

Re-fighting America's Vietnam War:
Populist Militarism and the Paradox of Imperial Consent

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Introduction:

Having spent most of the 1990s thinking about the politics of the world economy and contests over the meaning and future of globalization, I was both politically dismayed and professionally embarrassed by the turn toward more overtly coercive forms of U.S. global power which masqueraded under the title Global War on Terror during the first decade of the 21st century. It seemed clear that my own work, but perhaps more generally critical Marxian scholarship on world politics, had neglected the role of military force in creating and sustaining structures of global power. While a gratifying flow of scholarship has emerged attempting to re-think Marxian theories of imperialism and to theorize 'the international' within an historical materialist frame², I have come to see my own potential contribution as a more modest one. In keeping with the broad emphases of my earlier work, I wish to return to the question of the historical structures of U.S. global power, but to do so in a way that is more attentive to the ways in which political economy and culture enable and support the coercive exercise of power on a global scale.

It has struck me as puzzling that a people whose political origin story centers around their successful struggle for independence from an oppressive colonial power should be able to project their own power repeatedly around the world, spreading domination in the name of liberty, without succumbing to self-doubt or even a healthy sense of irony. I have called this the paradox of imperial consent. How is it that so many Americans are unable to glimpse in themselves the imperial pretensions that most of the rest of the world so clearly sees as animating U.S. foreign policy?³

A large part of the answer, I think, lies in the mythology of American Exceptionalism, which casts American nationalism and American power as vehicles for the propagation of values that are presumed to be universal. Although these beliefs are hardly exclusive to neoconservatives, we are likely to find no clearer or more concise statement of this than in the writings of neoconservative policy intellectuals closely associated with the Bush Doctrine of U.S. military supremacy. On this view, American interests and American principles are fused in a foreign policy that uses U.S. power to promote freedom around the world. In the words of William Bennett, "So long as we stay true to the principles of America's founding, our self-interest as a great power will be inextricably linked to mankind's universal interest in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." According to William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "the American-led world order that emerged after the Cold War is a more just world than any imaginable alternative." This not only sets U.S. foreign policy on a distinct moral plane but has - or ought to have -- the happy effect of legitimating U.S. power in the eyes of the world: "It is precisely because American foreign policy is infused with an unusually high degree of morality that other nations find they have less to fear from its otherwise daunting power."⁴ This conflation of U.S. power with the cause of human freedom presents Americans with a kind of moral blank check in terms of which any action can be rationalized as serving not just American, but human interests. To the extent that this becomes a widely accepted presupposition, it provides broad legitimation for US global policy in the eyes of the American public, and absolves the public of responsibility for critical reflection on America's role in the world.

Notions of American exceptionalism and the civilizationally progressive role of American global power have become deeply anchored within popular common sense in the U.S., helping Americans to make sense of their most profound world-historical experiences and

providing languages of justification in terms of which America's global role might be narrated.⁵ In his compelling survey of the cultural history of U.S. foreign policy, Walter Hixson argues that "Foreign policy flows from cultural hegemony affirming 'America' as a manly, racially superior, and providentially destined 'beacon of liberty,' a country which possesses a special right to exert power in the world. Hegemonic national identity drives a continuous militant foreign policy, including the regular resort to war."⁶ In the contemporary era, Andrew Moravcsik reports, "fully 71 percent of Americans see the United States as a source of good in the world... 70 percent have faith in their domestic institutions and nearly 80 percent believe 'American ideas and customs' should spread globally."⁷ Multiple surveys suggest Americans are more self-consciously patriotic than many other peoples, but also that there is no US popular consensus for (and in fact considerable skepticism toward) asserting unilateral world leadership or playing the role of global policeman. At the same time, however, Americans are more likely than most other peoples to see peace as attainable through military power, and this belief can be associated with an agenda of global military supremacy. "In 2005, a wide majority of the American public believed that U.S. policy should aim to preserve American global military dominance."⁸ A 2010 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute found that "A majority (58%) of Americans agree that God has granted America a special role in human history," and this belief is especially strong among white evangelicals and Republicans . Moreover, "Americans who affirm the idea of 'American exceptionalism' ...have a distinctly more militaristic approach to foreign policy than those who do not affirm this idea." Of white Americans who subscribe to this notion of American exceptionalism, 52 % claim that military strength is more important than diplomacy in securing peace, "a rate twice as high as among white Americans who do not affirm American exceptionalism."⁹ There is a clear partisan division in which a strong majority of

Republicans favor military power over diplomacy as the best way to attain world peace, and believe that Americans are obligated to fight for their country whether or not they believe its policies are right.¹⁰ I interpret all this as evidence that popular common sense in the US contains persistent and active strains of American exceptionalism, but that the implications of a culture of American exceptionalism are ambiguous and politically contested, with a distinctly militarist position as one of the major contenders.

Deeply embedded as they may be in American political culture and popular common sense, these beliefs are not simply hard-wired into the public mind: they must be culturally reproduced on an ongoing basis in the face of challenges large and small. Among the largest such challenge of the last hundred years has been the Vietnam War, and the widespread questioning of the nature of U.S. global power that the war provoked. Since the war, strong majorities of Americans have consistently called the war “a mistake” (although there is considerable ambiguity as to exactly what this might mean to respondents). In 1990, Gallup found that 68 percent of Americans considered the war unjust while 25 percent responded that it was just. This majority sentiment that the war was unjust increased to 71 percent in 1994, and declined to 62 percent in 2004 (i.e., after 9-11 and in the midst of the Global War on Terror) when 33 percent responded that the Vietnam war was a just war.¹¹

The thesis of this paper is that a great deal of cultural energy has been, and continues to be, devoted to the cause of re-narrating America’s Vietnam War so that it can be comfortably accommodated within the familiar narrative of the intrinsic righteousness of American power. The historical structures supporting American global power depend for their coherence upon this assimilation. Moreover, the particular ways in which this re-narration has been constructed -- in terms of a mythology of Victory Betrayed -- lends itself to articulations of populism and

militarism.¹² This ideological construction, which I am calling populist militarism, situates ‘the people’ on the side of the military and ‘the troops’ -- represented as avatars of the people in arms and champions of their intrinsic righteousness -- and positions critics of militarism as enemies of the American people and their values. In these ways, this mythology acts as a powerful cultural support for imperial power.

The Vietnam War and Popular Common Sense in the Imperial Homeland

In a 1996 postscript to his memoir of the war, Philip Caputo considers its seismic significance for American political culture:

Vietnam was the epicenter of a cultural, social, and political quake that sundered us like no other event since the Civil War. It was not an anomalous chapter in our national history, as even a casual reading of the Indian wars and the campaign to suppress the Philippine insurrection will bear out, but it was an anomalous chapter in our national mythology. Our self-image as a progressive, virtuous, and triumphant people exempt from the burdens and tragedies of history came apart in Vietnam and we had no way to integrate the war or its consequences into our collective and individual consciousness.¹³

Historian Marilyn Young sees a vortex of cultural and political tensions swirling in the wake of America’s Vietnam War:

The course of the Vietnam War challenged all the axioms of the post-World War II world, and the ideological conviction the United States needs to pursue its global dominion has yet to be recovered, if it ever can be. The Vietnam War remains today and

is likely to remain for the foreseeable future a zone of contested meaning; and the struggle over its interpretation is central to American politics, foreign and domestic, and of American culture as well.¹⁴

Among the presumptions of American political culture, underlying and enabling its exercise of global power, perhaps the most fundamental is that “this nation is always on the side of freedom and justice” and that its enemies are (and must be) intrinsically evil.¹⁵ It is precisely this dichotomous world view, along with the moral and political impunity it entails, which is at stake in those re-narrations of the Vietnam War which seek to recuperate America’s immaculate conception of its own global power.

Roots of Revisionism

The earliest accounts of the Vietnam war emphasizing themes now associated with right-wing revisionism came from military officers frustrated by the politics of the war; “By the summer of 1967, high-ranking military officers had become increasingly critical of what they considered unwarranted civilian limitations on military operations. ...The hawks also believed that prospects for remedying strategic deficiencies were undermined by divisiveness at home, which not only was corrosive to national morale but aided the enemy.”¹⁶ As President Nixon’s policies prolonged the war to obtain what he called “peace with honor,” the antiwar movement reached its peak with massive demonstrations in the fall of 1969. From the White House, Nixon addressed the nation, counterposing the patriotic perseverance of the “silent majority” with protests demanding “precipitate” U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, and implying that the latter constituted a betrayal:

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.¹⁷

As he expanded the war with a major U.S. offensive into Cambodia in 1970, Nixon urged his staff to counteract antiwar messages with the following talking point: “Don’t stab our men in the back while *they are fighting for this country* in Vietnam.”¹⁸ Themes of valiant military men sacrificing in the name of liberty while misguided or mendacious civilians made it impossible to achieve victory in Vietnam have become staples of right-wing revisionism.

Television Wars

In 1983, America’s Public Broadcasting System (PBS) televised an 11-part documentary entitled *Vietnam: A Television History*. Taking six years to produce, the path-breaking series was a joint effort of PBS’s Boston affiliate (WGBH) along with British and French television production companies. Of its \$4.6 million production cost, \$1.2 million was underwritten by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Millions of American households watched the series, it was critically acclaimed, and won numerous awards. According to PBS:

The series won television's top awards, including seven Emmys, the George Foster Peabody Award, the duPont/Columbia Journalism Award, the George Polk Award, two Writer's Guild Awards, and the Erik Barnouw Award of the Organization of American Historians. The duPont/Columbia jurors noted, ‘These 13 hours of spellbinding, journalistically exemplary television have deservedly been called a landmark in American broadcast journalism and the most important and most compelling documentary series ever made. The power and importance of this series will endure.’¹⁹

While the series producers strove to maintain a reportorial tone without explicit editorializations, and were widely praised for their even-handedness, their narrativization of the war necessarily emphasized some aspects of this complex history and de-emphasized others. Thus, their emphasis on Ho Chi Minh's nationalism was denounced by conservative groups as generating a more sympathetic portrayal than is warranted. By its relative de-emphasis of Ho's Communist commitments and the sins of Vietnamese Communism, the PBS series allegedly understated the degree to which the war represented a 'noble cause,' and did a disservice to the Americans and South Vietnamese who fought to resist Communism. Claims that *Vietnam: A Television History* represented a whitewash of Communist atrocities are unpersuasive. The series in fact included direct and explicit coverage of mass killings during the early phases of Communist land reform in North Vietnam; Viet Cong terrorism directed against government officials and American advisors in South Vietnam; torture of captured American airmen in the North; and the 1968 murder of almost 3,000 political prisoners in Hue. The fact that the series also devoted attention to atrocities by South Vietnamese and U.S. forces may help explain the hostile reaction of conservatives, insofar as this directly violates the tenets of American Exceptionalism which, I am arguing, they were at pains to defend.

