

SOCIAL CONSTRUCT CONSENT THEORY: WHY WE FOUGHT IN VIETNAM

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This project examines the motivational structures of military service, focusing on the Vietnam War. By plumbing the minds of the war's veterans, it seeks to identify the process by which soldiers consent to military service both before and during their service, and if differences in Military Operational Specialty correlate with different motivations for consent.

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Preface:

This project could not have been produced without the help of my thesis advisor Peter Karsten. His assistance at every stage of the process was both constructive and revelatory. Thanks are also due to my defense committee, made up of Leslie Hammond, Dick Smethurst, and Robert Kirkland, who raised important questions at my defense and pushed this project towards being a better piece of history. Thanks are also due to Rob Ruck, for stoking my interest in the study of history. Lastly, I must thank both the men who participated in this study and the men and women who served in Vietnam. Their sacrifices are not forgotten.

I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Back by Wilfred Gibson

They ask me where I've been,
And what I've done and seen.
But what can I reply
Who know it wasn't I,
But someone just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands...
Though I must bear the blame,
Because he bore my name.

Describing one's remembrance of military service as an out of body experience – for which one has many memories, except that of being in control – is as poignant in this

work as it is disturbing. In all likelihood, Gibson's poem truly resonates only with those who felt a similar sentiment after their own military service. Yet, perhaps everyone, at some point in their lives, has shared the feeling of dissociation of self from remembered behavior.

To abstract briefly away from the context of militarism, this thesis proceeds from a general philosophical premise and question. If linking a cause to a result is the keystone of writing historical accounts of human existence, then some results mustn't be limited to a single cause.¹ As E.H. Carr writes in *What Is History?*, "[t]he true historian, confronted with a list of causes ... would feel professional compulsion to reduce it to order, to establish some hierarchy of causes which would fix their relation to one another." While admitting the importance of a gamut of causes for one result, this historian will acknowledge the primacy of one cause, Carr's "cause of all causes."²

Enter the general philosophical question: are we as humans responsible for the decisions we make? Does our free will act as the "cause of all causes," in our behavior? Surely there are a wide number of factors that contribute to any discrete instance of human behavior, but in endorsing Carr's conception of aetiology can we put the individual firmly at the top of the "hierarchy of causes?" This question has baffled philosophers for centuries, and I would be a fool to believe this thesis might contribute substantially to that general debate. Rather, I will focus on a very specific context populated by very specific actors, and attempt to answer this question from that perspective.

¹ Though a profitable discussion of the matter might well be pertinent in another conversation, this thesis will eschew the Humean objection to the shaky conceptual ground of causation and proceed as though it were a valid concept.

² Carr, *What is History*, 117

In the early 1940s, Howard Zinn, the future academic and staunch opponent of most American wars, volunteered for service in the American Air Force to fight in WWII. He viewed the atrocities committed by Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich as so execrable that he felt personally compelled to stop them. Disregarding the effects of his experience as a bomber pilot in Europe,³ Zinn portrays what I'll call the ideal scenario for consenting to military service: a conscious decision to serve based on the association of service with the fulfillment of ones underlying ethical and moral principles. When the execution of these principles coheres with the military agenda of one's own belligerent government, (as they did for Zinn) one can be aptly described as an ideal consenter to military service.

In contrast, let's turn to the military career of another famous academic. In 1914, a young Ludwig Wittgenstein greeted news of the war not with nationalistic fervor or moral resonance, but with a highly more insular flavor of consent. One of his many biographers Ray Monk captures the famous thinker's feelings well: "in some sense, he welcomed the war... Like many of his generation, Wittgenstein felt that the experience of facing death would, in some way or other, *improve* [sic] him. He went to war, not for the sake of country, but for the sake of himself."⁴ Though Wittgenstein still consents to service, his reasons could not be further from those of Zinn as described above. If Zinn displays ideal reasons for wanting to fight in a war, Wittgenstein occupies the other end

³ Which would turn Zinn against the war effort and the idea of war in general.

⁴ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, 112

of the spectrum. He is completely disengaged from the broad ideological weight of the war, desiring participation only as a darkly therapeutic endeavor.⁵

The key word in the above passage is ideal. Consenters are an ideal toward which every government that wants to generate voluntary military service from its citizenry strives. To put Zinn's experience to the "hierarchy of causes" test, we can be relatively comfortable positioning his own free will at the highest point. Surely he was influenced by exterior factors, but his decision was primarily motivated by his own conception of right and wrong, which ideally synched up with the military agendum of his government. Wittgenstein's free will can be similarly placed, but for different reasons.

However, as military historian Peter Karsten illustrates in his essay, consent theory comes nowhere close to explaining *every* such decision of national military service. In fact, it explains only a small portion of such behavior. In discussing the problems with consent theory he writes, "[t]he theory [sic] is that young men, conscious of the freedoms and rights they possess in democratic societies, will freely consent to military service with a sense of political obligation."⁶ As he goes on to argue in the article, this theory is just that: a theory having imperfect observable support throughout history. Some soldiers no doubt agree with their government's military agenda, some perhaps not. More interestingly, some may have no opinion on the political aspect of the war, and are involved for different and more complicated reasons.

In keeping with the stark limits of consent theory, the initial examples of Zinn and Wittgenstein were intentionally simplistic demonstrations of consent, intentionally

⁵ Indeed, Wittgenstein believed that German/Austrian involvement in the war was futile against what he believed to be a superior English enemy. He would nonetheless serve on the Russian front.

⁶ Karsten, "Consent and the American Soldier," 42

divorced from the cultural contexts into which they were born and in which they grew up. A consideration of these contexts need be made if we are to make a more informative argument about just how young men (and women) make the decision to fight for their countries. Considering the surrounding context, we need to reformulate the notion of causation developed by E.H. Carr, and thus that of free will that I'll use in this paper. Men who can be placed as the "cause of all causes" in their consent to military service cannot occupy this position alone. They bear with them their upbringings, their socialization processes and memories. More importantly, as I'll demonstrate in this project, for some soldiers, these contexts (and thus, their motivations) *change* between the time that they consent to service and the experience of combat in the field.

i. Walter Sobchak & The Audacity of History

"What the fuck does anything have to do with Vietnam?"⁷

-The Dude (Jeff Bridges)

The Dude's question, *mutatis mutandis*, is one that must be asked of any historian studying a given period of history, and must be satisfactorily answered if the historian is to have the right to study that period. The methodology of this project is my answer to this question, and I sincerely hope it stirs inside the reader the same interest in the

⁷ Joel Coen, *The Big Lebowski*,

Vietnam War and in history in general that I have. Before discussing the question of my methodology proper, I should like to make a broad comment on its scope.

History proceeds by *moments*, each flowing logically, if sometimes opaquely, but all the while gracefully into each other in simple temporal rhythm. Moments establish, preserve, and are in large part defined by certain trends and forces the birth and death of which mark the moment's beginning and end. The dregs of these forces then metastasize into a new moment bearing distinctions from yet still evocative of their predecessors. Reconstruction in the post-Civil War American South, Russia in the months before and after the revolutions of 1917, Prussia during the political career of Otto von Bismarck and the subsequent unification of Germany: these are all what I call historical moments. Some moments are interesting and thus prompt in-depth studies; others are boring and are thus neglected by historians. Likewise, the Vietnam War is a historical moment, one that I deem to be worthy of attention.

My study of the Vietnam War stems from a deep-seated interest in the war as an important piece of American history, an important player in our national memory. Nonetheless, studying the Vietnam War, or historical moments in general, teaches us (if nothing else) that moments must not be studied in isolation of any other historical context. To do this, to place an ultimate determinacy on one historic moment, so that all preceding events are seen as leading inevitably to it, and all subsequent events can be explained entirely by it, is the height of historical ignorance; it borders on the pathological. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of behavior that is exhibited by another character in *The Big Lebowski* (to whom the epigrammatic question is asked): Walter Sobchak, played by John Goodman. To hilarious effect, Walter interprets most events in

the film (set in the early 1990s) in terms of how they are motivated by the Vietnam War, going so far as to lament how another sybaritic and debt-ridden character in the film is a direct affront to his fallen comrades. Everything in Walter's life is thus linked, by some supremely benighted logic, to the Vietnam War. Confronted with this kind of one-track thinking, The Dude's expletive-laden exasperation cannot be surprising.

In contrast to Walter's severely limited understanding of history and its uses, my methodology studies cultures, peoples, and motivations as trans-historical realities, while using the Vietnam War as a case-in-point. In other words, historical moments are important, but to invest too much of one's attention in one moment vitiates the overall effort of seeking the truth of the past. This project attests to that truism of history, and its methodology examines how certain definitive trends and forces in American history weave themselves into and out of the moment of the Vietnam War.

The selection of the Vietnam War is no accident. In many ways, every war is bad, but one can make a good argument that the Vietnam War was the worst in United States history if for no other reason than its unsuccessful conclusion. To be sure, there are other large-scale wars in our nation's history that have also not resulted in victory (e.g. the War of 1812), but none seem to have grown into more of an incubus on our national memory than has Vietnam.⁸ Our defeat there was especially damning to the consciousness of the American public, who had grown used to defeating enemy armies as powerful as the German Wehrmacht and as frightening as Japanese kamikazes. Over the course of the

⁸ As I'll argue later on, much of this status has been fuelled by inaccurate representations of the Vietnam War in American media outlets and historical accounts. These should be taken into consideration when comparing its historical status to other important moments of American history.

war, “[t]he wealthiest and most powerful nation in the history of the world made a maximum military effort, with everything short of atomic bombs, to defeat a nationalist revolutionary movement in a tiny, peasant country – and failed.”⁹ The war’s status as the pariah in our military history thus gives me an added reason to study it, and to study the motivations of soldiers to fight in a war that brought overwhelming national and international shame to their nation, and in some cases to themselves.¹⁰

Lastly, I would like to establish one final philosophical underpinning of the project: the audacity of history as a mode of knowledge. History proceeds as an audacious exercise, simply because it makes a claim to present the truth of the past. Historian Peter Novick expresses a concomitant duty of such a claim, saying that¹¹

[t]he assumptions on which [historical objectivity] rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned... Whatever patterns exist in history are 'found', not 'made'.

I would qualify this statement in the following way, *pace* considerations made by quantum physicists of observer effects: historical patterns exist apart from human knowledge. In this sense, none can be ‘made’ after such a time as they have already

⁹ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, 347

¹⁰ It ought to be mentioned here that service in the Vietnam War, for many veterans, was not a harrowing experience, but rather a necessary evil that effectively uplifted their feelings of national pride and identity. The reasons that the war would become so unpopular in the minds of generations to come likely had little effect on their own conceptualizations of their service, and rightly so.

¹¹ Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession*, 1-2

occurred. However, knowledge of these patterns is indeed ‘made’ by historians in the minds of their readers. Thus, a historian’s responsibility is not only to the truth of the facts he or she includes in an account, but also to the accuracy of the picture these facts in concert make. In interacting with a dormant corpus of historical facts, a retrospective account presented by any historian will bear flaws and imperfections simply in virtue of the phenomenology of retrospective observation.

When dealing with anything as complex and multi-layered as a society’s past, any historical account is bound to focus more on some aspects and less on others, to omit inadvertently (or intentionally) what may well prove to be important information for a complete understanding of the past. No historian can escape this occupational hazard of his or her trade. However, this project attempts to make a small step toward a better understanding of the Vietnam War, and provides an account of the voices that don’t often make it into its conventional tellings.

This project is no exception. I do not presume to present a complete history of the Vietnam War here, nor even a comprehensive account of why ‘we’ fought it.¹² However, through historical studies that bear an awareness of this immutable weakness of the academic field, we can find answers to historical questions that are certainly *better* than the orthodoxies that have been passed down. This is the work of the historian.

¹² Indeed, the ‘we’ used in the project’s title is intentionally vague. I use it to draw the reader into a more vigorous consideration of just who did the fighting in Vietnam.

ii. Talk the Talk

Before I delve into my methodology, I'll establish the importance of the evidence I am using with a discussion of language and its importance to the Vietnam veteran both then and now. Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin put together an expansive and exegetical book on the use of oral narrative by Vietnam veterans in their memoirs entitled *Soldier Talk: The Vietnam War in Oral Narrative*. It captures just how Vietnam veterans developed a language that they could use to show membership in a certain social group, and to display the effects of the war on themselves. If discrete sets of languages are indeed forms of life, then the rarefied language in which these soldiers spoke cannot be dismissed in such an expository project on Vietnam veterans. This section aims to describe just how Vietnam veterans used this rarefied language while both in country and in recreating their experiences through memoir. Before we can walk the walk, we must learn how to talk the talk.

This project is colored, constituted, by the subjectivities of others. As some authors are more willing to attest than others, the memoirs cited in this project are not what might be called an impartial history. They are, like any historical account, necessarily subjective, necessarily and perhaps even unwittingly omitting certain materials from what is included in the relation of past characters and events. Nonetheless, talking about their experiences, their feelings, and their perspective on the war was an absolutely essential part of many Vietnam veterans' tours. As Budra and Zeitlin assert at the beginning of their book: "[t]alk for the Vietnam combatant, is cheap, a way of

releasing tension, of articulating fantasies of freedom from a military hierarchy that is opaque and capricious."¹³ Indeed, the book proceeds "from the axiom that everything said by the historical witness conveys a form of 'the truth' even when the speaker is consciously or unconsciously lying; even the lies or misrepresentations point us in the direction of the underlying truths to which they indirectly refer or attempt to negate."¹⁴ However, despite the tendency among veterans to exaggerate to their liking their experiences in the telling, the role of this use of language is highly social and mentally salutary.

Solder talk was both a way to ease the pains of war, and, for the soldiers whose voices perhaps didn't matter on most other topics, a chance to present the first draft of the history of the Vietnam War. These memoirists operate under the assumption that¹⁵

language, in wartime especially, is inherently opaque and metaphorical, capable of absorbing heavy loads of parietic sentiment or ideological abstraction, and if, moreover, the media in war is more or less controlled or intimidated by a central command structure pursuing its own interests, then language itself is one of the primary battle sites of the war.

This project then, operating under this definition of language in the historical context of the Vietnam War, strikes a blow for the a-conventional, and what were at many times starkly anti-conventional, voices of the war. These voices, I submit, while perhaps given to various exaggerations and fluctuations, offer the truest rendering of the war possible. For, it was their owners who did the lion's share of the fighting and the dying. While

¹³ Budra and Zeitlin, *Soldier Talk*, 1

¹⁴ Budra and Zeitlin, *Soldier Talk*, 11

¹⁵ Budra and Zeitlin, *Soldier Talk*, 7

infantrymen often function without the perspective of grand strategy and overall moral cause, they bring viscerality to the historical account which no one without direct combat experience can. Ernest Hemingway, in *A Farewell to Arms*, touches upon the specific perspective of the foot soldier and the accompanying alienation he feels from the official accounts of the war. To his character Henry, “[a]bstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the number of roads, the names of rivers, the number of regiments and the dates.”¹⁶ He detests the attempts of those who have not lived through the war as he has to make feeble attempts at encapsulating in trite banalities what he has experienced first hand. From his perspective, only the soldier who has seen the war close-up has the right to testify. Such a reaction to official accounts of the war would not be inappropriate to apply to the infantrymen in Vietnam.

