leave his men out in the field until he got what he considered a respectable count. So this really put alot of

pressure on the men.<sup>4</sup>

With pressure from atop the chain of command, the padding of the body count became routine, and affected the daily practices regarding all Vietnamese, as a former company commander in the 25th Infantry Division noted:

The extreme stress was on what we called the kill-ratio--how many U.S. killed and how many of the enemy killed--or the body count. And this became the big thing. This is what your efficiency report was written on...the more you kill the more efficient you are. After a while, we didn't bother making much of a distinction between "enemy" and "friendly" Vietnamese--it was just kill as many gooks as you can, and tally it for the body count.<sup>5</sup>

Another former soldier of the 25th Division confirms this report. In a war crimes tribunal, he testified that, "...we were ordered to shoot anything that moved, to pile up the bodies just as a matter of standard operating procedure, because alot of our officers were sort of fanatical on this. They believed the only good Vietnamese was a dead Vietnamese."<sup>6</sup>

The underlying ideological rationale for American intervention in Vietnam hinged upon the Cold War discourse of America's benevolent intentions, or what might

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Eric M. Bergerud, Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993) 139.

<sup>5</sup>Bergerud, Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning 140.

<sup>6</sup>Bergerud, Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning 140.

simply be termed the "noble cause" syndrome--i.e. that we were in Vietnam to "help" the Vietnamese, to "save" them from the brutality of communist aggression. However, when the South Vietnamese did not respond with the expected signs of gratitude, American soldiers found it rather perplexing, as expressed by the following G.I. in a letter home: "...the Vietnamese people do not appreciate what we are trying to do for them...they don't seem to appreciate life. Here we are fighting and dying to save them, to protect their communities, and they just don't seem to care."<sup>7</sup> Expressing a bit more intense indignation, another soldier complained, "we were there to help but the Vietnamese are so stupid they can't understand that a great people want to help a weak people."<sup>8</sup> Both of these statements show that these individuals were still embracing the same ideological framework to which their culture had assigned them. A "weak" people would steal from "great" and benevolent American defenders only if the weak were also "stupid."

However, during their experience in Vietnam, other American G.I.s did not remain so resolutely attached to the hegemonic discourse of American benevolence. Army

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<sup>7</sup>Bill Adler, ed., Letters From Vietnam (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1967) 147.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Murry Polner, No Victory Parades (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1972) 249-250.

veteran John Riggan, writing his parents about a Vietnamese boy whose sister had just been killed by an American military vehicle, began articulating an alternative explanation regarding the defiance of the South Vietnamese: "the look on [the boy's] face mirrored all the frustrations and failures of our foreign intervention. It was anger and understandably hate--hate at what he already knew to be true (as I did) that though there would be an 'investigation' there would be no blame fixed and no justice rendered by us."<sup>9</sup> Here, the response of the Vietnamese people is not perceived as a function of stupidity, but rather of injustice experienced at the hands of a foreign country too powerful to be taken to task for its actions. For Riggan, the interpretive functioning of his culture's dominant ideological code for war shows signs of strain. First, the Vietnamese are clearly recognized as valuing human life, but more crucially, American justice is seen as duplicitous. Moreover, Riggan seems acutely aware of the incongruities between proclaimed concerns with preserving freedom and justice for Vietnamese, and America's racism:

We seem still cursed by a generalized inability to view these people whom we "came to save" as equals. First they must have clean towns, nice cars, TV sets and western clothes, before we

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<sup>9</sup>Edward Edelman, ed., Dear America: Letters From Vietnam (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1985) 115.

will accept them as being our peers...A Vietnamese remains a "gook" no matter whose side he's on.<sup>10</sup>

Not all American soldiers expressed themselves with the clarity and insight of Riggan. Nevertheless, his sentiments can be seen as representative of a large number of troops who witnessed their country's ideological foundation for war exploded by the actual lived experience of serving in Vietnam. Writing home to his father, a G.I. confessed:

Fighting for a people who have no concern for the war, people who do not understand, who knew where the enemy were, where the booby-traps were hidden, yet gave no support.... This country is no gain that I can see, Dad. We're fighting, dying for a people who resent our being here.<sup>11</sup>

No one knows better than veterans of the Vietnam War the debilitating feeling of fighting in a war when the most fundamental ideological beliefs that brought them to the battlefield were not sustained by their daily experiences. Indeed, without such an ideological foundation, the entire representational system of signs, symbols and images that constituted the dominant cultural mythos of war eroded and were deactivated by many. As the G.I. continued in his letter home:

I will probably get the Bronze Star for the

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<sup>10</sup>Edelman, Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam 116.

<sup>11</sup>Edelman, Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam 214.

firefight. Lt. Scott will get a Silver Star, and it is supposed to suffice for Lt. Scott's life. I guess I'm bitter now, Dad. This war is all wrong. I will continue to fight, win medals and fight the elements and hardships of this country. But that is because I'm a soldier and it's my job and there are other people who depend on me. That's my excuse. That's all I have, theories and excuses....<sup>12</sup>

The reflections on war expressed in this letter reveal an erosion of the representational value of medals won for bravery and valor, not to mention the lost sense of purpose. Battle, or "contact" with the enemy also inverted the dictum of the good guy/bad guy opposition. One Vietnam veteran recalled the precise moment when his dearly held beliefs about the "good guys" and the "bad guys" were burst asunder, where culturally inscribed expectations collided with harsh experience:

It's getting to be a hell of a long time ago, but I can remember it exactly almost as if it was yesterday. I'd already been in Vietnam for a few weeks. We had been fighting all day to retake an area around a series of villages, and we took heavy casualties. Once we finally rid the place of the Viet Cong, I remember walking through one of the villages expecting to be welcomed the way the French welcomed my father and uncles when they liberated France from the Nazis in World War II. Instead, I saw hatred in the eyes of the Vietnamese. Then it all hit me like a ton of bricks. All the shit up to that moment sort of crystallized before my eyes. Jesus, I thought, we weren't the liberators, we weren't the saviors. It was us! We

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<sup>12</sup>Edelman, Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam 214.

were the fuckin' enemy!<sup>13</sup>

In this statement, we see clearly elucidated the tangible progression of dis-integration from the cultural code for war caused by the ideological conflicts actuated by the experience of Vietnam. The notion of a hated American "liberator" was an abrasion to the constructed expectations that this individual brought with him to Vietnam. The expectation was that American forces would be construed as benevolent liberators and would be welcomed with gratitude, as was the case in World War II and World War II Hollywood movies. The experience of war in Vietnam inverted these assumptions. If Americans were not accepted as liberators, America might be "the enemy."

It took experiences like these to undermine and ultimately shatter the perception that America was fighting for the freedom of Vietnam. It took little else to bring some to the harsh realization that the war was not about preserving freedom for anyone, not even America's. As Army sergeant James Henry noted:

It takes only a few months to be subjugated to the circumstances of Vietnam when you realize that you are not fighting for Ky's freedom; you are not fighting for Thieu's freedom, you are not fighting for your mother's freedom or anybody's freedom. You're just getting your

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<sup>13</sup>Informal interview with Vietnam veteran, Freeville, N.Y., 27 December, 1993.

asses shot up and all you want to do is go home.<sup>14</sup>

Left with only a series of free floating signifiers with which to deal, G.I.s understandably attached them to the only tangible center of meaning that had any true constancy: individual and unit survival. From within this domain, war itself loses its claim to glamor, excitement, and seduction. Temporary meanings may be attached to old signs, symbols, and images, while some such as the warrior/hero figure may be discarded entirely. In writing a friend about the very nature of war itself, Thomas Pellaton provides compelling revelations about each:

There are the usual scares of war all over--the bomb and artillery craters, the ruined villages and the like. These things you can understand as the by-product of war--but I can't accept the human damage. Not just the dead, but the G.I.s who can't speak in coherent sentences anymore, or ones who have found they love to kill, or the Vietnamese, who must have been a very gentle and graceful people before the war turned them into thieves, black marketeers and prostitutes.... I feel like I'm at the bottom of a great sewer.<sup>15</sup>

According to Pellaton, war is not the glorious uplifting rite of passage into manhood as portrayed by American culture. On the contrary, war degrades even the "good guys." War is likened to a "sewer" into which one

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<sup>14</sup>Edelman, Dear America: Letters From Vietnam 106.

<sup>15</sup>Edelman, Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam 132.

is lowered, making the participants sewer-like, not heroic. Warrior/heros derive their status ostensibly from moral substance, yet America's military agenda for fighting the Vietnamese produced a moral vacuum from which normative judgement became confused. Like Pellaton, other soldiers confided their feelings to family and friends back in "the world." After an ambush that claimed the lives of three of his buddies, this Marine informed his wife: "I'm so confused. At the services today they were talking about God protecting people and eternal life and I felt so desolate, so despairing. I know there is no reward for them, or any hope."<sup>16</sup>

The disruption of one's entire ideological frame of reference caused some Vietnam G.I.s to openly question their own behavior, and the behavior of their fellow soldiers. In his memoir And A Hard Rain Fell, John Ketwig explores his one year tour of duty as a driver in an Army transportation unit, where he had occasion to witness incidents of interrogation and torture of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. One incident involved the interrogation and subsequent torture of three Vietnamese prostitutes at the hands of a group of U.S. Green Berets. He viewed this passively, and then went about his duties, since the scene had become common. However, this routin-

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<sup>16</sup>Edelman, Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam 132.

ization of atrocity did not put a halt to his own questioning, but rather served as a further catalyst for it. The areas to which his questions were directed were located squarely within the overall framework of the cultural code for war. "What had I become?", Ketwig asked. "The Army said it would 'make you a man.' Was this a macho rite? A masculine right? What had we become? Who is to blame? Our parents who gave us so much? The military leaders who cultivated an atmosphere of genocide and chauvinism?" The question "What had we become?" directs ardor toward the warrior/hero images. Ketwig found no ideological reference points to explain the atrocious behavior of the elite of the elite of American forces--the Green Berets, nor could his own passive acquiescence be explained. "Who is to blame?" is a query U.S. policy makers did not want its civilians, let alone its soldiers, to ask in the open-ended fashion of Ketwig. That question was to be directed permanently at the Vietnamese enemy. Yet interestingly, and perhaps exceptionally, Ketwig does not target the Vietnamese. He has no difficulty situating their behavior in an unambiguous context, and in so doing places his own country's presence in Vietnam outside America's self-definition:

The girl at the firebase had died so bravely.  
Just a whore. She must have known she was  
going to die. The other two must have known  
it, too. None of them would get out of there

alive.... They knew why they were there. They lived there. They had been invaded by strangers....I understood their rage. Hadn't anyone told them we were there for their own good? Were we?<sup>17</sup>

The actual lived experience of the Vietnam war encouraged G.I.s and returned veterans to scrutinize and rethink the fundamental elements animating their nations ideological code for war. Of course, not all, or even a majority, of G.I.s who went to Vietnam returned to America to actively protest the war. Nevertheless, G.I. and especially veteran antiwar dissent did reach unprecedented levels and the expression of active opposition that emerged from the ranks of average servicepeople displayed the signs of a deep estrangement from any notion that Vietnam brought heroics or glory to themselves or America as a nation. Moreover, the expression of this opposition spawned the development of perhaps the most potent form of mass-mediated cultural politics of the Vietnam era, for more than any other group that opposed the war, G.I.s and veterans appropriated and radically transformed the ideological space assigned them by the dominant cultural code for war and the notion of the warrior/hero, reconfiguring their own representational sign value as it were, and in so doing challenging the larger culture to inter-

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<sup>17</sup>John Ketwig, And A Hard Rain Fell (New York: MacMillan, 1985) 73.

rogate and question its celebration of war and the warrior.

As initially G.I.s, and then returned Vietnam veterans expressed dissent against the war, their use of popular culture forms and mass media became a necessity, not only as a self-conscious means of reaching a large audience, but also as a reservoir of representations, symbols, and images which provided crucial source materials from which their own oppositional communicative style developed. Appropriation of these source materials from mass media entails what anthropologist Michel de Certeau refers to as "poaching." Briefly stated, poaching is the active process whereby individuals and collectivities appropriate and re-appropriate a variety of cultural forms and social images gleaned from various cultural locations in the practice of their everyday communication.<sup>18</sup> In a society characterized by ideological hegemony, poaching is a necessary occurrence and is indicative of a highly dynamic and complex relationship between the public and mass media. The appropriation of representations, images, objects and symbols from other discourses also provides a productive illustration of Gottdiener's notion of transfunctionalization.

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<sup>18</sup>Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 77-89.

Vietnam veterans who resisted and opposed the war poached and reconfigured images, symbols and objects primarily from three interrelated social locations: first and foremost the representational forms of mass media--especially in regards to representations of war and the warrior/hero, but also their own experiences in the military, and the stylistic elements of the 1960s counterculture. These symbolic and imagistic materials were combined and transformed into unique and potent communicative ensembles. G.I.s and veterans transformed the meanings of these elements as they directed their antiwar sentiments at the American public. Moreover, these powerful acts of oppositional communication contributed tangibly both to the end of the war and also to a fundamental if somewhat short-lived reformulation of the American ideological code for war in the immediate post-Vietnam years. Interestingly, within the framework of this entire process we can observe that the initial audience users of mass media forms like Hollywood war movies (veterans in their pre-Vietnam youth) became the producers during their political activism. Conversely, the producers (the media industries) became the users in the post-war period. It would be mistaken, however, to assume that the later reciprocal relationship was one of equality, for it was not. As will be discussed in Chapter

4, it was ultimately one of a re-established and rehabilitated hegemony regarding war and the warrior/hero figure via the representation of Vietnam veterans in Hollywood film and television, albeit at a different and more problematic ideological equilibrium point than was the case in the pre-Vietnam years.

For the remainder of this chapter we will observe the ways in which antiwar Vietnam veterans attempted to use the mass media as a tool for effectively communicating dissent and opposition to the wars continuance. In so doing, these veterans attacked, poached and transfunctionalized the most powerful imagistic elements within the dominant cultural code for war--the celebration of war, and the very image of the warrior/hero. When all of the disparate imagery of the Vietnam era is considered (i.e. presidents and politicians reassuring the public that "victory" or "peace is at hand," protesting college students, flag-draped coffins, anguished Vietnamese peasants, black pajamaed Viet Cong guerrillas) none exceeds the cultural and symbolic power of the American warrior/hero signified by both in-service G.I.s and Vietnam veterans. It can be argued that the image of the warrior/hero was the defining element undergirding the entire dominant cultural code for war. Antiwar veteran poaching and reconstruction of that element undermined,

challenged, and fundamentally reconfigured this ideological matrix.

It should be noted that during the initial years of the Vietnam build-up in the mid-1960s, use of the unfettered dominant warrior/hero image was largely the preserve of those voicing prowar attitudes. The coupling of the warrior image with prowar sentiments gained momentum as American military involvement in Vietnam grew and as antiwar and countercultural sentiments began making themselves heard nationally. Not only did the employment of the image of the warrior/hero fulfill the usual function of war's promotion, it came to be initially used by prowar forces as a club with which to bash growing dissent and opposition to the war. For example, in June of 1965 after the mass media had given extensive coverage to a Students For A Democratic Society sponsored national demonstration against the war following the first large-scale deployment of U.S. combat forces to Vietnam, Democratic Congressman Richard Ichord, upon returning from a visit to South Vietnam, declared that the soldiers he had spoken to would, "prefer to be home, but not under the circumstances proposed by those terrible demonstrators." One of the soldiers Ichord had spoken to had been killed-in-action shortly thereafter, and Ichord claimed that the soldier's death "ought to silence the rabble-rousers,

unwashed beatniks, peace-at-any-price naysayers...and the misguided idealists who oppose the war in Vietnam." The silence of the soldier's death, in Ichord's opinion, "ought to silence the antiwar voices."<sup>19</sup>

Within this prowar discourse, the death of American soldiers functioned to discourage, marginalize and invalidate growing antiwar sentiment at home. In this sense, Ichord's statements can be seen as representing a miniaturized version of what Arlington National Cemetery represented for prowar ideological discourse in general: an underground warehouse of silent warriors that could be symbolically resurrected on Memorial Days during the war to "silence the rabble-rousers and unwashed beatniks." In a similar vein, in 1967 the Washington Star published an irate letter responding to their coverage of the massive "March on the Pentagon" antiwar protest during the fall of that year. The letter writer was "livid that these protesters would undermine the valiant efforts of our boys fighting and dying in Vietnam to thwart the tyranny of communist aggression. The thought of the so-called protestors cavorting only a stones throw away from Arlington Cemetery, final resting place for so many who died bravely for the freedom of this country, just makes me sick...Not only is this an insult to those who fight

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<sup>19</sup>Quoted in The National Guardian, July 3, 1965: 2.

gallantly for their country, but it encourages the demoralization of our boys in Vietnam. "<sup>20</sup>

And yet, as we have seen, Vietnam G.I.s did not need stateside antiwar protestors to encourage demoralization. The actual experience of the war did that. Interestingly, there is ample evidence that suggests that many Vietnam G.I.s maintained their mental stability and morale by actively appropriating the signs and symbols of protest and resistance developed by the "rabble-rousers" and "so-called protestors." This was especially true after 1968 when, following the Tet Offensive, it was plain to see that the war was continuing without any semblance of "victory" in sight and many of those drafted into Vietnam service had gained some knowledge of, and even sympathy for, the antiwar movement and the youth counterculture. Indeed, by 1969 Vietnam G.I.s were communicating anti-war sentiments with those "back in the world." One G.I. in Vietnam wrote the following letter to the Kaleidoscope, and underground counterculture newspaper from Madison, Wisconsin, in which he confided:

Over here in Vietnam most of the guys wear peace medals and buttons on their uniforms. These are precious commodities since they are not available in our P.X.'s for some strange reason. Those who don't have them draw them on

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<sup>20</sup>Letter to the editor, Washington Star November 2, 1967: 22.

their hats or helmet covers.<sup>21</sup>

Another Vietnam G.I., writing to The New York Times, personally decoded his own warrior/hero image by calling attention to the signs and symbols of the counterculture and antiwar movement he had appropriated:

If you look closely, you'll see beads and a peace symbol under all this ammo. I may look like Pancho Villa on the outside but on the inside, I'm nothing but a peacenik. I fight hard because that's the only way to stay alive out here in the boonies. I don't believe this war is necessary. I just work hard at surviving so I can come home and protest all the killing.<sup>22</sup>

While peace symbols and beads might be interpreted as only surface elements of dissent, nevertheless these expressions of opposition through counter-cultural symbols were the daily forms of resistance that signaled the disengagement from military codes of appearance and behavior in the war zone. Conversely, the appropriation of these items signaled an integration into antiwar sentiments, and instigated the development of the anti-war/warrior as a compelling counter image to that of the warrior/hero.

Although the everyday forms of dissent and resistance maintained by Vietnam G.I.s catalyzed the evolution of this counter image, this in and of itself was not

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<sup>21</sup>Madison Kaleidoscope, July 12, 1969: 4.

<sup>22</sup>The New York Times, August 4, 1969: C23.

enough to consolidate the full blown image of the anti-war/warrior as a form of overt political opposition. The task of consolidating that image via the transfunctionalization of mass cultural, military, and counter-cultural images and objects necessitated a greater degree of autonomy from the military than in-service G.I.s had at their disposal. Acts of resistance from within the military afforded Vietnam G.I. dissent some access to the public but the military could rather easily contain overt assaults against its own control of symbolic expression by G.I.s. The group that could consolidate and sustain the counter image of the antiwar/warrior against the warrior/hero image and in so doing reconfigure the elements within the dominant cultural code for war were discharged Vietnam veterans. They more than anyone knew the extent to which the dominant meanings of the representations, images and symbols of this cultural code had been disclosed as false by Vietnam. Crucially, as returned "warriors" they could also establish legitimacy with the mainstream of American society in a way other antiwar forces could not. In essence, Vietnam veterans deconstructed America's dominant ideological discourse of war.

Of course, antiwar veterans did face obstacles. Their antiwar voice broke down the dominant cultural code

that structured war veterans solidly within prowar discourses. Challenging this code was not accepted lightly by prowar forces. As will be discussed later, especially under the Nixon administration prowar advocates attempted to disclaim the validity of antiwar veterans. When the administration failed, they sought fraudulent means to neutralize the symbolic power of the veterans' movement. These means failed as well, but the desperation with which the Nixon administration endeavored to marginalize and negate the antiwar veterans suggests that veteran opposition deprived prowar forces of a valuable image used to insulate mainstream America from antiwar sentiments. As historian Priscilla Murolo has noted, "the tens of thousands of Vietnam veterans who joined the peace movement helped bring opposition to the war into the American mainstream."<sup>23</sup>

The American public got its first initial look at Vietnam veteran antiwar opposition when Master Sergeant Donald Duncan, a ten year career Army Green Beret, set his warrior/hero image into the service of the antiwar cause. In the mass media coverage of Duncan's antiwar efforts, we can observe the latitude that veterans were able to muster in appropriating and transfunctionalizing

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<sup>23</sup>Priscilla Murolo, "Remembering Vietnam," Radical History Review 33 (1985): 182-183.

the representational signifiers associated with the image of the warrior/hero as a means of cultural/political protest.

Duncan's record as a warrior was, by the standards of the U.S. military, outstanding and impeccable--he was a member of the elite Green Berets for over six of his ten year military career. He had served an eighteen month tour in Vietnam where he was decorated for bravery four times with the Bronze Star and Silver Star medals. In March, 1965, Duncan refused a field promotion to captain, and in September of that year, while being considered for another Silver Star, he resigned from the Army, citing his experiences in Vietnam as the primary motivating factor for his decision.<sup>24</sup> Shortly after announcing his resignation, Duncan decided to go public with his views. His public disclosures via the mass media reveal the self-conscious transfunctionalization of the warrior/hero image and military signs and symbols ordinarily the preserve of hegemonic culture and ideology.

To be sure, Duncan was well prepared for his role as an antiwar media activist. One of the duty assignments of his Green Beret service was a fifteen month stint as a

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<sup>24</sup>Donald Duncan, The New Legions (New York: Random House, 1967).

public relations NCO for the Special Forces. Duncan recalls that it was not very difficult to sell the Green Berets to the American public in the early 1960s, since the Special forces were strongly buttressed in several arenas of popular culture:

We weren't a hard product to sell, and the American public was ready....There was a best-selling book, record and comic strip about the Green Berets and the glories of war, Green Beret dolls and a Green Beret exercise book. For ten dollars Sears would send you a Special Forces gunpost, complete with machine gun, hand grenades, rockets, field telephone, and two plastic Green Beret soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

Duncan first gained widespread exposure in the national media on February 10, 1966. Over the next month the New York Times ran four articles pertaining to Duncan's disclosures about the Vietnam War. In addition, the left-leaning news magazine Ramparts ran Duncan on their March cover, gave him a feature article and even named him "military editor" of the magazine. In the mass media coverage afforded Duncan we see the cultural image of the warrior/hero used to counter the dominant ideological signification marshalled by the mass media itself. Duncan was too much the consummate American warrior/hero to be dismissed or ignored by the media. The first New York Times article run on page two of the February 10 edition was headlined, "VETERAN OF SPECIAL FORCES DE-

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<sup>25</sup>Duncan, The New Legions 198-199.