Reed Irvine, a pioneer of conservative media criticism and founder of Accuracy in Media (AIM), denounced PBS's "blatantly pro-Communist propaganda" as representing "a glorification of Ho Chi Minh and denigration of our fighting men in Vietnam".²⁰ To produce an antidote, a counter-documentary, Irvine raised \$120,000 from AIM membership while William Bennett, neoconservative chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities under Reagan, tapped a discretionary fund to provide AIM a grant for \$30,000 to assist the project. Narrated by Charlton Heston, AIM's documentary entitled *Television's Vietnam* was completed in 1984 and enjoyed a

well-publicized screening in the Reagan White House and an endorsement from the Gipper himself. In effect, the primary charge against the PBS series was that it narrated the story of the Vietnam War without privileging the familiar binaries of Cold War anti-Communism in which a unified global Communism menaced southeast Asia and the Free World more generally.

According to Heston's narration, the PBS series offers "no hint that two ways of life, one based on freedom, the other on Communism, were struggling for southeast Asia". Historian George Herring summarizes:

AIM's indictment of the PBS series follows the standard line of conservative postwar revisionism. It begins with the tragedy of postwar Indochina – the flight of the boat people, genocide in Cambodia – and works backward to argue in militant anti-Communist terms that those consequences of the war were predictable – and preventable. It stresses that Ho Chi Minh was always a Communist internationalist, a Moscow stooge, and condemns PBS series for portraying him as a nationalist. The upheaval that led to the Second Indochina War was instigated and controlled by Hanoi, according to AIM, not a spontaneous and autonomous southern rebellion, as it says PBS argues. ...Only, it says, if the United States refuses to learn the real lesson of Vietnam – the necessity of resisting Communism – will the fifty-eight thousand who gave their lives in Vietnam have died in vain.²¹

AIM thus implied that to criticize the war and its anti-Communist rationale was to betray every one of those fifty-eight thousand dead Americans. Moreover, critical interpretations of the war such as that allegedly presented by PBS weaken American resolve to forcefully resist Communism elsewhere.

AIM's indictment of the media went further than PBS and its 1983 Vietnam documentary. In the second part of AIM's counter-documentary, *Television's Vietnam* suggested that the American military had been close to victory in Vietnam but, in the words of Heston's narration, "our will to win was eroded by the way our media, especially television, reported the war." AIM suggested that the media, public opinion, and US war policy had been successfully manipulated by Communist disinformation, and it was this manipulation which resulted in ultimate Communist victory. PBS was persuaded to air the first part of the AIM documentary in June 1985, followed by a panel discussion of AIM's charges against the original PBS documentary. When PBS declined to show the second part of AIM's film contending that the media had in effect lost the war, Irvine threatened to seek Congressional de-funding of PBS.²² Individual PBS affiliate stations apparently decided to broadcast the film in their own local communities during fall, 1986. Subsequently, AIM distributed the film itself by advertising in conservative outlets. A full-page advertisement published in *National Review* (April 10, 1987) featured a giant headline that asked "Who betrayed those who died in Vietnam? Was it our own media?"²³ In this way, the contest over public memory was extended to the public airwaves and home TV screens as the first major attempt to present a popular video history of the Vietnam War rekindled debates potentially implicating the nature of US global power. The conservative backlash was not idiosyncratic, and needs to be understood in this broader context.

Reagan, Rambo, and Hanoi Jane

Elected in the aftermath of the Iran hostage crisis, which many Americans viewed as a national humiliation, Ronald Regan promised to strengthen the nation's military so that America could once again "stand tall" in the world and vigorously support the cause of liberty with American power. Integral to this agenda was putting the Vietnam conflict of recent memory in

the proper context, to which Reagan's famously sentimental attitude toward American history and notoriously flawed memory was extraordinarily well-suited. Speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars about the need to confront Soviet Communism with a strategy of peace through strength, presidential candidate Reagan provided a comprehensive re-narration of the Vietnam War which reactivated a dichotomous Cold War world view, restored America to its position of righteousness, redeemed America's fighting men, and placed the blame for war's outcome on those who had opposed it. Almost entirely erroneous, Reagan's fable of Vietnam was nonetheless compelling insofar as it resonated with self-understandings deeply embedded in popular common sense and tied them together into a more-or-less coherent narrative that seemed to make sense of an otherwise dauntingly complex and morally challenging historical conjuncture. "For too long," Reagan told the Veterans, "we have lived with the 'Vietnam Syndrome'."

Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors... Over and over they told us for nearly ten years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests. They had a plan. It was to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the field of battle in Vietnam... It is time we recognized that ours was in truth a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned. They fought as well and as bravely as any Americans have ever fought in any war. They deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern.

The lesson of Vietnam, Reagan continued, is that “we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.”²⁴ As President, Reagan continued to repeat these themes. The following year Reagan presented the Medal of Honor to a soldier who performed heroically in Vietnam, summarizing the Vietnam experience in terms which suggested that the military had been betrayed by civilians and by their civilian leadership: “Several years ago, we brought home a group of American fighting men who had obeyed their country’s call and who had fought as bravely and as well as any Americans in our history. They came home without a victory not because they’d been defeated, but because they’d been denied permission to win.”²⁵ Later, Reagan suggested that the American military won its battles in Vietnam, so it was misleading to portray the war as having been lost: “We didn’t lose that war. We won virtually every engagement.”²⁶ But despite the military’s putative successes, the media distorted the truth about victory in the noble cause, the public became disaffected and, in the end, Congress forbade funding for the military support that might have enabled South Vietnam to withstand the Northern offensive of 1975. American warriors, South Vietnamese anti-Communists, and ideals of freedom were betrayed by domestic opponents of the war.

Such narratives of Victory Betrayed became commonplace in the popular culture of the 1980s, with cartoonish movie heroes such as Sylvester Stallone (Rambo) and Chuck Norris (Col. Braddock) returning to Vietnam to rescue American prisoners of war betrayed and abandoned by a government populated with self-serving bureaucrats and double-dealing politicians. Before agreeing to his return mission to Vietnam, Rambo famously asks: “Do we get to win this time?” His commander replies “This time it’s up to you,” implying of course that the last time it was not. And, employing all the violent means he wants, Rambo the hyper-masculine fantasy warrior returns to Southeast Asia to overcome Vietnamese resistance and American treachery, bring

home the POWs, and redeem the Victory Betrayed. As Bruce Franklin has documented, this basic plot line was replicated in numerous movies, television shows, pulp novels and other popular media. Franklin's history of this culturally resonant mythology suggests that it originated in the Nixon administration's attempt to construct a publically acceptable rationale for continuing the war until a politically face-saving exit could be contrived. His investigation found "not a shred of verifiable evidence" that live POWs were still held in Vietnam.²⁷ Yet, "By the end of the 1980s, the POW/MIA myth had emerged from American popular culture in the shape of an ominous Frankenstein's monster beginning to haunt its ingenious creators in Washington."²⁸ According to Franklin, by 1991 "69 percent of Americans surveyed in a *Wall Street Journal* / NBC News poll believed that Americans [were] still prisoners of war in Southeast Asia and 52 percent of those surveyed are convinced that the government is not doing enough to get them back." The mythology suggesting that men officially listed as Missing in Action are actually held as POWs has a firm grip on the public imagination, politicians pay ritual homage to the lobby groups which have emerged around this non-issue, and POW-MIA flags fly from public buildings and patriotic private properties across the country.

Similarly embedded in popular culture, but unsupported by strong historical evidence, is the mythology of returning Vietnam veterans spat upon by anti-war activists. Sociologist (and Vietnam vet) Jerry Lembcke was unable to find any contemporaneous evidence (such as news stories or police reports) to corroborate incidents of spat-upon vets, and notes that survey evidence from 1971 shows overwhelming numbers of returning vets perceived their homecoming as friendly. Yet, this "spitting image" endures because it "provides an alibi for why the most powerful and righteous nation on earth (as America perceives itself to be) lost the war to an underdeveloped Asian nation. The myth says, in effect, that we were not beaten by the

Vietnamese but were defeated on the home front by fifth columnists”. In this way, “the responsibility for the loss of the war is shifted from those whose policies had failed to those who were critical of the policies all along.”²⁹

Among those who are held by the militaristic right-wing to have betrayed the country during the Vietnam War, few are as bitterly reviled as Jane Fonda, the movie star and antiwar activist who traveled to Hanoi on a mission of peace and solidarity in 1972 and was photographed sitting at a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun. “Hanoi Jane” has become the embodiment of the treachery and danger lurking within the American cultural left: “Far more than a symbol of the military mission betrayed, Hanoi Jane represented the antiwarrior latent within the culture, the self-indulgent and rebellious underbelly of America that could, and did, turn hard men soft and cost the nation its victory in Southeast Asia.”³⁰ By the 1990s, Reagan, Rambo, abandoned POWs, and Hanoi Jane were embedded in popular common sense, and could be called upon to articulate a powerful counter-narrative of Victory Betrayed and America emasculated in Vietnam.