And, if the soldier talk was a closer medium to the niceties of the war, it was also an identifiably, and deliberately, foul-mouthed one. As a tool of social identity in Vietnam, "obscene talk ... is to be understood as a kind of insurrection against an official, sanitized account that shies away from the real obscenity of war."¹⁷ As we'll see, there are examples of this in the memoirs included, but another reference to literature from another war seems pertinent. In *The Naked and the Dead*, Norman Mailer includes the watered-down curse word “fug” numerous times to identify his account as an attack on the sanitized language of others. In responding to what he deems an impertinent question about an assault mission, one soldier asks: “[w]hat the fug you caaeh? Ya yella?”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 148

¹⁷ Budra and Zeitlin, *Soldier Talk*, 8

¹⁸ Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, 267

Clearly, Mailer is employing a decidedly a-conventional language in which to transcribe the experience of war on its most minute level. Similar behavior is observable in many individual accounts of service in the Vietnam War.

The language in these historical accounts, both in how it sounds and how it is used, provides the background against which each memoir should be judged. While no single memoir captures precisely 'what happened' in Vietnam, each one deserves careful consideration. If nothing else, each memoir gives us a glimpse into the past as one man saw it, and can help us further approximate the truth.

iii. Methodology

In keeping with this value of memoir, my methodology consists of reading memoirs and surveying veterans of the war. The bibliography is made up mostly of memoirs of the Vietnam War, but there are some other books added to contextualize the project both in terms of the history of the country and the war, and also in terms of war memoirs in general.

The other section of my project consists of a broad survey I conducted of veterans of the war. In seeking to answer the questions that a war like this one raises, I thought it best to go straight to the source, straight to the men who fought it, and ask them about their experiences. In so doing, I hoped I could answer questions that might give me a better idea, not of why the United States government thought it a good idea to enter this war,

but why in the most minute detail (in terms of the decision-making process of individual soldiers) this war *was* fought.

The survey period spanned about 6 months, in which I contacted different veterans' organizations throughout the country (Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, etc.) and distributed the surveys to those that were willing to participate. Overall, I received survey data from organizations throughout the continental United States (Pennsylvania, Texas, and California were especially heavy in respondents) and from a wide swath of different MOS's. In the data listed in this project, I have grouped the respondents into two categories of "infantry" and "non-infantry" positions, so as to make the distinction between their responses clear. All of the chapters from which I received responses are listed in Appendix A of this project. The complete list of questions and responses can be found in Appendices B and C, respectively.

The survey was distributed and compiled online, so that I could collect information from as wide a swath of the country as possible. For the organizations that indicated they would be willing to participate, the response rate per organization was about 17% or the membership of each organization that had access to the survey. This perhaps would have been higher were the survey available in a paper format, but I am pleased nonetheless with the response rate that I got.¹⁹ As I indicate in the tables in Sections III/IV, I received 394 surveys from veterans who saw regular combat (infantry), and 1084 from those who did not.

¹⁹ This data pool is, of course, potentially skewed towards only those veterans who have adapted towards using new technology, but I don't believe an overrepresentation among this demographic would be harmful to the accuracy of the data collected.

One comment must be made here about the accuracy of the information I received. It is entirely possible that, 40+ years removed from their service, these men were misremembering the motivations and specific details of their time in Vietnam. Even more disquieting, the question of veracity must be posed. In *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley exhibit cases of Vietnam veterans claiming to have performed much more glamorous or dangerous duties while in country, when in fact they hadn't. The surveys style of this project's methodology does not lend itself to being sure about the truth of what the respondents were saying, so we must give them the benefit of the doubt in this respect. That the results of this project cohere with other, independent research (cited later) supports the reliability of its data.

In conclusion, this distinction between a country's government and its soldiery in relation to motivation is an important one for the project. It cues me into the complexities at play in human decision-making, and evolves into a richer and more accurate picture of the Vietnam War. In more specific terms, I distributed a survey gauging the thoughts and judgments of Vietnam veterans on the war and on their part in it, knowing full well that these may have changed over their years as a civilian. Nevertheless the graphical information provided by these surveys gives a great empirical basis to the stories that veterans have told in their memoirs.

II. MEDIA, MEMORY, AND HISTORICAL SYMBOLS

“Memory believes before knowing remembers.”

-William Faulkner

"I believe that there is a sense in which we have all been to Vietnam and even a sense in which we linger there today. This Vietnam is not the historical landscape on which the fighting and dying took place, but the landscape of public memory. Its battlegrounds are monuments, movie screens, and public libraries, presidential campaign trails and the Oval Office. At each of these sites, we struggle with one another and ourselves to recall the war and to put our recollections to use in the present."

-Fred Turner

The Vietnam War provides Americans today with a rich firmament in which to understand their history. This section will identify the different roles that the war plays as a resource of historical memory, and develop some problems in how the history of the

Vietnam War has trickled down throughout past generations. This project presumes, like all projects of history, to bring inaccurate representations of certain aspects of the Vietnam War closer to the truth. Additionally, like any historical project, it cannot recreate the past perfectly, but can perhaps draw us back to a closer approximation of what really happened leading up to, during, and as a result of the Vietnam War. First, I'll provide some general perspective on the ethos surrounding Vietnam veterans as figures of historical inquiry. Perhaps no other American war has produced a set of veterans that has been studied in such great detail, and this project aims to further this study with both validity and clarity.

David Halberstam, noted journalist who covered many important events of the Vietnam war, includes an important quote from a WWII veteran in his novel about the Vietnam War, *One Very Hot Day*:²⁰

We didn't know how simple it was, and how good we had it. Sure we walked, but in a straight line. Boom, Normandy beaches, and then you set off for Paris and Berlin. Just like that ... All you needed was a compass and good sense. But here you walk in a goddamn circle, and then you go home, and then you go out the next day and wade through a circle, and then you go home and the next day you go out and reverse the circle you did before, erasing it. Every day the circles get bigger and emptier.

The anfractuous strategic trajectories and foggy criteria for success were perhaps the biggest identifying characteristics of the Vietnam War in comparison to other American wars. Victory was not measured in the amount of territory taken from the enemy. There

²⁰ Halberstam, *One Very Hot Day*, 114

were no fronts, and the enemy appeared sporadically and absconded discreetly. This added even more stress onto the shoulders of the men who served in Vietnam, as a firefight victory did not equate to an overall sense that the war was being *won*. Tim O'Brien, in his novel *Going After Cacciato* puts this sentiment well. Soldiers²¹

did not know even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it a victory. No sense of order or momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels. No Patton rushing for the Rhine ... They did not have targets ... They did not know strategies ... They did not know how to feel ... they did not know which stories to believe ... They did not know good from evil.

Service in Vietnam carried little gratification for its combatants and little else for their loved ones and fellow countrymen at home. Clear demarcations of victory were opaque, inscrutable, ineffable.

Another important characteristic of the Vietnam War was its ratio of US non-combat to combat troops in country. Ronald H. Spector contends that "[b]y 1968, service, support, and headquarters troops made up at least 70-80% of all U.S. military personnel in Vietnam."²² While these statistics make clear that most Vietnam veterans did *not* see regular combat, this project focuses on those veterans who did.

One last important undercurrent in Vietnam,²³ which will be the focus of Section IV of this project, was the role played by one's fellow servicemen. Oftentimes, besides

²¹ O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 255-6

²² Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, 260

²³ And likely in all wars.

the families that were thousands of miles away, your platoon-mates were the only connection you had to the way things used to be back in America. John Sack captures this sentiment well in his novel *M*. Early in the book, M Company's sergeant gives a lecture on the role of your buddies in the M:²⁴

'this is our job in Vietnam, we're here to kill the VC,' M listening silently, none of its faces revealing whether the sergeant's words had reassured it. 'Now this battalion is good – know why? Why, because we help our buddies. We don't let our buddies down. I want you troops to say, if there's anywhere in the world that I want to get wounded it's in this battalion! Because my buddies'll bring me in, they're not going to leave me,' M not moving an eyelash.

Though we'll see this type of instruction and value later in the project, it cannot be understated. The survival of the group of men with whom you fought was tantamount to your own. Thus, protecting them was one of the highest priorities for the average American infantryman in Vietnam.

Sack also provides an account of M's ideological motivations for the war. The²⁵ truth is M didn't need to know its enemy to abominate him, just as it didn't need to know Thomist philosophy to appreciate God is good. Communism's wickedness seemed to M to be sewn in the primeval warp of the universe, it was indelible like the earth's magnetic field, it was axiomatic... [M] couldn't have quoted two consecutive words of Johnson's why it was going there: and M didn't need to. M firmly believed – or rather, it firmly believed that it firmly believed – in the principle of perpendicular geography, the article of faith that all of this

²⁴ Sack, *M*, 82

²⁵ Sack, *M*, 109

world's sovereign countries stand on their ends and if one topples over the rest shall follow...

Though this characterization may well have described the viewpoints used by the politicians who oversaw American involvement in Vietnam, this project will also argue that the political agenda of the war were not a decisive motivational factor for many soldiers who served in Vietnam. Such are the stakes of a historical account of Vietnam veterans. While this project runs the risk of intruding upon and condensing the experiences of others, it is for the purpose of correcting what may be faulty conceptions of Vietnam veterans in the American public at large.

So, what specific role(s) does the Vietnam War as an historical entity play in the minds of the American public? As we'll see, very many, and some are more accurate than others. This section is an attempt both to present current problems in the way we think about Vietnam veterans, and discuss the circumstances under which flawed conceptions of history can generate and perpetuate themselves.

If anything, the Vietnam War is a symbol of conflict, a time when our country was sharply divided between support and dissent. In *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*, Patrick Hagopian gives the example of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, a fund established in the late 1970s, arguing that its handling by the American public mirrors the ideological crucible of the war itself. He states that:²⁶

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund attempted to bring together all Americans,

²⁶ Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 23

whether they had supported or opposed the war, in a common project to honor those who had fought and those who had died. But the unity of purpose for which they hoped was undermined by the resentments persisting from the war era.

Politically conservative Vietnam veterans who blamed the U.S. defeat on their domestic enemies had too many scores to settle to want to reconcile with their antagonists.

Almost a decade after the last American soldier had left Vietnam, the country was unable to agree on a single treatment of its history. Above all else, this should tell us that the Vietnam War's status as a historical symbol is highly controversial.²⁷ What lessons should we take from it? As this section discusses, answering this question is extremely difficult when addressing such a tender period of our nation's history. However, many misconceptions and inaccuracies can and have precipitated out in our national memory of the Vietnam War, largely a result of its symbolic portrayal through various different media. This section will discuss the power of historical symbols, and the effects of symbolic modes of thought when applied to pursuits of historical knowledge. Then, it addresses the specific symbols associated with the Vietnam War, and the epistemological problems that these symbols have engendered.

²⁷ I've made a subtle but important transition in nomenclature here between the words "entity" and "symbol" when describing the war. This distinction will bear great importance on the rest of this section, as these two terms should *not* be taken as synonymous.

i. Historical Symbols & Vietnam Veterans

Symbols, for the idle student of history, act as a palliative for the questioning mind. A longing for understanding of the past is often soothed by these superficial representations of peoples and societies, and for this reason it is understandable how symbols perpetuate themselves down through the generations.

Symbols and symbolic structures of thought play a not dismissible role in the way people think about and remember their history. Bertrand Russell, Carl Jung, and other such pivotal thinkers of the 20th century have devoted their careers to identifying the nature and role of symbolism and symbolic logic. Russell understood the idealization process bound up in symbolic logic as “the doctrine that whatever exists, or at any rate whatever can be known to exist, must be in some sense mental,”²⁸ as opposed to empirical. Russell draws this distinction to illustrate the seductiveness of symbolic logic. It allows us to idealize our thought processes into discrete and definitive entities, which are then used to deduce the truth on some matter or another. Though symbolic logic can be a wonderful tool for deriving valid conclusions in logic and mathematics,²⁹ it presents certain problems of inaccuracy when applied to the social sciences. In this sense, symbolic logic is a tool that can be used for elucidation or delusion.

History, especially when it is re-purposed and distributed as a commercial entity in popular culture, does not escape the grasp of this mode of thought. Many people get their history of the Vietnam War from commercial films like *Platoon* (Oliver Stone), *We*

²⁸ Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 26

²⁹ Two fields which have the luxury of a reified set of linguistic expressions.

Were Soldiers (Mel Gibson), and others that I will examine below. While these can be enjoyable, they often include glaring historical inaccuracies and precipitate misunderstandings amongst their audiences. Exposure to these kinds of symbolic representations of the past cause the casual observer to swoon before his or her presumed comprehensive understanding, while often inaccurate cinematic depictions of the past hold them in thrall. These cinematic symbols can and often do constrain our perceptual experiences of reality, and thus claim an epistemological authority in a way that no amount of real world experience ever could. In this sense, they are often harmful to historical understanding. I'll use one especially potent, *salient*, symbol originating during the period of the Vietnam War as a case study for the problems of symbolic logic when applied to history.

At the very beginning of his memoir *The Killing Zone*, Frederick Downs places an epigrammatic anecdote designed to begin the story in a controversial tone. He tersely recounts an episode wherein a war protestor spat in his face upon realizing that Downs had fought in Vietnam.³⁰ Other vets make similar claims. Such claims have been made at other times, but in vastly different circumstances, by different people, for different purposes, and to different effects. In trying to smear the domestic anti-war sentiment, Richard Nixon once again invoked the image of the “spat-upon veteran” in chiding the peace movement as unpatriotic and unsupportive of the young men who were making the ultimate sacrifice for country. As journalist Jeffrey Cavanaugh writes, the symbol of the spat-upon veteran “originates in ... Nixon’s attempts to counter veteran-led opposition to

³⁰ Downs, *The Killing Zone*, ix

the war.”³¹

While this symbol may have gained currency at the time of its initial use, some voices challenged its legitimacy. Among them, Gary Kulik in his book *War Stories: False Atrocity Tales, Swift Boaters, and Winter Soldiers - What Really Happened in Vietnam*, Eric T. Dean in his article “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” and Jerry Lembcke in his book *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* all took a closer look at the profile of Vietnam veterans beyond the symbols, and found that there were serious causes for concern with this method of symbolic representation of the past. As Gary Kulik puts it in his examination of the Vietnam War in American media, our standards of knowledge for historical symbols are not the same as they are for the rote facts that we use to form everyday beliefs: “Did [protestors spitting on veterans] happen? There is no way I can prove it didn't. No one can prove a negative. All I can do, and will do, is to underline the implausibility of it all, to explain the context in which such stories came to be told, and to undermine those stories that are palpably false.”³² Such is the aim of this section. By examining the relevant evidence for these claims, and by identifying the broader social trends at work in this historical period, we can safely assume that the symbol of the spat-upon veteran was, in many if not most cases, at least highly dubious, and at most downright fabricated.