NOUNCES U.S. POLICY IN VIETNAM AS 'A LIE' ". Reporter Jack Raymond presented Duncan in a fairly evenhanded way, giving Duncan ample opportunity to voice his charges, although at one point Raymond declares Duncan's charges "sweeping allegations."<sup>26</sup> Despite this, the reader is informed that Duncan as a returned warrior stands alone as an authentic voice of protest: "Qualified sources could recall no other instances in which a veteran of combat in Vietnam had so sharply and publicly assailed United States intervention there."<sup>27</sup>

The delineation of Duncan's war experience as a Green Beret, a combat veteran, and the medals he won in service to his country were the signs of authenticity which made Duncan's antiwar sentiments newsworthy for mainstream media operating under the premise of objectivity. Even so, the Times rather quickly sought negations of Duncan's charges. In the February 11, 1966 issue, the Times began its attempt at negation in an article headlined, "GENERALS DENY EX-GIS CHARGE OF TORTURE METHODS TAUGHT." In this story, past and present Generals of the U.S. military denied Duncan's charges that Vietnamese

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<sup>26</sup>Jack Raymond, "Veteran of Special Forces Denounces U.S. Policy In Vietnam As A 'Lie'," New York Times 10 February 1966: 2.

<sup>27</sup>Raymond "Veteran of Special Forces Denounces U.S. Policy" 2.

prisoners of war were routinely tortured and executed by South Vietnamese troops trained by Green Berets. Very little information other than the denials was presented, leaving Duncan's charges questioned, but certainly not disproven.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, the Times ran only one photograph of Duncan in its multi-article coverage of his opposition to the war. In the February 11 issue, Duncan appears "out of uniform," attired in a civilian suit and tie. However, the public was about to witness another more oppositionally powerful visualization of Duncan in the March issue of Ramparts. On the cover of this issue, we see the creative appropriation and alteration of both military and mass cultural symbols and imagery. Duncan's pose in the cover photo is deeply resonant with popular culture and military imagery of the American warrior/hero. He appears in a bust shot in full Army dress uniform with the distinctive green beret on his head. His imposing expression--steely eyes, square jutting jaw--is like that found on countless military recruitment posters. Studio lights highlight the details of his uniform, emphasizing especially his upper left breast pocket which is densely adorned with the symbols of his

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<sup>28</sup>Jack Raymond, "Generals Deny Ex-G.I.'s Charge That Torture Methods Were Taught," New York Times 11 February 1966: 8.

military service and acumen: his airborne wings, Combat Infantrymen's Badge, Silver Star and other combat medals. In addition, his full sleeve of Master Sergeant stripes further signify Duncan's commitment to and experience in the military, and by implication the tenets of the American warrior mythology prior to Vietnam. This cover photo bears a striking and uncanny resemblance not only to dozens of Army and Green Beret recruiting posters, but also to the album cover of Sergeant Berry Sander's "The Ballad of the Green Berets," also released in 1966 and one of the most popular records of that year. No military public relations office would turn this pose down. In many respects it is a potent embodiment of what the American popular culture industries and the U.S. military had been representing as the true warrior/hero for years. And yet with just two words displayed above the peak of Duncan's green beret, this mass media image is reconfigured and thrown into ambiguity. The title reads simply: "I QUIT."

This Ramparts cover photo pose would be replicated in the dust jacket cover of the Random House edition of Duncan's 1967 book The New Legions. This dust jacket displayed essentially the same image without the "I QUIT," and did not go unnoticed by book critics. William Kennedy wrote a review of The New Legions for the maga-

zine America. From the opening remarks of his review, it is difficult to ascertain whether Kennedy is more offended by the dust jacket imagery, or the actual content of the book:

He appears on the dust jacket of The New Legions in full uniform, despite the fact that he is now a civilian. His book is an expansion of articles first published in Ramparts. These, also, were prompted through the use of large pictures of Mr. Duncan uniformed impeccably as a Special Forces NCO.<sup>29</sup>

The following passage of Kennedy's review is instructive in the way that some gatekeepers of the mainstream mass media resent having control of symbolic expression fall into the hands of forces of opposition and dissent:

Mr. Duncan has done his considerable talent as a writer grave harm by an unrestrained expression of opinion and emotion concerning subjects about which he has only superficial knowledge. The editors of Ramparts and whoever designs the dust jackets at Random House have compounded the harm by their exploitation of the Special Forces uniform.<sup>30</sup>

Kennedy is clearly outraged by Duncan's appropriation and revision of the connotations of the warrior/hero image. How else could Kennedy insist that there is "exploitation of the Special Forces uniform"? It is interesting to note that no similar outrage was expressed concerning Barry Sadler's record company's use of the same uniform,

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<sup>29</sup>William Kennedy, America 22 July 1967: 97.

<sup>30</sup>Kennedy 198.

medals and pose on the album cover of The Ballad of the Green Berets, nor was there any discussion of the "exploitation of the Special Forces uniform" when late in the 1960s singer Martha Raye was made an honorary Green Beret, issued the uniform, the beret and the Combat Infantrymen's Badge. It is the intentionality of Duncan's appropriation and alteration of the Green Beret image that bothers Kennedy, not his remorse for the exploitation of the uniform.

With Duncan's and Ramparts use of the military uniform, medals and pose as an altered and reconstructed set of images, we observe the creative appropriation of representational signs and symbols that are joined in combination with forms of protest as veteran antiwar resistance is initiated. Moreover, this early example of veteran transfunctionalization allows us to observe more clearly how cultural forms can be assigned oppositional signification through the intentionality of the senders, and how the image of the antiwar/warrior would come to occupy a more strategic place in the movement to end the Vietnam war henceforth. To be sure, this reconfiguration was a single, isolated and instantaneous action, and did not immediately carry over into a distinctive oppositional style either for Duncan or other veterans. However, it must be remembered that veteran opposition to the

Vietnam war was still quite new in 1966-67. As it continued to evolve veteran media activism would embrace a communicative style based in part on the creative appropriation of the military uniform as a symbol of protest.

The antiwar/warrior voice of Donald Duncan remained isolated for some time, as war veterans largely remained the symbolic preserve of prowar forces. Conservative organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion participated quite willingly as exponents of authenticity for prowar forces, and the mass media did not hesitate to provide coverage of disputes between these veterans and "hippies." Indeed, by 1966 antiwar forces were conceding that the symbolic power and authenticity of prowar veterans' groups was having an adverse effect on their efforts, even though the members of the VFW and American Legion had served in wars other than Vietnam.<sup>31</sup>

In order to provide an alternative to the prowar social meanings associated with being a veteran of an American war, a group called Vets for Peace formed in late 1966. The purpose of the organization was to insert itself literally and figuratively into the prowar/antiwar

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<sup>31</sup>In 1968 the National Guardian published an article on the formation of Vets for Peace, and in this article they discuss the problems posed by prowar veterans groups. See National Guardian, 26 March 1968: 4.

debate then beginning to erupt over the Vietnam war. Vets for Peace sought to create an alternative counter-image not only of American war veterans, but also to contest the argument deployed by prowar advocates that civilian antiwar protestors were really just cowards.<sup>32</sup> The groups' activities included taking out large advertisements in major national newspapers like The New York Times and situating themselves at the front of large national antiwar demonstrations. Most members of Vets for Peace were World War II and Korean veterans, and were quite cognizant of the importance of symbolic, imagistic political activity. In demonstrations against the war, members of Vets for Peace often donned their old service uniforms, adorned with medals and combat decorations. They would wear blue garrison caps and prominently display American flags.

All of these early protests by veterans contributed to the emergence of new symbolic and imagistic uses for objects of military and prowar origins. Moreover, the various ways in which these items were used and deployed (i.e. relocating and combining dominant symbols of war

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<sup>32</sup>In regard to this, a member of Vets for Peace stated to the National Guardian that, "[many of us] were outraged by that 'coward' and 'traitor' stuff at the last parade, [and] it occurred to three of us who talked it over that if veterans marched, it might discourage this nonsense. National Guardian 26 March 1968: 4.

and warrior heroism with explicit antiwar activities) signified the potentiality of cooperative relationships between the civilian peace movement and veterans. In addition, the assumed antagonisms between civilian activists and war veterans began to lose its monolithic cultural properties. An American war veteran could no longer be taken for granted as a prowar advocate.

The veterans organization that was most responsible for joining civilian peace activism with veteran antiwar efforts, and for fashioning a productive counter-hegemonic image of the American warrior/hero and the glory of war was the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Drawing on experiences similar to those of Donald Duncan, members of VVAW represented a collectivity of former Vietnam soldiers who would actively deconstruct the dominant cultural meanings of the symbols, images and representations associated with war and the returned warrior by employing them as reference points common to themselves and the American public at large.

It was no mere coincidence that VVAW brought their antiwar protest to bear upon the symbolic and imagistic terrain of mass-mediated culture. As was discussed previously, these individuals grew up in an environment thoroughly saturated with mass-mediated ideological codes that evoked patriotism and conformity to dominant cultur-

al meanings regarding the glories of war and warrior heroics. Nor is it surprising that the American ideology of war had a considerable influence on them. As sociologist Charles Maskas has demonstrated, patriotism and ideological commitment played a significant role in the motivations of Vietnam soldiers to participate in the war.<sup>33</sup> While the experience of fighting in Vietnam shattered the ideological precepts of U.S. rationalizations for the war for these veterans, they did not divorce themselves from their identification with the objects, symbols, and images of their youth and military experiences. Rather, they appropriated and reconstituted them to communicate antiwar meanings.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War began in April, 1967 when six Vietnam veterans marched together in a New York City antiwar demonstration. This initial small group of veterans garnered hardly any media recognition, but VVAW eventually would become the most fervently antiwar veterans organization in America's history. From their obscure beginnings, VVAW had a specific target for their activities, and a specific and self-conscious function in the antiwar movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In March, 1968, a VVAW spokesperson in-

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<sup>33</sup>See Charles C. Maskas, "The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam," Journal of Social Issues 31 (1984): 423-434.

formed the Student Mobilizer of Chicago:

Vietnam Veterans Against the War is primarily concerned with utilizing the abilities and experiences of its members to educate the public on the true nature of the war in Viet Nam. We are particularly interested in speaking to the uncommitted--the so-called "silent center." The apathetic or undecided public must sooner or later listen to us: we are the boys they sent there. Nor can the "hawks" ignore us: we are the boys he supported there.<sup>34</sup>

In their efforts to reach the "silent center" of the American public, VVAW--rather instinctively at first, but then more self-consciously--began to confront, reshape and reconfigure popular mythologies about Vietnam and the nature of war in general. Indeed, the VVAW carried the process of appropriation and transfunctionalization to one of its highest cultural watermarks in the history of American political dissent. To do so they employed a variety of materials and images from the mass-mediated representation of the warrior/hero, combining them with other culturally identifiable signs and symbols. The veterans engaged their countrymen at a variety of levels and locations which included face-to-face contact, organized demonstrations in heavily populated areas, publication of a national newspaper, books, short stories, poetry, films and most importantly through the channels

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<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Tom Wells, The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 347.

of the mainstream American mass media.

VVAW's first sustained exposure to the American public came in 1970, a time marked by real turbulence between pro and antiwar forces, as well as tangible fractures in the ideological rationalizations of the Vietnam war. This political climate warrants some attention here, in order that we might glean a fuller understanding of the impact made by Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Richard Nixon's 1968 election to the presidency brought with it a "secret plan to end the war" that included a graduated withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Primarily directed at quieting growing antiwar sentiment, the withdrawals only succeeded in "changing the color of the dead," as Ellsworth Bunker described it, and shifting the onus of the war onto the South Vietnamese. This so-called "Vietnamization" involved an insidious intensification of the bombing campaign that included secret bombings of Cambodia. It also entailed Nixon's "mad-man theory" of threatening North Vietnam with nuclear annihilation. Vietnamization did not succeed in silencing antiwar voices, however. By the end of 1969, the centers of antiwar organizing had shifted from college campuses to communities and to the military itself. This shift was reflected in a series of successful mass demonstrations in

October and November of that year. Called "moratorium" marches by organizers, these mass demonstrations throughout the country indicated that antiwar sentiment was broadening its appeal. Indeed, by the end of the 1960s nearly every social institution and community was splintered into pro and antiwar camps. From the mass media to the business community, pro and antiwar sentiments shaped the perceptions of Americans, making the Vietnam war the locus of all other social concerns.<sup>35</sup>

Concurrently with these demonstrations was the near complete unraveling of the warrior/hero image, and with that went large amounts of prowar ideological thread. In November of 1969, as millions of Americans were voicing their opposition to the war, disturbing revelations about American military conduct at My Lai over a year before were finally reaching the public.<sup>36</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>35</sup>See Edward Doyle and Terrence Maitland, The Vietnam Experience: A Nation Divided (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985). For additional information on the splits generated in major American social institutions by the Vietnam war, see Paul Joseph, Cracks In The Empire (Boston: South End Press, 1981), particularly chapters five and six.

<sup>36</sup>It was a Vietnam veteran named Ron Ridenhour who had compiled information about the massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops at My Lai, and who personally worked to get the military, Congressional doves, and the mass media to investigate the incident for a year and a half with no success. Freelance journalist Seymour Hersh finally began to pursue the incident after the October, 1969 Moratorium March. On November 13, the major media began to run Hersh's series on My Lai, and the incident became one of the major news stories of that year and the entire Vietnam

Special Forces Colonel Robert Reault was arrested for "exterminating with extreme prejudice" a suspected Viet Cong double agent.<sup>37</sup> These incidents catalyzed deep questions which struck to the very heart of the U.S. presence in Vietnam. Were My Lai and the Reault case isolated moments of individual malfeasance, or were they the logical outcome of U.S. military method and the ideology of war which undergirded it? Such questions forced Americans of all persuasions to confront directly the nature of the war. The investigation, arrest, court-martial and subsequent conviction of Lt. William Calley gave Americans an unaccustomed pose for the warrior/hero figure. Could U.S. soldiers really be killing innocent civilians, or were Calley and Reault merely aberrations that had to be isolated and removed from the dominant representations of the war? It would fall to the Vietnam Veterans Against the War to provide the public with the significance of My Lai.

VVAW members called themselves "winter soldiers," a term coaxed from America's past and employed as a linguistic sign signifying the antiwar/warrior. The derivation.

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<sup>37</sup>It was the Reault case which initiated the dry euphemism "terminate with extreme prejudice," later to be employed as a memorable line in the 1979 film Apocalypse Now. Quoted in Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York: Viking, 1980) 600.

tion of the name "winter soldier" was explained by William Crandell in his opening remarks at VVAW war crimes hearings in January, 1971:

In the bleak winter of 1776 when the men who had enlisted in the summer were going home because the way was hard and their enlistments were over, Tom Paine wrote, "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldiers and the sunshine patriot will in this time of crisis shrink from the service of his country. But he who stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." Like the winter soldiers of 1776 who stayed after they had served their time, we veterans of Vietnam know that America is in grave danger.<sup>38</sup>

This appropriation of Tom Paine's famous words and the choice of a name derived from the discourse of America's patriotic past contests prowar and mass media attempts to represent antiwar dissent outside the cultural boundaries of "patriotism." The choice of the term "winter soldier" was to be only the beginning of VVAW's poaching of signs, symbols, and images from prowar discourse. Maintaining a firm foothold within the purview of American patriotism necessitated linguistic references to as well as physical occupations of cultural terrain with patriotic connotations. Such a communicative strategy became a distinct part of VVAW's political practice. By recontextualizing and relocating their own creative ensemble of signs, symbols and imagery into America's patriotic past, antiwar

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<sup>38</sup>Quoted in The Congressional Record 117, 92nd Congress, 1st Session 5 April 1971 to 19 April 1971, 9948.

veterans deprived prowar forces of exclusive use of the domain of "patriotism" and provided mainstream Americans with counter-hegemonic imagery of the Vietnam war in particular, and the nature of war in general.

Beyond embracing a patriotic name for the anti-war/warrior, VVAW developed a distinctive means of expressing their opposition to the war which became known as "guerrilla theater" and involved the simulation of military ground patrols common in Vietnam. In this sense, VVAW endeavored to demonstrate against the war by giving demonstrations of the war. In its national newspaper First Casualty, VVAW outlined its approach to conducting guerrilla theaters:

Guerrilla theater should be conducted as often as possible but only when appropriate. The purpose of the theaters is to convey to the people in a serious manner what we are talking about when we speak of interrogation, search and destroy, etc. It should be done when the largest number of people can see it.<sup>39</sup>

These guerrilla theaters were ideally suited to confronting mainstream American sensibilities in a direct, face-to-face manner, without depending necessarily on amplification from mass media coverage. Nevertheless, the mass media was attracted to the unique power of VVAW's style after some initial reticence. Indeed, some chapters

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<sup>39</sup>Ed Stanowski, "Notes on Guerrilla Theater," First Casualty August 1971: 6.

developed quite a reputation with their guerrilla theater performances, and would customarily be invited to local demonstrations, churches and other community gatherings. Suburban shopping malls and mainstreets were popular locations for these performances, as unsuspecting shoppers would be jolted out of their everyday complacency as groups of VVAW winter soldiers conducted mock "search and destroy" patrols. It was guerrilla theater, then, that became the main thrust of VVAW's communicative effort in protesting the war, both for attracting mass media attention and for creating a context through which the inhumanity of the war might be better understood by the public. At the more than thirty-five chapters nationwide VVAW had as an organization, each would use the guerrilla theater to introduce themselves to their respective communities.

Interestingly, guerrilla theaters functioned as a potent inversion of an activity poached from the popular cultural practice of "playing army." We have already explored the childhood experiences of Vietnam veterans in this regard. As war veterans, VVAW members returned to this childhood practice, even using toy weapons. However, "playing army" as a means of opposing the war carried with it some important revisions, for during the guerrilla theaters the familiar oppositional roles were inverted. The "warrior/hero," for example, was represented as essen-

tially a war criminal, while the Asian "enemy" was portrayed as a victim of indiscriminate and brutal aggression, instead of a racially inferior communist fanatic. With these inversions, war itself was presented as stripped of any connotations of glory or heroism. This later point was emphasized as VVAW members smashed their toy weapons as a customary concluding gesture of the guerrilla theaters. Even though these activities had success at the local community level, it was VVAW's media activism that brought this type of antiwar opposition to the broader American mainstream.

During the first week of September, 1970, VVAW made their first concerted effort to bring their image of the winter soldier to a national audience. In an action entitled "Operation RAW," or Rapid American Withdrawal, over 100 Vietnam veterans marched 80 miles from Morristown, New Jersey to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania where a Labor Day rally was held. Along the way the veterans performed guerrilla theaters throughout the cities and towns enroute to Valley Forge. In general the mass media displayed caution in its coverage, although the New York Times covered the event for all of its four days. A documentary film was also produced on the march, but it received only limited distribution. This coverage is instructive in gaining an appreciation of VVAW's methods of stylistic,

symbolic, and imagistic activism, and in demonstrating the high priority the veterans gave to challenging and contesting the dominant meanings of Vietnam. Most crucially, the media attention given the Valley Forge march indicates the manner in which cultural objects and images acquired anti-hegemonic meanings within the confines of the dominant social system of ideological signification.

Beginning with a September 5 article headlined "Veterans for Peace Simulate the War," the New York Times began its representation of the event. The headline contains the essential elements of the frame that would persist for the three days of coverage. The term "simulation" referred to the repeatedly performed guerrilla theaters. The Times employed several news photos to illustrate the imagery created by the veterans actions. Adjacent to the first September 5 article is a photo showing veterans in column formation, wearing combat uniforms and brandishing plastic toy M-16s. These toy guns had flowers protruding from their barrels, juxtaposing objects from two conflicting discourses: toy weapons from the militarized aspects of popular culture, and the flower symbolic of the antiwar movement's counter-culture. It is also quite noticeable from the photograph that the veterans wore their battle uniforms in conjunction with other antiwar, counter-cultural objects like peace medal-

lions and beads. Most prominent was the almost universal wearing of long hair and facial hair. Long hair, beards, and mustaches on men had, by 1970, acquired a symbolic importance as the style became embroiled in prowar/antiwar struggles. However, veterans' wearing of long hair and beards had perhaps even greater confrontational implications, for the unorthodox style stood in direct contrast to the military's own repressive dress code of short-haired, clean-shaven conformity. Long hair and beards on veterans thus not only expressed an association with antiwar ideas, the style also mocked the repression within the military.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to their use of toy weapons, military apparel and counter-cultural styles, the veterans displayed a variety of military decorations and medals that

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<sup>40</sup>It should be noted that veterans who used the military uniform as a sign of protest did so with perhaps different intentions than did students who appropriated it as part of countercultural fashion. Robert Jay Lifton, the Yale psychologist who studied members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, noticed that even vets who had developed avowedly antiwar sentiments resented youthful mocking of military objects since American students had not derived their uses of the uniforms from the same social practices as did vets. One veteran who encountered a college student wearing a Marine Corps jacket as an overcoat stated: "I felt like I'd really like to go up and deck that kid. He's got a lot of nerve wearing that uniform. Even though I had the same [antiwar] feelings, that uniform represented alot...and I didn't want just anybody wearing it....[They] hadn't gone through the experiences." Quoted in Robert Jay Lifton, Home From the War: Veterans Before and After Vietnam (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) 235.

they had won in war service. These too were placed in direct association with peace medals. In a sense, this image projected by the veterans made it appear as if they had turned themselves inside out from their days as American "warrior/heroes," opting to stylistically and politically disassociate themselves from prowar discourse. This turning inside out of the image of war veterans was in fact an overt reflection of VVAW's intuitive political message--that the experience of Vietnam had overturned and rendered moot the dominant mythologies of American warfare.