This narrative even took on apocalyptic dimensions. For example, in his best-selling millennialist tome of the 1990s, televangelist Pat Robertson warned of a secretive Establishment, “a tightly knit cabal whose goal is nothing less than a new order for the human race under the domination of Lucifer and his followers.” This New World Order would subsume the USA into a socialistic one-world government in which the God-given rights and liberties enshrined in the U.S. Constitution would be lost forever. Claiming for himself the moral and epistemic authority of one who served as a Marine in the Korean war, Robertson resolves for his readers the puzzle of the presumptive moral purity of America’s troops and the military setbacks they suffered during their struggles with communism. In both Korea and Vietnam, America’s inability to

prevail was the product of duplicity and malign intent: “civilian authorities were actually prohibiting our troops from winning. ... Their plan for this country was not victory over communism but ultimate union with the Soviet Union in a one-world government.”³¹ In tandem with counter-culture intellectuals and academics seeking to undermine popular awareness of America’s special identity and divine mission, these Establishment figures were not just traitors to their country and dupes of communism, but were literally doing the devil’s work, agents of absolute evil.

Echoing the notorious Nazi fable of the “stab-in-the-back” that purported to explain German acceptance of a harsh armistice despite the absence of crushing military defeat in World War I, all of these popular mythologies speak of a virile and virtuous U.S. military which could have won in Vietnam had it not been undercut by the enemy within -- liberals, leftists, peace activists, feminists and gays.³² Bruce Franklin explicitly recognizes the reciprocal entanglement of militarism and cultural politics: “Americans have been led to believe that those responsible for this current menace to the nation [political correctness and the culture wars] are the same internal enemies blamed for the Vietnam debacle: self-indulgent students, the allegedly liberal press, African Americans and other people of color, feminists, and those left-wing professors and unionized public school teachers misleading all these un-American malcontents.”³³ In terms of this cultural narrative, restoring American greatness requires silencing these disloyal social forces, re-masculinizing America, and re-establishing the preeminence of a culture of militarism – which is to say that these mythologies embody a comprehensive conservative agenda for America and the world.

Fighting the Global War on Terror with Yellow Ribbons

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2001, the United States launched a series of military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. The roots of this so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) are complex, and will not be dug up here.³⁴ Rather, I want to focus on the ways in which American militarism reproduces itself culturally, through the omnipresent yellow ribbons, messages commanding the public to “Support the Troops,” and attempts to combat the effects of a Vietnam Syndrome in which the public supposedly became disaffected from the military and the war, robbing America of the victory that might have been. While Bush the elder famously declared that America had finally kicked the Vietnam Syndrome after its 1991 military victory in Kuwait, there is abundant evidence that considerable cultural energy continues to be devoted to putting the Vietnam genie back in the bottle of American Exceptionalism.³⁵ For those who embrace the lessons of Vietnam offered by conservative revisionists, it is essential to avoid a repetition of that self-inflicted disaster if America is to play its self-appointed role as global defender of freedom and, most recently, scourge of terrorists.

To preclude a recurrence the Vietnam Syndrome during the GWOT, the Pentagon has conducted an astonishingly vigorous and comprehensive public relations campaign that provides it with public visibility and with a familiar, readily accepted presence across a wide array of popular cultural activities.³⁶ During the Bush Administration, this included a program explicitly designed to encourage Americans to support US troops, and to create among US military personnel an impression that their efforts and sacrifices are valued back home and that the American public stands behind them as they continue the occupation of Iraq and the indefinite war on terror. This double-edged sword aimed at both a public and a military audience was called America Supports You (ASY).

According to AFPS, “The Defense Department launched [ASY] in November 2004 to showcase support for the country’s men and women in uniform from the American public as well as the corporate sector.”³⁷ With the aid of a multi-million dollar contract with a private public relations firm, a private foundation called the America Supports You Fund, over 35 major corporate partners such as Anheuser-Busch, Wal-Mart, and Microsoft, and hundreds of local affiliate groups, ASY organized mass “Freedom Walks” in dozens of cities nationwide to commemorate 9-11 and encourage patriotism and militarism as the appropriate popular responses. Along with public relations industry group The Advertising Council, ASY created a mass campaign of ‘public service announcements’ that ran in newspapers and magazines, and on radio stations, around the country, “designed to encourage Americans to support and participate in activities that show their support for the troops and to communicate that support to military personnel.”³⁸ ASY sponsored pro-troop events at NASCAR and Indy 500 auto races, and induced professional wrestlers, golfers, baseball players, rodeo cowboys and a range of celebrities to publicly express their support. They partnered with Marvel Comics to create a special edition comic book in which superheroes salute “the real heroes, the men and women of the U.S. military,” and with Ringling Brothers to remind circus-goers of their obligation to service members. ASY developed a special “teaching supplement” for inclusion in the *Weekly Reader* to encourage grade school kids to be grateful to and express support for US troops. And they sponsored mass campaigns cajoling people to write appreciative text messages ostensibly sent to troops serving overseas at Thanksgiving. Also, ASY teamed up with Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry to send holiday care packages to the troops and partnered with Wal-Mart to donate laptops, toys, food and cash to military families at Christmastime. They sponsored a special holiday “CD for the troops” in which 13 recording artists contributed songs free of charge for

service members. ASY strategically targeted a mix of old and new media: in addition to a radio show, ASY launched a blog and a My Space page, and uploaded videos to You Tube. And ASY distributed a Calendar of Support highlighting occasions throughout the year when they wished to prompt outpourings of public support. On every important holiday throughout the year, and across a range of popular cultural activities and venues, ASY organized mass expressions of popular support for the troops.³⁹

Allison Barber, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Internal Communications and Public Liaison, was in charge of the American Forces Information Service, parent organization of American Forces Press Service (AFPS) and the military magazine *Stars and Stripes*, as well as ASY. Explaining the mission of ASY in an environment when support for the occupation of Iraq was waning and Bush administration approval ratings were in free fall, Barber wrote in January 2007: “the American people are beginning to fatigue, even in their support for the troops ...I don’t think we have a minute to lose when it comes to maximizing support for our military, especially in the new political environment.”⁴⁰

Despite frequent claims that ASY was apolitical, one of the underlying purposes of the ASY program was to combat the Vietnam Syndrome in which popular opposition to US militarism and disaffection from the military was perceived as undermining the ability effectively to deploy military force overseas, as an AFPS report backhandedly suggested: “Barber, who heads the Defense Department’s internal communications and public liaison programs, said service members returning from war today are returning to heroes’ welcomes, unlike their Vietnam-era counterparts. ‘Vietnam has not happened yet because of you,’ she said [to an audience of ASY activists].”⁴¹ ASY aimed at constructing an identification of “the people” with “the troops,” forging an articulation of populism and militarism in terms of which uncritical

support for the military could be upheld as normative, and dissent could be framed as betrayal of the troops, the avatars of the people in arms.⁴² A few months after the program was launched, an editorialist at the conservative *New York Post* wrote approvingly about ASY, calling it the Pentagon's "new weapon" in a "battle for hearts and minds" that "ultimately may be the decisive factor in the War on Terror"-- "If Vietnam taught us anything, it's that, during wartime, public opinion counts. America Supports You will boost morale and make Americans feel good about their nation, their military and their cause. But maybe most important, it will help convince the world that, this time, this country will not grow weary, abandon its fighting men and flee, tail tucked."⁴³ President Bush repeatedly encouraged public participation in ASY as a way to support the GWOT: "Our troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and other fronts in the war on terror are serving in a cause that is vital and just. And on this Fourth of July, I ask every American to find a way to thank the men and women who are defending our freedom and the families that support them." Bush lauded ASY for sending the troops a message of unstinting support for "the vital work [they] do to achieve victory in Iraq."⁴⁴

Barber and ASY became caught up in a bureaucratic scandal, however, when multimillion dollar contracts with a public relations firm owned by a Barber crony, dubious financial transfers across segregating funding streams, and apparent ASY support for corporate sponsors and a private foundation were brought to the attention of the Pentagon's Inspector General. While the subsequent investigation did not result in criminal charges, it did find that Barber had mismanaged the program and, more interestingly for our purposes, concluded that "Instead of focusing on its primary mission of showcasing and communicating support to the troops and their families, the ASY program focus has been on building or soliciting support from the public."⁴⁵ With the Inspector General's report coming in the wake of revelations that

Rumsfeld's Pentagon had deliberately used a stable of media-friendly military analysts to massage public opinion and achieve "information dominance,"⁴⁶ Barber resigned her Pentagon post, ASY's public relations contractor was dismissed, and ASY was reorganized and its mission was refocused on communicating public support to military personnel rather than attempting to generate support.

According to a special report by the Associated Press, "Over the past five years, the money the military spends on winning hearts and minds at home and abroad has grown by 63 percent, to at least \$4.7 billion this year. ...Spending on public affairs [the domestic side of the military's information operations] has more than doubled since 2003."⁴⁷ Overt propaganda activity such as the military analyst program and ASY is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. The Military-Industrial-Cultural complex has become deeply entangled with movies and television, sports, video games and the internet, schools, and colleges.⁴⁸ Himself a former army officer and political conservative, the militarization of American culture has been highlighted, and lamented, by Andrew Bacevich:

Americans in our own time have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force. To a degree without precedent in US history, Americans have come to define the nation's strength and well-being in terms of military preparedness, military action, and the fostering of ... military ideals.⁴⁹

The Bush administration and the Pentagon were not alone in seeking to keep the Vietnam Syndrome at bay and reproduce the culture of militarism. For decades, a small group of right-wing foundations (including the Scaife, Bradley, Olin, and Coors foundations) have invested in

the development of a network of think tanks, media and public relations organizations providing the public intellectual infrastructure of the New Right in America. Much of what David Brock has termed the “Republican noise machine” or what Eric Alterman calls “the (really) conservative media” has been actively engaged in re-narrating America’s Vietnam War in order to sustain the social mythology of freedom’s empire.⁵⁰

Regnery’s *Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War*

Long a leading conservative publisher, Regnery Publishing is proud of its catalog of highly contentious, partisan, and popular books, of which thirty-two titles have ascended into the ranks of the top ten bestsellers since 1996. Among these was the notorious *Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans speak out against John Kerry* (2004), which impugned the Vietnam military record and subsequent antiwar activism of Democratic presidential candidate Kerry. *Unfit for Command* spent 13 weeks as the number one bestseller and a focus of national attention. More recently, Regnery has published a series of Politically Incorrect Guides (PIGs), each designed to directly attack a particular aspect of putatively spurious liberal ideology. Written by a former Marine pilot and alumnus of the CIA’s Air America, the *Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War* explicitly sets out to redeem “my fellow Vietnam veterans who have been so badly mistreated by the media and cultural trendsetters in this country.” It purports to correct the PC orthodoxy by telling “the true story of the Vietnam war, as it actually was, by someone who fought there.” According to its author, the book was necessary “because the people who misreported the war, hammered vile lies about it into our national consciousness, and now tout its supposed ‘lessons’ are the very same people who created ‘political correctness’ in the first place” – antiwar professors, journalists, and the cultural left.⁵¹

Not surprisingly, Jennings takes a narrow military perspective on the war and often seems to reduce its multidimensional complexities to a score-keeping exercise, as if war was understandable in the same terms as a sporting contest. On that basis, he does not hesitate to proclaim the Vietnam War an American military victory.