Before I address the specific merits and associated problems of the symbol of the spat-upon veteran, indeed before I can even get into the positive³³ work of this project, I

³¹ Cavanaugh, “Failing Our Heroes”

³² Kulik, *War Stories*, 75

³³ I use “positive” here in its philosophical sense, meaning “accumulative” and not “optimistic.”

need to articulate the ways in which the American public thinks about Vietnam veterans in general. In other words, I need to demonstrate how these men³⁴ have been depicted symbolically in the material marketed to the American public as a whole, and also in some more scholarly accounts. Additionally, I will include brief treatments of the historical problems with these modes of thought, problems which crop up in many accounts of historical events when they are made for primarily commercial purposes.

First Blood (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), starring Sylvester Stallone and initiating what would become the increasingly popular and increasingly blood-spattered *Rambo* series, features Stallone as John Rambo, a veteran of the Vietnam War suffering some psychological and social after-effects: “And at home at the airport those maggots were protesting. They spat at me, called me a baby murderer and shit like that! Why protest against me, when they weren't there, didn't experience it? It was hard, but it's in the past.”³⁵ Here again we see the symbol of the spat-upon Vietnam veteran, but this particular character also bears some palpable signs of psychological trauma. This persona, as Hollywood began to sink its teeth into the war as a subject of cinematic commercialism, become something of a stock-character. Characters like Pvt. Joker (Matthew Modine, *Full Metal Jacket*), Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro, *Taxi Driver*), Capt. Benjamin L. Willard (Martin Sheen, *Apocalypse Now*), and Michael (Robert DeNiro, *The Deer Hunter*) all embody the psychological duress that Hollywood, and the nation, would come to attribute to every Vietnam veteran. As Mark Taylor has argued, the “depiction of veterans in *The Deer Hunter* and other films which achieved critical or commercial

³⁴ This project focuses mainly on soldiers with combat experience in Vietnam. Though American women can currently serve in this capacity in the Army, this was not the case during the period of the Vietnam War.

³⁵ Ted Kotcheff, 1982, *First Blood* script, http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/t/rambo-script-transcript-sylvester-stallone.html

success provides a useful index of cultural attitudes towards the war, it is notable that the temptation to sensationalize the experience of the veteran has persisted."³⁶ The power of film served to reify in the minds of many Americans a certain picture of the Vietnam veteran. They "made frequent appearances in films and television drama from the late 1960s onward and, until the later 1970s, they usually meant trouble."³⁷ So, the image of Vietnam veterans that has been most broadly propagated among the minds of the American public is one of resentment and psychological duress. Is this image accurate? How might such an image strengthen the symbol of the spat-upon veteran?

ii. Deconstructing the Spat-upon Vietnam Veteran

Whether based in reality or not, superficial representations of social groups can be used to drive policies and public opinion to great effect. But what does the evidence on just how legitimate the symbol of the spat-upon veteran say? First, there is little independently confirmed evidence above hearsay to support that any such spitting ever occurred. Second, the broad social trends at work during the time when Vietnam veterans were coming home make for a more antagonistic appraisal of the relationship between certain veterans and peace movement protestors than might have otherwise been leveled in this discussion. These broad social trends, and *not* the symbols that have precipitated

³⁶ Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 5

³⁷ Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 137

out of them, are the truly valuable material for historians. They are primarily responsible for establishing environments in which historical symbols are born. Yet, due to the lustre and simplicity of symbolic understandings of history, these broad social trends are often ignored and omitted in our nation's memory. This omission makes it easier for people to implant their own, often glaringly inaccurate, causes for historical symbols. It is as though history as it happens is a powerful yet temporary storm which leaves a tree uprooted. In seeking to understand the tree's condition, it is much easier to paint one's own picture of history by neglecting the storm's gale force winds and bolts of lightning. What remains in our national memory is not the trends of the time, but the visible evidence of what those trends produced. What ought to remain, but often doesn't, is a genuine inquiry into the nature of wind, lightning, and storms in general. I elaborate on both of these claims below, and expand the analytical confines of this symbolic representation of the past.

Before I tackle the specific symbol of the spat-upon veteran, I'll point out some problems inherent in thinking about Vietnam veterans in the broad strokes Hollywood images that have been mentioned above. Once I've shown this image to be rather inaccurate, I'll address the historical and intellectual shortcomings of the symbol of the spat-upon veteran.

Patrick Hagopian provides us with a good introduction into understanding Vietnam veterans. While "the difficulties the troops faced on their return from Southeast Asia to what they called 'the World' were not unique," he does argue that "Vietnam veterans as a group faced a particularly difficult homecoming." Upon what evidence does he base this claim, and what motivates this anomalous treatment of returning veterans?

While there were likely many reasons that certain people were ill-inclined to give Vietnam veterans a heroes welcome back to their home country, Hagopian cites the fact that³⁸

other unpopular wars, such as World War I, had the compensating virtue of victory, but Vietnam veterans could not claim its laurels. Instead, they carried the stains of defeat and disgrace. Revelations about atrocities against Vietnamese civilians tarnished Vietnam veterans' reputation in the eyes of their compatriots as well as undermining the government's claims about the morality of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam.

Certainly this had something to do with the animosity that existed between returning veterans and civilians. But, as Hagopian along with many other military historians well know, this is not the whole story. There were many other issues at work besides the outcome of the war's military campaign that affected the way Vietnam veterans and their reception by the American public is perceived in history. I discuss these issues below.

To be sure, as with most groups of repatriating veterans, there were jarring divisions between returning Vietnam veterans and the society they returned to. As military historians Richard Severo and Lewis Milford attest in their wonderful account of veterans' experiences after returning from the front, *The Wages of War: When America's Soldiers Came Home – From Valley Forge to Vietnam*, “for the veterans of Vietnam,” it wasn't just mistreatment by a few people, but³⁹

the whole country. In a survey ... 37% of the Vietnam veterans in school who were questioned said they would rather live in a country other than the United

³⁸ Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 49

³⁹ Severo and Milford, *The Wages of War*, 358

States. The confrontations [between veterans and civilians] continued, and as they unfolded, the divisions between American society and its ex-soldiers as exemplified in the Bonus March of 1932 seemed not so remote.

In *Homeward Bound: American Veterans Return from War* Richard H. Taylor discusses the malaise that seemed to hang over Vietnam veterans as they attempted to reintegrate into civilian society. He cites a poll commissioned by Congress and administered by pollster Louis Harris to gauge the nation's feelings towards its returning soldiers. Harris found that "sixty-two percent [of the American public] connected veterans directly with a bad war and half considered them dumb for going."⁴⁰ As this project seeks to demonstrate, this characterization of motives for military service is not only unhelpfully reductive, but troublingly unconcerned with the real life experiences of the men who served in Vietnam. Nonetheless, a national malaise hung over the returning Vietnam veteran, and manifested itself in many ways. However, the specific circumstances under which veterans returned home made a significant shift throughout the war. As I'll argue below, the changing factors of the society that received them accounted for a considerable portion of their detachment from civilian life when compared to the effects of the war itself. This detachment would prove fertile ground in which the symbol of the spat-upon veteran spawned.

In his article "The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran," Eric T. Dean describes this Vietnam veteran image that had been broadcast to the minds of the American public as "either totally ignored by the civilian population, or worse, spat upon

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Homeward Bound*, 132

and blamed for losing the unpopular war.”⁴¹ According to this Hollywood persona, the average Vietnam veteran also “suffered from a number of readjustment problems, including high unemployment, drug addiction, divorce, suicide ... and lingering psychological problems.”⁴² While this might be a tempting characterization for those inclined to paint the war as an all-encompassing evil, Dean offers compelling reasons why it should not be taken as fact without due consideration of other important details.

The parties responsible for popularizing the persona Dean describes, in addition to the film directors above, had a vested interest in the American public believing that the Vietnam War created destabilized and potentially violent veterans of its soldiers. Members of the anti-war movement could more easily fan the flames of social unrest by perpetuating an ugly picture of the Vietnam veteran: a psychologically misshapen and temperamental product of an unnecessary and evil war. Additionally, as Dean notes, “some Vietnam veterans themselves have used the image of the ‘troubled and scorned Vietvet’ to obtain a number of benefits from the Federal government.”⁴³ These factors motivated misrepresentations of Vietnam veterans in many different forms of media, helping to cement a flawed image in the minds of the American public.

Dean begins his essay by giving an example of some of the earlier veterans to return from the war in 1968 with respect to their re-integration into the national economy and job market. Citing an article in the *New York Times*, he notes that “returning servicemen were finding jobs faster than at any time in the past ten years, and some were even worried that the Vietnam veterans would not utilize the GI Bill for education since

⁴¹ Dean, “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” 59

⁴² Dean, “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” 60

⁴³ Dean, “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” 69

jobs were so easy to find.”⁴⁴ So, it appears that simply serving in the Vietnam War was not in fact a one-way ticket to unemployment. As Dean points out, as the war dragged on, there were other economic forces at work that would prevent returning veterans from rapidly finding employment upon their return home. Nixon was elected in 1968 on a platform of drawing down the fighting force in Vietnam. Unfortunately for the returning veterans of the early 1970s, their journey back to America “coincided with President Nixon’s effort to ‘cool down’ the economy.” Thus, they faced increasing domestic unemployment “at the exact same time that the greatest number of Vietvets were entering the job market.”⁴⁵ This led to a spike in the unemployment rate of Vietnam veterans, which far outstripped that of the national workforce. In reference to some of the examples given above of the average Vietnam veteran as he was portrayed in popular media, think about Robert DeNiro’s character Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). Having just arrived home from the war, he is caught in the harsh process of looking for work in New York City, having to settle on a relatively undesirable job as a taxi driver after an arduous job search. Contrary to what this depiction might lead one to believe, by 1973, “the returning Vietvets had been reabsorbed into the economy and their unemployment rate was essentially the same as that for the general civilian population.”⁴⁶

So, although the returning Vietnam veteran had met sanguine job prospects in the late 1960s, a brief period of economic contraction in the early 1970s coupled with an inordinate draw-down of troops (which resulted in a correspondingly inordinate increase

⁴⁴ Dean, “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” 61

⁴⁵ Dean, “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” 62

⁴⁶ Dean, “The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran,” 62. Dean pulls unemployment statistics from a *New York Times* article entitled “Jobless Problem for Ex-GI’s Eases,” which gives their unemployment rate as 5.5% compared with the national average of 5.2% - a negligible difference compared to where it was just a few years before.

of job-seekers in the domestic economy) made for a seductively indelible image of the Vietnam veteran as an unhireable cipher in the job market. However, it is clear that his service in Vietnam had little if anything to do with this brief predicament. Rather, the vicissitudes of the national economy briefly held the unemployment rate of veterans high, expanding and accommodating them shortly after this brief period of contraction. But, it only took that brief period for this image to gain traction in the minds of the American public, and also in the minds of the people who would be portraying veterans in popular media for decades to come.

Another charge often levied against Vietnam veterans is that their traumatic experiences in country drove them to take up recreational drugs in dangerous amounts, resulting in debilitating addictions upon their return home. While increased drug-usage rates among Vietnam veterans after their tours did exist, it must be qualified by identifying different categories of drug abuse. By making such a categorical distinction, a more accurate picture of the drug habits of Vietnam veterans becomes clear. According to research performed by Nelson and Panzerella, certain veterans' drug habits became more serious after service, while others abated.⁴⁷ Dividing recreational drug use into six distinct categories (marijuana, amphetamines, barbiturates, acid, heroine/morphine, and opium) these researchers found that the only proportional increase from before their tours of duty to afterwards occurred in the use of heroin/morphine and opiates. Among the other four categories of drugs, use actually *decreased* after tours had been completed compared with their pre-tour levels.⁴⁸ Based on this research, it appears that service in the

⁴⁷ It should be mentioned that the highest rates of drug use for every category included in the study among the respondents was recorded during the war, when the drugs were likely easier to obtain.

⁴⁸ Karsten, *The Military in America: From the Colonial Era to the Present*, 418

Vietnam War did not in fact result in debilitating addictions among everyone who increased their drug usage while in country. On the contrary, drug use decreased for most after the return home.

One topic of inquiry about Vietnam veterans, perhaps the most painful to discuss, is also perhaps the most under-researched for that reason. As noted above, serious mental disturbance and suicidal thoughts are often included in cinematic depictions of Vietnam veterans (Travis Bickle, Capt. Benjamin Willard). Suicide, according to a June 2007 study published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* found that male veterans in general were about twice as likely to commit suicide than were males with no military experience.⁴⁹ Aaron Glantz addresses the paucity of available information in his book *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans* and points to the VA as a potential bottleneck for such data. His frustration is founded in the fact that "over the last thirty years, most observers believe more Vietnam veterans have committed suicide than the fifty-seven thousand who died fighting the war. No number is definite, however, because over the years the Department of Veterans Affairs has stubbornly refused to track the numbers of veterans who commit suicide."⁵⁰ Glantz does take care to include governmental efforts to prevent suicide among returning veterans, such as the "Joshua Omvig Suicide Prevention Act," (signed by President George W. Bush in 2007), which requires across the board psychological tests for veterans returning to America, in an effort to diagnose any potential signals of oncoming suicide before they metastasize into something more dangerous. So, while

⁴⁹ Mark S. Kaplan, Nathalie Hugué, Bentson H. McFarland, and Jason T. Newsom, "Suicide among Male Veterans: A Prospective Population-Based Study," 619-24

⁵⁰ Glantz, *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans*, 177

suicide may be a serious problem for Vietnam veterans, it remains unclear whether these men are *more* prone to suicide than those who have served in other theatres of American military interest. Glantz even speculates that suicide might be a bigger problem for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans than it was and continues to be for those who served in Vietnam. He cites professor Mark Kaplan (one of the authors of the June 2007 study) describing the rarefied set of medical realities faced by American soldiers today. While the frontiers of medical research and care have expanded since the days of Vietnam, this has some troubling effects on veterans. Kaplan argues that “more and more soldiers are surviving this war with severe psychological trauma,” which he attributes to “painful, debilitating injuries that people would have died from in previous wars – brain injuries or very disfiguring disabilities with third degree burns throughout the body.” In his study, “we found that disability was an important risk factor [for suicide] among vets from all wars.... The vets that we found that had committed suicide were more likely to have a disability.”⁵¹ If the VA becomes more willing to share this type of information, conclusions might be clearer on the extent to which suicide plagued Vietnam veterans. All we can responsibly say now is that, as with many other veterans from many other wars, suicide rates among Vietnam veterans lends credence to General Sherman’s credo: “War is hell.”