Written by New York Times reporter Ronald Sullivan, the text of the articles discuss the theatrical context that activated the symbols, objects and imagery employed by VVAW in their march. Sullivan also notes the reaction of onlookers to the use of culturally familiar objects like uniforms assumed to be the preserve of prowar discourse. For dramatic effect, supporters of VVAW would take their place among unsuspecting passers-by. On command from a veteran the guerrilla theater would begin. As the first day's reporting described, "the search and destroy patrol seized a young woman ...and dragged her away shouting obscenities and abuse at her." These actions evoked negative response from onlookers. A man identified as a former World War II paratrooper, "holding

a large American flag across his chest," stated, "you men are a disgrace to your uniforms."<sup>41</sup> The juxtapositioning of military uniforms with the simulation of war crimes apparently affronted the sensibilities of the public, but a VVAW member responded, "What you are seeing is something that happens every day in Vietnam. The establishment uses patriotism as a club--if you're against war, you're a communist. I don't deplore this country, I love this country. But I hate what we're doing in the name of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>42</sup>

In the following days of the march the Times continued its coverage of the mock search and destroy actions. As the veterans began their assaults, we are told, another veteran would follow the column handing out flyers to onlookers which stated:

A U.S. infantry company has just come through here. If you had been Vietnamese, we might have burned your house, shot you and your dog, raped your wife and daughter, burned the town and tortured its citizens.<sup>43</sup>

This flyer is quite revealing, for in the anti-war veterans' discourse the place of the American warrior/hero is

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<sup>41</sup>Ronald Sullivan, "Veterans For Peace Simulate the War," New York Times 5 September 1970: 5.

<sup>42</sup>Quoted in 1971 documentary film of the event entitled March of the Winter Soldiers produced by Pacifica Films.

<sup>43</sup>Ronald Sullivan, "Anti-War Vietnam Veterans Finish 4-Day March," New York Times 8 September 1970: 6.

inverted as being that of the raper and destroyer of Vietnam, not the heroic savior. Yet the public, according to the Times, again felt betrayed by the images they were witnessing. Another disgruntled observer is quoted as being, "disgusted that the veterans would disgrace their uniform."<sup>44</sup> The reaction recorded by the Times was confirmed by what VVAW members themselves observed, as one veteran noted that "it shocks people beyond belief that this is actual policy in Vietnam, but that's part of what we're trying to do--shock people into seeing the truth about this war."<sup>45</sup>

On the last day of Operation R.A.W. the Times described the action at the historic Valley Forge location: "Veterans carried with them black body bags that counted in white lettering outside the 43,419 men killed in the war [while singing] all we are saying, is give peace a chance."<sup>46</sup> Speakers at the concluding rally included anti-war Hollywood celebrities Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda, although the content of their speeches was curiously omitted from the report. The finale of the four day protest march saw veterans again stage guerrilla theaters,

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<sup>44</sup>Sullivan, "Veterans For Peace Simulate the War" 5.

<sup>45</sup>Ronald Sullivan, "Anti-War Vietnam Veterans Finish 4-Day March," New York Times 8 September 1970: 4.

<sup>46</sup>Sullivan, "Anti-War Vietnam Veterans Finish 4-Day March" 4.

with each veteran smashing his toy weapons and calling for an immediate end to the war. This smashing of toy guns became a common component of VVAW protest as a means to express the de-militarization of their views on war.

The VVAW's choice of sites for the conclusion of the march deserves some attention here. Choosing the historic Valley Forge site not only provided VVAW with an effective background for communicating and attaching new meanings to objects and symbols of both pro and antiwar discourses, but also helped to juxtapose a powerful symbolic location of America's own historic struggle against foreign domination with the fact that U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam was essentially working against the same kind of effort on the part of the Vietnamese to throw off the yoke of thousands of years of foreign control. By placing themselves within the cultural space of Valley Forge, VVAW was recalling for America its past commitment to revolutionary ideals of freedom and self-determination. In essence, then, VVAW's early antiwar opposition included the poaching and transfunctionalization of prowar objects, symbols, and images, activation of new antiwar meanings within the framework of guerrilla theater, and the utilization of cultural space previously the preserve of the dominant culture, the latter symbolizing the heritage of American ideals. This structure of protest and dissent, actuated

during the Operation R.A.W. march on Valley Forge, would be the most effective means to attract major media attention to VVAW in the months and years that followed.

In their next attempt to address a national audience, VVAW organized a war crimes tribunal held in a Howard Johnson's motor lodge in Detroit in early February, 1971. The hearings were called "Winter Soldier Investigations" and the timing of this event promised to attract major sources of media attention. Lt. William Calley's My Lai court-martial was in full swing, so an entire hearing on war crimes conducted by Vietnam veterans could hardly be ignored, and indeed as the investigation opened every major press and television network was present. Over the three days, veterans testified in panels arranged according to branch of service. However, these events were not guerrilla theater. Instead, organizers embraced a format similar to the Bertrand Russell International War Crimes Tribunal held in Stockholm in 1967. The mainstream media dutifully recorded portions of the veteran's testimony. CBS filmed portions of the proceedings, but none of it made the national news. The network rationalized its blackout of the hearings by claiming that the testimony was "not confirmable."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>See Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching (University of California Press, 1980) 192, footnote 18.

For the veterans themselves, the blackout confirmed that what the VVAW had to say was damaging to those intent on continuing the war, and therefore had to be heard. Although the hearings did not make the national media immediately, all of the testimony was eventually read into the Congressional Record of April 6-7, 1971, and a condensed version of the hearings was published in book form.<sup>48</sup>

Essentially, the Winter Soldier Investigations were an orthodox linguistic rendering of the same messages expressed during the Valley Forge march. A few of the veterans read from prepared texts and reveal the attitudes of VVAW as an organization, especially regarding the cultivation of their own social image. For example, the opening remarks by William Crandell make reference to the distinctive social image VVAW saw itself developing through their communicative efforts. The words chosen by Crandell are drawn from Mark Twain, but it is apparent that the use of Twain is meant to express a far more contemporary viewpoint:

We have invited our clean young men to soldier  
adisccredited musket and do bandit's work under a  
flag which bandits have been accustomed to fear  
and not follow. We cannot conceal from  
ourselves that privately we are a little trou-  
bled by our uniform. It is one of our prides; it

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<sup>48</sup>See John Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War The New Soldier (New York: Collier Books, 1971).

is acquainted with honor; it is familiar with great and noble deeds. We love it; we revere it. And so this errand it is on makes us uneasy. And our flag another pride of ours, the chiefest. We have worshiped it so when we have seen it in far lands, glimpsing it unexpectedly in that strange sky, waving its welcome and benediction to us, we have caught our breath and uncovered our heads for a moment for the thought of what it was to us and the great ideals it stood for. Indeed, we must do something about these things. It is easily managed. We can have our usual flag with the white stripes painted black and the stars replaced by the skull and crossbones.<sup>49</sup>

From this passage we can gather that the VVAW was quite self-conscious about its relationship to the symbols and objects that made up their social experiences and social image. "Flags," "muskets," and "uniforms" all had particular significance, and this passage highlights those meanings. First, the veterans saw themselves as the nation's "clean young men" sent to "do bandit's work." They used their toy weapons to symbolize the "discredited musket," and appropriated parts of military uniforms to demonstrate the uneasiness with the "errand" it was on. However, it was the "bandit's work" that was emphasized during the Winter Soldiers Investigation testimony. Veterans expressed verbally what they had demonstrated theatrically at Valley Forge and around the country. And, just as at Valley Forge, veterans expressed their anger at

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<sup>49</sup>United States Congress, Congressional Record 177, 92nd Congress, 6 April 1971 (Washington: GPO, 1971): 9949.

seeing their image as returned warriors used by advocates of the war. Former Marine officer Robert Muller directly criticized his status as a wounded veteran being assimilated into the warrior/hero image by prowar forces:

These people who promote the war are playing on the emotions of guys like me. They're using me again to carry on the war, so I want to go out and I want to tell people from my wheelchair, "Don't use me as a rallying cry to continue this war for a just peace."<sup>50</sup>

This plea went largely unheard, for in April, 1971 Vice President Spiro Agnew was attempting to use the returned Vietnam veteran as a foil to antiwar dissent. In a speech on April 1, Agnew claimed that, "as a result of [antiwar protest] the veterans of Vietnam have carried a greater burden piled on them by home-front snipes than any American servicemen who ever went to war."<sup>51</sup> But this kind of unambiguous use of the veteran as a prowar image did not have long to go. Frustrated by the lack of national media attention afforded to the Winter Soldier Investigations, VVAW felt that "something positive had to come out of Detroit, some hope for the future. It was difficult [to] swallow the public's indifference. Out of

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<sup>50</sup>United States Congress, Congressional Record 177, 92nd Congress, 6 April 1971 (Washington: GPO, 1971): 9952.

<sup>51</sup>James A. Naughton, "Judge Lets Veterans Sleep on the Mall; Rebukes U.S. Aides," New York Times 23 April 1971: 25.

the frustration grew the idea of a march on Washington."<sup>52</sup> In the nation's capitol in April, the VVAW would attain its national forum through one of the most dramatic and unanticipated antiwar actions of the entire Vietnam era.

Probably the most potent example of veteran anti-war media activism, in the spring of 1971 VVAW organized one of the most electrifying, visually powerful antiwar demonstrations of the entire Vietnam era, a week long action in Washington, D.C. entitled "Dewey Canyon III: A Limited Incursion into the District of Columbia." In many ways, Dewey Canyon III, and the veterans who participated in it, served as a powerful symbol of the political and cultural odyssey traveled by large segments of post-World War II American society: from naive acceptance of war in the 1950s, to organized dissent against it in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The name "Dewey Canyon III" was derived from the appropriation of military code names of two secret incursions into Laos, one in February, 1969, and another in February of 1971. These operations were called "Dewey Canyon I" and "II," respectively. Dewey Canyon III took place during the week of April 19-24 and represents a more

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<sup>52</sup>Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, The New Soldier (New York: Collier Books, 1971) 3.

complex development of how political collectivities can, through media activism, assign oppositional values to a variety of cultural objects and symbols, regardless of their previous cultural/political backgrounding. Perhaps most crucially, Dewey Canyon III also demonstrates that even with mainstream commercial media coverage, potent anti-hegemonic meanings can be disseminated and sustained for public observation. Finally, we will see that Dewey Canyon III demonstrated the distinctive symbolic politics which characterized VVAW's antiwar activity, combining demonstrations against the war with demonstrations of the war.

Crucially, Dewey Canyon III continually brought the image of the antiwar vet to bare upon several strategic cultural locations in the Washington, D.C. area. D.C. was (and remains) extremely rich in symbolic resolution. The city symbolized the location where power was exercised, and where politicians made the decisions to initiate American military involvement in Vietnam. Moreover, just across the Potomac River was the Pentagon, pantheon of the U.S. military. The D.C. area was also the site of Arlington National Cemetery, where America's fallen war heroes rested and in their silence were ostensibly to function as reminders of why the war had to be continued.

By bringing the image of the antiwar/warrior into a

social location so abundant with buildings, monuments, and statues of patriotism and national glory, VVAW could effectively rejoin for public scrutiny the two necessary elements within the entire American political process regarding Vietnam: those who formulated and justified the war and gave the orders, and those who "did their duty" and followed those orders. No other antiwar demonstration of the Vietnam era juxtaposed these two potentially volatile elements, symbolically or otherwise. The eye-to-eye confrontation between the elite policy makers and the instruments of that policy provided the fundamental structural opposition of the entire protest. From within this principal confrontation emerged smaller confrontations, each extending the conflict over which image of the American warrior, and the returned veteran, was most fit for public consumption.

The initial skirmish between VVAW, the Nixon Administration, and Nixon's surrogates occurred on April 19th. On that day well over a thousand antiwar Vietnam veterans from across the nation marched to the gates of Arlington National Cemetery. Arlington had historically been the cultural property of prowar forces and upheld as a "natural" symbol of the worthiness of U.S. foreign policy. During countless Memorial Day ceremonies, presidents, high-ranking military officials, and the mass media gath-

ered to "honor" America's "fallen heroes." The role that these silent soldiers played in such ceremonies served obviously to reproduce and sustain support for all of America's military adventures around the globe.

VVAW's purpose in going to Arlington was to challenge the dominant ideological signifying process regarding America's war dead. Their march to the cemetery was to include a wreath laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in honor of the dead on both sides of the war. As two delegates of the veterans, accompanied by several Gold Star mothers, went to the main gate, they were formally denied entrance. The denial was based ostensibly on a bureaucratic regulation prohibiting wreath laying in connection with demonstrations at Arlington. The denial of access to the national cemetery represents the manner in which the dominant culture designates to only certain groups and individuals the right to determine the functions America's war dead should serve.

The story of living antiwar veterans being denied access to dead veterans was an irony that did not go unnoticed by the mainstream press. They quickly framed the story in confrontational terms. First, either through photos, text, or both, the major press set up the antiwar connotations of the veterans' presence. This was done by referring the readers to the antiwar/warrior image pro-

jected by the veterans through their distinctive mode of appearance. For example, Time magazine showed a photo of the veterans and described their appearance:

...wearing fatigues with the shoulder patches of the 1st Air Cav, the 101st Airborne, the 1st MarDiv, the 25th Infantry, the Big Red One. They wore long hair and beards and medals: Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts. Some were missing an arm or a leg; some got about in wheelchairs. They carried squirt guns, cap pistols, toy rifles made by Mattel.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, the Washington Post noted that "Many wore battle fatigues, helmets, and combat boots. Many were shaggy haired, bearded, and had painted peace emblems on their jackets."<sup>54</sup>

Once the mainstream media had identified the reconfigured set of cultural symbols and objects associated with the image of the antiwar/warrior, veterans were interviewed for their response to the situation. The New York Times quoted a wounded veteran as saying, "the whole thing is a waste of people's lives...It's our cemetery and people are going to pay respect to their brothers and they close the cemetery. Who do they think they are." Perhaps Navy veteran John Kerry revealed the full irony of the situation when he stated, "These guys risked their lives

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<sup>53</sup>"Protest: A Week Against the War," Time 3 May 1971: 11.

<sup>54</sup>Stanford J. Ungar and William L. Claiborne, "Vets Camp On Mall Banned By Burger," Washington Post 21 April 1971: 1.

to go out and pick up these bodies and put them into body bags so they could be shipped home. You can't bar these men from paying honor to their friends." The officials at the cemetery reluctantly came to agree. The following day three hundred veterans returned to Arlington, laid wreaths inside the cemetery, and honored the dead of the United States and Indochina. The Washington Post showed a follow-up photo of the veterans kneeling at Arlington with the caption reading, "Veterans protesting the war toll with clenched fists during a wreath laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery."<sup>55</sup> In this encounter we can see that the process of assigning meaning to the American war dead was wrested away from the grasp of pro-war advocates, even if only briefly.

Developing concurrently with the confrontation at Arlington was another involving VVAW and the Nixon Administration. In the week prior to the VVAW "incursion" into Washington, the administration obtained an injunction against veterans' using the Mall adjacent to the Washington Monument as a camp-site. The Justice Department issued a restraining order forbidding veterans from using the area before the week began. Former Attorney General Ramsey took the case to the Washington District Court of

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<sup>55</sup>Ungar and Claiborne, "Vets Camp On Mall Banned By Burger" 12.

Appeals, and had the injunction lifted April 19th. However, the government then requested that Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger re-instate the injunction, and Burger complied. The veterans had until 4:30PM, April 21st to vacate the Mall. Clark then appealed to Deputy Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, and a rather ridiculous compromise was reached. As Clark explained to the veterans gathered at the Mall, they were permitted to remain throughout the night, but were forbidden to "sleep, lie in bedrolls, make fires, erect any shelter, break any earth or carry on any cooking activities."<sup>56</sup> The veterans had to decide whether or not to sleep, placing themselves in defiance of the Supreme Court, or stay awake and be in compliance. As the debate went on, VVAW leaders and supporters addressed the group. Radical journalist I.F. Stone was present, and he captured the symbolic nature of the event (and anticipated its outcome) when he encouraged the gathering:

The best thing about this year's demonstration is you fellows. You're the one new note and hope of making an impression on the country. I remember very vividly as a young newspaperman in 1932 when Herbert Hoover called out General MacArthur and the troops and drove the bonus marchers out of Washington and burned down their tents. It was the biggest mistake Herbert Hoover ever made. And if they drive you out tonight, it'll be the biggest mistake Richard

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<sup>56</sup>Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, The New Soldier 76.

Nixon ever made.<sup>57</sup>

The veterans elected to "sleep" in defiance of the Supreme Court. No attempt was made by the Nixon Administration to arrest or remove the veterans from the Mall.

The following day the major press began to frame the confrontation as a VVAW victory. The front page headline of the Washington Star bugled, "VETS OVERRULE SUPREME COURT," while the Washington Post headline stated, "Vets Disobey Court Order, Sleep on Mall." Newsweek intimated that the Nixon Administration's decision to allow the veterans to remain on the Mall was a public relations decision, stating that "neither the Administration nor the police had the stomach for that kind of fight."<sup>58</sup> Finally, with publicity mounting against the implicit intention of the injunction, the powers of the court gave in. On April 22nd, the Washington District Court of Appeals dissolved the injunction and District Court Judge George L. Hart gave the Nixon Administration a public tongue-lashing: "You have put the Vietnam veterans in a situation of openly defying the courts of this country. This is a position this country cannot tolerate and live with."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Quoted in Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, The New Soldier 76.

<sup>58</sup>"Farewell to Arms," Newsweek 3 May 1971: 25.

<sup>59</sup>James A. Naughton, "Judge Scores U.S. On Mall Dispute," New York Times 23 April 1971: 25.

As Administration efforts to deny VVAW its access to a mass audience failed, efforts were made to negate the impact of the demonstration by delegitimizing the veterans. At one point in the week, it was alleged that President Nixon estimated that only 30% of the demonstrators were in fact veterans. The VVAW members thwarted this allegation, however, by coming to Washington with their DD 214 forms (the official Armed Forces form that contains an individuals military record) and discharge papers. Within hours, 900 DD 214 forms were presented. As Time magazine suggested, the administration "had egg on its face." Indeed, one veteran seized upon the situation by announcing, "Only 30% of us believe Richard Nixon is president."<sup>60</sup>

With the failure of the Nixon Administration, and the unwillingness of the major media to negate the impact of Dewey Canyon III, the hegemonic edifice of American war mythology, so strong in the pre-Vietnam period, took a resounding beating. This was helped along by the fact that by April 21st the national press had shifted its initial caution about antiwar/warriors to almost open embrace. The most extensive and favorable coverage came from the Washington Post, which was by 1971 already considerably "dovish" on the war. The Post's articles and

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<sup>60</sup>"Protest: A Week Against the War" 11.

photos detailed the activities of VVAW, affording the Vietnam antiwar movement perhaps the best coverage of its history. For example, a dramatic VVAW guerrilla theater on the steps of the Capitol building enacting the brutality of the war's conduct was covered in extensive and vivid detail. In order to glean a deeper sense of the Post's coverage, it will be necessary to quote the article in some detail:

Earlier, demonstration "squads" of veterans staged mock search-and-destroy missions...on the east steps of the Capitol, while scores of tourists looked on in astonishment. At the Capitol, three girls wearing straw coolie hats attempted to run away from the squad of "infantrymen" armed with toy M-16 rifles. With a burst of simulated automatic firing of the weapons, the girls clutched their stomachs and burst plastic bags of red paint that splattered grotesquely over the Capitol steps. "It's disgusting. It's horrible," said one middle-aged woman as she turned away. "Waste em'! Waste em'! Get the body count!," cried some of the mock raiders as their toy rifles clacked and their "victims" screamed. Before that, at the steps of the Old Senate Office Building, William Crandell...led a platoon in portrayal of the seizure of Viet Cong suspects. "Why are you here? This is my home," the Vietnamese actors cried, as Crandell's men pinned them to the ground at rifle point and grabbed for their identification papers. "This is something we're doing to show the kind of mentality we were forced into in Vietnam...."<sup>61</sup>

The report went on to detail the ceremonial smashing of toy rifles on the steps of the Capitol at the conclusion of the guerrilla theater.

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<sup>61</sup>Ungar and Claiborne, "Vets Camp On Mall Banned By Burger" 12.

This lengthy portrayal of the VVAW guerrilla theater action provides evidence concerning the transformation of the ideological values of cultural objects and images used to deconstruct rather than sustain official views of Vietnam, not to mention the entire popular cultural code for war. War and the warrior/hero are depicted not as glorious and heroic, but rather as brutal and callous. The entire childhood activity of "playing war," of recreating scenes of warrior/hero glory propagated by Hollywood, is effectively poached and transfunctionalized to connote oppositional, antiwar meaning. The smashing of toy rifles at the end can be interpreted as a symbolic "break" from hegemonic constructs of war and unquestioning patriotism.

The mass media's description of the narrative of the guerrilla theater undoubtedly assisted the VVAW in its attempt to communicate antiwar opposition by deploying culturally identifiable objects (like toy guns) as props for their theater. One transfunctionalized "prop" yet to be discussed is the American flag. VVAW contributed to the creative appropriation of this most prestigious of patriotic symbols.

Woodrow Wilson once said that the American flag was "a symbol of our national unity." Yet by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the flag had become a major symbol of

political and cultural conflict.<sup>62</sup> By this time, the flag had become an object put to use by both prowar and antiwar groups. Some civilian antiwar activists expressed their dissent by burning the flag. Counter-culture figures like Abbie Hoffman took to wearing shirts fashioned out of American flags. Still others poached and reconfigured the flag by replacing the blue field of stars with a peace symbol. For those on the opposite side of the political line of scrimmage, however, the flag was used as a rallying cry for the righteousness of the American effort in Vietnam and as an expression of unfettered patriotism in "supporting our boys." Richard Nixon and his cohorts wore lapel-button flags, thereby ostensibly "standing behind the flag," and the American Legion announced that "the flag is motherland and apple pie."

On April 22nd, VVAW joined the fray by displaying a huge American flag mounted upside down on a flag pole as the lead object in a candlelight march to the White House, its upside down mounting signifying a nation in distress.

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<sup>62</sup>In a July 6, 1970 cover story, Time magazine chronicled the contestation over the flag as a cultural object, giving accounts of various conflicts over its use. For example, the article detailed the case of a college student who was arrested for flying the flag upside down. At his trial hearing, the presiding judge was quoted as saying, "it looks like we have before us one of those young men who wants to destroy our society." Yet, as the article later mentioned, the American Legion "flew their flag upside down...and no action was taken." See "Who Owns the Stars and Stripes?" Time 6 July 1970: 8-15.