The biggest Myth perpetuated about the Vietnam War is that America lost. However misguided America's leaders might have been in some of their political, strategic, and tactical decisions, we still won the war. We forced North Vietnam to Submit to the Paris Peace Accords of 1973. Those accords ended the war and pledged the North Vietnamese to peaceful coexistence with the South. I fought in Vietnam and I never saw us lose a battle... the Communists never did defeat us on the battlefield. If you look at casualty figures, you can see brutal confirmation of that. The United States military lost more than 58,000 men in the Vietnam War. The North Vietnamese lost more than 1.1 million. Who would you guess was the victor?

Yet, despite the fact that the U.S. military left the field with the highest score, they were not recognized as winners; they were apparently robbed of the victory Jennings believes that they earned with their sweat and blood. "It is obscene to say these sacrifices were in vain. It is without reason to say that America's servicemen 'lost' anything."⁵²

Drawing heavily on the writings of disgruntled military commanders and a small group of heterodox conservative historians⁵³, Jennings claims that America's Vietnam War was as good as won at three different historical junctures, but on each occasion defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory by varying combinations of strategic interference and micromanagement of the war by civilian officials; vacillation or half-measures applied by weak-willed Democratic

politicians; misrepresentations of the war effort by liberal media and antiwar activists; and the moral cowardice of Congress who ultimately betrayed and abandoned the South Vietnamese and the American servicemen who had fought with them.

In his account of the war's onset Jennings categorically asserts that the Diem regime was the legitimate government of an independent, sovereign state under attack from foreign forces. "The Vietnam war was not a civil war among the people of South Vietnam; it was a war of Communist aggression by North Vietnam against the sovereign, free, internationally recognized nations of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia."⁵⁴ That the very existence of the state of South Vietnam was the result of an American-led effort to frustrate the Geneva Accords of 1954 and prevent the unified rule of Vietnam by the Viet Minh forces who had defeated the French colonial occupiers and were almost certain to win the country-wide elections called for by the Accords, Jennings barely acknowledges.⁵⁵ While offering the briefest of hints that the Diem regime was corrupt, nepotistic, and brutal (relatively superficial issues in comparison to its inorganic, alien roots), Jennings quickly dismisses these issues by asserting that "his [Diem's] methods were considerably less harsh than those of the Stalinist Ho Chi Minh – whose Soviet and Communist Chinese backers endorsed any and all means to achieve a Communist state."⁵⁶ Jennings asserts that the Diem government in Saigon was legitimate, effective, moderately progressive, and was actually winning the war against the guerillas until Diem was deposed and murdered in a military coup supported by the Kennedy administration. By betraying "the most experienced, respected, and unifying leader South Vietnam had," Kennedy committed "the largest American blunder of the Vietnam War," setting the stage for the tragedies to come.⁵⁷

In Jennings' re-narration, the second episode of Victory Betrayed occurred at the culmination of Lyndon Johnson's war. Foolishly following the advice of civilian defense

intellectuals intoxicated with abstract notions of limited war and discrete steps on ladders of escalation, Johnson had gradually escalated the bombing of the North in hopes of ratcheting up the pressure for them to cease their “invasion” of the South. In so doing, he had ignored the wise advice of commanders who called for massive bombing “to prove to the Communist government in Hanoi that it would have to accept the existence of an independent South Vietnam – or face the obliteration of the North Vietnamese capital.”⁵⁸ In the South, Westmoreland – an otherwise admirable soldier – adopted a flawed strategy of attrition based on “search and destroy” operations designed to bring American firepower to bear on enemy forces. According to Jennings, the strategy was flawed because a totalitarian Communist government could coerce its people into fighting to the last soldier, because the Communists had sanctuaries “off-limits to U.S. firepower” in Laos and Cambodia, and because it destroyed and destabilized large areas of South Vietnam.⁵⁹ It is precisely this widespread destruction in the Vietnamese countryside, and the massive civilian casualties and dislocations this necessarily entailed,⁶⁰ that led many commentators to view the war as immoral – a position Jennings dismisses as being both naively idealistic and slanderous of American military servicemen.

During 1967 General Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker, and the Johnson administration conducted a public relations campaign at home to shore up public support for the ongoing war by asserting again and again that steady progress was being made in Vietnam, the enemy was being ground down, and victory was within sight. Then the guerillas launched the Tet Offensive of early 1968, attacking over a hundred targets across South Vietnam, including major cities and military bases as well as such symbolic bastions of the U.S. presence as the American embassy in Saigon. These attacks were spectacular and shocking (all the more so in light of the official narrative that the war was all but won), but they also exposed the guerillas to

concentrated American firepower. “From a military point of view, the Tet Offensive was a massive Communist defeat, both in terms of casualties and in proving that if the people of South Vietnam were ever to rise up, it would be against the Communists, not for them.”⁶¹ For Jennings, this translates into a potentially decisive military victory that was misrepresented by the media and antiwar forces at home, undermining political support for the war at the moment when a more aggressive follow-up could have, and should have, won the war.⁶²

The third act of Jennings’ military tragedy occurred in 1972-73. Jennings lionizes President Nixon for his willingness to bomb North Vietnamese cities, and to send US and South Vietnamese troops and bombers against Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. As the author sees it, Nixon’s pit bull toughness once again brought victory within reach. For Jennings, the Paris Accords of 1973 were a Communist capitulation to the Nixon onslaught.⁶³ However, liberal and antiwar forces in Congress sought to cripple Nixon’s policies with funding cutoffs and with the new War Powers Act, and ultimately prevented the U.S. from using airpower to sustain South Vietnamese independence in the face of renewed Northern aggression. Presuming that it was within America’s power to sustain South Vietnam indefinitely, Jennings holds Congressional Democrats, biased journalists, academics and antiwar activists “responsible for the loss of South Vietnam to the brutal rule and atrocities of the Communist North.”⁶⁴

Overarching all of this is the presumption of the fundamental righteousness of the U.S. war in Vietnam, in Daniel Ellsberg’s words, the “tacit, unquestioned belief that we [Americans] had a *right* to ‘win’ in ways defined by us.”⁶⁵ Grounded in a stark, unreconstructed Cold War world-view – dichotomous, zero-sum, strongly reminiscent of NSC-68 – Jennings asserts that Communism was the world’s greatest evil, that it had its source in the expansionism of the USSR and Communist China (rather than in socio-political dynamics particular to various countries and

regions where it arose), and that the lessons of Munich (appeasement of tyrannical aggressors is folly) applied as much to global Communism as to Hitler. Following the procrustean logic of NSC-68, “a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere” and vital interests are therefore at stake in every context where Communism and freedom confront one another.⁶⁶ On this view, the dubious origins, unrepresentative nature, and manifold sins of the Southern regime are beside the point. So long as it was anti-Communist, the U.S. military effort that sustained that regime was ultimately about preserving the “Free World” in the face of Communist expansionism, its single greatest menace. Understood in these terms, the war was indeed a noble cause and to claim otherwise was to support the enemy in wartime or, now, is to betray the legacy of the Americans who fought there. Not surprisingly, Jennings’ book spends little time actually weighing the arguments of those with whom he disagrees since the underlying presumption is that there can be no good reasons to put forth an alternative interpretation, no honest and moral person would say any such thing. For Jennings and those who think like him, these are not debatable differences of historical interpretation; to represent the war differently is an act of bad faith, moral bankruptcy, abject betrayal – a stab-in-the-back.

The *Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War* has been favorably reviewed in a range of conservative outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Times*, *Human Events*, and *World Net Daily*.⁶⁷ These reviewers welcomed it as an important corrective to liberal cultural orthodoxy. Jennings maintains an active Facebook page for the book’s fans. Clearly, segments of the American public desperately want reassurance that U.S. foreign policy is intrinsically moral, that the U.S. military is virile and masterful, that outcomes which fail to reflect this nobility and power must result from unmanly cowardice and betrayal by particular segments of the American public, and that the history of the Vietnam War somehow affirms all these beliefs.

Victory Betrayed: Conceptual Furniture in the Right-wing World

These kinds of re-narrations of the Vietnam War have become commonplace in the political discourse of the American right-wing. The mythology of Victory Betrayed forms a kind of taken-for-granted background knowledge, of the sort that “everybody knows” so it needs little support aside from its regular reassertion. The most popular conservative radio, television, and print commentators are happy to do precisely that.

Bill O’Reilly⁶⁸ of Fox News acknowledges that all was not well with the South Vietnamese regime, but he does presume that the U.S. military was winning the war, antiwar forces were responsible for ending the war and aiding the enemy, and that a direct consequence was the enslavement of the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge killing fields. Further, O’Reilly sees all of this as creating an obligation to re-establish the cultural status of American fighting men.