But, shedding light on these broadly stated misconceptions about Vietnam veterans doesn’t yet get us to the issue of the symbolic power of the spat-upon veteran, and how this symbol has come to play an undeserved role in American history. What I

⁵¹ Mark S. Kaplan, Nathalie Huguet, Bentson H. McFarland, and Jason T. Newsom, “Suicide among Male Veterans: A Prosepective Population-Based Study,” 619-24

have so far argued is that the Vietnam veteran, based on inaccurate representations in the popular media, was often misused and misrepresented as testament to the unequivocally evil effects of the war in general. His failings upon attempted re-assimilation to American society were touted in films like those mentioned above, as symptomatic of the universal bankruptcy of the war and the American military machine. As I've shown above, such claims need be at least partially recanted. Now, I'll move on to the specific charge of this section: the spat-upon Vietnam veteran. What is it about this symbol that has persisted in the historical accounts offered by many veterans of the war? As I've hinted at above, its historical accuracy is highly questionable, while its relation to the broader trends of the American media and the demographic factors at play in the anti-war movement more likely account for the use of this symbol as a source of historical authority.

In the years after the war's conclusion, journalist Bob Greene posed a question in his Chicago Herald Column to all returning veterans: "Were you spat upon when you returned from Vietnam?"⁵² From the many responses that he received, he wrote a lengthy book on Vietnam veterans returning home: *Homecoming: When The Soldiers Returned from Vietnam*. In the initial section entitled, "Yes It Did Happen ... It Happened to Me," he includes accounts from numerous veterans all claiming they were spat upon during some form of anti-war protest. In the introduction to the subsequent section, entitled "I Was Never Spat Upon," Greene states that some of "the veterans whose stories appear in this section do not believe that anyone was spat upon after returning from Vietnam." While these veteran's responses are rich in detail, Greene doesn't conduct much rigorous sociological analysis of the veterans he is studying, nor of the circumstances to which

⁵² Greene, *Homecoming*, 10

they returned after their tours of duty. This section will look at other accounts of the phenomenon of the “spat-upon veteran,” and also broader issues surrounding their return from Vietnam, and propose a general schema under which we can better understand Vietnam veterans and their post-tour lives.

As Jerry Lembcke writes in *The Spitting Image*, “in the memory of a large number of people the anti-war movement came to be connected with the image of activists spitting on veterans. Moreover, what is conversationally safe is not the same as good social science. The fact remains that there is scant evidence that any person opposed to the Vietnam War engaged in this behavior.”⁵³ By scant evidence, he is making a claim about the “documentability” of such an incident. If a protestor were to spit on a veteran, surely the scandalous nature of the act would have been documented by some news source. But, as Lembcke makes clear, there is an acute lack⁵⁴

of the kind of direct evidence we would have expected to find in police or court records had anti-war people been accused of such an act at the time, when they undoubtedly would have been arrested. Certainly today if any political or religious group made it a practice of approaching people in public places and spitting on them the perpetrators would be arrested.

Again, it is “impossible to prove a negative,” but this simple fact about the spat-upon veteran should give us pause for concern. If there is little in the way of independently confirmed evidence of this ever happening, how would such an image gain traction? Surely the sensational nature of spitting on men in uniform had to have *some* correspondence with the truth.

⁵³ Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, 72

⁵⁴ Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, 73

As it turns out, this type of question is not far off the mark. According to the record, spitting *was* a practice used by anti-war protestors and in the context of public demonstration. However, the targets were *not* veterans.

In 1967, author Norman Mailer led a movement against the Pentagon encapsulated in his novel *The Armies of the Night*, wherein he recounts the tale of how he, Dwight MacDonal, Robert Lowell, and many others marched on the Pentagon and were forcibly restrained by the National Guard. Though Mailer omits any incidence of spitting from this account, journalist James Reston, who covered the event, “reported that protestors spat upon the National Guardsmen protecting the Pentagon in October 1967.”⁵⁵ A year later, at the contentious Democratic Convention in Chicago, “the Walker Report on the police response to the demonstrations at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, documented that demonstrators spit upon National guardsmen as they established a perimeter around the Convention Center.”⁵⁶ With these instances of spitting at widely covered and highly contentious events, it is easy to see how this symbol was propelled into the country’s mainstream discourse surrounding the war as a method employed by the anti-war movement against the establishment. Once there, it was much easier to apply this symbol to the dichotomy between veterans and anti-war protestors. What else about this dichotomy can explain its purported antagonism, and thus the ease with which people might apply the symbol of the spat-upon veteran? As I’ll demonstrate below, quite a lot.

But first, what other direct and incontrovertible evidence might there be to prove that such a spitting act did in fact happen? Lembcke points out that there isn’t any video

⁵⁵ Kulik, *War Stories*, 27

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

or photographic evidence of this happening. While this might not strike us as a very compelling reason to dispute that it ever did happen, he adds the following comment:⁵⁷

GIs returned from Vietnam heavily armed with Pentax cameras bought at base PXs, so it is likely that such photos would exist - if spitting had occurred with the frequency now believed. It is all the more likely that a photo would have been snapped if some GIs had actually been told by the military that they would be greeted by hostile "hippies" upon their return. Surely, some enterprising GI, his photographic talents honed by a year of picture taking in Vietnam (GI photos were processed free, thus inducing many GIs to shoot thousands of slides and prints in Vietnam) would have been quite keen to snap a shot of war on the home front.

This strikes me as very disconcerting for the notion of the spat-upon veteran. If it did happen in the frequency with which many veterans claim, how could there not be any shred of photographic evidence? One would think veterans would have a vested interest in punishing these types of protestors, and had the ability to do so. That they did not should make us think twice about the legitimacy of this symbol.

Demographic considerations need also be made in this conversation. I submit that the symbolic antagonism between the Vietnam veterans and anti-war protestors inherent in the spat-upon veteran historic symbol is based in much more than the peace movement's disapproval of the war and the military's disapproval of national disloyalty. What's also at stake in this relationship is a clear example of inter-social-class schism and resentment and thus, a context of antagonism that might not be clear to the casual thinker.

⁵⁷ Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 73

Thinking within this context of antagonism, it is much easier to understand how dubious claims about the protest methods used by the anti-war movement might be made by veterans. Making this distinction pushes us further in the direction of questioning the legitimacy of the spat-upon veteran as a historical symbol.

As Michael Useem has demonstrated in his book *Conscription, Protest, and Social Conflict*, a significant portion of the servicemen in Vietnam had less than high school diploma and came from lower-income backgrounds. In asking the question: “Have you or any immediate relatives been in the armed services and stationed in Vietnam over the previous five or six years?”⁵⁸ Useem tracked the rate of responses from different education and income ranks, and cross-referenced these responses with the proportion of respondents who themselves served or had relatives who served in Vietnam. His findings showed a clear trend between education/family income, membership in the armed forces, and service in Vietnam. As education rates (from “10th grade” to “at least some college”) and family income of the respondents went up, and membership in the armed forces was distributed in a roughly normal “hump” over the education/income categories that Useem had defined. However, the proportion of respondents who either themselves had or had immediate family members who had served in Vietnam was not distributed in the relatively normal “hump” as was service in the armed forces in general. Rather, it was highest amongst the lowest levels of education and family income, and gradually came down as rates of education and family income went up. So, the Vietnam War seems to be at least partially overrepresented in its in-country servicemen by the less educated, poorer members of the population.

⁵⁸ Karsten, *The Military in America*, 141

On the other hand, consider the demographic makeup of the anti-war protest movement. Surely, some of the biggest hubs of anti-war sentiment were college campuses around the nation. Howard Zinn describes the role of students in the peace movement as such:⁵⁹

The climax of protest came in the spring of 1970 when President Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia. At Kent State University in Ohio, on May 4, when students gathered to demonstrate against the war, National Guardsmen fired into the crowd. Four students were killed. One was paralyzed for life. Students at four hundred colleges and universities went on strike in protest. It was the largest general student strike in the history of the United States. During the school year of 1969-1970, the FBI listed 1,785 student demonstrations, including the occupation of 313 buildings.

But Zinn is no idle historian. He goes on to offer more context for understanding the anti-war movement in general, and gives cause for a reconsideration of the movement as primarily driven by college students. While he admits that the “publicity given to the student protests created the impression that the opposition to the war came mostly from middle-class intellectuals,”⁶⁰ he includes the results of a University of Michigan survey showing that “throughout the Vietnam war, Americans with only a grade school education were much more strongly for withdrawal from the war than Americans with a college education.”⁶¹ Zinn’s observation about the prevalent media coverage of “middle-

⁵⁹ Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, 361

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, 362. The specific statistics that Zinn cites are as follows: 27% of people with a college education were for immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam in June of 1966, with 41% of people holding only a grade school level of education responding in favor of immediate withdrawal at that time. By 1970, 47% of the former and 61% of the latter favored immediate withdrawal.

class intellectuals” protesting the war plays nicely into the symbolic narrative of the spat-upon veteran. Such disproportionate coverage of the sources of anti-war opinions likely fed the idea among servicemen that all anti-war protesters were college students and thus had reaped the benefits of their family’s social class and higher incomes in obtaining student deferments from the draft.

While there is some truth to this perception among servicemen, it should be mentioned here that the demographics of college students were undergoing rapid changes in the period of the Vietnam War. No longer was education available primarily to the elite, functioning more as a marker of social distinction than a place of intellectual development. Doubling from 2 to 4 million in the 1950s, university enrollment ballooned to 7 million by 1968.⁶² This expansion was made possible in large part by federal tuition programs designed to increase the average level of education nationwide. Policymakers like Clark Kerr and Harlan Hatcher “argued in the 1950s and early 1960s [that the] demands placed upon the nation by the emerging American-centered global economy, as well as by an escalating nuclear arms race, required the creation of a technologically proficient, college-educated, society.”⁶³ Among the expanding ranks of the nation’s colleges emerged a new identity, a “new social class ... which was neither blue nor white collar, and which stood apart from the larger society.”⁶⁴ So, although the student protests were fuelled by recipients of student deferments from the draft, these students themselves would likely have claimed a vastly different identity than their counterparts of the 1940s and before.

⁶² Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 77

⁶³ Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 76

⁶⁴ Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 77

In any event, these two demographic trends may well have struck multiple chords of anger and resentment among servicemen returning home after their tours. As much as there is an apparent ideological rift between these two groups (one anti-war, one pro or at least neutral), the apparent class differences must also be taken into account, as they surely played a significant role in galvanizing the anger and alienation that many veterans felt towards the anti-war movement. This kind of resentment makes the breeding of inaccurate symbols like the spat-upon veteran all the more likely.

This exercise brings us to two conclusions, one merely formal, the other leading us into the next section of the project. First, it is very easy to slide into a symbolic logic of thinking about the past, arriving at reductive and inaccurate conclusions which glide over the precious niceties of history. Without due attention, students of history may well leave their studies less rather than more enlightened, and be thus worse off for the effort writ large. Second, and more importantly, the imputation of a pro-war attitude by the anti-war protestors to returning veterans is bound, as this example shows, to result in intractable feelings of resentment, and also gross inaccuracies. In general, this project is an attempt to correct these inaccuracies, and diagnose the social dynamics at work among the men who actually did the fighting and dying in Vietnam. Once such a diagnosis is made, we can perhaps approach a more comprehensive, less reductive, and ultimately more accurate understanding of the actions of Vietnam veterans. The first step in this process is identifying and deconstructing the symbolic understandings of our past.

III: WHEN THEY WERE KIDS: JOHN WAYNE AND THE MEN WHO FOLLOWED HIM INTO WAR

“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

-President John F. Kennedy, 1960 Inaugural Address

“There’s some things a man just can’t run away from.”

-John Wayne as The Ringo Kid

In reading about the cultural influences that made young American boys more inclined to fight in the Vietnam War, it is very surprising to see how much influence one particular person wielded. Though JFK, and the lofty global ideals expressed in his 1960 Inaugural Address, would certainly be high up on this list, he doesn’t come close to the

power of film actor Marion Robert Morrison, better known by his stage name John Wayne. Wayne was tough, manly, and played by his own rules. He was unafraid to use violence when the circumstance called for it, but still adherent to a moral code. Most of all, he was a frontiersman, and dealt with the great unknown of the Wild West and its dangerous and savage Indian inhabitants. As the above quote hints at, his film persona defined the rules of American masculinity. Charting this new territory for the American homestead, John Wayne will always be associated in our national memory with the expansion of American territory, and more importantly that of American ideology.

This pattern of American hegemony over indigenous and purportedly inferior peoples occurs in stark detail in the context of the Vietnam War. As I'll discuss in this section, the films of John Wayne would play a very important role in many young men's decisions to serve. However, it is important to look to other cultural influences as well in the formulation of the motivational schema that will endure throughout this project. There were many reasons that young men decided to enlist (and to serve if drafted) and fight in the Vietnam War, not all of which can be explained by their desires to live out the epic tales of John Wayne they had seen depicted on the screen. This section will attempt to break down all of these reasons one by one, and describe how these different reasons primed young men in different ways for military service. Though there were certain demographic trends observable among the men who did serve (as we have partially seen in Section II), these young men entered with different stories and different expectations. So, this section looks at a cross-section of Vietnam veterans before they went to war. Among the questions it seeks to answer are: What kind of communities did these men grow up in? What shaped their worldviews? Who were their role models? What, if

anything, did they think about military service, or about the war in Vietnam before they enlisted or were drafted? As with each section, I'll pull the evidence upon which my answers to these questions are based from two qualitatively different sources: memoirs and the data collected from surveys as described in the "Methodology" portion of Section I. This section largely serves to identify motivations for military service that did not enter the minds of servicemen as a condition of the experience of service itself. In other words, these are the pure motivations; they do not spring up *after* the decision to serve has been made.

i. Political Rhetoric

Before it became a reality for the men who served, Vietnam was closer to a vague, rhetorical notion, if not a completely alien and unknown entity. Illuminated by speeches from politicians like Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson and Democratic Senate Majority Whip Russel Long, Vietnam represented a crossroads of geopolitical ideology. On the one side were the grasping communists, bent on world domination and imposition of global communism. On the other was America, courageously taking up the battle for freedom, and protecting those countries too weak to protect themselves. This theatrical dichotomy is necessarily reductive, but it can nonetheless be observed in the rhetoric of many prominent politicians in talking about war in Vietnam.

In 1966, Congressman Long addressed the issue of Vietnam and America's obligation to it in saying that America:⁶⁵

was founded because we had courageous men. We became a great nation because the people had courage. They did not give up because they had to fight Indians. If the men who came on the Mayflower were frightened to helplessness the first time they had to fight Indians, they would have gone back to England on the Mayflower. But they fought the Indians and won, meanwhile losing some fine Americans, until this Nation became great. We are upholding [in Vietnam] our commitments in the proud tradition of our fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and many other courageous Americans who fell on the field of battle.

An antipodal country that had never had much to do with American life like Vietnam was necessarily an unfamiliar concept in the minds of most Americans. By couching this country in the rhetorical structures that had run through American history since its founding, Congressman Long here attempts to elicit more concern with the welfare of Vietnam and its people among the American public. He draws upon the tradition of American history and argues this tradition requires involvement in Vietnam. Though his history of American westward expansion leaves out its aggressive and rapacious nature, it still works as a rhetorical device attached to Vietnam. Congressman Long was now equating in the minds of many young Americans the duty of American history and service in the Vietnam War.