Following the march, the veterans returned to the Mall where those carrying the upside down flag positioned it atop the camp-site stage. The news photo of this which appears in Time magazine's coverage of Dewey Canyon III is one of the most striking and poignant antiwar images of the entire Vietnam era. Taken by freelance photographer George Butler, the photo bears an unsettling similarity to the famous flag-raising at Iwo Jima. It is not known whether the VVAW flag-raising was a conscious appropriation of the Iwo Jima event, but afterward a veteran spoke of his impressions of the spontaneous ceremony using Iwo Jima as a reference point:

It was Thursday night, after the candlelight march, when the guys came back with the flag. There was this spontaneous feeling of pride. I sort of drew a parallel with Iwo Jima. I guess you had to, because it was with the same type of pride that they put up the flag in Iwo Jima.<sup>63</sup>

The photo shows a collectivity of veterans, all with their hands clutching the flag-pole, hoisting the upside down flag into an upright position. With one exception, all in the frame have their eyes cast upward, and all display the distinctive visual style of the VVAW antiwar-warrior: beards, long hair, remnants of military uniforms, and an assortment of other military and antiwar objects. The lone individual whose hands are not on the

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<sup>63</sup>Washington Post, 25 April 1971: 18.

pole is clutching aluminum crutches. As a poached and reconfigured cultural symbol used to communicate veteran's antiwar dissent, the upside down flag became a common adornment of veterans' shirts and fatigue jackets worn as part of their everyday practice.

Following a week of marching, lobbying congress, arrests and guerrilla theaters on the steps of the Capitol, Dewey Canyon III came to a dramatic conclusion when nearly 900 Vietnam veterans individually threw the medals they had earned in Vietnam over a wooden fence onto the steps of the Capitol. Perhaps no other antiwar event of the Vietnam era ranks higher in symbolic magnitude. This culminating event began when a veteran provided the following commemoration: "We now strip ourselves of these medals of courage and heroism....We cast these away as a symbol of dishonor and inhumanity."<sup>64</sup> One by one, the veterans stood before microphones, made whatever comments they wished, named the medals they were returning, and tossed the medals at a statue of Supreme Court Justice John Marshall. Most of the veterans made short but poignant remarks as the whole world watched. One stated, "here's my badges for murder...from the country I betrayed

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<sup>64</sup>Paul W. Valentine and William L. Claiborne, "Vets Leave; Mass March Slated Today," Washington Post 24 April 1971: A1.

by enlisting in the U.S. Army."<sup>65</sup> Former Air Force sergeant Joseph H. Trilio confided, "[my Vietnam service] was three and a half years of wasted time. It was a disservice to my country. As far as I'm concerned, I'm now serving my country."<sup>66</sup>

This event is highly significant in that American history does not record a similar form of protest. American warrior/heroes of Hollywood vintage never apologized for their conduct, nor did they come to feel that their war service was a disservice to their country. Certainly, warrior/heroes were not supposed to view their service to their country as a betrayal of Americans. As a form of anti-hegemonic protest, the medal tossing functioned as the ultimate expression of what Herbert Marcuse called "the great refusal."

The throwing away of the medals negated the dominant meanings that medals and military decorations had come to have. More broadly, beyond the straightforward rejection of the medals earned for participating in the Vietnam war, the tossing of the medals can be interpreted as part of a metamorphosis in the signification of military objects and war in general in these veterans' lives. As children

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<sup>65</sup>Valentine and Clairborne, "Vets Leave; Mass March Slated Today" A9.

<sup>66</sup>"Veterans Discard Medals In War Protest at Capitol," New York Times 24 April 1971: 12.

watching war movies and "playing army," medals represented signs of warrior/heroism, war's glory and the righteousness of their country's mission in the world. As soldiers, medals were awarded for "heroism." Antiwar veterans, on the other hand, poached and radically reconfigured the meaning of the medals so that they came to represent the brutality of their experience in Vietnam and the war's inherent inhumanity. With the medal tossing, the veterans were suggesting that medals were only capable of signifying protest and opposition. Thus, at specific stages in the veteran's lives, medals came to signify warrior/heroism, war criminality, and finally war protest. Just like the smashing of the toy weapons, the throwing back of the medals culminated a historical process of absorption, integration into, and then rejection of the dominant cultural ideologies of war, propagated by Hollywood war movies and the dominant culture in general. Indeed, the medal tossing was only the final and most dramatic act of deconstructing that aspect of hegemonic ideology pertaining to war and Vietnam. This de-militarization of their lives, and distancing from the mythologies of war, prompted one veteran to remark after returning his medals, "I feel like I'm clean, that I'm completely

cleansed."<sup>67</sup>

There is a final aspect of Dewey Canyon III that should be noted, one that in 1971 effectively put prowar advocates on notice that Vietnam veterans could no longer be considered an automatic image of justification and rationale for the continuation of the Vietnam war in particular, and for the support of war in general in the future. It came in John Kerry's speech before J. William Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 23rd. In an emotional speech filled with references to VVAW's Winter Soldier Investigations in Detroit, gruesome recountings of search-and-destroy patrols, and an overriding sense of having been used and betrayed by governmental elites, Kerry endeavors to reclaim for Vietnam veterans control over their own personal and cultural image:

In 1970 at West Point Vice President Spiro Agnew said, "some glamorize the criminal misfits of society while our best men die in Asian paddies to preserve the freedom which most of those misfits abuse," and this was used as a rallying point for our effort in Vietnam. But for us, as boys in Asia whom the country was supposed to support, his statement is a terrible distortion from which we can draw a very deep sense of revulsion, hence the anger of some of the men who are here in Washington today. It is a distortion because we in no way consider ourselves

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<sup>67</sup>Valentine and Claiborne, "Vets Leave; Mass March Slat-  
ed Today" A6.

the best men of this country; because those he calls misfits were standing up for us in a way that nobody else in this country dared to; because so many who have died would have returned to this country to join the misfits in their efforts to ask for immediate withdrawal from South Vietnam; because so many of those best men returned as quadruplegics and amputees--and they lie forgotten in Veterans' Administration hospitals in this country which fly the flag which so many have chosen as their own personal symbol...<sup>68</sup>

The short term effects of Dewey Canyon III were somewhat predictable. The heart of prowar forces were ostensibly unmoved by VVAW's actions. Members of national veterans organizations attempted to belittle and delegitimize VVAW by offering sarcastic responses. National commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Herbert Rainwater stated, "I realize the remnants of uniforms, toy guns and spilled red ink are colorful and considered newsworthy....But I question the value of this type of publicity to the American people over an extended period of time." American Legion commander Alfred Chamie remarked that he "deeply regretted any veteran feeling it...necessary to return medals to the government after they were justly earned." Both organizations were emphatic in their denial

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<sup>68</sup>Quoted from complete text of Kerry's speech in Steven Cohen, Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to a Television History (New York: Knopf, 1983) 367.

that VVAW was representative of Vietnam veterans at large.<sup>69</sup>

In a number of editorial retrospectives following the demonstrations, the mainstream press began coding Dewey Canyon III as a truly unique and notable event. For example, Newsweek stated that "VVAW represents a provocative new voice in the war against the war," one which "rekindled hope in the efficacy of mass demonstrations."<sup>70</sup> In an April 26th editorial, the New York Times stated: "In what must rank as one of the most poignant and eloquent protests against this nation's continued involvement in the war in Indochina, wounded and decorated veterans last week hurled their battle ribbons and medals at symbols of government in Washington representing the authority which sent them into battle."<sup>71</sup> And Time magazine voiced similar amazement at the media event when they stated, "Washingtonians have long since become inured to peace demonstrations, but they had never seen anything quite like the week of antiwar guerrilla theater staged by Vietnam veterans...."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Quoted in Valentine and Clairborne, "Vets Leave; Mass March Slated Today" A2.

<sup>70</sup>"Farewell To Arms" 25.

<sup>71</sup>"Demonstration in Washington," editorial, New York Times 26 April 1971: 34.

<sup>72</sup>"Protest: A Week Against the War" 11.

In the months that followed Dewey Canyon III, VVAW spokespersons were invited to appear in the mass media spotlight on television talkshows like "The Dick Cavett Show" and "The David Suskind Show." For the remainder of 1971, VVAW maintained a presence in all areas of mass media, denying prowar advocates of the ability to indiscriminantly use the image of returned Vietnam veterans without subjecting such use to public contestation. Indeed, when the opportunity arose, even Congressional doves would taunt the Nixon Administration for daring to mention Vietnam veterans as a rationale for war or related issues. In an October, 1971 speech Senator Edward Kennedy mocked the Administration's ostensible concern for returning Vietnam veterans by commenting:

They say they care about Vietnam veterans....But when veterans assembled in Washington, to plead for an end to the war, the same government that sent them 8000 miles to sleep in the mud of Indochina, sues to keep them from sleeping on the grass of the capital.<sup>73</sup>

Interestingly, the Nixon Administration began anticipating these kinds of problems shortly after Dewey Canyon III and adopted measures to try to negate the impact of VVAW. Only a month after Dewey Canyon III, another Vietnam veterans' organization calling itself "Veterans for a Just Peace" appeared seeking a place within the media's

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<sup>73</sup>New York Times, 10 October 1971: 20.

arena. The group's principle message was support for Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy. Supposedly the organization was spontaneously and independently formed by a Vietnam veteran named Bruce Kessler. In reality, however, the group was contrived by White House special counsel, and author of the infamous "enemies list," Charles Colson.<sup>74</sup> Although the clean-cut organization never developed the kind of publicity that VVAW did, it did manage to debate VVAW on national television.

By the end of 1971, VVAW was back on the front pages with "Operation Peace On Earth." During Christmas week, VVAW engaged in mass civil disobedience by again occupying key cultural locations rich in patriotic connotations. Included in this action was an occupation of the Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia and the Statue of Liberty in New York City. Operation Peace On Earth "got the war back on the front page where it belongs" as VVAW leader Al Hubbard remarked after the occupation of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>75</sup> VVAW was even able to successfully demand that their Christmas week action be broadcast to soldiers in Vietnam via the military's own publication Stars and

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<sup>74</sup>Steve Weisserman, Big Brother and the Holding Company (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1974) 244.

<sup>75</sup>Lawrence Van Gelder, "War Foes Reject U.S. Plans to Reopen Statue of Liberty," New York Times 28 December 1971: 32.

Stripes, and Armed Forces radio and television also carried the stories.

In the broader scheme of the Vietnam war as a whole, it would certainly be fair to argue that all of the media publicity given to VVAW did very little to substantively examine the specific causes for U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and that nowhere in the coverage is there any discussion afforded to larger socio-economic issues which informed the war and U.S. conduct in it. In an April 23rd editorial in the Washington Post, Nicholas von Hoffman noticed quite the same tendency for the mass media to rush to the symbolic instead of the substantive. Summing up his feelings regarding VVAW's Washington D.C. demonstration, he commented:

[antiwar veterans] had come to tell us the truth we already knew, and we received him as the last supremest irony. That was what we were doing on the grass, playing the game of ironies with these hottest and most American of symbols. Sad delectation, real and imagined. The boy in the wheel-chair locked out of Arlington. The fantasy picture of Nixon's cops clubbing paraplegics over the head on the Capitol steps. Hey you Commie, fag bastard, coward, yellow peace symps, why doncha go over there with the real American, patriotic boys and fight. And now the boys are back, a maimed and inverted American Legion of an Oh, So Foreign War...a disconcerted cross section of those whom we'd impressed for the slaughter.<sup>76</sup>

Overall, there is no reason to doubt that the main-

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<sup>76</sup>Nicholas von Hoffman, "...Keep Em' On the Mall," editorial, Washington Post 23 April 1971: 11.

stream mass media would have loved to capture for its readers/viewers some of the "imagined" confrontation, moreso because the VVAW was self-consciously rich in visual signifiers, and thus made spectacular copy, once the media got around to recognizing the newsworthiness of antiwar/warriors in a time of war. Of course, by the early 1970s the antiwar movement and the New Left was becoming painfully aware on its own that the American mass media thrived on visual confrontation while starving its audience for substance. In this respect, the concentration on VVAW's symbolic mode of protest should remind us of the limitations of effective political opposition via commercial mass media. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that by making their protest so rich in the visual signs, symbols, and images of the dominant culture, VVAW was able to lay bear and publicly critique the brutal and inhumane reality of the Vietnam war with an authenticity and effectivity that no other antiwar group could. VVAW's success in this area underscores a trenchant observation made by Harold Lasswell in 1936: "symbols are cheap and elusive....Any established order possesses a dominant myth (ideology); but a symbol monopoly is less easy to protect than a monopoly of goods and vio-

lence."<sup>77</sup> And yet, even Lasswell did not anticipate the extent to which the "elusive" symbols might impact upon the "dominant myth (ideology)." It is this matter that will be discussed in the examination of Hollywood representations of the Vietnam veteran in the 1970s and 80s that follows in the next chapter, keeping in mind that hegemonic ideology--in this case the ideology of war and the warrior/hero--reconfigures and re-establishes itself using the social and political actions of real people and real events as its source material.

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<sup>77</sup>Harold Lasswell, Politics (Cambridge, Ma.: M.I.T. Press, 1936) 235.

## CHAPTER IV

THE VIETNAM VETERAN ANTIWAR/WARRIOR IN HOLLYWOOD FILM,  
1971-1994: IMAGES AND ISSUES

The antiwar dissent of Vietnam veterans helped complete the collapse of ideological hegemony in the historical conjuncture of the Vietnam era. There was no turning away from the fact that the antiwar/warriors who had fought in Vietnam confirmed rather than denied what other war critics were saying--that the war was at its very core brutal, inhumane, and immoral, waged at the needless cost of thousands of Vietnamese and American lives, and the untold suffering of countless others. Moreover, the final pullout of American combat troops in 1972, Richard Nixon's resignation following the Watergate debacle in 1974, and the final inglorious defeat of the American war effort with the fall of Saigon in 1975 confirmed that American antiwar opposition was a central driving force of the era.

With the end of the war and the end of the Nixon Administration, however, the *raison-d'être* of antiwar forces faded. As the war finally drew to a close, inevitably the civilian and veteran antiwar resistance ended. Richard Nixon's hand-picked successor Gerald Ford was given the initial task of attending to the nation's

ideological rehabilitation, of filling the cultural and political void left following the only war America ever lost. In April, 1975, directly on the heels of the fall of Saigon and the humiliating imagery of the last Americans making a hasty exit from Vietnam, Ford attempted to exorcise the contentious meanings of Vietnam from public discourse by exiling the war to another realm of cultural signification--the past. Addressing a student audience at Tulane University, he stated: "Today, Americans can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished."<sup>1</sup>

If Ford assumed that hegemonic reconstitution and recovery regarding the ideology of war could be accomplished by "putting the war behind us," he was in a sense both correct and incorrect in his assessment of the nascent cultural clime of post-Vietnam America. He was correct, since relegating the war--and by extension the antiwar movement, as well--to the past placed the meanings and images of the Vietnam era within the hands of cultural industries and institutions usually quite adept at assimilating and taking the bite out of political opposition and social criticism. Nevertheless, this

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York: Viking Press, 1983) 667.

chapter will focus primarily on the reasons why Ford was incorrect, for while ideological hegemony expressed through entertainment media may have reconstituted itself by the 1980s regarding war and the warrior/hero ethic, it did not do so at its pre-Vietnam equilibrium point. The cultural industries fashioned a new and potent cultural mythology of war, but not without ceding significant ideological territory. We will see that while the engines of popular culture certainly appropriated, reconstructed and reconfigured the social image of the Vietnam antiwar/warrior, and the Vietnam war as a whole through its representations of returned veterans, it did not do so without leaving tangible residues of the anti-hegemonic meanings of the antiwar years.

Any number of mass media could be examined for traces of oppositional and antiwar sentiment, but generally speaking, the reconstitution of a hegemonic ideology of war did not gain ground without Hollywood. Along with television, the commercial film industry represents a greater confluence of social sources in the production and dissemination of cultural images and meanings than perhaps any other mass medium. What is more, Hollywood films have the capacity to reach millions, certainly more than political tracts, revisionist scholarly monographs, or for that matter works of literature. Thus, popular film

functioned in the 1970s and 80s, and continues to function today, as a highly significant cultural barometer for waging ideological reconstitution in the post-Vietnam period.

It is crucial to note, however, that if ideological reconstitution could not readily proceed without Hollywood, Hollywood itself could not proceed without acknowledging the images generated by the political opposition to the Vietnam war itself. On one level, following the release of John Wayne's sharply criticized film The Green Berets in 1968, Hollywood treated the issue of Vietnam as something to be approached with caution or avoided altogether. At the root of this was the notion that the division and opposition generated by the war rendered it essentially unsalable as a cultural commodity. As film critic Peter McInerney observed:

a war that so traumatized and divided Americans was not a logical topic for popular entertainment. How could films succeed which reminded audiences of military stalemate if not outright defeat, generated guilt about suffering Vietnamese and Americans, or caused bandaged cultural wounds to bleed afresh?<sup>2</sup>

McInerney's assessment is to a certain extent true, yet it misses important nuances concerning the manner in which entertainment media approached the issue of the war and

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<sup>2</sup>Peter McInerney, "Apocalypse Then: Hollywood Looks Back at Vietnam," Film Quarterly 33 (Winter, 1980): 22.

its manifold impact on homefront American society both during and immediately following the Vietnam war. Rather than total avoidance, the conventional Hollywood strategy was one of displacement, of representing the war and its consequences indirectly via allegory and metaphorical allusion. Certainly many Hollywood films of the late 1960s and 1970s appear only on the surface to be far removed from the social problematics engendered by Vietnam, and on closer scrutiny can be seen to purvey tangible, if oblique, references to the war's impact on American society, and to carry indelible traces of the contradictions and political challenges the war generated in American life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Allegorical references to Vietnam abounded in Hollywood films of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Usually this involved displacing Vietnam onto representations of past American wars. Prominent examples of this include Little Big Man (1970), which displaces Vietnam onto the frontier Indian wars of the 19th century; Kelly's Heroes (1970) which displaces Vietnam onto World War II; and MASH (1970), which displaces Vietnam onto the Korean War. Productive discussions of this allegorical tendency in Hollywood during the Vietnam era are provided by Julian Smith, Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam (New York: Scribners, 1975) and regarding Little Big Man specifically, John H. Lenihan, Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980). In addition, one of the most notable and longstanding of allegorical references to Vietnam in the 1970s was the enormously popular television series MASH, a spin-off of the film. Airing from 1972 to 1983, the series made oblique but nonetheless unmistakable references to the Vietnam war both in its antiwar and irreverent antimilitary stance and its Asian locale. That the 1970 film and the television series could not directly represent the Vietnam war within the constraints of Hollywood and commercial

When Hollywood finally afforded more direct attention to the issue of Vietnam, it found that the image of the returned Vietnam veteran would be central to its representational strategy. Indeed, since we have seen that the antiwar Vietnam veteran became a highly potent social image during the late years of the war in the early 1970s, and keeping in mind that the culture industries depend on real people, real events and images to fashion their offerings, the image of the antiwar/warrior had to be appropriated, transfunctionalized and eventually reconstructed by Hollywood. The connections between the industry and real antiwar vets were at times quite explicit and direct, as in the case of films like Coming Home (1978) and Born On The Fourth of July (1989). It would be mistaken, however, to limit our scope of inquiry to these more overt connections, for as was the case for most Hollywood productions dealing with the war both during it and afterward, it is often the indirect, oblique, and unintended representations of the warrior figure portrayed via the image of the returned veteran that are more revealing about the impact of anti-hegemonic images. In any event, the manner in which the image of the Vietnam antiwar/warrior was appropriated,

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television certainly attests to the problems of representability regarding the war, particularly during the time it was fought and in its immediate aftermath.

reconstructed and reconfigured by Hollywood in the 1970s and 1980s had profound implications for the rest of the ideological code for war in American society and the struggles over ideological and cultural hegemony in the post-Vietnam period. And as Harry Haines argues, it is in this sense that:

...media representations of the war and returning veterans have political significance. Film and other cultural forms provide sites of ideological struggle and assign meaning to the war experience and veterans in an attempt to reintegrate both into the ongoing national story...Media representations produce a general frame of reference that assigns particular meanings to the Vietnam War experience.<sup>4</sup>

One of the earliest representations of the dissident Vietnam antiwar/warrior was released during the same period of time as Vietnam Veterans Against the War's Dewey Canyon III protest in 1971. The independently produced Billy Jack centers on the social and political activities of the "Freedom School," an alternative school for young people of all backgrounds and races located near a small town in the rural Southwest. Through the portrayal of the projects undertaken by the school and the intolerance, bigotry, and violent antagonism of many of the local townspeople, the film dramatizes central issues and

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<sup>4</sup>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, Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 83.

conflicts which confronted antiwar activists and other radical social movements of the late 60s and early 70s, doing this via the representation of a Vietnam veteran, a "Green Beret who turned against the war."

Crucially, in its adoption of the figure of the Vietnam vet antiwar/warrior, Billy Jack presents one the most overt critiques in the history of mainstream cinema of the traditional masculine warrior/hero, and by implication the entire mythology and mystique of Hollywood warrior heroics that had so enraptured many Vietnam veterans in their adolescence. On one level, via the manner in which the character is visually deployed in the film, Billy Jack closely resembles the classical Hollywood male hero. He dresses in conservative western garb, is self-reliant, highly skilled in one-on-one combat, and lives by his own independent code of honor. However, unlike most such heroic figures he associates himself with a group dedicated to radical nonviolent social change. In this unique sense, the film employs a popular American heroic archetype in concert with the image of the Vietnam vet to dramatize radical ideas and the problems of protest organizations of the Vietnam era, such as the conflict between violent and nonviolent means of protest, and moreover the tension between individualistic and collective modes of response to political issues. Indeed,

many of the key sequences of Billy Jack involve Billy single-handedly exacting righteous revenge against town bigots and corrupt police officers who threaten the young people at the school. In these sequences, Billy takes on the role of the vigilante "enforcer": he is, in essence, the "Dirty Harry" of the forces of anti-establishment resistance. However, in direct contrast to Dirty Harry and other such Hollywood heroes, Billy Jack's individualism and violent tactics are openly criticized in the film.