That’s the biggest myth in the world that the U.S.A. lost the [Vietnam] war. We didn’t lose the war.... The United States armed forces did not lose one engagement, not one... And we pulled out of there for political reasons. ...our political will was not there.⁶⁹

American protesters succeeded in shutting down the war effort in Vietnam. And that was a good thing. The South Vietnamese government was corrupt and President Johnson would not fight the war to win because he was afraid of Chinese and Soviet intervention. But when U.S. troops pulled out of southeast Asia, many bad things began to happen. Two million Cambodians were slaughtered by Pol Pot and his Communist killers and millions were enslaved by a totalitarian regime in Vietnam. In you remember, peaceniks

back then said nothing about those atrocities, ignoring the holocaust in Cambodia altogether.⁷⁰

Did you have any problem with the Vietnam Protestors? Because they were giving aid and comfort to the enemy.⁷¹

[Speaking to Mel Gibson about his Vietnam War movie, *We Were Soldiers Once*] What I like about this movie is that it celebrates the courage of soldiers in Vietnam, which hasn't been in America done [sic]. Hasn't been done. ...It goes beyond cinema here. You're into helping the country and particularly people who fought in Vietnam and have memories of that, and have not been acknowledged.⁷²

The king of conservative talk radio, Rush Limbaugh⁷³ embraces the thesis that protesting against the war was betrayal of the country and its military: "Let's get one thing straight right here about this protester policy and what they were really trying to do. They weren't trying to save lives. They were not trying to do anything other than defeat U.S. policy in this war. They were on the side of our enemy, whether they want to admit it or not."⁷⁴ The conservative magazine, *Human Events*, approvingly quoted Limbaugh's definition of patriotism: "Patriotism is supporting our troops on the battlefield, not undermining the mission and morale."⁷⁵

Right-wing media shooting star Glenn Beck hosts highly popular national radio and television programs, has had a daily audience estimated at some two million persons, and has authored several best-selling political books. Prior to the Iraq war, Beck worked with Clear Channel Communications to organize a series of pro-military "Rallies for America" in cities around the country.⁷⁶ Beck told the Tampa Tribune "his rallies are designed to prevent a repeat of what happened after Vietnam, when returning soldiers were spat upon and called baby killers.

‘That can’t happen again,’ he said.”⁷⁷ More recently, Beck became a Fox News commentator and celebrity purveyor of John Birch-style tales of Marxist-intellectual conspiracies to deliberately distort U.S. history, mislead the public with malicious lies, and construct a totalitarian state in America.⁷⁸ In August 2010, Beck organized a mass rally on the Washington mall emphasizing the theme that “restoring America” and “turning our faith back to the values and principles that made us great” -- that is, reanimating faith in American exceptionalism -- entails a renewed commitment to follow religious values, defend god-given rights and liberties, and honor the troops. Beck urged his listeners to “stand with America and god”. Right-wing populist icon Sarah Palin addressed Beck’s rally, asserting that the military “is a force for good in this country, and that is nothing to apologize for”: Palin’s remarks were greeted with chants of “U-S-A, U-S-A!”⁷⁹

In his bestselling book, radio talk show host and Fox News commentator Sean Hannity explains that the legacy of America’s moral exceptionalism has been squandered and betrayed by the leftists and liberals who opposed the Vietnam War and have since become a powerfully institutionalized presence in American politics.

[In WWII], we saved civilization and freed captive nations and people around the globe. ...for decades, the US engaged in costly efforts to contain the Soviet advance. Bloody wars were fought in South Korea and South Vietnam, killing nearly a hundred thousand American soldiers. Inside our own borders, the Left preached appeasement and conciliation.

A new generation of liberals, far more radical than their New Deal-era predecessors, not only opposed the Vietnam War but sought the evisceration of certain core American

institutions, including the military, law enforcement, and capitalism. By the early 1970s this movement had virtually hijacked the Democratic Party....⁸⁰

A professional culture warrior and red-baiter funded by the sugar daddies of the radical right such as the Scaife and Bradley foundations, David Horowitz⁸¹ is also at pains to re-narrate the Vietnam War in ways consistent with the mythology of American Exceptionalism and Victory Betrayed. Horowitz and his leftist-tracking web site, Discover the Networks, identify the Vietnam War era as a time when American radicals attained a disproportionate and pernicious cultural influence:

The war marked a time when the political left openly identified the U.S. as the font of all evil in the world, charging America with genocide, terrorism, and crimes against humanity. The so-called “Vietnam Syndrome” would thereafter become a part of America’s national psyche, characterized by self-doubt and self-blame in every international conflict.⁸²

These radicals Horowitz identifies as a generation of privileged students and academics whose self-indulgent politics led them to shirk their duty during the war, to rationalize this by interpreting the war as an expression of American evil, and to continue to oppose and undermine foreign policies based on American values and principles: “[During the war] the privileged avoided their obligations, and have persisted since that time in demeaning the experience in order to protect themselves from the judgment of history.”⁸³

In a book none-too-subtly entitled *The Enemy Within*, Dinesh D’Souza -- a former Reagan administration policy advisor subsequently associated with conservative culture war hot-

houses such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institution -- spins out a comprehensive and sinister version of the betrayal myth:

Remember that Vietnam was a defeat for the American armed forces, but it was a victory for the political left. It was a victory in the sense that the left demanded that America accept humiliation and withdraw, and America accepted humiliation and withdrew. The left sought the “liberation” of Vietnam, and Vietnam was “liberated”. This outcome turned out to be very bad for the people of Indochina, who suffered unimaginable horrors following the U.S. pullout. At the same time, the Vietnam disgrace helped advance the leftist agenda in America. ...Not only did America’s defeat corrode the morale of the American military, but it also undermined patriotism and traditional values in America. ...It greatly bolstered the counterculture, giving added impetus to women’s liberation, gay rights, and the sexual revolution. So, from the left’s point of view, Vietnam was not only a foreign policy success, but also a cultural success. Therefore, for this group, the prospect of “another Vietnam” in an outcome that is eagerly anticipated.⁸⁴

D’Souza claims that this internal enemy demoralized America, degraded its culture, weakened its defenses, and all but invited the terrorist attacks of 2001. And when loyal Americans seek to eliminate this terrorist threat, the enemy within does everything in their power to bring about another Vietnam-like betrayal. These are the kinds of background understandings called up, for example, when Sarah Palin accused the Obama-Biden ticket of planning “a white flag of surrender in Iraq and that is not what our troops need to hear today.”⁸⁵

But the implications go much deeper than electoral rhetoric. Narratives scapegoating entire segments of society are a tradition of long standing on the American right and constitute a

central element in the culture of right-wing populism.⁸⁶ Scapegoating internal enemies who are presumed to be both dangerous and incorrigible lends itself to a form of political rhetoric David Neiwert calls “eliminationism”-- “a politics and culture that shuns dialogue and the democratic exchange of ideas in favor of the pursuit of outright elimination of the opposing side, either through suppression, exile and ejection, or extermination.” Citing examples from the political statements of Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, Bill O’Reilly, Dinesh D’Souza, David Horowitz and other popular conservative commentators, Neiwert argues that “Eliminationism has become an endemic feature of modern movement conservatism.... It shows itself as an unwillingness to argue the facts or merits of issues and to demand outright the suppression or violent oppression (and ultimately the purgation) of elements deemed harmful to American society.”⁸⁷ The ideological confluence of national rebirth through militarism, scapegoating and eliminationist rhetoric comes uncomfortably close to replicating core elements of fascism’s political culture.⁸⁸

Even if that darkest possibility remains unrealized, the narrative of Victory Betrayed presents a ready-made script in terms of which imperial militarism can defame its critics as enemies of the people, and culturally reproduce itself. So, for example, when some Democrats and anti-war forces were critical of the 2007 Bush-Petraeus military surge in Iraq, Rush Limbaugh read from this script, identifying John Kerry among the critics (“a man who’s done his best to undermine his comrades in Vietnam”) and telling his audience: “We’re dealing with treason here. ...They cannot get on the side of the American people being victorious. ...Why [he asked as if he was confronting Iraq war critics with evidence of their perfidy] are you actively seeking the defeat of your country in the war on terror?”⁸⁹ This discourse of treachery and betrayal by disloyal segments of society – enemies of the people and their values -- is a potent

cultural weapon with which to discredit and isolate those who do not embrace, or fit easily within, the culture of populist militarism.

Conclusion

Mark Fenster has argued that “just because overarching conspiracy theories are wrong does not mean that they are not on to something.”⁹⁰ He sees them as distorted forms of populist critique, representing an inchoate sense of unequal social power and injustice and an aspiration to speak and act in resistance to these, but mis-representing their social and political roots. I suggest that narratives of *Victory Betrayed* in Vietnam might be similarly understood.

The U.S. did not win the war, and this was not because liberals and anti-war activists were duped by the Communists or betrayed their country and its men and women in uniform. America’s war aims were unobtainable regardless of the intensity of violence directed at the Vietnamese. Americans wanted to preserve an anti-communist regime in South Vietnam, but the southern regime was a foreign implantation with no deep social roots or domestic legitimacy, with no prospect of political or economic viability apart from massive American support, and with indomitable enemies in both the north and the south who enjoyed much greater legitimacy among the bulk of the population. Vietnamese endured the horrendous suffering meted out by the American war machine and persevered in order to win unification and independence. To acknowledge this does not require us to presuppose that one side was morally pure and the other entirely evil. In those senses, the narrative of *Victory Betrayed* is wrong.