⁶⁵ Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 20

President Lyndon Baines Johnson also contributed to Vietnam's rhetorical status. A shrewd user of the Domino Theory, he sought to define Vietnam as another domino waiting to topple, contributing to an eventual American capitulation to communism if nothing was done. "If we quit Vietnam tomorrow we'll be fighting in Hawaii and next week we'll have to be fighting in San Francisco."⁶⁶

Robert Mason, a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, provides an example of the public effect of this speech in his memoir *Chickenhawk*. His initial desire to serve was a combination of his youthful desire for flight, and also a televised speech of President Lyndon Johnson's. When Mason, "heard President Johnson announce on television, 'We will stand in Vietnam,' and 'I have today ordered to Vietnam the Air Mobile Division.' A tinge of fear mixed with excitement came over me. The games were over. Life was getting very serious for helicopter pilots."⁶⁷ Mason was clearly influenced by the speeches he heard on TV, but he is not without his hesitations concerning the war effort in Vietnam. As he states, he⁶⁸

wasn't a believer. Now that I was interested enough to read about it, I thought the Vietnamese ought to be able to decide what kind of government they wanted, just like we had. If they wanted to be Communists, then they ought to be. They probably wouldn't like Communism; but, then everybody has to make his own mistakes. If democratic capitalism was better for them, then they'd fight for it. Mason exhibits a probity about the moral equation of the war that few of his fellow servicemen likely shared. However, this worry about the legitimacy of the war

⁶⁶ Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 22

⁶⁷ Mason, *Chickenhawk*, 25

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

was "spawned by my fear of dying young."⁶⁹ This fear notwithstanding, LBJ's exhortations played perhaps a decisive role in Mason's desire to serve in Vietnam.

Scott Higgins shared Mason's hesitation about the righteousness of the war. Nevertheless, he decided to serve based on the feelings of national loyalty likely imbued in him by the political rhetoric to which he has been exposed. He "went over there against the war because I thought it was a mistake, but that still didn't excuse me. If I was called I was going to go. I suppose it comes from a certain kind of patriotism many people had back then."⁷⁰ In the context of the political ideologies being touted by President Johnson and Congressman Long, Higgins reaction is entirely understandable. It binds him into a fellowship with other Americans, and insures him against accusations of laziness or disloyalty.

Another infantryman, Leroy TeCube, was likely influenced by the ideas propounded from the political institutions of the country. As he was being processed in January of 1968, he ran into one of his buddies from basic training in Ft. Polk, a Mr. Leon-Guererro, who would not return from his tour of duty. This prompted TeCube to make the following remark: "The brief encounter with him and his parents will always hold a special place in my heart. It reminds me of how much we were willing to sacrifice to help another country. That was the reason we headed to an unknown country halfway around the world."⁷¹ In the case of TeCube, we will see (in Section IV) how his motivations to fight undergo a stark change once he arrives in country and begins to perform his duties as an infantryman. However, it is important to note here the main

⁶⁹ Mason, Chickenhawk, 25

⁷⁰ Santoli, Everything We Had, 87

⁷¹ TeCube, Year in Nam, 4-5

reasons that TeCube has for consenting to military service. Much like Howard Zinn, he believes his service to be a helping hand for the people of South Vietnam.

The last politician I include in this section is President John F. Kennedy. In 1960, he delivered one of the most memorable inaugural addresses in American history. As quoted above, JFK undertook a similar task in his address to that of Congressman Long and LBJ. As he was free to flex his red-baiting muscle on the campaign trail (more so than was his opponent Richard Nixon), this rhetorical flourish espoused defending freedom from communism around the globe at any cost. His soaring rhetoric found deep purchase in the hearts of many young men around the country, and many mention him as a motivating figure in their service in Vietnam. Philip Caputo, a former Marine and author of *A Rumor of War*, states early on that part of his reason for joining the Marines in 1960 was that he “got swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era.”⁷² Frank McCarthy, a rifleman included in Al Santoli’s *To Bear Any Burden* (a title lifted exactly from JFK’s inaugural) mentions Kennedy’s rhetoric as being bound up with his identity and pride: “We were Kennedy’s soldiers and proud of it. It was an honor and a privilege to be a soldier under JFK.”⁷³ Sgt. Allen E. Paul was also clearly affected by the President’s speech and ideology, writing in a letter to his sweetheart Beverly that he “keep[s] saying one of JFK’s sayings over and over - it goes something like this: ‘The credit belongs to the man, the man who actually is in the arena, his face covered with sweat and mud.’”⁷⁴ Though he misattributes this Teddy Roosevelt quote to JFK, Kennedy’s symbolic power is still evident here with Paul.

⁷² Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 4

⁷³ Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden*, 106

⁷⁴ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 20

The content of political speeches, while sometimes exhilarating and awe-inspiring, is still only a small piece of this initial motivational schema. I mention it first because it probably has the greatest claim to universality among the men who served. The ideals expressed by these politicians bound the nation together, and forged a common identity and mutual relationships among its men and women. As we will see, other sources emitted this ideology of rolling back communism. Moreover, defending liberty and stamping out communism played only a minor if any role in many young men's decisions to serve.

ii. Cultural Media

Ronald Lawrence Kovic was, as his memoir *Born on the Fourth of July* implies, indeed born on the 4th of July in 1946. Born in Wisconsin but raised in Massapequa, New York, Kovic had what he recounts as an idyllic childhood. Growing up, he quickly became infatuated with such heroes as Micky Mantle and John Wayne, and also quickly learned to associate these monolithic, larger-than-life heroes with his own country's identity. Playing mock war games with his friends in the surrounding woods of his neighborhood, Kovic waxes on about how "we'd walk out of the woods like the heroes we knew we would become when we were men."⁷⁵ His childhood pursuits are governed to a substantial degree by these heroic figures that were presented to him as synonymous

⁷⁵ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 55

with national identity. He feels personally related to them through his own nascent patriotism.

Of the many causes of Kovic's eventual service in Vietnam, one sticks out as especially interesting for this subsection. As a high school student and an American kid growing up in the 1950s, he was exposed to certain cultural representations of his country and its enemies abroad that would shape his worldview. Being born on the fourth of July imbued young Ronald with a preternatural love for his country, and an inclination to ally himself with whatever he was told represented American interests. This national pride eventually develops a military orientation. Again, as many youngsters growing up in the post-WWII years, Kovic is exposed to certain media idolizing America's role in that conflict. His is the side of good and moral righteousness (The Allied Forces), contrasted with that of absolute evil and baseness (The Axis Forces). Seeing Sputnik orbit above him in the sky galvanizes this ardency; Kovic felt compelled to defend the country that he loved so dearly against the alien and potentially hostile. Immediately after witnessing this celestial demonstration of Russian technological strength, he takes up an interest in the inner mechanisms of rockets, in a juvenile effort to aid what he perceives to be his country's lagging space program. At this point, Kovic has proven himself as a young impressionable boy who is given completely to whatever he believes his country's cause to be.

Kovic's conception of 'otherness' embodied in the USSR gains more concrete form when he sees television shows like *I Led Three Lives*. Its portrayal of the insidious effects of communism on American life strengthens Kovic's distaste for the external forces deemed to be hostile to his country's interests. He begins to align himself with the

kind of thinking popularized by George Kennan and his famous “Long Telegram” and coming to fruition in the Truman Doctrine, seeing communism as a creeping force hostile to American interests with the potential to insidiously circumscribe the globe. He will eventually include the Viet Cong in this same category. Absorbing instructional videos (as we’ll see shortly) decrying the evils of communism were par for the course for many servicemen during the Vietnam War. That Kovic receives these messages as part of his pre-military life plays a huge role in his eventual decision to join the Marines.

Similar stories abound, and are likely influenced by other such cinematic representations of the evils of Communism in films like *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1949), and *Invasion U.S.A* (1952). Additionally, WWII films, upon which this generation of American men had been raised, also played an important role in shaping perceptions of war and national duty. By⁷⁶

portraying combat in WWII in terms of a global struggle against a clearly identifiable evil which could only be subdued by superior force ... WWII combat films became an important socializing influence, giving symbolic form to a number of ideas which thereupon achieved the status of everyday knowledge. This sentiment relates back to the symbolic modes of knowledge discussed in Section II, but addresses how the men who would eventually fight in Vietnam were first exposed to the idea of war, rather than how the war itself is remembered.⁷⁷

Apart from commercial films, military educational films also played a considerable role. As related by Gerald Snead in *The Vietnam War, A Brother’s Account*,

⁷⁶ Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives*, 22

⁷⁷ As we will see, many Vietnam veterans had an even better source of WWII history in their lives: their fathers and uncles.

the films shown at basic training dealt with the same subject matter, but with less subtlety:⁷⁸

You watch the commercial and the element of truth is the product they're trying to sell; it does exist. They then surround the product with ridiculous words, catch phrases, and actions that usually have nothing to do with the quality of the product... after seeing it time and time again, we begin to remember the product by the commercial. The two exist as one, so upon entering a store, we are more likely to pick up something familiar, not realizing that the familiarity was brought about by the commercial.

As Thomas Palmer points out, these indoctrination activities “have taken place in America’s armed forces since 1941.”⁷⁹ Their main function today is to address “such nonmilitary subjects as citizenship, democracy vs. communism, forces for freedom, and world affairs.”⁸⁰ Though Snead exhibits some resistance to the message of the film, he is nonetheless drawn into its way of representing the war and his role in it.

There is an obvious parallel here with the cinematic symbols discussed in Section II. Both evoke Umberto Eco’s conception of the perceptual dissonance between linguistics and semiotics. When portrayed via the media of “photographic, motion-picture, and television images [as opposed to spoken or written language],” a particular version of personal duty and national service gets imprinted into the visual constituents of these films. However, the experience of watching these films does not function as a

⁷⁸ Taylor, *Vietnam & Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance*, 226

⁷⁹ Karsten, *The Military in America*, 382

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

“sequence of discrete elements,” but as a “toposensitive whole,”⁸¹ designed to reshape of enforce a certain code of thought and behavior. The danger, as Eco tells us, lies in our tendency to view imprints not as disconnected and artificial images, but as *mirror images*:⁸²

At a certain level of analysis – when, for instance, one is concerned only with iconographic conventions – one is entitled to look at photographic imprints as if they were real mirror images, that is, the immediate result of a reflection *tout court* [sic], and their semiotic strategies will be investigated only at the highest manipulatory levels (staging, framing, and so on). In other cases, it would be, on the contrary, indispensable to cast in doubt their presumed ‘innocence’, [sic] to discuss their cultural origin, the non-naturality of their supposed causal relation with the referent.

Decoating the rarefied semiotician-ese, Eco’s point is simply that photographs, movies, and television present seductive versions of reality that tend to trick our perceptive capacities into endorsing their status as mirror images of the world around us, as we would our own reflection when we look in a mirror. We embrace these images as representing the truth, because we are conditioned to do so by simply opening our eyes every morning when we wake up.

The responses of Snead and Kovic to this type of political propaganda demonstrate its efficacy. Both soldiers come from very different backgrounds, and have very different conceptions of the primacy of national duty. Still, neither is completely immune from the intellectual hegemony of the propaganda to which they are exposed.

⁸¹ Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 225

⁸² Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 225-6

This comparison paints a clear picture of the role and potency of anti-communist propaganda as it influenced those who fought in the Vietnam War.

No discussion of anti-communist propaganda would be complete without reference to a film starring John Wayne. A hardcore conservative and anti-communist himself, he starred in the 1968 film *The Green Berets*, which premiered just a few months after the Tet Offensive. As John Mueller has demonstrated, public support for the war effort had been declining steadily since 1965 (with a roughly corresponding increase in public opposition, those people holding no opinion remaining relatively unchanged).⁸³ In addition to its primarily commercial motivations, the release of this film might be interpreted as an attempt to inject new life into public support for the war (while also paying tribute to the military expertise of some of America's most specialized forces in country: the Green Berets).⁸⁴ *The Green Berets'* representation of the war included⁸⁵

details [that] evoke[d] the atmosphere of the western and enable[d] contemporary audiences to put recent events in Vietnam to the back of their minds (Tet Offensive) ... [the film] also reminded Americans that they were the winners and reinforced an important aspect of the Special Forces' heritage: 'the tough, self-reliant, combat-tested soldier who fought on the Indian frontier of our own country during the 1870s.'

Such a film attempted to shoot life back into the American war effort, but its intended effects were never realized.

⁸³ Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 56

⁸⁴ The large-scale coordination involved in the Tet Offensive was the first evidence American military forces received of their enemy's capacity. Though the Tet Offensive was a crushing military defeat in terms of lives lost for the VC (as was the war in general), this coordinated demonstration of power surprised many Americans in country and back home. Headlines in the *News American* on February 3rd commented how the "vast scope of [the] attacks [were] unexpected."

⁸⁵ Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 50

Though this film did not rally the domestic front to support the war to the intended degree, its significance as a type of propaganda should not be overlooked. Wayne, as he had been doing in the other Western films in which he starred (*Stagecoach*, *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *True Grit*, etc.) brings together Congressman Long's espousal of American territorial expansion and the Vietnam War. Using his semi-mythological status as exemplar of American tradition, he portrayed the American soldier as fighting boldly against evil communist forces in Vietnam. This dynamic mirrored his films set in the U.S., wherein he fought against the evil Indian forces bent on destroying white civilization in the Wild West. As Turner describes in *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, the nation had a distinct and potent fascination and voyeurism with John Wayne:⁸⁶

In the early 1960s, John Wayne served as an intermediary between private lives and national myths. Through him, individual citizens gained access to the immense emotional treasure-house of American right and might. In backyards and back alleys, Wayne's 'willingness to use violence' impelled prepubescent boys to play cowboys and Indians and to attach each other with chrome-plated mock revolvers.... Having seen that justice flowed in John Wayne's wake in the movies, many Americans assumed that justice must likewise naturally flow in the wake of American interventions abroad.... As they watched John Wayne, Americans – particularly young male Americans – could feel that power in themselves.

It was films like those that made John Wayne famous and also wrought important

⁸⁶ Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 20

changes on the mindsets of the young boys who would soon be sent to fight in Vietnam.

Lloyd B. Lewis puts it nicely in saying that these films⁸⁷

encouraged the audience to dissociate and depersonalize experience, to view life *as a movie* [sic]. This tendency to detach oneself from the ongoing flow of events in the perceptual field is a behavioral trait which movie-going made possible. The Vietnam War was, at least for some of the soldiers who fought it, *The Vietnam War Movie* [sic]...

The star power wielded by actors like John Wayne, while insufficient to pull the nation out of the shock surrounding the Tet Offensive, was nonetheless an important factor in shaping the thoughts and decisions of the generation of young men, like Ron Kovic, who would serve their country in Vietnam.

iii. What/Who Are We Fighting For?