Jean, the organizer and director of the Freedom School, is presented as the dramatic counterpart to Billy. She is an advocate of nonviolent direct action and gradually influences him to consider the interests of the collectivity above his desire for personal heroism. In the climactic final scene of the film, Billy is hiding out in a deserted building surrounded by police, who must take him into custody for his retaliatory killing of the son of a powerful rancher who raped Jean and brutally murdered a pacifist Indian youth associated with the school. Billy initially refuses to give himself up, but Jean finally convinces him that it is better to face trial than to die a martyr's death, arguing that, "You can't make your own laws. You can't solve everything by violence, Billy." Billy initially counters this by remarking cynically, "You

worked for Martin Luther King and where is he?" His final defense against Jean's arguments for nonviolence is to assert that there exist fundamental temperamental differences between them: "Your spirit is calm and pacific; mine has been in a rage since the day I was born." In perhaps the most direct verbal criticism of the male hero's use of violence in any film of the 1970s, Jean retorts, "Billy, that's a bunch of crap." Shortly after this exchange, Billy Jack decides to turn himself in and face trial.<sup>5</sup> The closing scene of the film shows Billy being taken away in a police squad car, surrounded by a collectivity of youth saluting him with upraised clenched fists, a familiar gesture of protest solidarity during the Vietnam era.

In the 1976 film Taxi Driver, the combination of the dissident Vietnam veteran and the warrior/hero figure are configured in a different but in the end no less deconstructionist manner. In a sense, Taxi Driver

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<sup>5</sup>Through the motif of Billy Jack's court trial being used as a forum of political protest (similar to the infamous Chicago 8 trial of 1969), the 1974 sequel The Trial of Billy Jack further develops and magnifies the themes established in Billy Jack. It continues the debate about violent and nonviolent protest, vociferously criticizes the Vietnam War, the injustices of the American legal system, and the use of the National Guard by corrupt politicians to intimidate people involved in protest movements, thus touching on most of the salient events and issues associated with radical protest in the Vietnam era.

represents an opposite pole from Billy Jack in terms of the way the veteran is represented as relating to broader socio-political currents, in that the protagonist of the film never approaches any collectivist sentiment regarding the confrontation of social issues such as war and injustice, nor the stance of the individualistic male hero per se. Rather, the main character Travis Bickle is portrayed as a man completely awash in anomie. Travis is a Vietnam veteran who spends his sleepless nights driving a taxi in New York City, as alienated in the bowels of the city as he was in the rice paddies and jungles of Vietnam. Adorned with remnants of his Marine uniform, he rides through the streets commenting on the vile inhabitants he encounters on his voyages. In a passage which anticipates the violent climax of the film, Bickle narrates the depth of his anomic state:

All the animals come out at night, the queers, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick and venal. Some day a real rain is going to come and wash all the scum off the streets.... Thank God for the rain to wash the trash off the sidewalk. Listen you screwheads! Here is a man who would not take it anymore, a man who stood up against the scum, the filth.

Bickle is portrayed as an individual in search of a mission which might lead to his personal redemption, and to the redemption of the society he once served and fought for in the Vietnam War. As the film's narrative progresses, Bickle strikes up associations with characters

identified as victims, and two who are identified as villains. The latter are two men--a vacuous presidential candidate named John Pallintine, and a manipulative street pimp called Sport. In their own ways, the two women are represented as victims of the two men and the institutions they represent: politics and prostitution. Betsy, a campaign staffer for Pallantine, and Iris, a twelve year old runaway prostitute were, in Bickle's mind, in need of rescue from their respective environments, and this becomes the focal point of Bickle's mission.

After failing to make meaningful contact with Betsy or Iris regarding the malevolence and corruption of their situations, Bickle's admonitions fall on deaf ears, and he undertakes a quasi-military training regimen to prepare himself for a climactic confrontation not unlike the "search and destroy" operations of the American military in Vietnam. After arming himself with a small arsenal of handguns and other weaponry hidden underneath a battered field jacket and fashioning his hair into a mohawk, Bickle is prepared for a final battle. After first attempting to assassinate Pallantine at an outdoor rally but being foiled by secret service agents, Bickle turns to Sport and his associates congregating in a tenement brothel. In what amounts to a sequence of violent bloodletting and symbolic cleansing, Bickle systematically slaughters Sport

and the brothel's management, is gravely wounded himself in the process, and then tries turning his own arsenal on himself. However, his attempt at self-assassination fails as the chambers of his weapons are now empty.

On the surface, Taxi Driver can be criticized for offering a negative stereotype of psychotic Vietnam veterans ready to commit My Lai-style massacres on the streets of America.<sup>6</sup> On a deeper level, however, such criticisms would be narrow, since the society portrayed is itself sick beyond recognition or redemption. This point is affirmed in the final sequence when it is revealed that Travis has been accorded the status of civilian hero for "rescuing" Iris, a status he chooses to reject. The implication is that only a deeply disturbed and violent society could confuse the actions of a deeply disturbed individual for heroism. In this sense, the character of Travis Bickle was not so much represented as a deranged war veteran ready to unleash himself on an unsuspecting and innocent civil society, but rather as the inevitable product of that society, its wars, and its warrior/hero mythology. Travis Bickle is thus, as James Combs argues,

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<sup>6</sup>Such a criticism would incorrectly place Taxi Driver within a cycle of largely B-movies released in the 1970s which used the image of the deranged Vietnam veteran, or "psycho-vet," merely as a vehicle for gratuitous violence. See, for example, Chrome and Hot Leather (1971), The Losers (1971), Welcome Home, Soldier Boys (1972), and The Stone Killers (1973).

"the ultimate victim of Vietnam, bringing the war home and realizing that home was a war too, a society so close to disintegration...with violence now the norm of a barbaric world."<sup>7</sup>

There is no direct linkage of the character of Travis Bickle to the activities of antiwar/warriors. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the film was more than merely tangential to the issue of Vietnam. Screenwriter Paul Schrader acknowledged that the opaque nature of Taxi Driver was necessary in order to broach the topic of Vietnam with the American public in the mid-1970s, in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Saigon. Of this period, Schrader stated, "the war was still too close to most Americans for them to sufficiently detach themselves....One must work in metaphors."<sup>8</sup> In this way, Taxi Driver paralleled the general Hollywood tendency of the early and mid-1970s to represent the war and its effects indirectly through metaphorical allusion. And yet Taxi Driver is a highly suggestive metaphor, not only in reference to the debilitating horrors of war but also for its implications regarding the popular archetype of the

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<sup>7</sup>James E. Combs, American Political Movies: An Annotated Filmography of Feature Films (New York: Garland, 1990) 85.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Morris Dickstein, "Bringing It All Back Home," Partisan Review 45 (1978): 633.

warrior/hero figure. Travis Bickle is certainly lightyears away from John Wayne's Sergeant Stryker of The Sands of Iwo Jima, yet they embody similar characteristics--both appear to be in society but not of it, both are capable of unleashing violence on their perceived enemies, and both are awarded a hero's status for their actions. Beyond these surface similarities, however, the differences are crucial. Sergeant Stryker's enemies were defined clearly and unambiguously in political terms, while Bickle equates mainstream politics and government with "sick and venal" social corruptions. Sergeant Stryker wore his heroism proudly, while Bickle lays bare and distorts his expression of warrior/heroism with his violent overkill syndrome, mohawk hair style, and overall condition of anomie.

Taxi Driver and its representation of the returned veteran would be difficult to imagine without the ideological and cultural space opened up by the actions of antiwar/warriors, and indeed the entire antiwar movement of the Vietnam era. In this film, the warrior figure is a deformed and distorted hero granted heroic status by an equally deformed and distorted society, and in this way the film helps establish the groundwork whereby the effects of war are coded not in terms of glory or heroic celebration, but rather of madness, alienation, and rage.

In various forms, these themes remained a substantial part of the Vietnam war films that followed later in the 1970s. And yet as will be discussed below, Hollywood's appropriation and reconfiguration of the social image of the antiwar/warrior to meet entertainment criteria retained implicit and explicit antiwar and anti-government tendencies.

Hollywood's next major effort to represent the returned Vietnam veteran, 1978's Coming Home, ranks as perhaps the least politically ambiguous film both in terms of its overt, if carefully tempered, critique of the Vietnam war, and its deployment of the imagistic and ideological significations of the antiwar/warrior. The film simultaneously builds on the image of the deranged warrior projected in Taxi Driver. Coming Home was in the end fully backed as a commercial release by United Artists, yet its production came about largely through the concerted designs and efforts of antiwar activists and celebrities prepared to self-consciously enter the post-Vietnam arena of ideological struggle over the meaning of the war.<sup>9</sup> The initial ideas for Coming Home began to

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<sup>9</sup>In an interview conducted just after the release of Coming Home in 1978, screenwriter Bruce Gilbert made a statement remarkably prescient regarding Hollywood's role in the cultural struggle over the social implications of the Vietnam war: "Nixon was determined to manipulate the nature of the war to hide what really happened...We felt that there would be a cultural battlefield in the future to determine

take shape in 1973, when Jane Fonda and fellow antiwar activists Bruce Gilbert and Nancy Dowd expressed an interest in doing a film that explored the consequences of Vietnam on the home front. Fonda and Dowd had engaged in previous antiwar activities, including stints with FTA ("Fuck The Army") shows which brought antiwar skits and satires to stateside G.I.s near military bases in the late 60s and early 70s. Initially United Artists producer Jerome Hellman felt that Dowd's screenplay was unfilmable, and the script went through several rewrites, being revised as the film was shot. Nevertheless, the substantive linkages between those involved in the film's production and the potent antiwar imagery of the Vietnam era made for an interesting hybrid. In essence, if a truly radical film on Vietnam was to come out of Hollywood, it would be difficult to imagine a group more credentialed to undertake it, yet it took five years for the project to move from concept to fruition. The cinematic outcome represents both the opportunities and limitations of Hollywood in terms of purveying antiwar sentiments via the image of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior.

The main character in Coming Home is Luke, played by

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what the lessons of the war were, and saw film as an integral part of that." See Richard Turner, "The Worst Years of Our Lives," New Times 20 March, 1978: 63.

Jon Voight. Voight prepared for the role by spending time with wounded Vietnam veterans, including Ron Kovic, author of Born On the Fourth of July. The character of Luke was based loosely on Kovic's experiences as a paraplegic Marine veteran who became one of America's most outspoken antiwar activists in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Until the release of Oliver Stone's filmic adaption of Born On the Fourth of July in 1989, Luke became Hollywood's closest approximation of a Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior. The manner in which the character is visually portrayed in the film suggests his identification to antiwar ideas, and his conversion to an outward antiwar ideological position. He is adorned with visual signifiers and symbols similar to those displayed by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War-- long hair, a beard, beads, and a Marine Corps jacket modified to mockingly read "War Hero" on the front, "The Duke" and "Semper Fi" on the back. In addition, Luke's wheelchair, obvious in nearly all his scenes, serves not only as an indicator of physical wounds suffered in the

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<sup>10</sup>When queried in a 1987 interview about why she decided to make Coming Home, Jane Fonda acknowledged that Kovic served as a direct inspiration: "At a rally I met [Ron Kovic]...a very charismatic veteran. He had enlisted twice for Vietnam and got wounded. His experiences turned him against the war, and he became a very eloquent speaker. At the rally he said something that knocked me out. He said, 'I may have lost my body, but I have gained my mind.' That [became] the theme of Coming Home." See "Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden," Rolling Stone 5 November-10 December, 1987: 126.

war, but also as a powerful signifier of war's true nature, stripped of its glorious and spectacular mythic heroic qualities.

Standing at the opposite end of the ideological axis is the character of Bob Hyde, a Marine Corps Captain who represents the conventional warrior in stylistic expression and political persuasion. To a great extent, Hyde embodies the symbolic composite of Luke's pre-Vietnam life, what in military parlance is known as a "sharp troop": unquestioning dedication to the Marine Corps, its mission in Vietnam, and his expected role in the war. Moreover, he is portrayed as being diametrically opposed to antiwar sentiment, as illustrated in a scene when a demonstrator approaches Hyde outside a Marine base, flashes him the two-fingered "V" peace salute and says, "peace brother." Hyde's response to this is a sarcastic, "peace on you, brother," and a middle-fingered salute of his own.

To date, Coming Home is the only Hollywood Vietnam war film to explicitly structure this warrior/hero-antiwar/warrior opposition into its narrative. As the use of the Rolling Stones song "Out Of Time" early in the film suggests, Captain Hyde is indeed "out of touch" with his times and is "running out of time" regarding the dire consequences the war will soon wreak on his life,

consequences which his obedient consent to the ideologies of war and warrior/heroism blind him to. Luke, on the other hand, is represented as being a heroic and cathartic individual, but not without initial expressions of bitterness and cruel sarcasm, thus signifying him in the first quarter of the narrative as at least somewhat unhinged regarding the physical and emotional costs the war and his own early acceptance of the warrior/hero ethic have wrought on him. Informing the developing and at first implicit rivalry between Luke and Hyde is the other major structural element of the film, a love triangle involving Hyde's wife, Sally, played by Jane Fonda. While Captain Hyde is in Vietnam, Sally takes a volunteer position at a local Veteran's Administration hospital, where she meets Luke and is forced to confront the ugly side of Vietnam that her cloistered existence as an officer's wife had kept her insulated from. In the end, it is the war that brings the three major characters into an intense relationship, and it is the war's effects on the social consciousness of all of them that determines the outcome of this relationship.

The manner in which the love triangle evolves and plays itself out establishes the essential political thrust of Coming Home. Sally is drawn to Luke's developing sensitivity to the complexities of war, and the

paraplegic veteran ends up assisting Sally in her attempt to gain some modicum of independence by throwing off the mental shackles which military life has imposed on her. The relationship between Luke and Sally moves to a higher level of intensity when another veteran at the hospital commits suicide by injecting air into his veins. Moreover, this suicide serves as the catalyst which propels Luke into assuming his role as an antiwar/warrior. In a spontaneous act of protest, Luke chains himself and his wheelchair to the gate of the Marine Corps base, which captures the attention of the media and the F.B.I.. F.B.I. and military intelligence agents then monitor the comings and goings of Luke and Sally. Later, this monitoring is revealed to Captain Hyde, who has returned home early from the war due to an accidental self-inflicted gunshot wound to his leg. The revelations of his wife's infidelity, along with the traumas of the war, intrude upon Hyde's coming home. Further emotional dissonance occurs when the Marines decorate Hyde for his wound. Hyde can't fathom how or why he could be decorated for shooting himself in the leg.

Captain Hyde cannot cope with the impact of a war that so inverts his masculine world of warrior/heroism, medals for bravery, and obedient women, and begins quickly descending into a state of mental disarray. After being

notified by superiors that his wife and Luke had been monitored, Hyde first informs Luke of the surveillance and of his subsequent knowledge of their relationship, and then prepares to "waste" his wife and himself. Hyde, Luke and Sally are then finally brought together in the climactic scene of the film. At the Hyde home, Captain Hyde confronts his wife with a loaded weapon, assaulting her with verbal denigrations like "slope" and "cunt" usually reserved for the Vietnamese. Luke then arrives on the scene and is himself confronted by the armed Hyde, but succeeds in calming him down by telling him, "I'm not the enemy. The war is the enemy." Broken, Hyde confesses that he is "fucked" and turns the weapon over to Luke. Within the context of the film, Hyde's confession signifies the symbolic death of the hegemonic warrior/hero figure and the emergence of at least an approximation of the antiwar/warrior. This is emphasized more tangibly when Hyde admits to Sally that, "all I ever wanted to be was a hero, a fucking hero, that's all."

Contrasted with Hyde's precipitous descent into madness is Luke's ascent to outspoken antiwar/warrior and along with it a new, empowering purpose in life. Scenes of both characters conversions are cross-cut with one another in the final sequence of the film. While scenes of Hyde show him preparing for a suicidal plunge into the

ocean, Luke is shown accepting a speaking invitation to debate a military recruiter at a local high school, explaining that "what I have to say to high school kids they're not ready for." Next, as Hyde moves toward jumping into the ocean, Luke makes an antiwar speech. His speech, much like Captain Hyde's previous confession, makes linkages with the tradition of American male heroism. Drawing on his pre-Vietnam past, Luke tells his audience that he was captain of his high school football team, enveloped with the idea of being a war hero, and had enthusiastically enlisted in the Marines. However, in contrast to Hyde's conception of heroism, Luke offers a critique of the warrior/hero mystique as it applies to Vietnam. Choking with emotion, he informs the high schoolers: "I killed for my country and I don't feel very good about it. And there's a lot of shit I did over there that I find hard to live with....All I'm saying is, there is a choice to be made here."

This juxtaposition of Hyde's suicide with Luke's gesture of VVAW-type activism stands as a central apex of Hollywood's appropriation of the figure of the antiwar/warrior and the type of veteran antiwar protest generated by the Vietnam war itself, yet at the same time it also reveals the barrier beyond which Hollywood has largely refused to venture. The rather strong critique

leveled against the warrior/hero mythology is only partially matched by the film's rendering of the Vietnam veteran as antiwar/warrior. It is crucial to note that Luke's antiwar actions do not go beyond the individualistic, with no attempt to link them to the broader collective veterans movement exemplified by such groups as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Luke neither approaches a substantive social analysis of the war he comes to reject, nor a revelation of the precise nature of the war's criminality and inhumanity. Indeed, it can be argued that Coming Home retreats to even safer ideological ground by ambiguously representing war in general as the enemy, rather than the policy makers and governmental-economic elites who led the nation into Vietnam.

For these reasons, Coming Home received criticism especially from the remnants of the antiwar left. For example, leftist film critics Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, perhaps expecting more from a vocal antiwar critic like Jane Fonda, argue that Coming Home is "a liberal, safe film, and formally too conventional to really get to the psychic and political core of Vietnam....It knows that emotions like moral rage and the themes of psychological transformation are clearly more accessible than a critique

of the government and culture that sustained the war."<sup>11</sup> There is a certain surface validity to these charges. With films like Coming Home, Hollywood was indeed sanitizing the Vietnam experience. And yet on the other hand, it must be remembered that as Hollywood undertook the task of reconstructing and reconfiguring a cultural code of war suitable for public consumption in post-Vietnam America, it was compelled to acknowledge, however superficially, potent antiwar images such as the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior, and the brutality of the war itself.

The release of Coming Home in 1978 helped open up space in Hollywood for a period of time in the late 1970s for two additional large-budget Vietnam releases, The Deer Hunter (1978) and Apocalypse Now (1979). While neither of these films contains any overt, direct representations of the antiwar/warrior image per se, several oblique and indirect references can be discerned in this respect nonetheless, and they warrant careful attention. Of all of the Vietnam films Hollywood has produced over the past twenty-five years, few have developed the controversy of Michael Cimino's The Deer Hunter. If remnants of the

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<sup>11</sup>Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, "Hollywood and Vietnam: The Triumph of the Will," Cineste 9 (Spring, 1979): 4, and How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam (New York: Praeger, 1988), 51.

antiwar left leveled rather mild criticisms against Coming Home, they were unrelenting in their condemnation of The Deer Hunter. Journalist Gloria Emerson claimed that Cimino had "cheaped and diminished the war as no one else," while Jane Fonda referred to the film as "a racist Pentagon version of the war."<sup>12</sup> Auster and Quart echoed these sentiments by arguing that The Deer Hunter was "right wing propaganda, racist, and a homage to American individualism and machismo."<sup>13</sup> Even the conservative magazine National Review saw fit to condemn the film, claiming that,

For all its pretensions to something newer and better, this film is only an extension of the old Hollywood war-movie lie. The enemy is still bestial and stupid, and no match for our purity and heroism; only we no longer wipe up the floor with him--rather we litter it with his guts. The average movie-goer gets no antiwar message from The Deer Hunter.<sup>14</sup>

Like those against Coming Home, these criticisms have a superficial validity. In terms of its narrative structure, The Deer Hunter is strikingly parallel to heroic films of the 1940s, 50s and early 60s. The audience is first presented with a social group and

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<sup>12</sup>Both Emerson and Fonda are quoted in Lance Morrow, "Vietnam Comes Home," Time 23 April, 1979: 23.

<sup>13</sup>Auster and Quart, "Hollywood and Vietnam," 6.

<sup>14</sup>John Simon, "Lame Deer," National Review 16 February, 1979: 248.

community that it comes to know intimately, but this collectivity also shows signs of weakness and inability to cope with various "frontier enemies," and a heroic figure with special qualities suited to meet the challenges from the frontier takes it upon himself to fight the villains. Moreover, the hero's "success" in this endeavor restores to the community a sense of security and stability.<sup>15</sup> In The Deer Hunter, however, this familiar narrative formula is fleshed out with quite different content. The admonishments of Jane Fonda and others notwithstanding, the film is neither racist, unambiguous right-wing propaganda, nor one which the Pentagon saw fit to endorse. Indeed, The Deer Hunter lends productive credence to R.E. McKerrow's contention that analysis of commercial media texts should seek to disclose a "subordinate or secondary reading which contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of dominant cultural norms."<sup>16</sup>

The Deer Hunter presents the male warrior/hero in

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<sup>15</sup>These structural elements of The Deer Hunter, and their parallels in the western film genre, are identified and discussed in John Hellmann's American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 173-188.

<sup>16</sup>R.E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," Communication Monographs 56 (1989): 108.

three phases--first as civilian, second as Vietnam warrior, and finally as returned veteran. Within these three stages, the film deglorifies war, deconstructs and demythologizes the warrior/hero figure, and allows the audience to witness the destruction war brings to the naive and powerless. For these reasons, The Deer Hunter is rich in implicit antiwar tendencies, and moreover demonstrates Hollywood's haphazard search in the late 1970s for a post-Vietnam warrior/hero image amenable to hegemonic reconfiguration.

The community setting from which the narrative of The Deer Hunter unfolds is depicted in terms of two interrelated levels: a ritualistic level, and the level of social instability. The latter is quite evident in the representation of the working class industrial town of Clairton, Pennsylvania. Work life in the local steel mill is portrayed as hell-like with shots of the mill as a flaming inferno. In addition, family life is shown to be brutal, as Linda (played by Meryl Streep) is physically abused by her alcoholic, women-hating father. Steven (played by John Savage) is about to marry an older woman who is pregnant by another man. The Catholic church, whose steeple is the dominant visual presence in the town in addition to the steel mill, is portrayed as corrupt for sanctioning the marriage against the wishes of the groom's

mother. It is clear that Clairton is no small-town American paradise. Quite to the contrary, it is shown to be riddled with internal deterioration of its work, family and religious institutions.

Amidst this social instability, members of the community attempt to cope through adherence to cultural rituals aimed at orienting their lives. These rituals include adherence to elaborate ethnic Russian cultural ceremonies, boastful American patriotism, and the central motif of the film, deer hunting. This is illustrated in an elaborate wedding scene in which members of the community gather to celebrate both Steven's wedding and his imminent departure with two other native sons to Vietnam. The American Legion Hall where the reception takes place is draped with American flags, clean-cut pictures of Michael (played by Robert DeNiro), Nick (Christopher Walken) and Steven. A huge banner hung underneath these pictures announces that the three young men, and by implication the community, are "Serving Proudly God and Country" by volunteering for military service in Vietnam.