But it is not implausible to suggest that ordinary Americans were lied to and manipulated, their unequal sacrifices exploited, by powerful social forces that continue to dominate American politics and pursue strategies of world order that enhance the wealth and power of the globally

privileged few. As I understand it, the Vietnam War was an attempt to police the boundaries of the “Free World” – that is, the U.S.-centered capitalist world order that American state managers sought to construct and maintain in the decades after World War II. Pursuing a world order strategy guided by an overarching concept of “economic security,” they conflated the defense of capitalism with the defense of liberty, and defined non-Communist countries and peoples as parts of the Free World presumptively under American leadership.⁹¹ Viewing global geopolitics through that prism, they saw Vietnam as a test of America’s credibility as leader/defender of the capitalist Free World, and perhaps as a strategic opportunity for the U.S. to take advantage of a marked military superiority over the Soviet Union and the Communist world more generally.⁹² American policy-makers were unable or unwilling to understand the conflict within the context of Vietnamese history and politics. Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh, the National Liberation Front, all were represented as Communists whose political success in Vietnam would diminish America’s Free World sphere of influence, weaken American credibility, and expose U.S. political leadership to domestic political attack for softness in the struggle against Communism. Undermining the 1954 Geneva Accords and conjuring the nation of South Vietnam, supporting an unrepresentative, undemocratic, and repressive regime in Saigon, all of this could be assimilated with the defense of freedom so long as the Saigon regime was firmly anti-Communist and closely allied with the United States. Maintaining anti-Communist South Vietnam became the overriding goal of successive American administrations that misrepresented the nature of the war as an invasion of the free and independent country of South Vietnam by foreign Communists, issued disingenuous warnings of falling dominos in order to encourage political support for intervention and escalation, hid important aspects of their policies from the American public, fabricated justifications for escalations they knew would not suffice to end the

war in order to avoid facing the implications of failure, and sustained a war that killed and maimed millions and badly scarred both Vietnam and America (albeit in different ways).

In the ironic formulation of historian Gerard DeGroot, “The Vietnamese people paid dearly for efforts on their behalf.”⁹³ Some two million people were killed in the war; there were at least one and a half million civilian casualties; and more than ten million were driven from their homes. What had been a self-sustaining agrarian society was subjected to severe economic disruption and mass, forced dislocation and urbanization (whether by deliberate relocation or by the effects of the American firepower unleashed in the countryside), and the rich but leaky pipeline of the American-funded war economy became the primary source of livelihood for vast numbers of Vietnamese. The Vietnamese landscape itself was disfigured by the enormous scale of the bombing and shelling, and by heavy spraying of toxic chemicals on forests and farmlands thought to provide cover or resources to the guerillas.⁹⁴

In America, the most immediate costs of the war were born by the predominantly working-class soldiers the country sent to fight on false pretenses.

Vietnam, more than any other war in the twentieth century, perhaps in our history, was a working-class war. The institutions most responsible for channeling men into the military – the draft, the schools, and the job market – directed working-class children to the armed forces and their wealthier peers toward college. Most young men from prosperous families were able to avoid the draft, and few volunteered. ...In Vietnam, American soldiers encountered a reality utterly at odds with the official justifications of the war presented by American policy-makers. Though many men arrived in Vietnam believing they had been sent to stop communism and help the people of South Vietnam preserve

democracy, their experiences fundamentally contradicted those explanations. Told they were in Vietnam to help the people, soldiers found widespread antagonism to their presence. Told they were there to protect villagers from aggression, they carried out military orders that destroyed villages and brought terror to civilians. Told they were fighting to prevent the spread of communism, they discovered that support for revolution already flourished throughout the country and could not be contained behind fixed boundaries.⁹⁵

While many soldiers may have become skeptical of the war's official justification and the ways it was carried out by the military brass, the fact that the burdens of living these contradictions – or dying for them -- were placed primarily upon working-class Americans generated a bitter class-based tension that continues to lend itself to articulations of populism and militarism. The memoir of a Vietnam War veteran is highly suggestive: “To so many of us the peace phalanx parading American streets were the spoiled, gutless middle class kids who cowered in college classrooms to escape the battlefield and who, to soothe their cowards’ consciences and regain their lost self-respect and their girlfriends’ admiration now campaigned with ball-less envy to destroy what honor and prestige we might earn through our courage and sacrifices in battle. The peaceniks might not be attacking the integrity of American soldiers directly but they were proselytizing against the war as dishonorable and contemptible and we who were participants in the conflict therefore felt that, by implication, we too were being made contemptible.”⁹⁶ In light of this longstanding source of social tension and resentment – aggravated now by the steep economic inequalities generated by thirty years of neoliberal political economy -- it is not particularly surprising that relatively privileged leftist and liberal

academics, students, intellectuals, writers, journalists should be especially reviled in right-wing populist narratives of Victory Betrayed.

Unaccountable power, unequal social privilege, duplicity as to ends and means, and betrayal of avowed normative commitments are demonstrable parts of the war's history, and in that sense – despite its historical distortions -- the betrayal narrative is indeed on to something. It is this that accounts for its populist appeal and its enduring political danger. Until Americans interrogate that history, critically examine those structures of social power that provided the war with its conditions of possibility, and rethink what it means to be American-in-the-world, they will be susceptible to the siren call of militarized nationalism justified by ideologies of American exceptionalism and providing a rationale for the negation of internal and external others. In a world criss-crossed by manifold relations of power, domination, and exploitation, exercises of U.S. global power cannot be morally purified -- contrary to centuries-long mythologies of American Exceptionalism, propped up by the decades-old sub-plot of Victory Betrayed in Vietnam. Seeing through those mythologies and critically confronting the political powers and moral ambiguities they obscure is a necessary condition for constructing a more democratic society and a post-imperial foreign policy.

Notes

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² See, for example, the various essays in Alexander Anievas, editor, *Marxism and World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010).

³ By imperialism, I mean to suggest the exercise of coercive force to support and maintain a capitalist world order structured around US economic & political power. International surveys suggest that during the height of the Global War on Terror, anti-Americanism was on the increase world-wide, there was widespread suspicion that US policy in the Middle East was designed to retain control of the region's oil resources, and many believed that US policy aimed at global domination: see Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *America Against the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), pp. 25-27, 174, 176, 183; also World Public Opinion, "World View of US Role goes from Bad to Worse," January 22, 2007, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org>, accessed November 4, 2010.

⁴ William Bennett, "Morality, Character and American Foreign Policy" in *Present Dangers*, edited by R. Kagan and W. Kristol. (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), p. 304; William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Introduction: National Interest and Global Responsibility" in *Present Dangers*, pp. 24, 22.

⁵ Popular common sense is a central element of a Gramscian conceptual vocabulary that suggests a reservoir of cultural resources, "a syncretic historical residue, fragmentary and contradictory, open to multiple interpretations and potentially supportive of very different kinds of social

visions and political projects,” therefore “a ground of struggle”: Mark Rupert, “Reading Gramsci in an era of Globalizing Capitalism” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 8, 4 (2005), p. 487.

⁶ Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 1-2. Hixson’s historical tour-de-force has much to recommend it, but tends to treat the relationship between exceptionalism and militarism as direct and almost culturally necessary, rather than seeing them as mediated by political struggles in which the articulation of exceptionalism and militarism is at stake. This latter perspective on cultural politics and hegemony owes much to my reading of Antonio Gramsci and contemporary interpreters of Gramsci such as Stuart Hall: see Rupert “Reading Gramsci.”

⁷ Andrew Moravcsik, “Dream on America,” MSNBC/Newsweek January 31, 2005. www.newsweek.com/id/48345. Accessed March 13, 2009.

⁸ Kohut and Stokes, *America Against the World*, p. 203, but compare p. 204

⁹ Jones, Robert and Daniel Cox, “Old Alignments, Emerging Fault Lines: Religion in the 2010 Elections and Beyond,” Public Religion Research Institute, November 2010, pp. 18-19. www.publicreligion.org/objects/uploads/fck/file/AVS%202010%20Post-election%20report%20FINAL.pdf, accessed November 30, 2010.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, “National Security More Linked with Partisan Affiliation: Politics and Values in a 51%-48% Nation,” January 24, 2005; also Jones and Cox, “Old Alignments, Emerging Fault Lines,” p. 18.

¹¹ Public opinion figures are from Michael Tomasky, “Long Division,” *The American Prospect*, September 19, 2004. Online at: prospect.org/cs/articles?articleId=8539. Accessed September 22, 2011. Tomasky’s conclusion that “America is not – emphatically not -- divided over Vietnam”

seems to me oversimplified. As the remainder of this paper will attest, such a categorical claim is inconsistent with extensive evidence of ongoing contestation over the meaning of the Vietnam War. On the ambiguities and interpretive difficulties involved in the “mistake” indicator, see William Lunch and Peter Sperlich, “American Public Opinion and the Vietnam War,” *Western Political Quarterly* 32, 1 (March, 1979), pp. 24, 30.

¹² Following Stuart Hall’s conception of “Marxism without guarantees,” I do not assume that ideologies or symbols have fixed, intrinsic meaning, nor social actors a necessary, structurally determined identity. Rather, ideologies and self-understandings are the products of practices of articulation – simultaneously material and ideological -- in which socially situated actors forge socially meaningful associations between ideological elements (e.g., particular aspects of a complex, contradictory, and politically ambiguous popular common sense), and between those ideological products and the self-understandings, interests, and political projects of social agents. “Ideology always consists, internally, of the articulation of different discursive elements; and externally that discursive articulations can position the same groups or individuals differently.” The crucial implication for political inquiry is “that interests are not given but always have to be politically and ideologically constructed.” Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 10, 167. My claim is that the articulation of populism and militarism constructs a socially meaningful ideology, and positions social actors, in ways that may predispose them toward support for the political project of global military supremacy. Populist militarism also articulates racialized and gendered symbols and identities into its ideology of domination.

¹³ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, 1977, 1996), pp. 353-4.

¹⁴ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 313-14.

¹⁵ Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p. 314.

¹⁶ Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*. (Oxford: Blackwell 2009), p. 9.

¹⁷ Richard Nixon, "Address to the nation on Vietnamization," November 3, 1969.

vietnam.vassar.edu/doc14.html. Accessed August 3, 2010.

¹⁸ Nixon quoted in Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 217.