The ardent patriotism that Ron Kovic had nurtured as a youth is lacking one ingredient before it can be turned into a viable fighting force for the military: testosterone. As he matures into adolescence, his body, and with it his general spirit of holistic well-being, also changes. He takes up wrestling in high school, for which he develops a muscled physique. Kovic takes pride in his natural developments, his

⁸⁷ Lewis, *The Tainted War*, 23

“wrestlers shoulders,”⁸⁸ and other physical changes in his body. His body is now becoming as much of a precious possession for him as his citizenry and identification with American nationalism. These physical changes in young Ron Kovic’s body should not be under-stressed. It is his own confidence in his own physical capabilities that partially assures him of his potential success as a soldier. This borderline vanity will play an integral role in his eventual disillusionment with the American military, but its role before his service is primarily to stoke his confidence and feed his desire to put himself to the test. To truly validate his new physique, warfare provided a great test for young men like Kovic.

As he matures physically, Kovic’s patriotic yearnings strengthen in potency and rigidity. The night before he is to be shipped off to basic training he⁸⁹

stayed up most of the night ... watching the late movie. Then ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ played. I remember standing up and feeling very patriotic, chills running up and down my spine. I put my hand over my heart and stood at rigid attention until the screen went blank.

Kovic is truly his country’s son. His allegiance to national interest borders on jingoism at this point; he lives and dies with America. This newfound potency also breeds an acute nausea in Kovic about the prospect of remaining in Massapequa for the rest of his life, following in his father’s footsteps. His school friends, not his parents, now have a more influential role over his behavior. As they had consorted about the wilderness playing war against each other, Kovic now wants to put his newfound confidence to the test.

⁸⁸ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 64

⁸⁹ Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 75

There is a strand of Lewis B. Puller's story similar to this one. In speaking about his college years, and in reflecting in particular on the summer of 1967, he admits how he "had drifted through the previous four years, drinking beer and chasing girls with a singleness of purpose that belied my lack of meaningful direction, and now, on the threshold of manhood and with the war as a backdrop, I realized that the time had come to put frivolity aside."⁹⁰ By "putting frivolity aside," Puller refers to continuing the illustrious military tradition established by his father and passed down to him through his family. I'll discuss these kinds of influences below, but here the point is that Puller is partially motivated by feelings of ennui with the life he is currently leading at home, as though it doesn't measure up with the life he had envisioned for himself. He feels as though there is something lacking from his life, something that military service might satisfy.

Norman Russell, in *Suicide Charlie*, remembers a platoon-mate dubbed "Bean." He had come from a rural community in Minnesota, hard in its Mennonite underpinnings and conservative ideologies. He was bored, with no proms, no dances, and nothing to do around the town. As Russell recounts,⁹¹

[t]he Army was one way [out], and Bean didn't even wait till his number came up to take it. He had partied through a single quarter in junior college sixty miles down the road in Worthington, then dropped out and volunteered for the draft so he could go off to basic at Fort Lewis with some buddies. He knew from watching Walter Cronkite every night that maybe five hundred guys a week were coming back in tin boxes, but it never sank in that one of them might be him.

⁹⁰ Puller, *Fortunate Son: The Healing of a Vietnam Veteran*, 30

⁹¹ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 37

It appears that the ennui that “Bean” felt as a result of his upbringing and community was enough to de-emphasize the palpable risks to life and limb involved in warfare.

James Hebron was seduced by military service as it seemed to provide an opportunity to indulge the more libidinous parts of his desires. He confesses an early demystification in his military career:⁹²

I joined the Marines when I was seventeen, having graduated from high school a year early. At that age I was super-naive. I was influenced by combat as written by noncombatants, i.e., Stephen Crane, author of the *Red Badge of Courage*. A combination of that plus bravado, you know: Marine Corps, blood, rape, kill, plunder, that kind of thing. It was just fantasy until I got orders for Vietnam.

Hebron has been influenced both by portrayals of war in literature, and by his the onset of adolescence.

John Ketwig, in his memoir ... *and a Hard Rain Fell*, offers a good account of the distinction between, or rather what GIs saw as the distinction between Vietnam and "The World." The⁹³

[w]orld wasn't a planet. It was your hometown, your tree-lined street in the suburbs, your tenement in the ghetto. It was your wife, or girl fire, or mom, or just a female with round eyes and a swelling bosom.... The World was flush toilets and doorknobs and fishing streams. A mythical, magical place that had existed once, and would again, and had been interrupted by the Vietnam war as a TV show is interrupted by a commercial.

Growing up on a farm near the Finger Lakes, Ketwig developed an early love of

⁹² Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 88

⁹³ Ketwig, ...*and a Hard Rain Fell*, 4

rock and roll drumming and of cars and car repair. When he speaks about his parents, and about the parents of the kids coming of age in the '60s in general, Ketwig takes a skeptical tack:⁹⁴

They told you to defend freedom, and used cattle prods on the Freedom Riders in Alabama.... This is a democracy. It didn't always work just right, they said, but your generation will have to get it all together because now there's a bomb that can eliminate the whole population of the planet. So we grew up believing we could do it, and that the answer was peace, or love, or the golden rule, or whatever you wanted to call it.

His decision to go to war is thus not as automatic as that of an enlistee like Ron Kovic. In the time leading up to his service, many community members pushed Ketwig to enlist, claiming that his orders would probably not be as dangerous as an enlistee than as a draftee. Among many memoirs, this kind of calculus attached itself to the decision to enlist or wait for one's draft number to be called. The received wisdom held that enlisting decreased one's chances of being assigned an MOS with regular combat. Sociologist Charles Moskos has performed a study to verify this claim. In *The American Enlisted Man*, Moskos demonstrates that draftees in Vietnam were slightly more likely than volunteers to serve in combat positions, but not by much.⁹⁵⁹⁶

At this point, it is clear that Ketwig doesn't agree with the war on an ideological basis; he doesn't want to kill VC because it violates the "golden rule," the rule that he believes his generation was taught to live by, but was also taught to ignore when it came

⁹⁴ Ketwig, ... *and a Hard Rain Fell*, 10

⁹⁵ Karsten, *Military in America*, 414

⁹⁶ 28% of the men drafted and 23% of those undrafted (either volunteers or "draft-motivated" volunteers) made up the combat forces in Vietnam.

to communism and its potential influence in the world and in America. He doesn't really know much about the country of Vietnam, along with likely the vast majority of the men who fought there.

iv. Family Values

In his memoir *Fortunate Son: The Healing of a Vietnam Vet*, Lewis B. Puller describes the structural influences at work as he considered service in Vietnam. He would eventually become a 2nd lieutenant and go to Vietnam in the summer of 1968, leaving shortly thereafter as a result of serious debilitating injuries suffered in the field. Among his reasons for being willing to serve, Puller emphasizes his family's military tradition. Puller's father epitomized this tradition for his son:⁹⁷

There were other things I noticed about my father in the summer and fall of 1951, a time during which he made a special effort to be accessible to his only son and to make up for his absence during the war. My father was born before the turn of the century, the third of four children and the elder son. His father was a traveling salesman whose battle with cancer had been lost by the time Father was ten. His grandfather had been killed by Union fire at Kelly's Ford in Virginia during the Civil War, and his boyhood heroes, long before he became a role model for a newer generation of Americans, had been Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

⁹⁷ Puller, *Fortunate Son: The healing of a Vietnam Vet*, 3-4

When Father came home from his fifth and last war, Lee and Jackson remained in his eyes the standard against which all military leaders were measured, and I remember kneeling with him and invoking their hallowed names in my bedtime prayers before he tucked me in.

The military men of the past become larger than life figures for Puller and his father, role models upon which they base their own behavior.

Puller goes on to mention how his father's debilitating physical and mental condition⁹⁸ pushed him towards military service, towards carrying on the family tradition all the more. He remembers how, as he grew older, he "began the sometimes painful process by which a son distances himself from his father in preparation for striking out on his own," and "began to realize that [his] father the man and [his] father the legend were not always one and the same."⁹⁹ In this light, Puller wants to serve not only to carry on a hallowed family tradition, but also perhaps to reclaim the social respect accorded to his family as a result of the tradition that his father and grandfather before him had embodied.

Defending one's family's social status and respectability also played a role in Allen Paul's decision to volunteer for enlistment. Paul served with the men of A Battery, 1st of the 77th Artillery, and D and E companies, 2nd of the 5th Cavalry. In his collection of letters sent to his parents and his girlfriend during his service, Paul initially claims a desire to provide for his family's good name in their community by means of his service. In this sense, he exhibits a robust sense of patriotism and national duty during his time in OCS training, saying that he "wants the world to know that the Paul family did what was

⁹⁸ In part a result of his old age and many years of rigorous military service.

⁹⁹ Puller, *Fortunate Son: The Healing of a Vietnam Vet*, 27

asked of them in Vietnam.”¹⁰⁰ He fears being lumped in with the opposition movement to the war, which is, admittedly, modest in size at this time. Still, he can’t comprehend how these people can be so disloyal to their country.

Another veteran who lists family influences as motivating his service is Philip Caputo, author of the memoir *A Rumor of War*. Caputo was among one of the first whose battalions landed in Vietnam, landing with the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade in Da Nang in 1965.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, he does not come from as strong of a military tradition as does Puller, and correspondingly his father didn’t play as big a role in his service. While he does include a “being swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era” as a reason for his service, it is not the largest. Rather, he lists his biggest reason for wanting to serve in the military as the boredom he felt with “the safe, suburban existence I had known most of my life.”¹⁰² His home community and the life that it and his family had provided for him functioned for Caputo more as something to escape from rather than something he wanted to honor in his service. He wanted to get away and prove to them and likely to himself that he could handle the duties of service, whatever he estimated them to be.

Worries about his hometown and his family’s estimation of him follow Caputo through to basic training. While reminiscing about the drills he had to execute, he states that, “nothing [the drill sergeant] could do could be as bad as having to return home and admit to my family that I had failed. It was not their criticism I dreaded, but the emasculating affection and understanding they would be sure to show me.”¹⁰³ Again it is not disapprobation for failing to uphold a family tradition that he fears, but rather a highly

¹⁰⁰ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 9

¹⁰¹ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xi (introduction)

¹⁰² Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 4

¹⁰³ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 10-11

personal form of punishment and shame. He wants to escape the “safe, suburban existence” of his hometown for fear that it might leave untapped the depths of his nascent masculinity. Military service for Caputo thus becomes an opportunity to build his own self-respect.

Caputo’s discussion of military identity coheres with this theme of war as a test of one’s manhood. While in basic training, comes to idolize the military uniform that he will potentially wear as a serviceman. It becomes an object not just of social distinction, but a way to exercise the demons of boredom that haunted him at home. He recounts how “a man who wore that uniform was somebody. He had passed a test few others could. He was not some down-on-his luck loser pumping gas or washing cars for a dollar-fifty an hour, but somebody, a Marine.”¹⁰⁴ The uniform simultaneously represents conformity and escape.

Frank McCarthy, making numerous appearances in both of Al Santoli’s books about Vietnam, provides another good example of family influences in his interview in *To Bear Any Burden: The Vietnam War and Its Aftermath in the Words of Americans and Southeast Asians*. McCarthy served as a rifleman in the 1st Infantry Division, and was stationed in the Iron Triangle (near the boarder of South Vietnam and Cambodia, considered to be one of the most dangerous parts of the country in terms of VC resistance) from October 1965 – March 1967. In remembering his service and his initial reasons for wanting to go to war for his country, McCarthy remembers an eponymous uncle, “who was my role model as a child, was a career soldier. My mother divorced

¹⁰⁴ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 13

when I was young. So I was gung ho all my life.”¹⁰⁵

Greg Skeels, a member of Charlie Company included in *Charlie Company: What Vietnam Did To Us*, remembers accepting his draft notice with little if any compunction. As the authors relate, Skeels’ draft notice¹⁰⁶

came in January 1968, and [he] accepted it as a condition of his life, as common to his crowd as marrying young and as inescapable as the weather... In his world, it was simply accepted that when the country called, men went, as generations had since the Revolution and as Skeels’ own stepfather had in World War II. *This is just something that happens to everybody*, he thought in his turn when his papers came.

Service in the Skeels family is a tradition, and questioning the possible effects of continuing the tradition simply never occurs. Survey evidence (as we’ll see in the final subsection of this section) coheres with this dynamic, and shows the power that a people’s history can have over their present and future.

v. Conflict and the Thought of Desertion

No account of the marshaling of American troops for service in the Vietnam War would be complete without a consideration of those who resisted it. I’ll include only

¹⁰⁵ Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden*, 105

¹⁰⁶ Goldman and Fuller, *Charlie Company: What Vietnam Did To Us*, 25

one example in this section, as I feel Tim O'Brien's experience in deciding to serve in Vietnam encapsulates the mental anguish that some young men went through in making this decision.

Historian Howard Zinn's aphorism "you can't be neutral on a moving train" provides a good intellectual backdrop for Tim O'Brien's Vietnam memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. Zinn uses this credo as a title of one of his latter works, and also as a guiding philosophy through the study and transmission of American history. He exhorts "you" to proactively strive for social change rather than let the "moving train" silently yet assiduously carry you through your own life according to its own agenda. Tim O'Brien was subject to similar forces. When confronted with a set of forces, especially those originating from sources that are near and dear to us, that are nonetheless contradictory to our personal beliefs, what sort of decisions do we make? Tim O'Brien's story provides us with a good starting point from which to answer this question in terms of fighting in the Vietnam War.

Growing up in Worthington Minnesota, O'Brien received a fairly similar education (in the broadest sense) as Ron Kovic. Serving one's country, with little if any regard given to what precisely was being asked, was a given – there was never a question of protest. Just as Kovic, O'Brien read the history books and watched the historical accounts in television and film of American participation in WWII, inculcating a deep devotion to his country and an absolute belief in its moral vindication in matters of foreign policy and war. To go down in the pages of history alongside those brave men who had stood up to fascism would have been a great honor to O'Brien and his friends.

In addition to his formal school education, his parents reinforced that same message. Their “talk was tough. Nothing to do with causes or reason; the war [in Vietnam] was right, they muttered, and it had to be fought.”¹⁰⁷ Again we see an inclination in the older generation of Americans of O’Brien’s childhood toward the Stephen Decatur “my country, right or wrong” way of thinking. However, O’Brien remains skeptical at best, and downright antagonistic when it comes to the righteousness of the war.¹⁰⁸ “I was persuaded then, and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong. And since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil ... But perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew anyway?”¹⁰⁹ Here, O’Brien tries to convince us, and himself, that his country’s rationale for war in Vietnam was so vague as to warrant a sort of default loyalty from its soldiers. His attempt results less from his own uncertainty, more from his own discomfort of fighting a war that is morally wrong. Nevertheless, “I submitted. All the soul searchings [sic] and midnight conversations and books and beliefs were voided by abstention, extinguished by forfeiture, for lack of oxygen, by a sort of sleepwalking default. It was *no decision*, no chain of ideas or reasons, that steered me into the war.”¹¹⁰ [ital. added]

O’Brien appears to be so invested on a subconscious level with his country and its moral defensibility that he cannot stomach the thought of disloyalty. Thus, his evident pacifism before the war fails to fructify, and he marches off to war without peace of mind, but with conviction. This uncertainty, this hesitation that O’Brien overcomes in his

¹⁰⁷ O’Brien, *If I Die...*, 12

¹⁰⁸ This antagonism, it should be mentioned, is thoroughly self-censored. At this point in his life, he does not want to bring his family shame by expressing how he really feels about the war. He feels a stronger tie towards his parents and his community than to personal conscience.