However, the film represents these cultural rituals as ultimately too frail to withstand intrusions from the war itself. This point is made clear in a sequence involving a Green Beret Vietnam veteran who is present at

the reception/farewell party. The soldier is in an immaculate uniform, clean-cut and highly decorated, and his appearance contrasts sharply with the drunk and disheveled soldiers-to-be. Upon recognizing him as an "authentic" war hero, Michael, Nick, and Steven approach the man with the kind of respect and admiration more common in a less troubled time and from a less troubled war. Steven shouts, "Hey, Green Beret! Sir! Sir!", but the man does not respond. "Sir, Mike Vronsky," Michael introduces himself. "This is the groom, Steven, we're going airborne." Nick chimes in, "I hope they send us where the bullets are flying and the fightin's the worst. The Green Beret's response to Nick's naive enthusiasm for war is abrupt and cursory: "Fuck it." Unable to comprehend this kind of response, Michael asks, "Well, what's it like over there?" He receives an identical response: "Fuck it." With no room in his ideological and perceptual framework for such an unfamiliar and unpatriotic rejection of war, Michael angrily advances toward the man until restrained. "Fuck who?", he demands, not accepting that the "it" refers to the war.

This scene indicates the inability of naive young men to comprehend the realities of the war beyond the ideological boundaries of warrior/heroism ingrained on their imaginations. The veteran's response of "fuck it"

signifies the rejection of war and the rejection of support of Vietnam premised on the false notions that war brings heroism and glory. And yet the lessons of the Green Beret are not heeded. Michael, Nick and Steven are doomed to learn the true meaning of "fuck it" only after they experience the war itself.

Before leaving for Vietnam, Michael, Nick and several friends go on a final deer hunt. The deer hunt serves as a masculine arena similar to war in that there are hunters, hunted, weapons and their use. It also serves as an activity where the qualities of the heroic figure can be presented and explored. Like Billy Jack, the central heroic figure of the film, Michael, displays qualities common to American mass cultural heroes of the past: a stoic, highly restrained and repressed personality ("a control freak" as one of his friends refers to him), adherence to a moral code apart from those of his community, and the ability to unleash just the right amount of physical violence for "success." Within the particular context of the deer hunt, success is defined when a deer is taken.

Michael's moral code is established with his insistence on killing a deer with only one shot. His insistence places him in varying degrees of disfavor with his peers. Nick admits that he does not consider the one

shot ethos to be that important, but Michael not only considers "one shot" to be essential, he also deems it of direct relevance to Vietnam. Just before departing for the hunt, Michael and Nick have the following discussion:

Michael: You know, I'll tell you one thing, if I found out my life had to end up in the mountains, that'd be alright. But its got to be in your mind. Nick: What? One shot? Michael: Two is pussy. Nick: I don't think that much about one shot anymore. Michael: You have to think about one shot. One shot is what it's all about. The deer has to be taken with one shot. I try to tell people that but they don't listen....Do you ever think about Vietnam? Nick: Yeah, I think about the deer, going to Nam, I don't know, I like the way the trees are....You're a fuckin' nut, you know that? A fuckin' control freak.

In the mountains on the hunting trip, Michael displays further indications that the hunt is a kind of preparation for the war. When his friend Stan forgets his boots and wants to borrow Michael's, Michael refuses. Stan, who is represented as the antithesis of the self-controlled hero, pulls out a handgun and begins waving it around and making idle threats. Stan's bombast spills over into an argument with Michael:

Stan: Some fuckin' friend, you're some fuckin' friend. Michael: You gotta learn. Every time you come up here you got your goddamn head up your ass. Every time he comes up he's got no knife, he's got no jacket, he's got no pants, he's got no boots. All he's got is that stupid gun he carries around like John Wayne. Well, that's not gonna help you. Stan: You're a fuckin' bastard, you know that? Michael: Stanley, you see this? [holds up a bullet] This is this! This ain't nothin' else! This is

this! From now on, you're on your own. Stan: Hey, you know your problem Mike? No one ever knows what the fuck you're talkin' about! This is this! What the hell is that supposed to mean? Is that some faggot sounding bullshit, or is that some faggot sounding bullshit?

In this exchange, Michael rejects the false "John Wayne" form of manhood for something he perceives to be more authentic--the single bullet. Stanley taunts Michael to shoot him, opening a place in his shirt as a target. Michael points his rifle away and fires one shot into the air. The single bullet is meant for the deer, the adversary, not for friends on the same side. However, this structure of beliefs will soon be perverted by the experience of the war, and in the process the foundation of the hero will be torn asunder.

The narrative then shifts to Vietnam, showing Michael entering a village armed with a flamethrower. After a North Vietnamese soldier drops a grenade in a bunker full of peasants, Michael incinerates the man. By coincidence, Nick and Steven happen to be on the same operation and are reunited with Michael, but almost immediately the three become the hunted as enemy soldiers approach. Captured by the Viet Cong, they are taken to a squalid holding pen, immersed in water, and forced to play Russian Roulette while their enemy captors gamble on the outcome. This game becomes the film's central metaphor for the random

terror and trauma of war.

The Russian Roulette game assumes an ironic function, transforming the one shot ethos of the deer hunt into a single deformed ritual. More specifically, the moral code of the war, while resembling the deer hunt, does not allow the hunted or the hunters to stop at one shot. The chamber of the weapon is continually reloaded with a single bullet, and the deadly ritual continues. The cycle of this "game" is broken only when Michael convinces his captors to break the one shot code. As Michael faces Nick, three bullets are loaded into the chamber, allowing Michael and Nick to kill their captors, rescue Steve, and escape. This Russian Roulette sequence represents Asian people as a diabolical and heartless reminiscent of the Asian enemies depicted in Hollywood war movies of World War II vintage. Of course, these are the sequences that critics refer to as racist. However, this familiar image of the fanatical Asian enemy is thrown into ambiguity when, later in the film, Michael and an entire group of Americans, French and Chinese are shown betting on the same game in a Saigon gambling parlor. The games are controlled by a corrupt Frenchman who has involved Nick into becoming a regular player. With Michael as a gambler and Nick as a player, their heroic qualities are demystified--war does not produce heroes, only players in

someone else's "games." After suffering severe trauma from the war, Nick has gone AWOL and is destined never to return home to Clairton. He remains in Vietnam, addicted to heroin and supporting his addiction by being a player in the Saigon parlor. Michael returns home, but to a community where he feels anomic and estranged. His friends in Clairton still adhere to the rituals of his pre-Vietnam past, and they try to welcome Michael back with a hero's welcome home, but he cannot face this ritual. He drives by the party and sequesters himself in a secluded motel where he waits alone, torn apart by his experiences. His immaculate uniform bedecked with medals suggests heroic status bestowed upon him by the military. Nevertheless, like the Green Beret at the wedding reception, the military uniform and medals cover a hollow and disturbed individual.

The degree to which Michael has internalized the trauma of the war becomes clear when he, Stan and two others go deer hunting again. This trip stands in stark contrast to the hunt before Vietnam. Michael is shown stalking a magnificent buck. He has the animal clearly in his sights, but he cannot bring himself to shoot, and instead fires one shot into the air, letting the deer escape. Upon returning to the cabin, Michael intrudes upon Stan carelessly brandishing his revolver in front of

one of the other hunters. He then violently disarms Stan, unloads the gun except for one bullet, and then holds the gun to Stan's head, screaming, "You wanna play games? Alright, I'll play your fuckin' games! How do you feel now, huh? How do you feel now, big shot?" He then pulls the trigger, getting an empty chamber. Prior to Vietnam, Michael did not pull the trigger on Stan, but did pull the trigger on the deer. In the post-Vietnam hunt, the essence of the ritual, and by extension the ethos of the warrior/hero, is inverted--Michael cannot shoot the deer, but is willing to take his chances on killing Stan.

Despite the concluding scene of The Deer Hunter in which the traumatized community sings "God Bless America" at Nick's funeral, the film is at the very least implicitly antiwar and critical of the implications of the Vietnam war on those who served in it, starkly portraying young men and their society distorted and destroyed by a war they could not explain. Like Coming Home, there is a certain amount of ambiguity in the way this is depicted. Nevertheless, while The Deer Hunter does not address the tangible sources of economic and political power as culprits in the making of war, it does show how war affects the naive and the powerless who are sent to die for reasons they cannot understand. And while the film does not present an overt depiction of an antiwar veteran,

it nonetheless effectively deconstructs the warrior figure, exorcising it of its heroic and romantic qualities. In the context of The Deer Hunter, war and the warrior/hero remain unglorified and unromantic. In essence, the character of Michael, like Travis in Taxi Driver and Luke and Captain Hyde in Coming Home, is a transitional warrior, one whose traumas and disturbances Hollywood had trouble recontextualizing into areas suitable for hegemonic reconfiguration. Only a few years later, however, the film industry would find in the image of the returned Vietnam veteran vehicles much more suited to the reconstruction and renewal of the hegemonic male warrior/hero, and the dominant ideology of war in general.

Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now (1979) goes beyond most all previous Hollywood films in its deglorification and demystification of the American warrior/hero figure, and in its stark representation of the inhumanity, grotesque depravity, and inevitable madness which war brings. Moreover, unlike previous Hollywood efforts, the American presence in Vietnam comes under overt criticism. A loose adaption of Joseph Conrad's famous novella Heart of Darkness, the film depicts in turn three primary warrior characters: Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), Major Kilgore (Robert Duvall), and Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando).

Although Apocalypse Now does not portray a Vietnam veteran in the context of the "coming home" theme of the films discussed up to this point, it does have as its central protagonist and narrator a soldier who went home to the United States but found life there untenable due to his experiences in Vietnam, and thus decided to return to Vietnam. Captain Willard is a career Army officer who undertakes special top-secret assignments with the C.I.A. that resemble the actions of a professional assassin. His decision to return to Vietnam comes neither from devotion to military duty nor from patriotic sentiment, but rather from his inability to function "back in the world." Making reference to his previous tour of duty, Willard narrates: "When I was here [Vietnam], I wanted to be there [America]. When I was there, all I could think about was getting back into the jungle."

As the narrative unfolds, Willard receives an assignment from the commanding general of American forces to "exterminate with extreme prejudice" Colonel Kurtz, a renegade Green Beret officer whose methods of fighting the war have become "unsound." Kurtz's military credentials as a warrior/hero are beyond reproach: he is a West Point graduate, a Korean war veteran, possesses a Harvard Master's degree, and is a Special Forces commander who completed a tour of duty in Vietnam before reassignment.

Yet as Willard is allowed to listen to Kurtz's disembodied last words monitored out of Cambodia, it is clear that this warrior has become distorted: "We must kill them, we must incinerate them pig after pig, cow after cow, village after village, army after army." These are the "unsound" methods.

The grotesque nature of Kurtz's recommendations are then juxtaposed with ostensibly "sound" methods of military conduct as Willard moves toward his destination aboard a Navy swiftboat. The first of these involves Major William Kilgore. Willard must rely on Kilgore to get the Navy boat to a suitable point at the mouth of a river that will take him toward Kurtz. Kilgore's visual representation signifies a link between Vietnam and America's frontier mythology. He is adorned with the familiar signifiers of the 19th century western cavalry, including cavalry hat and pearl-handled six shooter. He commands a unit of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, who have "turned in their horses for helicopters and gone tear-assing around the Nam looking for the shit." In addition, Kilgore's cultural preferences link the Vietnam experience to a form of absurdist American cultural imperialism--he loves beach parties, barbecues, beer, and most of all surfing. When he learns that one of the G.I.s accompanying Willard was a champion surfer in California,

Kilgore informs him that he does a lot of surfing in Vietnam but the surf is of poor quality. One of Kilgore's cohorts informs him that the area along the mouth of the river has excellent surf, but that it is "Charlie's beach." Kilgore's reply reveals his attitude toward the war in Vietnam: "Charlie don't surf." He then decides to launch an assault on the village to secure it so he and his men can surf.

The sequence depicting Kilgore's attack on the village is one of the most blatant condemnations of American military involvement in Vietnam to be found in Hollywood film. American servicepeople went to Vietnam, so they were told, to defend the "American way of life" (i.e. beach parties, outdoor barbecues, beer and surfing). Since the Vietnamese did not know how to "properly" make use of the seven foot swell off the shore of the village, they deserve to be displaced and destroyed. Interestingly, Kilgore's semiotic association with the American frontier heritage places the Vietnamese in the same cultural horizon as the American Indian. It was the American Indian who was assumed to not know how to make "proper use" of the land, thus justifying their removal and destruction. This ensemble of signs and symbols from America's historical past, and present, combine in this sequence for this possible reading, one that emphasizes

the basic ideological proclivity of American involvement in Vietnam: Those in our past and those in our present who do not recognize the superiority of the American way of life, deserve to be forcibly displaced and destroyed, "pig after pig, cow after cow...." Major Kilgore is simply the willing agent of this sort of cultural imperialism.

The helicopter attack on the Vietnamese village is brief but destructive, leveling the entire village in a matter of minutes. It is during this assault sequence that the film portrays the awesome firepower of the American military in the form of a large airmobile assault force. As the helicopters near the Viet Cong village, its inhabitants are shown mobilizing for defense. Women gather children, and others begin passing ammunition and manning defensive positions. The sequence represents a telling inversion of World War II-era combat films where the "good guys" were the ones outgunned and outmanned by a fanatical enemy. In Apocalypse Now, the reverse is essentially represented to be the case. The violent destruction of the village is depicted as being the result of a fanatical American force led by a deranged, maniacal leader.

The theme of "the American way of life" imposing itself upon the culture of the Vietnamese is continuous throughout Apocalypse Now. As the Navy swiftboat proceeds

up the river a number of scenes display the G.I.s blaring rock music over their radios, water skiing behind the boat, and in the process callously disrupting the routine activities of Vietnamese civilians along the way. In a scene that parallels the infamous 1968 massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American G.I.s at My Lai, a Vietnamese sampan is stopped and searched for contraband. In a moment of fear and anxiety, G.I.s open fire on the boat with a machinegun, killing all but one of the civilians aboard. When the Chief in command of the swiftboat wants to take the lone wounded survivor aboard, Willard immediately kills her instead so as not to further delay his mission in pursuit of Kurtz.

It is notable that Apocalypse Now balances the images of American atrocities against the Vietnamese with the tale of a Viet Cong atrocity of maiming young children told by Kurtz near the conclusion of the film. The function of making reference to atrocities on both sides--and ultimately the function of the film itself--is to represent war itself as a "horror" which distorts and deranges all who are touched by it. This entails depicting American warriors either as ethnocentric racists (Major Kilgore), cold-blooded assassins (Captain Willard), or madmen mentally warped beyond the point of redemption (Colonel Kurtz and the Viet Cong who hacked off the

inoculated arms of peasant children).

It should be emphasized that while such portrayals do go a long way towards deglorifying and demystifying the true nature of war and warrior/heroism, they also simultaneously remystify war, not as romantic or glorious, but as beyond the reach of human control. Apocalypse Now thus represents war as a product of humankind's seemingly innate "heart of darkness," as opposed to it being the product of concerted, rational decision-making on the part of governmental and economic elites. In this sense, as Martin Novelli argues, the film "rejects the war as grotesque tragedy," yet it is ultimately "unable to [sufficiently] illuminate the complexity of the war."<sup>17</sup>

Of all the Hollywood Vietnam veterans discussed thus far, only one can be said to be truly representative of an antiwar/warrior in the sense that was discussed in Chapter III, and that would be Luke Martin of Coming Home. While he channels it in only an individualist direction, he is the only character who is depicted as developing any semblance of substantive political perspective based on his anger, outrage and alienation. Billy Jack, Travis Bickle, Captain Hyde, Michael Vronsky and Captain Willard

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<sup>17</sup>Martin Novelli, "Hollywood and Vietnam: Images of Vietnam in American Film," in The Vietnam Era: Media and Popular Culture in the U.S. and Vietnam (London: Pluto Press, 1989) 121.

all share some degree of common ground with Luke Martin, since their collective anger and frustration are portrayed as deriving from similar experiences in Vietnam, yet they are never shown cultivating a larger critical consciousness or activist sensibility due to those experiences. Still, all of these characters have common ground with the veterans who chose to actively oppose the Vietnam war, for it was these real-life antiwar/warriors who fashioned a potent anti-hegemonic social image of the American warrior hero which opened the ideological space through which these popular culture characters could coherently emerge.

Following the release of Apocalypse Now, the Hollywood image of the Vietnam veteran remained essentially in limbo for a few years. Hollywood film projects touching on Vietnam went into a period of hibernation from 1979 to 1982, as few film dealing directly with the issue of Vietnam were produced. The reasons for this can be located in broader historical shifts and the changing political and social currents of 1980s America, signalled most prominently by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and a resurgent tide of right-wing Republicanism. Closely related to this was an organized effort by conservative political and corporate

economic interests to put in check the effects of antiwar sentiment on military spending and public attitudes overall regarding the exercise of American military power following the Vietnam War in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> This shift in political tides found expression in a number of areas across the social landscape, most pointedly in a disturbing upsurge of hyper-nationalism, jingoism and militarism following the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, and the renewal of Cold War binarisms in response to the Soviet Union's attack on Afghanistan in 1980 and Reagan's subsequent labeling of the Soviets as an "evil empire." With this the film industry seemed to on the surface turn away from the divisive and problematic issues engendered by the Vietnam War to productions with an inward-looking, domestic focus like On Golden Pond (1980) and Ordinary People (1980) as well as cartoonish fantasy narratives which highlighted simplistic oppositions between heroic forces of good (inevitably represented in the form of white males) and villainous evil, such as The Empire Strikes Back (1980) and Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). Yet the issues of the war still boiled just below the surface, and the renewed sensibilities of nationalism and

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<sup>18</sup>For a productive discussion of the resurgence of the New Right and its effects on broader political and cultural dynamics in America at the turn of the 1980s, see Alan Crawford, Thunder On the Right: The New Right and the Politics of Resentment (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

militarism in reaction to Vietnam found pronounced expression via a tendency in 1980s Hollywood which Claude J. Smith identifies as "the rehabilitation of the U.S. military." In marked contrast to such Vietnam films of the 1970s as Coming Home, The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now, which emphasized a sense of brooding disillusionment with the war and the military establishment and its moral and spiritual corruption, Smith notes a remarkable shift to much more positive and even celebratory portrayals of the American military, and a corollary rejuvenation of romanticized warrior/heroism, in such films as An Officer and a Gentleman (1981), Stripes (1981), and The Lords of Discipline (1982).<sup>19</sup> This trend continued in the mid-1980s with such militaristic celebrations as Top Gun (1986) and a related cycle of films which sought to reinscribe Red Scare paranoia regarding communist belligerence, the most prominent examples here being Red Dawn (1984) and Chuck Norris's hawkish narrative of Soviet invasion and take-over Invasion U.S.A. (1985).<sup>20</sup> All of

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<sup>19</sup>Claude J. Smith, "The Rehabilitation of the U.S. Military in Films Since 1978," Journal of Popular Film and Television 11 (Winter, 1984): 145-151.

<sup>20</sup>For a discussion of the rejuvenation of "Red Scare" fears and paranoia in 1980s America and the manner in which this found expression in Hollywood films of the period, see Chapter 6 "From the 'Evil Empire' to Glasnost" of William J. Palmer's The Films of the Eighties: A Social History (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994) 206-245.

these films are implicitly characterized by the notion that America has been destabilized and dangerously weakened by the loss of the Vietnam War and the opposition generated by the antiwar movement, but can regain a sense of national pride and "stand tall" again through the embrace of militaristic heroism.

All of these elements were most successfully combined and definitively projected in Sylvester Stallone's Rambo films. In late 1982, United Artists released the modestly budgeted First Blood, and its box office popularity led to the release of a sequel in 1985, Rambo: First Blood, Part II. This latter film was not only a monumental box office success, it also catalyzed an enormous chain reaction of both praise and criticism. When the dust finally settled, America had its new, reconfigured post-Vietnam warrior/hero in the form of a returned Vietnam veteran.

Both First Blood and Rambo: First Blood, Part II featured Sylvester Stallone as former Green Beret John Rambo. Rambo, we are told, served three tours of duty in Vietnam, was a POW, and won the Congressional Medal of Honor. During the final scene of First Blood and all of First Blood: Rambo, Part II, Hollywood achieved a tangible degree of hegemonic recovery regarding the warrior/hero figure and the Vietnam war as a whole. The projection of the image of the Vietnam veteran as disturbed and

distorted warrior, developed in the films previously discussed, found in the character of John Rambo a rationale for the unusual qualities of the returned veteran. While Taxi Driver, Coming Home, The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now emphasized the notion that the horrors of war itself generated the resentments and frustrations of veterans, First Blood located these frustrations on more precise ideological ground. In the process, war itself was reinscribed with glory and heroism, a one-dimensional evil enemy was reintroduced, and most crucially, other cultural industries, especially those producing toys and other movie "tie-ins," wholeheartedly embraced the profitable opportunity to link up with this new warrior/hero, thus making Rambo not just another Hollywood hero, but a popular culture phenomenon of the highest magnitude.

In the first three quarters of First Blood, John Rambo closely resembles the embittered, angry and frustrated veterans presented in the Vietnam films of the 1970s. His dress and mannerisms suggest that he is essentially an alienated loner and nonconformist. Moreover, he looks strikingly similar to the members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War who protested Vietnam on the steps of the U.S. Capitol during Dewey Canyon III in 1971: he wears a battered Army field jacket emblazoned

with an American flag patch, has long hair, and displays various symbols of the antiwar counterculture such as beads and torn jeans. Indeed, it is Rambo's visual resemblance to the antiwar/warrior that leads the veteran into a confrontation with authorities.

Rambo travels to a small town in the Pacific northwest to reunite with a Vietnam buddy named Delmore Barry, but Barry's mother informs him that her son has died due to exposure to the chemical defoliant Agent Orange. Dejected, Rambo walks back toward the town to get something to eat, but he is stopped by the local sheriff who begins harassing him about his appearance: "...wearing that flag on that jacket, looking the way you do, you're asking for trouble around here. We don't like guys like you in this town. If you want some friendly advice, get a haircut and take a bath." Rambo defies the sheriff, is eventually arrested and subject to a brutal fire hosing and beating at the police station. This causes him to flash back to being tortured by the Viet Cong while a POW in Vietnam. He goes into an explosive rage and manages to escape into the surrounding forest, where he proceeds to carry out a one man campaign to exact revenge against the police and town--and by implication the society--that has marginalized and tormented his life.