¹⁹ Quotation is from Public Broadcasting System (n.d.) *American Experience: Vietnam Online*, www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/series/index.html. Accessed July 25, 2010. On the production and initial reception of the series, see F. Rothenberg, "'Vietnam: A Television History' Starts Tuesday Night on Public TV," Associated Press, October 12, 1983; and F. Butterfield, "A critique on PBS of Vietnam series sets off a dispute," *New York Times*, June 13, 1985.

²⁰ Irvine quoted in United Press International, "PBS accused of 'pro-Communist' programming," January 22, 1986, accessed via Lexis-Nexis database. Even before founding Accuracy in Media in 1969, Irvine had a long history as a red-baiter. Irvine and AIM have been recipients of the largesse bestowed upon vociferous right-wing culture warriors by the Scaife and Coors foundations, and other conservative funders. According to David Brock, "AIM advocated that domestic protestors of the Vietnam War be charged with treason under the Alien and Sedition Act." In 1985, Reed founded Accuracy in Academia to pursue the right-wing culture war on America's campuses. David Brock, *The Republican Noise Machine* (New York: Crown – Random House, 2004), pp. 75-80, quoted passage is from p. 76.

²¹ G. Herring, "Review: 'Vietnam: A Television History' and 'Television's Vietnam'" *Journal of American History* 74, 3: 1123-24.

²² B. McCloskey, "Public Broadcasting System Criticized by Media-Watcher," Associated Press, January 22, 1986. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis database

²³ D. Culbert, "Television's Vietnam and Historical Revisionism in the United States" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 8, 3 (1988), p. 255.

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety," Address to Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, Chicago, Il, August 18, 1980.

www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/8.18.80.html, accessed 6/04/2010. On Reagan's role in re-imagining the Vietnam War, see H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and other American Fantasies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Pres, 2000), p. 41-2; and Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 105-108.

²⁵ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Master Sergeant Roy Benavidez," February 24, 1981. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=43454, accessed 6/04/2010.

²⁶ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Regional Editors and Broadcasters," April 18, 1985. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=38498, accessed 6/04/2010. This enduring claim is contradicted by at least two widely known examples: the 1965 battle near landing zone Albany in the Ia Drang valley; and the 1967 battle of Ong Thanh. In both cases large American army units were ambushed, overrun, and decimated. See Hal Moore and Joseph Galloway, *We were Soldiers Once... and Young* (New York: Random House, 1993); and David Maraniss, *They Marched Into Sunlight: War and Peace Vietnam and America October 1967*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003). Further, it would be surprising if these are the only such cases since the vast majority of combat engagements were initiated by the guerillas or the North Vietnamese Army on their terms, often ambushing Westmoreland's endlessly patrolling "search and destroy" missions: see Christian Appy, *Working-Class War:*

American Combat Soldiers in Vietnam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1993), pp. 163-4, 171.

²⁷ H. Bruce Franklin, *MIA or Mythmaking in America* (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992), pp. xi, 169.

²⁸ Franklin, *Vietnam and other American Fantasies*, p. 196.

²⁹ Jerry Lembke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), pp. 74-5, 184.

³⁰ Jerry Lembke, *Hanoi Jane: War, Sex, and Fantasies of Betrayal* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p. 38.

³¹ Pat Robertson, *The New World Order*, Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1991, pp. 37, 78-9. On the role of academics and counter-culture intellectuals preparing the way for Lucifer's new order, see pp. 145-65.

³² On the centrality of stab-in-the-back narratives for the Nazi political project of purgative national renewal, militarization, and genocidal aggression see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936 Hubris* (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 87-105, 240-253; Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945 Nemesis* (New York: Norton, 2000), pp. 63, 461-494, 821-822; and Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London, Penguin, 2003), pp. 60-76, 168-175, 197-199. On the stab-in-the-back narrative in America, see *Time Magazine*, "The Army and Viet Nam: the Stab-in-the-Back Complex" December 12, 1969. www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,840467,00.html. Accessed 6/04/2010; Jeffrey Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces and Society* 14 (1988), pp. 433-458; Franklin, *Vietnam and other American Fantasies*, p. 188; and Kevin Baker, "Stabbed in the Back! The past and future of a right-wing myth" *Harper's Magazine*, June 2006, pp. 31-42. On the politics of resurrectionist masculinity in the

wake of the Vietnam War, see Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and James Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

Culturally insecure masculinity and homophobia has been a subtext of Cold War anti-Communism at least since the Red Scare / Lavender Scare of the 1950s: see Barbara Epstein, “Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.,” *Critical Sociology* 20, 3 (1994), pp. 21-44; K. Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-60,” *Journal of American History* 87, 2 (2000), pp. 515-45; and Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001). Avoiding an open acknowledgment that hegemonic American masculinity met its match in Vietnam – with all the painful and potentially wrenching cultural reconstructions that might entail -- may be one of the major elements at stake in the continuing cultural battles over the significance of the Vietnam War.

³³ Franklin, *Vietnam and other American Fantasies*, p. 112.

³⁴ For a broad interpretation of the roots of the GWOT, see Mark Rupert and M. Scott Solomon, *Globalization and International Political Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), chapter 5.

³⁵ Franklin, *Vietnam and other American Fantasies*, pp. 23-46.

³⁶ This section of the paper builds on research that was originally published in Mark Rupert, “Academia and the culture of militarism,” in *Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic Industrial Complex*, edited by Anthony Nocella, Steven Best, and Peter McLaren. (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), pp. 428-36.

³⁷ Donna Miles, “America Supports You Summit Helps Groups Build on Momentum,” American Forces Press Service, January 25, 2008. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

³⁸ PR Newswire “U.S. department of Defense and Ad Council Launch ‘America Supports You’ PSA Campaign.” March 26, 2006. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

³⁹ Kathleen Rhem, “America Supports You: Superheroes Step Up” Armed Forces Press Service, April 28, 2005. <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=31325>. Accessed October 11, 2010. Donna Miles, “America Supports You Summit.” Donna Miles, “Celebrities Honor Troops on ‘America Supports You’ Videos,” AFPS, November 17, 2005. Miles, “America Supports You: Bush Urges Americans to Support Modern day Patriots,” AFPS, July 5, 2007. Samantha Quigley, “Indianapolis Motor Speedway Joins America Supports You Team” AFPS, May 23, 2005. Quigley, “America Supports You Comes to Town with the Circus”, AFPS, February 12, 2006. Quigley, “America Supports You: Bush Thanks Troop-Support Groups,” AFPS, February 28, 2007. Quigley, “America Supports You: Third Freedom Walk Continues New Tradition,” AFPS, June 20, 2007. Quigley, “America Supports You: Teachers Learn How Kids Can Support Troops,” June 26, 2007. Quigley, “America Supports You: Artists Create CD to Thank Troops,” AFPS, November 16, 2007. John Kruzal, “America Supports You: Golfers, NASCAR Enthusiasts Honor Troops” AFPS, June 5, 2007. AFPS, “America Supports You: Software Giant Lends Support to Troops,” October 9, 2007. AFPS, “Calendar Provides Troop-Support Ideas,” January 3, 2008. AFPS and Fed News articles were accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁴⁰ Barber, quoted by Source Watch, “America Supports You,” no date.

www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=America_Supports_You. Accessed July 26, 2010.

⁴¹ Barber paraphrased and quoted in Quigley, “America Supports You: Bush Thanks Troop-Support Groups.”

⁴² As Andrew Bacevich has persistently highlighted, there is a poignant irony in a culture of populist militarism when the actual burdens of military service fall upon the less than one percent of the population who serve in the professional military. Bacevich, *New American Militarism*, pp.108-9, 217-224; and *The Limits of Power* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), pp. 61, 129-31.

⁴³ Adam Brodsky, “We Love the Troops – As New Program Shows, This Time the Military’s Got Support” *New York Post*, May 29, 2005. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁴⁴ Bush quoted in Miles, “America Supports You: Bush Urges Americans to support modern day Patriots,” and Quigley, “America Supports You: Bush Thanks Troop-Support Groups.”

⁴⁵ Inspector General, United States Department of Defense, “The America Supports You Program,” Report no. D-2009-032, December 12, 2008.

<http://www.dodig.mil/audit/reports/fy09/09-032.pdf>. Accessed October 12, 2010. See also Associated Press “Pentagon sets sights on Public Opinion” February 5, 2009.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29040299/>, accessed October 12, 2010.

⁴⁶ David Barstow, “Behind Analysts, the Pentagon’s Hidden Hand” April 20, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/us/20generals.html>. Accessed April 21, 2008. The phrase “information dominance” is attributed to Barber’s former boss, Victoria Clarke, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs in Rumsfeld’s Pentagon.

⁴⁷ Associated Press “Pentagon sets sights on public opinion,” February 5, 2009.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29040299/>, accessed October 12, 2010.

⁴⁸ On the extent and depth of the culture of militarism, see Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapter 4; Henry Giroux, *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers,

2007); Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades our Everyday Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

⁴⁹ Bacevich, *New American Militarism*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Eric Alterman, *What Liberal Media?* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), chapter 13; Brock, *Republican Noise Machine*; Lewis Lapham, "Tentacles of Rage," *Harper's Magazine* (September 2004), accessed via ProQuest Database.

⁵¹ Philip Jennings, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2010), pp. 2, 3.

⁵² Quotations from Jennings, *Guide*, pp. 1, 139. Note Jennings' use of gendered language here, and throughout. Although thousands of American women served in Vietnam, it is the reputation of military servicemen – male warriors -- that Jennings is at pains to redeem by insisting on their battlefield mastery over the Vietnamese. This would seem to support arguments that American martial masculinity was perceived to be at stake in Vietnam, and still is.

⁵³ Among the historians whose "revisionist" arguments Jennings embraces is Mark Moyar. On the historiographical controversies surrounding Moyar's work, see the essays in Andrew Wiest and Michael Doidge, editors, *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010); and, for an even-toned assessment of the major revisionist historical claims, see Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).

⁵⁴ Jennings, *Guide*, pp. 160-61, also 48, 67.