¹⁰⁹ O’Brien, *If I Die...*, 17

¹¹⁰ O’Brien, *If I Die...*, 24

decision to serve becomes a burden for him to bear while in country. It will become, once he has been attuned to the harsh realities of warfare, a source of deep longing for comfort and emotional support.

vi. Survey Data

We've got the narratives, now lets take a look at some raw data. My survey elicited quantitative responses on a 1-7 scale (1 being complete disagreement and 7 being complete agreement, with 4 being neutrality) to 21 questions probing different aspects of each veteran's service.¹¹¹ On the Table 1 (below), I have listed responses from questions #6-#10.¹¹² As they demonstrate, there was an important distinction between the initial factors motivating the consent of those who would become infantrymen and those who would not. Perhaps the most important piece of data on this table is the response to question #9: "I understood the military objective of the United States in South Vietnam before I was deployed." This shows how, for the average Vietnam veteran, questions concerning the moral aspect of the war were likely the last things on their mind. But, the difference between the two categories of respondents for this question (infantry/non-infantry) shows that non-infantry servicemen were perhaps more invested in the war's

¹¹¹ A full list of the survey results is included in this project in appendices B and C.

¹¹² The statements are as follows: "I am from a military family." (#6) "I am from a community where compelled military service is seen as a duty." (#7) "I had reservations about enlisting (response only required for draftees)." (#8) "I understood the military objective of the United States in South Vietnam before I was deployed." (#9) "My service involved relatively frequent contact with enemy forces." (#10)

general cause, or at least in staying informed about it. The other responses offer more definitive evidence on the differences between these two demographics.

Questions #6 and #7 show that those who would eventually serve in non-infantry positions were more likely to have received a “military” upbringing, whether they were exposed to American military culture in their homes or in their communities at large. As we can see, even given the reservations that some of them held about going to war, these men consented to serve because they wanted to honor family traditions and uphold pre-existing community values.

Question #8 supports the idea that draftees bound for infantry service had more compelling reservations about the war than did those bound for non-infantry positions. Question #10 shouldn't surprise us: infantrymen did the lion's share of fighting in Vietnam. However, it should be realized that non-infantrymen, given the unclear division between VC/American held territory, were *not* free from the danger involved in the war.

Table 1

	Infantry n=394	Non-Infantry n=1,084
Question #6	5.2	6.1
Question #7	5.8	6.3
Question #8	5.5 n=112	4.5 n=285
Question #9	1.9	2.3
Question #10	6.6	3.2

Important to note is that these questions probe the minds of veterans *before* they went to war. In section IV, we will see how these motivations change based on the distinction between Infantry and non-Infantry MOS.

What draws these men's stories together, and what is the reason for listing them here in terms of this project? It is important to understand first that the people who fight in wars do so for many and variegated reasons, not all of which remain consistent throughout the entire span of their tours of duty. Family influences, one of the most powerful driving forces in anyone's life, were certainly a big factor in many Vietnam veterans' decisions to go to war. Conspicuously absent from many of these soldier's

decisions to fight was a kind of moral calculus in the righteousness of the war's strategic agenda, if not its moral purpose, and the survey data include in this section bear this claim out. This kind of consideration, I submit, and as the survey data suggests, was likely the last thing on the minds of this type of servicemen.

While their families would remain crucial links back to the "real world" during their time in country, providing for many soldiers the only respite from an otherwise miserable existence, the second part of this project will advance evidence supporting the idea that family influences often became transmuted once the soldier in question became attuned to the real hardships of war. While these soldiers went to war believing that their service was something that affirmed both their membership in their families and their families' status in their communities, they were often disabused of such pretenses after a short while in country. The motivational schemas that these men would then turn to is the subject of this project, and will be further enunciated in Section IV. In doing so, I'll argue that the men with whom one served often played as important if not more important a role than one's family in the process of ongoing consent as a part of Social Construct Consent Theory.

VI. SOCIAL CONSTRUCT CONSENT THEORY

“You don’t know the horrible aspects of war. I’ve been through two wars and I know. I’ve seen cities and homes in ashes. I’ve seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, war is Hell!”

-Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, in an address to the graduating class of the Michigan Military Academy in 1879

"In a sense, we infantrymen were all rebels. We were the restless ones, the guys who were willing to take a chance. We were all draftees - USs, as Kumo had told the major back at the French Fort - whose service numbers began with US instead of RA, for regular army. We were the guys doing most of the fighting. The army didn't expect much out of us as long as we were willing to squeeze the trigger. Of the six hundred thousand men in-country when I was there, less than 20 percent were combat troops, the rest support. That's the war the American army operates. Takes a lot of swimming pool guards and chauffeurs to keep the boys in the field... That's what the army's own figures stated. Of the 8.5 million Vietnam-era vets, 2.5 million saw service in 'Nam. Twenty

percent of that is 500,000. KIAs were about 50,000, wounded another 150,000. That's a 40 percent chance you wouldn't get through the war without at least picking up a piece or two of shrapnel, if you were infantry."

-Norman Russell

As any veteran will likely tell you, the wars they fought in had little if any similarity with the war games they used to play in their backyards, or the heroic narratives they used to imagine. It is hard to imagine a more physically or spiritually enervating task than warfare. How did they cope? Or, what causes can we point to when seeking to explain their continued service throughout their tours of duty? Going AWOL in a country covered by thick and dangerous jungles was not an appealing choice for most soldiers, so even if they detested the requirements of their in-country duties, escape was not a viable option. This section advances evidence of an important aspect of infantrymen's motivational schemata, what I'll call Social Construct Consent Theory.

Social Construct Consent Theory (SCCT) is an extrapolation of Peter Karsten's Consent Theory as articulated in the introduction to this project. The main difference between the two theories is the temporal dimension of the former. SCCT attempts to explain the actions of servicemen not just in the initial phase of their military lives (e.g. their decisions to enlist/accept their draft duties), but extends the boundaries of consenting behavior to be observed and explained. Its strength lies in its power to explain not why men are willing to go to war, but why they are willing to maintain their commitment throughout their service. In this regard, SCCT looks for the immediate

influences on soldiers' behavior while in the field, and attempts to formulate a schema wherein the behavior of individuals in separate units can be better understood.

Other motivations for this theory come from the pre-existing body of research that has been performed on the veterans of the Vietnam War. Perhaps the most comprehensive is James R. Ebert's *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam, 1965-1972*. In a chapter entitled "Change and Coping," Ebert details the methods by which infantrymen would adapt to their roles while in country, and would change along with the demands that were made of them by the war effort. His collection is expansive to say the least. Before I treat of his work, I'll reference one fictional work about the Vietnam War by veteran Tim O'Brien, which introduces a lot of the information to which Ebert gives empirical support. As we already know, O'Brien served in Vietnam and returned home to write prodigiously and eloquently not only about his experience, but about the process of writing war memoirs in general. Early on in his fictional work *The Things They Carried*, he provides a description of the different items that his platoon-mates chose to carry as they were "humping" through the bush:¹¹³

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs.... Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he'd stolen on R & R Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried 6 or 7 ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders, the

¹¹³ O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 2-3

RTO, carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament... Later he describes how Dobbins even carried “his girlfriend’s pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter.”¹¹⁴ Most importantly, “[t]hey all carried ghosts. When dark came, they would move out single file across the meadows and paddies to their ambush coordinates, where they would quietly set up the Claymores and lie down and spend the night waiting.”¹¹⁵

O’Brien’s prose is powerful, and evokes the human aspect of the war. The things that his platoon-mates carried helped them cope not with the physically challenging aspects of the war (its long route marches, laborious digging of foxholes and hazardous spelunking of potential VC hideouts), but rather with the psychological duress that plays such a big part in every soldiers’ story. The things they carried reminded them of home, reminded them that there was something else out there besides the miserable existence of the average infantryman. These things reminded O’Brien’s platoon-mates that, God willing, when they arrived home they would be greeted with open, loving arms.

The “ghosts” that O’Brien refers to represent the memories of things past that these soldiers bore with them through the jungle. These ghosts represented the fears, the anxieties, and in some cases the pathologies that precipitated the coping mechanisms that O’Brien and Ebert describe. To combat these ghosts, these men retreat into their own inner consciousness. By making conscious decision to alter the things they must tote along with them during their regular marches through the Vietnamese jungle, they are effectively hedging their bets against karma. Carrying extra weight through the jungle

¹¹⁴ O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 10

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

was a burdensome task, but these men likely felt that adding this extra task onto their daily labors not only shielded them from some kind of karmic reprisal, but also made sure that their loved ones, however far away, were still close with them in their time of need. Moreover, these things they carried tell us that above all else, these men were human beings, and as such were given to the same strange and illogical methods of thinking and reasoning as we are all at certain points in our lives. They affirm that whatever the duress thrust upon them by the war, they still maintained some functioning part of their humanity, and some connection to the real world, the world of their home and their loved ones.

Alongside this fictional account stands Ebert's collection of the coping mechanisms of Vietnam infantrymen. He recounts how:¹¹⁶

most men conditioned themselves to function under fire and a few men came to enjoy it, there were a few for whom the stress of exposure to battle was simply too much. But fleeing the battlefield was not common in Vietnam if for no other reasons that that, in a war without fronts, soldiers had no way of knowing which way to run. Operating in isolated platoons and companies, most troops were too far from a rear area for men to entertain any hope of seeking safety there. Survival depended on staying with the group rather than running away from it. Only men in total panic took flight, and such instances were rare.

In these dangerous circumstances, infantrymen were faced with a pretty grim fate. Many simply resigned themselves to suffer whatever the war would throw at them. By doing so, they¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ebert, *A Life in a Year*, 222

attempted to reach a workable compromise between their unavoidable exposure to the dangers of combat and the almost overpowering desire to avoid that danger. So infantrymen assembled a vast array of mechanisms and attitudes that enabled them to cope with their dilemma. Coping often took the form of adopting precautionary behavior – positive actions in the field that helped soldiers stay alert and alive... some soldiers carried extra weapons or ammunition, whereas others faithfully wore helmets or flak jackets. In lieu of genuine ways to reduce their exposure to danger, soldiers often tried to allay their fears by treating the symptoms of their distress rather than the cause, which was beyond their ability to control. One such method was the observance of superstitions and the adoption of good-luck pieces.

While I don't want to assail the validity or the efficacy of these coping mechanisms, I am worried that Ebert has neglected to mention a very important one. What I've called Social Construct Consent Theory is qualitatively different than any of the methods that he has described, but I believe it produces the same results in a more efficient and more subtle fashion.

¹¹⁷ Ebert, *A Life in a Year*, 227

i. Social Construct Consent Theory in the Bush and Among the Grunts

Before I get into the longer narratives included in this section, I'll briefly go over some shorter stories that illustrate some key components of SCCT and the Vietnam War. Though these snippets of veteran experiences grossly understate their whole stories, they are good enough to ground us in the range of emotions and thoughts that infantrymen and others would have while in the field.

From the earliest days during their time in country, grunts were taught, or otherwise learned, to care for their buddies. Not only were these men their only ticket home, they were their emotional and mental lifelines while in country. If they failed to protect them, they themselves were that much more likely to die or become unmoored. As William E. Merritt remembers in his memoir *Where the Rivers Ran Backward*, this theme ran through much of the five days of additional training he received when he first arrived in country. His drill sergeant was intent on drilling one firm principle into his head:¹¹⁸

Charlie's everywhere out there. You think you gonna watch your own ass when you in the field? Ain't no way. You buddy's gotta do that. And you gotta watch his. God help you if you let anything happen to him. Don't let a God damn FLY land on him. Feed him your C's if he's hungry. Carry him to safety when he's hurt. Stand his watch when he's tired. Kiss him when you go to bed at night and

¹¹⁸ Merritt, *Where the Rivers Ran Backward*, 64

kiss him when you wake up in the morning. Cause you ain't NEVER gonna get home without him.

The feelings of care and devotion espoused here are almost like that between a mother and her child. In protecting the latter, the former will often do things she otherwise wouldn't. Such a dynamic is not so dissimilar from the one at play among many infantrymen in the field in Vietnam. Its effects oftentimes acted as the supreme coping mechanism and kept grunts fighting if for nothing else than to protect their buddies for whom they had developed such deep-seated love and affection.

This relationship is also exhibited by Luiz Martinez, Team Commander of the U.S. Marine Combined Action Platoon in Da Nang from July 1970 to July 1971. Commenting on how his Hispanic heritage affected the social dynamics of his platoon he dismisses its relevance: "in the Marines were no different than anybody else. When you're in a war situation, everyone is green."¹¹⁹ Robert Rawls, an African American rifleman in the 1st Cavalry Division (stationed at Tay Ninh from Early 1969 - early 1970) displays a similar crossing of the color line:¹²⁰

[O]ne of my best friends was a white guy. There was no racism between him and me, nothing like that. That was mostly back in the rear. Out in the bush everybody was the same. You can't find no racism in the bush. We slept together, ate together, fought together. What else can you ask for?

After he gets back from his tour, his marriage falls apart, and he goes through other readjustment issues. "I can't say now if I was one of the lucky ones. Sometimes I wish I

¹¹⁹ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 160

¹²⁰ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 156

could've just went ahead and died with my friends."¹²¹

These relationships seem to run counter to some sentiments expressed by African-American draftees before the war. In *GI Diary*, David Parks remembers the overt racism he experienced during his service. To him, it was¹²²

strange, all these guys gathered here from all over the States. It's stranger still when you think that we are all going supposedly for the same cause – when half of us don't have a decent word for the other half. When we stand out there and salute that flag, or march down the road to cadences, we're together.

Activist Malcolm X characterized the double-bind of the African-American soldier in Vietnam, a man who could not criticize the war because “we're not supposed to say that. If we say that, we're Anti-American, or we're seditious, or we're subversive, or we're advocating something that's not intelligent.”¹²³ In comparing these differing accounts of the race relations surrounding the Vietnam War, one is left searching for a binding force that brings together these seemingly bifurcated accounts.

Perhaps the shift is best summed up by the example of Adolphus Stuart. Stuart, an African-American scout who served from April 1967 to March 1968, remembers experiencing the painful loss of a friend in combat after his friend was¹²⁴

shot in the neck and died from the loss of blood ... helicopters were unable to extract the wounded in time. I can remember being very hurt at the death of my friend. He was white, by the way. But I cried like a baby. The way he died made it even worse. I had nightmares out there in the field, dreaming about killing a

¹²¹ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 157

¹²² Taylor, *Vietnam & Black America*, 177

¹²³ Taylor, *Vietnam and Black America*, 59

¹²⁴ Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden*, 136

bunch of people in Saigon. I've never seen the place, but in my dreams I would go to the heart of where the shit hit, the nation's capital, and cause havoc. We'll see this type of dynamic and this type of reaction reiterated in Leroy TeCube's experience in country. It is clear here that race takes a decided backseat to the bond that Stuart has formed with his white platoon-mate.