As the narrative develops, the familiar good guy/bad

guy structural opposition emerges, but with an unusual twist: Rambo represents the good guys, while the authorities in the form of the police and the National Guard called out to assist in Rambo's capture are representative of the bad guys. As Rambo is pursued into the heavily forested area around the town he is shown to be lacking in sophisticated weaponry, but extremely resourceful in this formidable environment ostensibly quite similar to the thick jungles of Vietnam. His pursuers, on the other hand, enjoy complete logistical and technological superiority. The conflict between the huge force of the authorities and Rambo then develops into a peculiar reverse allegory for the American military presence in Vietnam.

More specifically, the forces of the police and National Guard signify the American war effort. This parallel is illustrated as we see the police and National Guard in full military uniforms, brandishing M-16s and other automatic weaponry, flying helicopters and even displaying dissension within their ranks. Rambo, on the other hand, represents the stealth and discipline of the Viet Cong. As he continually defies those who pursue him, Rambo demonstrates such skills as crafting primitive but effective weaponry, making booby traps, pungi sticks and living off the forest to avoid capture. He is also adept

at capturing "enemy" weapons, including an M-60 machine gun, and using them to launch his own counter-offensive. In essence, Rambo has internalized the methods and mentality of the Viet Cong, and is able to use this to his utmost advantage.

Towards the conclusion of First Blood, Rambo has alluded capture and transformed himself into the image of the new American warrior/hero: long hair, head band, brandishing an M-60 machine gun with ammunition bandoleers draped over his bare chest. This image stands at the apex of the Hollywood appropriation and reconfiguration of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior. However, this potent ensemble of signifiers does not yield antiwar sentiments. On the contrary, another ideological tendency emerges from First Blood, one that does not criticize American involvement in Vietnam but in an oddly peculiar way seeks to justify it. This ideological shift is encountered in the last few scenes of the film. Rambo's former commanding officer from Vietnam tries to convince him to surrender himself to the authorities, telling him that "its over." Trying to articulate his frustration, anger and alienation, Rambo explodes:

Nothing is over, nothing! You just don't turn it off! It wasn't my war, you asked me, I didn't ask you! I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn't let us win. Then I came back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spitting on me,

calling me a baby killer and all kinds of vile crap! Who are they to protest me, huh? Who are they unless they've been there and been me and knew what the hell they're talking about? Back there, I could fly a gunship, I could drive a tank, I was in charge of million dollar equipment. Back here, I can't even hold down a job at a carwash!

With this final diatribe, a hegemonic ideological coding of war in the post-Vietnam era is reconfigured and re-established via the representation of the Vietnam veteran. Indeed, as Andrew Martin argues:

[At the conclusion of First Blood] Rambo touches on all the conservative revisionist biases, central to which is the notion that the war was lost at home, not in the field; that the military was held back from winning; that the peace movement (positioned as a present-day version of "commie dupes") undermined America from within.<sup>21</sup>

To illustrate this generalization further, it is useful to recall John Wayne's 1968 film The Green Berets, the only direct filmic representation of the Vietnam war to be released during the war. The essential message of that film was that antiwar sentiments were illegitimate since they were formed without first-hand experience in Vietnam. In addition, according to Wayne's film, experience in Vietnam would naturally work to dissolve antiwar sentiments, not encourage them. In 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive and mounting evidence of the futility and

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<sup>21</sup>Andrew Martin, Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993) 125.

human waste of American involvement in Vietnam, this message was rapidly declining in credibility. Yet by 1982, a virtually identical message, updated in the form of John Rambo, had not only gained legitimacy, it warranted a sequel to First Blood in the form of Rambo: First Blood, Part II.

What had changed? On the level of popular cinematic representation, the message was still coming from a "green beret," although Rambo was of course also a returned veteran. In contrast to Wayne's message, however, Rambo purveyed it via an entirely different set of signs and symbols which had gained legitimacy through the antiwar activism of real Vietnam veterans. In this sense, then, First Blood marked the transition and transformation of the signs, symbols and images of the antiwar/warrior into fictional images which justified American involvement in Vietnam ideologically and moreover rationalized America's defeat in the war. Through the representation of the disillusioned Vietnam veteran, the Vietnam war was recast as a "noble cause" betrayed by liberal politicians and the civilian counterculture and antiwar movement. Condensed within the signifier of the new American warrior/hero-- John Rambo--the opposition to the war by veterans was ironically reconstructed and transmuted into a prowar discursive framework.

Once Rambo had redeemed himself against the ostensible domestic enemies of the American war effort in Vietnam--symbolized by the "maggots" described by Rambo at the end of First Blood--and rationalized veteran opposition to the war, the new warrior/hero was ready to return to Vietnam a decade after the fall of Saigon for a "rematch" with the Vietnamese, and to symbolically "win" the war for America. This is what takes place in Rambo: First Blood, Part II.

As the film begins, Rambo is doing time for destroying the town in First Blood. While breaking rocks in prison, he is approached by his former commanding officer, Colonel Trautman, and given a secret mission to return to Vietnam and rescue American M.I.A.s still held captive by the communists. Upon accepting the mission, Rambo asks, for the benefit of the audience, "can we win this time?" The narrative then has John Rambo, heir-apparent to the image of the Vietnam antiwar/warrior, back in the jungles of Vietnam to refight and rewin the war. There, he singlehandedly destroys a Vietnamese enemy which looks shockingly similar to the Japanese portrayed in Hollywood war films of the 1940s.

The Vietnamese are depicted as utterly despicable and contemptible in the film. Indeed, they are costumed in military uniforms virtually identical to those worn by the

Japanese in World War II. The Vietnamese are, moreover, depicted as being mere puppets of a larger European adversary portrayed in the form of Russian military personnel. The Russians initially capture Rambo, but they, too, prove to be no match for his prowess as a one man arsenal. The Vietnamese and the Russians all go down to ignominious defeat as Rambo shows what an unrestrained American warrior can do to America's enemies if just given the chance to "win this time."

Nevertheless, in reconstructing the hegemonic ideology of war via the image of Rambo, Hollywood still had to implicitly acknowledge some degree of anti-establishment sentiment among Vietnam veterans. This is done in the final sequence of the film. After rescuing the M.I.A.s and returning stateside, Rambo discovers that he has been used as cannon fodder by U.S. government and military officials. By the final scene, Rambo gets his opportunity for revenge. Upon entering the computer-laden high-tech command center of the U.S. military directing his mission, Rambo puts his M-60 machine gun on full automatic and destroys the machines and the complex as a whole. This destruction represents the new American warrior/hero's distrust of governmental authority. Notwithstanding the triumphant return of the male warrior/hero figure, and the renewal of war as a glorious

and romantic enterprise, Rambo still has anti-government tendencies, but these are configured via an ideological proclivity far different from those Vietnam veterans who felt compelled to actively protest the Vietnam war in the late 1960s and early 70s. In this sense, as Harry Haines argues, the film "coopts Vietnam's radical potential by representing the veteran's distrust of power in terms consistent with potential reassertions of military power."<sup>22</sup>

Rambo: First Blood, Part II was the box office smash of the summer of 1985, and became one of the top money making films in Hollywood history. Reviewers predictably acknowledged the obvious right-wing currents that ran through the film, but claimed that audience attraction was the result of "a new wave of patriotism"<sup>23</sup> sweeping the country. Moreover, as Rambo: First Blood, Part II and

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<sup>22</sup>Harry Haines, "The Pride is Back: Rambo, Magnum, P.I., and the Return Trip to Vietnam," in Cultural Legacies of Vietnam: Uses of the Past in the Present, Richard Morris and Peter Ehrenhaus, eds. (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990) 112. In the broader context of the culture industry, Russel A. Berman underscores this point as well when he argues that Rambo: First Blood, Part II, in its depiction of Rambo's antagonism to government and military bureaucracy, represents "a basic shift in the strategy of the culture industry which has abandoned the imagery of mass conformism and uniform identity while replacing them with the artificial negativity of a valorized deviance." See Berman's "Rambo: From Counter-Culture to Contra," Telos 64 (Summer, 1985): 145.

<sup>23</sup>See Rob Roe, "Is Rambo Right About Vietnam?," USA Today 22 June, 1985: D1.

similar films found audiences in the mid-1980s, other arenas of the culture industries began making overt linkages to the new, and highly profitable, warrior/hero image. The American toy industry began marketing objects gleaned from the signifiers of Rambo.<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, American youth of the 1980s began embracing these toys to play war games ominously similar to those played by Vietnam veterans in their youth as detailed in Chapter II. Indeed, an eleven year old boy was interviewed in December, 1985 about his selection of Christmas toys, and he revealed that his favorite was a Rambo toy machine gun. The boy's older brother stated:

When kids play with this stuff, they think they are Rambo. They try to climb trees like Rambo,

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<sup>24</sup>Of course, Rambo: First Blood, Part II was not the only film of the mid-1980s that portrayed the new American warrior/hero as a Vietnam veteran returning to Vietnam to exact righteous revenge on the Vietnamese, and symbolically "rewind" the war. Uncommon Valor (1983) and especially Chuck Norris' Missing In Action (1984) and Missing In Action II (1985) are also highly representative in this regard. However, only Rambo: First Blood, Part II saw the development of Rambo dolls, costumes, facsimile weapons, and other such "spin-off" paraphernalia. Coleco Industries, the makers of Rambo "male action figures," declared that "...we believe the character is emerging as a new American hero, a hero that has a high degree of excitement and patriotism and a thirst for justice associated with him." Quoted in Todd S. Purdum, "Coleco Smitten by Rambo," New York Times 1 August 1985. It should be no surprise that in conjunction with movies of this nature the American war toy industry boomed in the 1980s. Indeed, an article in an advertising trade magazine stated that, sparked by "Rambomania," the production of war toys had become a billion dollar industry. See "Rambomania: Action Dolls, Other Tie-ins Spark Toy War," Advertising Age 5 August 1985: 3, 63.

they hit other kids in the face with the end of the gun and they fake like they're stabbing people with rubber knives. They really get wrapped up with that movie character and in the movie [Rambo] must've killed a person every minute.

The eleven year old himself confessed:

After seeing Rambo, me and my friends tried to imitate him. We played war, like hide-and-seek, but we did it violently. We'd physically attack our enemies, we'd capture them and take them back to our fort and pull their hair and stuff.<sup>25</sup>

Given the nature of these passages, one could conclude that with Rambo Hollywood and the culture industries had found the right combination of images, symbols, and cultural objects to again make war a respectable activity for American youth. Yet it is important to note that this image of the new warrior/hero and its reglorification of war and a militarized culture did not go uncontested, especially by Vietnam veterans themselves. For every Rambo-like film that was produced in the 1980s, there were still veterans who refused to reaffirm the warrior/hero mythos for their children and for the society at large. Indeed, some veterans decided to renew some Winter Soldier-type activism, protesting Rambo and the new militarism by picketing outside movie theaters, at shopping malls, and even trying to confront

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Tom Shayne, "This Christmas, It's Rambomania," Ithaca Journal 14 December 1985: 10.

Sylvester Stallone himself about the simplistic, jingoistic image he was projecting of veterans and the experience of the war.<sup>26</sup> In doing this, however, veterans had to confront as well a painful and unexpected irony regarding whose image of the Vietnam veteran, and the nature of warrior/heroism, would hold sway via mass media. This did not go unnoticed by media scholar Kevin Bowen, himself a Vietnam veteran:

Veterans...expressed their revulsion at [the Rambo image] by picketing theaters and selling miniature plastic body bags outside stores in malls where Rambo dolls are sold. In Boston, local veterans gathered in the rain outside Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club to confront Sylvester Stallone as he arrived to receive their "Man of the Year" award following the release of Rambo: First Blood, Part II. Held back by police lines, the veterans were accosted

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<sup>26</sup>In seeking to challenge Stallone and the image projected of the Vietnam veteran in Rambo, veterans outside a movie theater in Salt Lake City showing Rambo: First Blood, Part II distributed the following leaflet, entitled "Open Letter to Sylvester Stallone," which makes pointed reference to the powerful influence of the earlier John Wayne warrior/hero image and Stallone's culpability in reglorifying militarism for a new generation of youngsters:

What right do you have to make this kind of movie and allow people of this country who have never been to war to believe that this is how wars are fought? Many of our brothers went to their graves because they believed that you fought wars the way John Wayne did in his movies. Are you prepared to accept responsibility for the deaths that may happen in future wars as a result of the youths who believe?

Reprinted in Haines, "The Pride is Back" 112.

and told to "go home" by a group of teenagers waiting to get Stallone's autograph. Stallone, the teenagers screamed, was "a real veteran."<sup>27</sup>

Such was the ideological power of Rambo in reinscribing the ethos of the American warrior/hero through rewriting the Vietnam war that it generated a reaction from some quarters of Hollywood itself. Indeed, what David James calls the "second wave"<sup>28</sup> of Vietnam War films released in the late 1980s can be viewed as a response to the cartoonishness and "inaccuracy" regarding the representation of the Vietnam experience generated by the Rambo phenomenon. Chief among these is Oliver Stone's Platoon, released a year after Rambo: First Blood, Part II in late 1986. If some American teenagers felt that Rambo represented a "real veteran," in reaction against this critics and commentators lauded Platoon as the first "real" Vietnam film. This point was clearly illustrated in a January 26, 1987 Time cover story entitled, "Platoon: Vietnam, The Way It Really Was" in which noted historian David Halberstam claimed, "The other Hollywood Viet Nam films have been a rape of history. But Platoon is historically and politically accurate...Thirty years from

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<sup>27</sup>Kevin Bowen, "'Strange Hells': Hollywood in Search of America's Lost War," in Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds. From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 229.

<sup>28</sup>David James, "Rock and Roll in Representations of the Invasion of Vietnam," Representations 29 (Winter, 1990): 79.

now, people will think of the Viet Nam War as Platoon."<sup>29</sup>

This perception of Platoon as the first "accurate" Vietnam film was due in no small part to the fact that it was the first Hollywood film about Vietnam to be written and directed by a Vietnam veteran. The film was consciously marketed to highlight just this fact, featuring advertisements and posters with a wartime photograph of Stone with other GIs he served with during his 1967-68 tour of duty.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, in its attempt to be a film that authentically embodies the experience of those who fought in Vietnam, Platoon in effect dehistoricizes the war so that it becomes all wars. Indeed, its narrative of a young man's loss of innocence, rite of passage, and transformation through combat into a seasoned warrior is a common Hollywood war film cliché that transcends the situation of the Vietnam War. Like The Deer Hunter and

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<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Richard Corliss, "Platoon: Viet Nam, The Way It Really Was, On Film," Time 26 January 1987: 58.

<sup>30</sup>It is notable that these claims to authenticity were also fueled by the very manner in which Platoon was produced. Stone hired fellow vet and former Marine Dale Dye to put the actors through a rigorous boot camp-like training session in the Philippine jungle where the film was shot so that they would appear in the film as "real" Vietnam infantrymen. Interestingly, Dye claims to have created his Vietnam movie "consultancy firm" called Warriors, Inc. in direct reaction to what he termed the "metaphorical ramblings" of earlier films such as The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now. See Dan Goodgame, "How the War Was Won," Time 26 January 1987: 58.

Apocalypse Now, Platoon focuses on the experience of the individual American soldier as the ideological center of the war, producing an experience of war while largely neglecting to call attention to the specific political situation which created and sustained the war.

This same tendency informs Stone's filmic adaption of Ron Kovic's acclaimed antiwar memoir Born On the Fourth of July. Stone's 1989 film is the only extant Hollywood representation of the experience of a real-life antiwar Vietnam veteran, yet unlike the book the central focus of the film is not Ron Kovic's transition from naively patriotic small-town boy completely enthralled by the American warrior/hero mythos to vociferous and eloquent antiwar/warrior. Rather, the film's major thrust is in presenting a highly melodramatic rendering of Kovic's individual psychic dilemma in coming to terms with the physical paralysis wrought by wounds suffered in Vietnam, and his subsequent loss of masculinity.<sup>31</sup> To be sure,

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<sup>31</sup>In terms of the imagery deployed and the manner in which Kovic's story is told, the differences between Kovic's 1976 memoir and Stone's 1989 cinematic rendition are manifold. Kovic's book is characterized by spare and direct prose, and deals quite directly with his post-Vietnam disillusionment with the warrior/hero ethic and his eventual rejection of it. Stone's film, on the other hand, is presented in the form of a Hollywood epic complete with sweeping visual imagery, melodramatic excess, grandiose music score and a focus on fictionalized romantic encounters and an acrimony between Kovic and his mother that were not present in the original memoir. See Ron Kovic, Born On the Fourth of July (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

this psychic dilemma had much to do with Kovic's gradual transition to becoming an ardent spokesman for the antiwar veterans' movement of the 1970s, yet in the end Stone's Born On the Fourth of July does not so much focus on Kovic's developing political critique of the ideological and governmental apparatus which sent him to Vietnam in the first place and then ignored him when he returned a paraplegic, but rather on a fictionalized reintegration of Kovic back into this same apparatus.

The film begins by delving into the cultural origins of Kovic's initial embrace of warrior/heroism and militarism, quite similar to those adolescent activities discussed in Chapter II of this study. A brief narration at the opening sets the scene as part of a distant, nostalgic small-town America when Kovic enthusiastically believed in the masculine warrior/hero mythos. The opening scene shows Kovic engaging in the childhood activity of playing war with his friends in the woods near his home, complete with toy uniforms and weapons. "And we turned the woods into a battlefield," the older Kovic narrates, "and dreamed that someday we would become men." The rest of the early sequences of Born On the Fourth of July are devoted to slow, golden images of Kovic's childhood: patriotic Fourth of July parades, home runs at Little League baseball games, Kennedy's rhetoric, and

young, innocent love. These images are shortly replaced by scenes from Kovic's teen years when he "gave his best" for the wrestling team and missed his opportunity for love. In the film, the forces which define Kovic's character are not so much the John Wayne and Audie Murphy war movies as detailed in the 1976 memoir, but rather a despotic, abusive wrestling coach and especially his staunchly Catholic and fervently anticommunist mother. The coach urges Kovic on with calls to kill and suffer: "You want to win, you gotta suffer! You want to be the best, you gotta pay the price!" When an immaculately uniformed Marine Corps recruiter arrives at Kovic's high school, he seduces him with the same rhetoric, telling the gathering of boys that you have to earn the right to be a Marine. Kovic decides immediately to enlist.

After a melodramatic scene which shows Kovic running through the rain to dance with his high school sweetheart at the senior prom to the tune of "Moon River," the narrative cuts abruptly to Kovic's battlefield experience in Vietnam. In Vietnam, Kovic must struggle with an experiential reality that contradicts his romantic and naively patriotic assumptions regarding war and heroism. To a friend back in the States, he describes the final firefight at which he was wounded, how he tried to do "the John Wayne thing," still fighting even though wounded in

the foot, until a bullet creases his spine, rendering him a paraplegic.

The Vietnam War scenes are the most effectively antiwar of the film. These scenes end only in death (of both Vietnamese and Americans) and deny any implicit nobility or heroism in war. The experience of the war is depicted to be one of almost total confusion, not heroic certitude. This is illustrated when in an earlier firefight Kovic is shown accidentally killing another Marine who he mistook for an enemy soldier. Moreover, American military leadership is depicted as utterly callous and corrupt, for when Kovic attempts to inform his superiors about the accidental killing, he is told to ignore it because it will be covered up, and is threatened with court-martial if he reveals anything of the incident.

In following Kovic's status as a returned paraplegic veteran, however, Stone's Born On the Fourth of July is less effective in detailing Kovic's developing antiwar sensibilities. This is due in large part to the fact that the film locates the source of Kovic's disillusionment and rage upon his return not so much in the inhumanity and corruption he witnessed in the war, nor in the shoddy treatment he received in VA hospitals, but rather in his loss of masculinity and the subsequent scapegoating of his mother. Kovic is not only wounded in the war but is

rendered impotent while still a virgin, and the film directs his bitter resentment in this regard primarily at his mother. Kovic's father is depicted as a sympathetic figure upon his return. When Kovic comes home drunk one night, it is his father who carries him to bed and nurtures him. Kovic's mother, on the other hand, cannot face what has happened. In the penultimate scene of the film, Kovic confronts his mother with his impotence, yelling "penis" at her and screaming that it was her catholic and anticommunist rhetoric that sent him to war. In this sense, she is clearly scapegoated as the castrating woman, unable to acknowledge the word ("don't say penis in this house"), and the one that Kovic is depicted as blaming for his "dead legs." In Born On the Fourth of July, Kovic comes to symbolize the impotence of the American male, which the film presents as ultimately the greatest tragedy of the Vietnam War, thus implicitly, and ironically, absolving larger cultural and political forces of the responsibility for sending young men to the war in the first place.

After presenting Kovic briefly leading a drunken and debauched life in a Mexican brothel devoted to serving paraplegic veterans, the narrative again abruptly shifts to the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami, where Kovic is shown to be a full-blown antiwar activist and

leader of a contingent of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War who seek to confront Richard Nixon in the convention hall. In marked contrast to his freshly scrubbed clean-cut pre-Vietnam appearance, he has now completely assumed the visual style of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior; he has long straggly hair, a beard, and wears his khaki Marine Corps uniform adorned with medals from his Vietnam service. In a powerful scene, Kovic and another wheelchair-bound veteran are spat upon and regaled as "cowards" by delegates in the convention hall when they try to "confront the warmakers" in front of nationwide television coverage. Here Kovic makes the only unambiguous antiwar speech of the entire film (and along with the one Luke Martin made at the close of Coming Home, one of the very few in Hollywood Vietnam films), declaring to television reporters that, "I don't hate my country, I love my country! I just hate what is being done in it's name by our leaders who are a bunch of corrupt, lying thieves waging a war against an impoverished country just trying to win it's independence after a thousand years of tyranny." This dialogue constitutes the most direct antiwar criticism by a Vietnam veteran of all the Hollywood films discussed in this chapter. Yet this speech, and Kovic's status as an antiwar/warrior, are rendered ambiguous because these are not the focal points

of the narrative thrust of the film. His transition to becoming an antiwar activist, as well as his conversion from bitter individual to collective member of the veteran's antiwar movement, is left unexplained and presented without context. It is seemingly just another scene in Stone's rambling and episodic rendering of Ron Kovic's autobiography, and is effectively subsumed within the film's larger focus on Kovic's individual psychic grappling with his physical and sexual disability.