⁵⁵ Compare Jennings, *Guide*, pp. 20-30; Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), chapter 7; Neil Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 169-96; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, chapter 3; Gerard DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 60-66, 84-7; Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance:*

Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 3; David Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 18-28; Hess, *Vietnam*, pp. 73-80.

⁵⁶ Jennings, *Guide*, pp. 23-4.

⁵⁷ Jennings, *Guide*, pp. 23, 60.

⁵⁸ On the improbability of attaining victory by bombing the North, see deGroot, *Noble Cause?*, pp. 183-200; and Hess, *Vietnam*, pp. 85-91, 107-8.

⁵⁹ Jennings, *Guide*, pp. 82, 69-70.

⁶⁰ On the intensity of American violence in the Vietnamese countryside, see Jonathan Schell, *The Real War* (New York: Pantheon 1987), p. 198; Appy, *Working-Class War*, pp. 190-205.

⁶¹ Jennings, *Guide*, p.93.

⁶² This common claim that Tet was a U.S. military victory turned into political defeat by the media and antiwar elements of the public is directly and persuasively rebutted in two recent historical studies: Schmitz, *Tet Offensive*; and Hess, *Vietnam*. The group having the greatest influence on the Johnson administration's post-Tet policy shift was not the anti-war left, but hard-nosed anti-Communist business, legal, and foreign policy elites. Clark Clifford, who succeeded McNamara as Secretary of Defense, was instrumental in translating these elite views into a shift in war policy. Viewing the war against the backdrop of a U.S.-centered capitalist world order, Clifford and his "Wise Men" concluded that the increasingly costly stalemate in Vietnam was undermining the political economy of U.S. global power and its ability to sustain world-wide commitments. The massive costs of the war were generating inflation and eroding international confidence in the dollar, cornerstone of the capitalist world economy since the Bretton Woods agreements of 1944. Coinciding with the Pentagon's urgently framed post-Tet

request for hundreds of thousands of new troops, these developments effectively broke the back of what Schmitz calls “the Establishment consensus on Vietnam.” See Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p. 229; Schmitz, *Tet Offensive*, pp. 112-116, 125; Franklin, *Vietnam and other Fantasies*, p. 98. Further, public opinion data suggest that support for withdrawal from Vietnam had been building steadily since early 1967 and this trend did not accelerate significantly at the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive. What did change dramatically was public support for escalation of the war, which dropped from a peak of 55% in November 1967 to around 32% by March 1969. If Tet had an effect on public opinion, it was to undercut hawkish sentiment (especially among well-off Americans who had disproportionately supported the war) rather than to trigger a shift in favor of withdrawal – contrary to the central claim of the betrayal narrative. See Lunch and Sperlich, “American Public Opinion and the Vietnam War,” especially Graph 3, p. 26, and p. 40.

⁶³ Jennings’ interpretation of the success of Nixon’s Christmas bombing of Northern cities is contradicted not just by the historical literature, but also by Kissinger aide John Negroponte, whose ironic assessment was that “We bombed them into accepting our concessions”: quoted in Hess, *Vietnam*, p. 201; see also Young, *Vietnam Wars*, pp. 278-80; DeGroot, *Noble Cause?*, pp. 230-33.

⁶⁴ Jennings, *Guide*, p.165, also 152.

⁶⁵ Daniel Ellsberg , *Secrets: a Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 247.

⁶⁶ NSC-68 in Ernest May, editor, *American Cold War Strategy* (Boston: Bedford, 1993), p. 29.

⁶⁷ Jim Fletcher, “The Vietnam War: Who Says We Lost?” *WorldNetDaily*, May 11, 2010.

www.worldnetdaily.com/index.php?pageId=152481. Accessed July 20, 2010. Peter Kann, “War, Remembrance, Revival” *Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 2010. James Robbins, “America’s Victory

in Vietnam” *Washington Times* April 30, 2010. Christian Toto, “Book Sets Record Straight on Vietnam” *Human Events*, March 31, 2010. Kann, Robbins, and Toto accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁶⁸ On O’Reilly, see Alterman, *What Liberal Media?*, pp. 35-38; and Brock, *Noise Machine*, pp. 335-46.

⁶⁹ The O’Reilly Factor, Fox News, August 19, 2005. Transcript accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁷⁰ The O’Reilly Factor, Fox News, February 17, 2003. Transcript accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁷¹ The O’Reilly Factor, Fox News, February 27, 2003. Transcript accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁷² The O’Reilly Factor, Fox News, March 1, 2002. Transcript accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁷³ On Limbaugh, see Alterman, *What Liberal Media?*, pp. 72-75; Brock, *Noise Machine*, chapter 11.

⁷⁴ Rush Limbaugh show, October 28, 1992. Transcript accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁷⁵ Limbaugh quoted in Ericka Andersen, “Reiding Rush Wrong” *Human Events Online*, October 2, 2007. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁷⁶ Brock, *Noise Machine*, pp. 308-9; Alexander Zaitchik, *Common Nonsense: Glenn Beck and the Triumph of Ignorance* (New York: Wiley, 2010), pp. 81-99.

⁷⁷ Jim Sloan, “DJs Rally for America draws ire of Protesters” *Tampa Tribune*, April 1, 2003. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis database.

⁷⁸ Zaitchik, *Common Nonsense*, pp. 210-234; Sean Wilentz, “Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party’s Cold War Roots” *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2010.

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/18/101018fa_fact_wilentz. Accessed October 13, 2010. On the John Birch Society’s role in propagating conspiracy culture on the American far right, see Rupert, *Ideologies of Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 94-118.

⁷⁹ DeNeen Brown, “Glenn Beck’s plans for Rally” *Washington Post*, August 17, 2010.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/16/AR2010081605042.html>, accessed August 20, 2010. Amy Gardner, Krissah Thompson, and Philip Rucker, “Beck, Palin tell Thousands to Restore America,” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2010.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/28/AR2010082801106.html?hpid=topnews>, accessed August 29, 2010.

⁸⁰ Sean Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (New York: Harper, 2002), pp. 290, 69.

⁸¹ On Horowitz, see Alterman, *What Liberal Media?*, pp. 86-7, 251; Brock, *Noise Machine*, pp. 100-108; and Alan Jones, “Connecting the Dots,” *Inside Higher Ed* (June 16, 2006), online at <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2006/06/16/jones>, accessed December 22, 2010.

⁸² Discover the Networks (n.d.) “Issues – Vietnam War.” www.discoverthenetworks.org/guideDesc.asp?catid=100&type=issue. Accessed July 12, 2010.

⁸³ In the interest of full disclosure, I note that this club of self-indulgent academic radicals is one to which I personally have been ascribed membership by Horowitz and [discoverthenetworks.org](http://www.discoverthenetworks.org). It is not an exclusive club: Horowitz claims that 55,000 “anti-American” professors are effectively in league with terrorists and represent “a huge danger for the country”: Horowitz

quoted in Media Matters for America, “Horowitz: ‘There are 50,000 professors ...[who] identify with the terrorists.’” March 3, 2006. [Mediamatters.org/print/research/200603030013](http://mediamatters.org/print/research/200603030013). Accessed July 20, 2010.

⁸⁴ Dinesh D’Souza, *The Enemy At Home: The Cultural Left and its Responsibility for 9/11* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), p. 271.

⁸⁵ Vice Presidential Debate, October 2, 2008. Transcript on New York Times web page: elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/vice-presidential-debate.html.

⁸⁶ Berlet and Lyons understand populism as the articulation of a “celebration of ‘the people’” with vilification of elites (or others represented as alien to, hostile toward, or parasitic upon the people) who are often represented as conspiring to exploit or oppress the people. While populism can take on many political colorations, when it is articulated with “efforts to maintain or intensify systems of social privilege and power” and “a backlash against liberation movements, social reform, or revolution,” Berlet and Lyons refer to repressive or right-wing populisms. Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America* (New York: Guilford, 2000), pp. 4-5. Identifying antiwar sentiments and criticisms of militarism as aspects of “political correctness” ideology foisted upon the people by college-based elites, and promoting the interests of people of color, feminists, gays, as opposed to those of “the people,” therefore meets the criteria of repressive, right-wing populism. Also suggestive in this regard is Stuart Hall’s characterization of Thatcherism as a project of “authoritarian populism” at the heart of which was an articulation of right-wing populism with a program of aggressive policing directed at racialized others -- and the corresponding political disempowerment of their putative social democratic enablers -- in the name of restoring “law and order.” Thatcher also took advantage of the Falklands war to

articulate cultural residues of British imperial militarism with her domestic program of authoritarian populism: see *Hard Road to Renewal*, pp. 68-74.

⁸⁷ David Neiwert, *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk radicalized the American Right* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press 2009), pp. 11, 18.

⁸⁸ On the animating impulses in the political culture of Nazism, see Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936 Hubris*; Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945 Nemesis*; and Evans, *Coming of the Third Reich*.

⁸⁹ Rush Limbaugh, "America is winning in Iraq, and Treasonous Democrats are losing," September 10, 2007. Broadcast transcript online at www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_091007/content/01125106.guest.html.

⁹⁰ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999), p. 67.

⁹¹ See, for example Robert Pollard, *Economic Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945-50* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Rick Saull, *The Cold War and After: Capitalism, Revolution, and Superpower Politics* (London: Pluto, 2007).

⁹² This thesis of U.S. military superiority during the decade between the Korean War and the commitment of American combat forces in Vietnam is forcefully argued by Porter, *Perils of Dominance*.

⁹³ De Groot, *Noble Cause?*, p. 325.

⁹⁴ David Levy, *The Debate over Vietnam* second edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 55-58; DeGroot, *Noble Cause?*, p. 325.

⁹⁵ Appy, *Working-Class War*, pp. 6-7. Appy (p. 27) estimates that "enlisted ranks in Vietnam were comprised of about 25 percent poor, 55 percent working class, and about 20 percent middle class, with a statistically negligible number of wealthy."

⁹⁶ Quoted in Appy, *Working-Class War*, p. 221, see also pp. 40-43.