The film closes with Kovic speaking before the 1976 Democratic Convention, thus signalling his reintegration into the political mainstream and by implication back into the mainstream of American society. He has seemingly finally become a "hero" of sorts--but not necessarily for being one of the most outspoken antiwar critics of the 1970s. Fans, guards, and assistants surround him; a woman asks him to sign his memoir; reporters push and shove to hear him. He disappears into the great white light of the convention hall, stating, "Just lately I've felt like I'm home. Maybe we're home."

Born On the Fourth of July was the last of Hollywood's "second wave" of Vietnam War movies, and essentially left the social image of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior in again in ideological limbo. By the

beginning of the 1990s, this would shortly be overshadowed by wider socio-political currents as America embarked on another overseas war. The manner in which a war is remembered by a nation through the ideological apparatus that construct its sense of history is profoundly related to how that nation further propagates war. Thus, the rewriting and narrative recasting of the Vietnam War, and the war's veterans, in films like Rambo: First Blood, Part II, Platoon, and Born On the Fourth of July had at least some effect on sustaining the manufactured "need" for the United States' involvement in the Persian Gulf War. Attempts to give the Persian Gulf War a simple and unproblematic narrative, one which reinscribes the narratives of World War II which initially informed the Vietnam War (in which, for example, America endeavors to "liberate" a weak and desperate country imperiled by a dangerous tyrant) make it clear that the disruptive and problematic nature of the Vietnam War and the oppositional tendencies it spawned are not due simply to its situation in the late twentieth century. Many lessons were learned by the political and military establishment from the experience of the Vietnam War, and the fervent opposition to it, that were applied quite overtly to the Persian Gulf War--i.e. the importance of a finely-tuned standard war narrative that Vietnam lacked, the need for military

censorship, and the importance of putting American lives quickly at stake in order to foreclose public debate on the war and defuse potential antiwar protest. In this sense, the Persian Gulf War has not been, and will not need to be, rescripted and reconfigured in popular culture with films like those discussed in this chapter, because in a very real sense it was already a reconfiguration of the memory of the Vietnam war and Vietnam veterans. The way in which the Persian Gulf War was (and is) situated on the cultural landscape of war was in terms of an attempt to denote an unproblematic lineage from World War II in order to establish the Vietnam War and the oppositional and antiwar movements it generated as an aberration in American history.

The ideological effectivity of the Persian Gulf War was in the re-emergence of a discourse of heroes, and of the unsullied image of warrior/heroism. Both of these had been conspicuously lacking during and after the Vietnam War, and were openly challenged by antiwar Vietnam veterans. The veterans of the Gulf War, on the other hand, were men and women who arrived home ostensibly untraumatized and pristine from their war experience. Their bodies and spirits remained essentially intact. They were greeted by huge homecoming parades, including the largest ticker tape parade in the history of New York

City. And yet clearly these were not merely welcome home parades concerned with celebrating the end of a six-week war, but were rather celebrations aimed at wiping out the cultural legacy of Vietnam--the stain of defeat, the loss of America's image as a benevolent and technologically superior military power, and moreover the challenges to larger ideological sensibilities concerning war instigated by the antiwar movement and groups like the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Indeed, this central message was rather baldly put, as George Bush gleefully declared following America's overwhelming defeat of the Iraqis: "The Vietnam Syndrome is over!"<sup>32</sup> Thus, as Douglas Kellner has noted, "the most important result of the victory in the Persian Gulf War was that it would once and for all allow the United States to overcome 'the Vietnam syndrome'."<sup>33</sup> Yet wasn't all this excitement and glee an expression of backlash against the disillusionment and oppositional challenges of the Vietnam War, and an attempt to rehabilitate the hegemonic coding of war in American culture--i.e. war is not about pain, loss, and death, but rather about "smart" weapons, technological spectacle, and

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<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Ann McDaniel, "This Will Not Stand," Newsweek Gulf War Commemorative Edition Spring/Summer 1991: 49.

<sup>33</sup>Douglas Kellner, The Persian Gulf TV War (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992) 385.

celebration of American "victory."

In direct contrast to the Vietnam War, the generation of contested cultural narratives regarding the Gulf War has been altogether absent in popular culture. This is largely due to the fact that the predetermined historicization of the Gulf War has been very effective in quelling such contestations, since this was a war fought on the very symbolic grounds of the history of American military intervention overseas, and in direct relation to the problematic memories of Vietnam. Indeed, it seems now that there is almost a self-willed amnesia concerning the Persian Gulf War among Americans; the fast, sterile sound-bite war whose veterans returned seemingly unscathed and unscarred to joyous celebration, has now been just as quickly forgotten. And as the location of America's reassertion of its military superiority and warrior prowess, the Persian Gulf War can be forgotten because its central cultural purpose--lending closure to the ideological ruptures generated by the Vietnam War--has been largely accomplished. Moreover, that the Persian Gulf War has been so forgotten, its effects on the Iraqi people and the U.S. veterans who served there so ignored, speaks in very telling ways to the now predominant silence regarding the effects of war, the nature of the warrior/hero mythology, and the experiences and

sensibilities of American war veterans. And it is this silence that has found ironic expression in Hollywood's most recent foray into the issues of the Vietnam War and the experience of Vietnam veterans, 1994's Forrest Gump.

Forrest Gump was the surprise box-office hit of the summer of 1994, earning \$100 million during the first week of it's release and grossing over \$225 million by the end of the year<sup>34</sup>, thus becoming one of the top-20 grossing films in the history of Hollywood. The film tells the life story of a young man from rural Alabama with an IQ of 75, and in so doing renders a chronicle of the past forty years of American cultural history with a particular focus on the Vietnam war and the trauma and turmoil the war engendered. The end result is a narrative recasting of the experience of Vietnam veterans and political opposition movements of the Vietnam era which configures the cultural memory of these events in a manner strikingly parallel to the ideological contexts of post-Gulf War America.

Forrest Gump is portrayed as a man who because of limited mental capacity seemingly blunders into situations of great social and political consequence. After spending five years as an All-American football running back at the

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<sup>34</sup>Richard Corliss, "The World According to Gump," Time 1 August 1994: 53; People Weekly 1995 Entertainment Almanac (New York: Little, Brown, 1995) 113.

University of Alabama, Forrest naively enlists in the Army and is soon sent to Vietnam to serve as an infantryman. There he encounters Lieutenant Dan Taylor, a platoon commander who comes from a long lineage of war heroes. Interestingly, the film renders the experience of Vietnam in stark and unromantic terms: Forrest and his fellow G.I.s engage in endless foot patrols in swampy terrain inundated by ceaseless rain. They encounter little until a climactic battle scene in which they are ambushed and overrun by the Viet Cong. Here Forrest is shown comporting himself as a hero on the battlefield, rescuing Lieutenant Dan and other wounded G.I.s from hostile fire and carrying them to safety, yet he is also depicted as experiencing the loss and waste of human life wrought by the war when a buddy, himself a simple-minded and naive young man from Alabama, is killed.

Lieutenant Dan loses his legs in the battle, and when Forrest next encounters him a few years after the war he is wheelchair-bound and living in a shabby hotel in New York City. It is at this point that Forrest Gump reveals the still tangible residues of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior image as appropriated by Hollywood over the course of twenty years. In this sequence Lieutenant Dan has been visually transformed from a clean-cut, athletic career Army officer to an embittered and

disillusioned veteran. He has long shaggy hair, a beard, and is adorned with fatigue pants and other remnants of his military uniform. A sticker on his wheelchair mockingly reads: "America--My Kind of Place", and when he discovers that Gump has been awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in Vietnam, he blurts out sarcastically, "Well that's just great. God fuckin' bless America!" However, similar to the initial visual depiction of John Rambo in First Blood, in it's rendering of Lieutenant Dan Forrest Gump appropriates only the superficial surface details of the antiwar/warrior image, and never shows Lieutenant Dan articulating a substantive critique of the war, any political consciousness regarding his experience nor any connection to the veteran's movement of the Vietnam era. In this sense the film draws on Hollywood's tendency, as noted earlier in this chapter, to embrace elements of the image of the Vietnam antiwar/warrior for the purposes of characterizing a forceful but nonetheless politically inarticulate expression of the frustration and disillusionment of Vietnam veterans.

Despite actor Tom Hank's claim that, "The film is nonpolitical, and thus nonjudgmental,"<sup>35</sup> Forrest Gump is in fact highly charged with politics and judgements regarding the manner in which the Vietnam war and the

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<sup>35</sup>Corliss, "The World According to Gump" 54.

Vietnam era should be remembered, particularly in reference to antiwar opposition. This is illustrated in a sequence in which Forrest is in Washington, D.C. to attend the Medal of Honor award ceremony. Following the ceremony, he happens upon a large antiwar demonstration on the Mall, where a group of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (replete with long hair and remnants of military uniforms) are about to speak before the rally in a manner similar to the activities of the VVAW at Dewey Canyon III in 1971. The VVAW members never actually say anything (and indeed are presented largely as background figures seemingly to lend a semblance of "authenticity" to the scene) but Forrest finds himself unwittingly enlisted to express his position regarding his Vietnam experience before the gathering, yet before he is able to utter more than a few words, the microphone is cut off, and his words remain unheard. To be sure, this scene is rendered in part for comedic effect, since the film's audience is led to believe that because of his low IQ Forrest would be unable to verbally articulate his feelings beyond child-like simplicities anyway. Yet this scene is also profoundly relevant to the larger silences regarding the Vietnam war and the war's veterans now predominant in the wake of the Persian Gulf War. The implication seems to be that because the ideological disruptions of the Vietnam

war have finally been afforded closure by the Gulf War "victory," and because the antiwar oppositions generated in response to the war have been so marginalized (or forgotten altogether) there is no longer any need for further commentary on Vietnam in popular cinema; the festering wounds have finally healed, the warrior mythology has been effectively reinscribed, the veterans have finally been "welcomed home" and reintegrated into the mainstream of American society (in a telling scene at the end of the Forrest Gump, a rehabilitated Lieutenant Dan returns to Forrest's wedding completely shorn of the antiwar/warrior image, having become a millionaire business tycoon)--in short, the issue of Vietnam is no longer problematic and thus is in need of no further debate. The hegemonic edifice of war and the warrior/hero have seemingly been resurrected from the ashes of Vietnam, the oppositions the war generated safely contained and put to rest, and what we are offered in return is a simple-minded innocent to which the Vietnam war simply "happened," implicitly absolving economic and governmental elites of any responsibility for the conduct of the war or its aftermath.

Still, on a deeper level a film like Forrest Gump can also be taken as an indication that the ideological disruptions and oppositions of the Vietnam era are still

palpable, that residues of the war and the experience of veterans still exist that cannot be so easily contained or dismissed. Despite the obvious intention of the film to render the Vietnam experience in terms that are in the end easily digested, comforting, and ultimately reassuring, the potent image of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior in the form of Lieutenant Dan nonetheless haunts the film like a spectre, serving as a troublesome reminder of the rage and tangible disillusionment which the war generated, and the human costs, both physical and psychological, of unchallenged acceptance of war. Despite the fact that his anger and disillusionment are presented solely in individualistic terms and rendered ambiguously, and despite the fact that at the end of the film he is portrayed as having "magically" reintegrated back into the mainstream of American life--both economically and moreover physically with new prosthetic limbs which enable him to stand upright--the visual image of Lieutenant Dan throughout the better part of Forrest Gump, with his wheelchair and amputated legs (obvious in most every scene involving the character) and his adaption of stylistic elements of the antiwar/warrior, nonetheless functions as a primary and prominent signifier of the problematic and disruptive consequences of the Vietnam war in American society. That this image continues to be appropriated,

and thus acknowledged, by Hollywood in cinematic representation of Vietnam veterans speaks to the fact that these persistent elements will not simply disappear, will not be simply wished away, and will continue to resist complete and unproblematic hegemonic incorporation.

## CONCLUSION

The primary research agenda of this study has been to illustrate the contentious nature of the construction of ideological meaning by focusing on war as a cultural event in post-World War II America. Initially, we focused on the manner in which cultural meanings of war were shaped by powerful mass media institutions like the Hollywood film industry which, in conjunction with other dominant social institutions like the military, constructed and disseminated a potent cultural code for war via filmic representation.

Key elements of this code, most notably the figure of the warrior/hero and the glorification of war itself, were assimilated into the common sense of those who would eventually serve in the Vietnam War. And yet, the assimilation of these elements did not constitute the mere manipulation of passive recipients through the imposition of dominant cultural meanings. Rather, as examination of their own autobiographical testimony revealed, Vietnam veterans in their youth actively embellished and animated cultural meanings of war in their everyday lives, and thereby actively participated in the construction and maintenance of the cultural code for war themselves--they

enthusiastically watched Hollywood war movies and energetically consumed cultural commodities associated with war. Thus, the ideological significations of war were not just passively absorbed, but were actively assimilated and employed in several areas of their everyday lives. They embraced toy weapons and "played war" in their neighborhoods, were proudly observant of male family members who had fought in World War II, and envisioned themselves as being glorious, heroic warriors once they too were afforded the opportunity to serve in war. In essence, then, little in the cultural experience of these individuals ran counter to the dominant ideological meanings of heroic warriors or the glory of war propagated by Hollywood movies--war, and their eventual participation in it, existed as a natural part of the cultural horizon, and indeed an inherent part of future expectations. In this sense, at this particular historical juncture, the cultural code for war had hegemony, in that the dominant meanings of war were actively consented to, rulers and ruled shared cultural identities, and each participated in their own way to the construction of cultural experience as it pertained to collective meanings regarding war.

However, when the actual lived experience of fighting in Vietnam was scrutinized, it was observed that the war,

and the very manner in which it was fought, tore asunder these earlier common sense meanings of warrior/heroism and war's glory. The experience of the Vietnam War itself inverted the dominant ideological significations of war, and motivated some G.I.s to actively oppose the war when they returned home.

Interestingly, from the very ideological foundations upon which the images, signs and symbols of the code for war were constructed came the active deconstruction of the code by antiwar Vietnam veterans. The fervent and unprecedented antiwar opposition of these veterans denied prowar forces a crucial ideological ingredient in rationalizing the continuation of the war in Vietnam--the unambiguous and unfettered image of the American warrior/hero. Through their creative program of mass media activism, groups like the Vietnam Veterans Against the War were able to effectively contest the prowar image of the warrior/hero by substituting in its place the image of the antiwar/warrior. The image of the antiwar/warrior was itself created through acts of bricolage from the key semiotic elements of the warrior/hero in combination with stylistic elements drawn from the broader youth counterculture. In the process of constructing the image of the antiwar/warrior in this way, VVAW poached images and objects intended to promote war and its glory and

recontextualized them so that they became charged with new antiwar connotations.

Finally, when the Vietnam War came to a close in 1975 and the antiwar opposition dissipated, the manner in which Hollywood in turn selectively appropriated and reconfigured the image of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior was detailed. From Billy Jack in 1971 to Forrest Gump in 1994, the image of the antiwar/warrior, afforded representation in both explicit and implicit forms, became a fundamental element in Hollywood's attempt to portray the experience of veterans and the war itself in a manner amenable to the conventions of commercial film and the changing political winds of post-Vietnam America. In their deployment of elements of the antiwar/warrior image, films released on the heels of the fall of Saigon in the 1970s like Taxi Driver, Coming Home, The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now reveal an implicit (and at times quite explicit) tendency of antiwar critique. With the rise of a renewed militaristic jingoism in the 1980s, however, Hollywood responded with enormously popular films like Rambo: First Blood Part II which effectively transformed the antiwar/warrior into the form of the new American warrior/hero ready to symbolically refight and "win" the Vietnam War. The Persian Gulf War in the early 1990s was enacted in large part for the purpose of erasing

problematic cultural memories of Vietnam and the ideological dissension it catalyzed, and signaled the effective renewal of a prowar ideological discourse of warrior/heroism and the glory of war for a new generation of Americans. And yet the continued use of elements of the Vietnam veteran antiwar/warrior image, however muted, as a fundamental motif in representing veterans and the problematics of war itself in recent Hollywood films like Forrest Gump can also be taken as a sign that at least some of the oppositional challenges of the antiwar/warrior will remain alive for quite some time.

In Travels in Hyper Reality, Umberto Eco notes that, "today, more than ever, the political is itself marked, motivated, and abundantly nourished by the symbolic. Understanding the mechanisms of the symbolic world in which we live means being political. Not understanding them leads to mistaken politics."<sup>1</sup> The major purpose of this study has been to highlight the contentious nature of symbolic, imagistic politics in the domain of mass media. The antiwar political opposition of Vietnam veterans, the distinctive visual style they presented in their opposition via mass media, and the film industry's subsequent assimilation of this visual style provides

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<sup>1</sup>Umberto Eco, Travels in Hyper Reality (New York: Harcourt-Javanovich, 1983) 217.

productive illustration of the contentious struggle over the cultural and political meaning of Vietnam in post-World War II America, and moreover the struggle over who has the power in different historical junctures to assign meaning to the Vietnam experience in the public realm of the symbolic. Contention over the meaning of Vietnam--and by extension the meaning of war itself--remains ongoing, and every time images of the Vietnam veteran and the experience of the war are deployed in commercial cinema or other forms of popular discourse, political struggle over the meaning of Vietnam will continue to be enacted. In an effort towards understanding more fully the dynamics of the contentions over the meaning of Vietnam in recent America, this study has endeavored to emphasize the crucial degree to which politics must be conceived and analyzed at the cultural and symbolic level of mass media imagery and visual representation, and to shed light on the manner in which the very nature of political accommodation, opposition and resistance in post-World War II America must be regarded as the politics of the image.

The study has also endeavored to provide concrete illustration of the manner in which cultural meanings are constructed, circulated, absorbed and altered across time. The purpose here has been to highlight the fundamental historical dimension concerning the circulation, use,

appropriation and ultimately the reconfiguration of the cultural forms of mass media during a time of enormous social change and political upheaval in America. Of particular importance in this regard has been the degree to which particular media texts like Hollywood war movies are inscribed with ideological signification at one historical juncture, the manner in which these significations were appropriated and altered by Vietnam veterans at a different juncture to communicate an antiwar ideological position, and the way in which these antiwar alterations were themselves reappropriated and absorbed by Hollywood in yet another historical juncture for the purpose, I argue, of ultimately reconstructing and reinscribing film texts representing veterans with prowar meanings. And in this sense, this study has attempted to address the pressing need to afford sustained attention to the historically variable nature of cultural meanings as they are given expression through mass media, and the way such meanings are constantly shifting through appropriation and reappropriation accross time by both producers and audiences to serve particular political and ideological interests.

This also brings forth a limitation of the study which unfortunately cannot be redressed easily or simply. I can identify with some precision the ways in which pre-

Vietnam Hollywood war movies were inscribed ideologically with prowar meanings and most crucially the degree to which these prowar meanings were actively absorbed and consented to by Vietnam veterans in their youth. Thus, the manner in which such meanings gained wider circulation in the lived experience of audiences can be specified in this regard. I also address with some degree of precision the ways in which elements of these prowar meanings were later appropriated and altered by antiwar veterans to project the image of the antiwar/warrior. In addition, I can also readily identify some of the ways these altered meanings were absorbed, reconfigured and projected in cinematic representations of Vietnam veterans in the post-Vietnam era for the ultimate purpose of renewing prowar cultural meanings in 1980s America. What I cannot do with great precision is specify exactly the degree to which such renewed prowar meanings gained ascendance or circulation in the lived experience of audiences in the post-Vietnam era. In chapter IV, I try to draw useful parallels between the reconfiguration of the antiwar/warrior image in films like First Blood and Rambo and broader historical shifts like the rejuvenation of militarism and jingoism in the 1980s. However, drawing solely on the films themselves as evidence I cannot specify the precise manner in which the films influenced

such shifts. As is the inevitable limitation of textual analysis, one can point to possible ways in which mass media texts work to privilege certain meanings over others, and the ways such texts might work to constrain audiences to certain places or positions within the overall ideological processes of communication. Without recourse to materials or data which illustrate the ways such identified meanings are actually absorbed by audiences and gain circulation in the wider society, however, one can only outline in relatively broad (but still instructive) terms the possible social influence of film and other media in terms of their power as catalysts of cultural and political change. Still, with the pronounced remilitarization of American culture and renewed romanticization of the warrior/hero as a popular figure in post-Vietnam America (especially in reference to the ways in which this gained rapid ascendance up to and beyond the time of the Persian Gulf War), it is difficult to assume that Hollywood films, in their deployment of the Vietnam veteran as the new heroic figure in the 1980s and 1990s, had no influence at all in this regard. Nevertheless, the precise nature of that influence will remain difficult to ascertain.

This caveat aside, this study still points to fruitful avenues of future research in reference to the

mass media politics of dissident groups and social movements of the Vietnam era. The Vietnam veterans antiwar movement is only one example, albeit a prominent one, of the manner in which oppositional politics was sustained and rendered highly visible to large segments of the American public during the 1960s and 1970s via the selfconscious courting of mainstream media attention. Certainly groups like the Yippies, the American Indian Movement, and the Black Panther Party were defined at least as much by the distinctive social image they deployed to communicate their political opposition as by the actual political positions they embraced. As well, like the VVAW, these groups employed explicit acts of appropriation and bricolage in their political practice, raiding the signs, symbols and images of American mass culture for raw materials with which to construct their own oppositional social images. The Yippies, for example, were one of the first groups to appropriate and alter the American flag as an integral part of their political communication, and the inverted flag was a prominent image used by the American Indian Movement throughout their 1973 mass media protest at Wounded Knee, South Dakota (AIM also employed altered elements of common Hollywood stereotypes of Native Americans, i.e. feathered headdresses, beads, and buckskin apparel). One can also identify the manner

in which Hollywood in turn appropriated and deployed elements gleaned from these oppositional social images in their representations of radical groups in the 1970s. In particular, there is a striking similarity between the social image projected by the Black Panthers in the late 1960s (black leather jackets, dark glasses, and brooding facial expressions) and the manner in which the figure of the black militant was represented in the "blaxploitation" films of the early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> These are all areas ripe for sustained exploration along the lines implemented in this study. As noted above, this would necessarily involve moving beyond emphasis on the purely institutional and rhetorical elements of dissident social movements as the main unit of analysis, and toward the careful scrutiny of the cultural politics of the symbol and image, and the way these were given amplification via mass media to become crucial and essential parts of the politics of opposition in recent America.

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, The Bus Is Coming (1971), Superfly (1972), Shaft (1972) and Trick Baby (1973). Regarding Shaft, the similarity between the visual characterization of protagonist John Shaft and the actual appearance of Black Panther leader Bobby Seale is notable.

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