If Stuart did experience the negative side of racism in the field, it was in a context that provided him with the tools to confront it and move on. He recounts his racial confrontation in the field, when another platoon-mate inadvertently makes a racial slur in Stuart's presence. However, Stuart rises above:¹²⁵

once we were in the field, there was no trouble. There was no color. I put my life on the line many a time trying to stop a white fool from doing something he was told not to do. And as a result of getting hurt, he exposed me to more danger. I hated that. And fortunately I was never in a apposition where someone had to do that for me. But I'm quite sure that they would have done the same for me.

What could have effected this general change in race relations? Surely the war didn't turn all its servicemen into completely tolerant people, but the circumstances of service effect a powerful force of social bonding. This force manifests itself in many different memoirs, and they are the focus of this project.

Before we move into the longer renderings of memoirs, I'll mention two final examples: an officer who exhibits the effects of SCCT, and an infantryman who does *not*. Both present a clearer picture of the social effects of combat.

¹²⁵ Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden*, 138

Robert Santos was a platoon leader for 101st Airborne Division stationed in Hue from November 1967 - November 1968. Tasked with clearing the NVA out of Hue City in the wake of the Tet Offensive, his platoon performed numerous “anvil/hammer” operations to oust the NVA who had taken the city’s strongholds. His conception of patriotism is highly experienced based, rather than a vague, abstract notion. He describes it as¹²⁶

just loyalty to friends, people, families ... [sic] I didn't even know those guys in Vietnam until I got there, and it wouldn't have mattered if you came to my platoon tomorrow - if we got hit, I would go out and try to save your ass just as I wouldn't done for anyone else I'd been with for a month, two months, three months. Instant bonding.

His officer’s mindset of responsibility results in what might be considered deviant behavior in an effort to protect his men from harm. After a booby trap kills one of his men, Santos decides to burn down several hootches in a neighboring village he believes to be under VC control. As a major from the nearby division of the 1st Cavalry comes by and asks about what he is up to, Santos considers that his¹²⁷

responsibility would be, I think, somewhat complex. I had to uphold the traditions of military America, all that crap. I had to worry about my men. And I felt that responsibility goes down rather than up. I owed no allegiance to America. I owed no allegiance to the S-5 or the 1st Cav. and all that crap. I had to make sure that these thirty guys - which were never really thirty; eighteen or twenty-two - had to keep their head in line.

¹²⁶ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 115

¹²⁷ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 118

Santos here has pinpointed the policy embraced by the top military brass and American presidents from Kennedy onward of 'winning the hearts and minds'. When such an ideal competes with the safety of the military force that is supposed to be winning the war, Santos very easily defaults to protecting his men, and carrying out an important directive as an officer: protect these men while leading them in the systematic killing of Viet Cong soldiers. Though Santos is an officer (and thus his procession in adhering to the group norms is understated in comparison to the regular infantrymen in this project), I include him as an exemplar of a soldier who, by embracing his unit as a whole, finds motivation to fight.

Frank McCarthy continues this pattern, and describes his association with his fellow platoon mates as follows:¹²⁸

We had a tremendous amount of esprit de corps. For a year we learned everything about the 1st Division and all its traditions and great battles, being the first in combat. The D-day Normandy invasion, Italy, Africa ... they were everywhere and just great. We were going to carry on that tradition.

Even before they are assigned missions in country, the tradition of McCarthy's company binds him together not only with the other members present, but connects him with all those men who have served in the 1st Division before him.

After the platoon loses some men after a mine is tripped, the effects of these connections are borne out. 11 men in total are killed in this episode from early in McCarthy's tour (which lasted from October 1965 to March 1967), a loss that¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden*, 106

¹²⁹ Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden*, 107

absolutely enraged [us] because for the previous years we had all been very close. Every weekend our families would visit. We knew guys' wives, mothers, and fathers, their kids. And when they died it enraged us. We wanted to find the VC and kill them. But at that point it was very difficult to find them.

We'll see this kind of virulent reaction again when we return to Leroy TeCube's narrative below.

Exemplars like Santos and McCarthy can be profitably contrasted with a soldier like James Hebron, a scout sniper in the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, stationed at Khe Sanh from August 1967 to February 1968. Hebron describes feeling isolated from the group of soldiers he served with, as he was a singular replacement for the platoon. He speaks about how he¹³⁰

never got that sense of unit camaraderie It took so long to develop it... That kind of tightness should be developed in combat units to delay any kind of problems in a hot LZ. You know from the way the guy is behaving what is happening, you sort of read between the lines. It takes a long time to develop that. It just doesn't happen if you are going in as individual replacements. It just isn't there. It's like being new on the block...

This failure to be accepted into the group results in his starkly individualistic conception of his service in the war. He describes the feeling of having an enemy in his sights as a¹³¹ sense of power of looking down a barrel of a rifle at somebody and saying, 'Wow, I can drill this guy.' Doing it is *something else too* [sic]. You don't necessarily feel

¹³⁰ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 88-89

¹³¹ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 89

bad; you feel proud, especially if it's one on one, he has a chance. It's the throw of a hat. It's the thrill of the hunt. If you just keep it at that and don't go closer and try to anthropomorphize them and take pictures, it is all pure symbolism at that point. Indeed, an internal and symbolic representation of his combat works best for Hebron as he was not, while stationed at Khe Sanh, one of the “buddies”. Rather, he was an outsider sent in to replace a fallen comrade of the original set. Additionally, he was a sniper, and was assigned mostly solo missions at night. The demands of his assignments did not cohere with most others in the platoon, and thus he did not find much strength from the collective care that the platoon had for its members. His consent is of a profoundly different nature than that of most infantrymen described in this project. His view of the war begins and ends within his own mind; it is completely self-contained. The strength that is precluded from him by his platoon-mates becomes replaced with something more akin to a survival instinct, where his actions are justified as necessary to preserve his own well-being.

With these brief examples in mind, I will now delve into some longer accounts from veterans that show the effects of SCCT.

Following Leroy TeCube’s story in country, a similar trend makes itself apparent. Doing what, in the author’s estimation, “we had to do”¹³² becomes an exercise in SCCT. Tracking his experience through his year in country provides us with many great examples of how this theory can be readily applied to the ongoing process of an infantryman’s coping and combatting the spiritually debilitating hardships of war.

¹³² TeCube, *Year in Nam*, dedication page

TeCube gets his orders to report to the Americal Division (11th brigade, 4th of the 3rd infantry battalion), a division about which he is shortly thereafter educated extensively. When he first gets to his post in Chu Lai, his sergeant gives him and his platoon-mates a brief history of the Americal Division, including its founding in WWII, and a syllabus of its merits in American military history.

Though it's unclear whether this introduction finds any purchase with TeCube, if it does, he doesn't mention it. He is more focused on getting to know his platoon-mates. Upon receiving all of this new information about the war and their role in it, the men of the 23rd Infantry discuss their prospects. One GI, whom TeCube befriends and becomes close with over the course of the next year responds, when asked what he would do when he had to shoot a VC replies: "Me, I don't want to kill anyone."¹³³ TeCube describes him as "exemplif[ying] the average GI in the Vietnam War. He has been drafted. He was white and about nineteen years of age. He was of medium statue, and you could tell he had had a proper upbringing." Finally, GIs like Ladd had "the discipline needed to carry out orders."¹³⁴ This description suggests that TeCube feels like something of an outsider to the norm of infantrymen like Ladd. Through his experience fighting alongside such men in his unit, he will become more comfortable identifying with them as equals.

When TeCube first meets his platoon-mates, it takes them a matter of minutes to dub him with the sobriquet of "Chief," to which TeCube makes an interesting observation:¹³⁵

Most of the guys would call me Chief from then on, although a handful of

¹³³ TeCube, *Year in Nam*, 13

¹³⁴ TeCube, *Year in Nam*, 15

¹³⁵ TeCube, *Year in Nam*, 22

individuals called me by my real name. Up until that moment throughout my training no one even suggested calling me Chief. I wondered why that was so. Perhaps because as trainees we were used to being treated as animals and were addressed by our last names. Now here in Vietnam everyone had an identity. This phenomenon might be compared to the nicknaming process that social fraternities or other such camaraderie-engendering groups go through to establish clear identities and relationships for their membership. Perhaps TeCube has never been accepted by conventional society before (as he describes Ladd to be the exemplar of) and thus appreciates the acceptance of his platoon-mates even if it is based on a cultural stereotype. This feeling will become a source of strength throughout his entire tour.

TeCube's experience combines this intra-unit social dynamic with the exigencies of war. He takes an unusual interest in the culture of the Vietnamese peasants that his platoon comes across in the jungle, taking note of their agricultural practices and their diet. Though he spends a considerable amount of time recounting this information, it is only to rudely awaken us with a report from a firefight near the same village he had been observing. One of his platoon-mates, Guthrie, points out a heap of dead bodies left over from the skirmish. "At that instant," he thought, "I fully realized what war was all about. In the most simple terms it was merely kill or be killed."¹³⁶ This mantra of "kill or be killed" is in many ways the harsh reality of an infantryman. TeCube's membership status among his unit, as we will see, contributes directly to the willingness with which he accepts this decision as his duty in Vietnam.

After his first firefight, TeCube is rattled, but sustained. Like most of the rest of

¹³⁶ TeCube, *Year in Nam*, 32

his platoon, this is the first time TeCube has had to fire his weapon at the enemy, and he becomes aware of the disconnect between the idealized and the actual difficulty soldiers often have with firing their weapon at the enemy. Nevertheless, he does fire rounds in the general direction of the VC from his foxhole until they beat a retreat. "When the shooting subsided I felt a great sense of relief. Not from the idea of shooting to kill, but from being a team player. I knew then that I would do my part in the fight."¹³⁷ This is quite an important observation from TeCube in terms of SCCT. His real fears in this war reside less in his personal competency to fire his weapon and kill his enemy, but in being considered outside of the group of men in his platoon, of being considered an outsider from their social constructs. He translates between firing at the VC during a firefight and acceptance into this construct with acute facility.

After experiencing the loss of the first member of the platoon, (who was also a friend from his days in basic training at Ft. Polk) TeCube expresses another important element of the SCCT: "Charlie believed that such casualties caused us to fear him. In reality it only made us more resentful of him. None of us was scared, and we became intent on revenge."¹³⁸ This intent drives TeCube and, as we will see, his platoon-mates to avenge their fallen comrades in battle. The emotional valence of warfare is one that here repeats itself in something like an infinite feedback loop, and the bonds that TeCube has formed with these comrades make the subsequent reprisals all the swifter.

In describing combat, TeCube refers to an "animal" that would come out of him and drive him to kill the opposing VC. Oftentimes, this "animal" was born in the wake of the death of a good buddy or some other circumstance imbued with similar pathos. Later,

¹³⁷ TeCube, *Year in Nam*, 43

¹³⁸ TeCube, *Year in Nam*, 48

when he hears reports of the My Lai massacre (perpetrated in a different section of "Pinkville" than where his platoon was stationed) in March 1968, he interprets it in these terms:¹³⁹

On the day of the My Lai Massacre the situation was ripe for the animal to emerge. Unfortunately, at My Lai it appears that the animal completely took over not just one individual, but a whole unit. When it did, the men were unable to stop it until it was too late...

In this description of the My Lai massacre, TeCube couches the episode in terms of what these men were willing to do for their buddies. This description presents the more dangerous side of SCCT, when executing military orders results in the deaths of innocent women and children. While it is likely a hard truth for TeCube to bear, he has been motivated by the same factors that he believes motivated the My Lai massacre.

Nevertheless, TeCube's time in country gives us a great example of the effects of SCCT. If he initially had misgivings about participating in Vietnam, they were quickly allayed by the thought that his service was both a defense of his fellow infantrymen and also an affirmation of his own identity as part of his unit.

John Ketwig offers a similar story of relying on one's fellow infantrymen when in need. He perhaps presents an even starker example of the power of SCCT in lieu of his initial feelings about the war and the priority of national service. As he states in the introduction, he "didn't ask to go to The Nam," and he "wish[es] [he]'d never seen the

¹³⁹ TeCube, *Year in Nam*, 99-100

things [he] did.”¹⁴⁰ Chillingly, he ends the introduction with the confession: “I don't want my children to see the world I have known.”¹⁴¹ Nonetheless, the memories of Vietnam possess deep emotional valence for Ketwig, and he ends the introduction by confessing that he. This begs the question of just why Ketwig wants to revisit this painful portion of his life.

Is the truth of Vietnam possibly too much for his children to bear? Whatever the answers to this question, Ketwig's nostalgia¹⁴² for his time in Vietnam is both something abhorrent and necessary, something that he feels must be preserved in writing for future generations, but must also be guarded from those generations because of its sheer unpalatability. These feelings about his past hint at the deep emotional quagmire that the war had become for him, and are thus a fertile ground in which to form bonds of friendship with the other men around him.

Unwillingness to perform received national duty is a major theme of the memoir, and Ketwig wants to demonstrate how he got through his deep reservations about serving in Vietnam. He begins the memoir with a quote from Benjamin Franklin:¹⁴³

It has been for some time a generally received opinion that a military man is not to inquire whether a war be just or unjust; he is to execute his orders. All princes who are disposed to become tyrants must probably approve of this opinion.... but is it not a dangerous one? Since, on that principle, if the tyrant commands his army to attack and destroy not only an unoffending neighbor nation but even his own subjects, the army is bound to obey... the slavery then of a soldier is worse

¹⁴⁰ Ketwig, *...and a Hard Rain Fell*, 13,

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Using the ancient Greek meaning of this word, which means literally "the pain from an old wound," and not how it is used in conventional American English argots as wistful longing for a time past in one's life

¹⁴³ Ketwig, *...and a Hard Rain Fell*, frontispiece

than that of a negro.

It is clear that Ketwig agrees with this characterization of the military man. In being drafted, his fear of losing his individuality and free will begins to mount, manifesting in deviant behavior while in basic training at Fort Dix. During this time, he took pride in flouting the dictates of the Drill Instructors; spending mere seconds longer during his meal times than was allotted "was [his] secret, [his] token individuality, and they were never able to strip it away."¹⁴⁴

After making the trip across the Pacific, he is stationed in the Central Highlands near Pleiku. Had he been near the coast, Ketwig would have "tried to swim east til [he] drowned."¹⁴⁵ He later claims that he "felt no sense of duty"¹⁴⁶ upon arriving in country. However, this attitude changes after a few months in country. Upon arriving in Pleiku, he meets a few men who he had known in basic training. He remarks how "it was good to be with old friends in this hostile and depressing environment."¹⁴⁷ After time, he grows closer to his platoon-mates. They become a social safety net in which he can trust and grow to cope with his time in the war. They "showed [him] how to tuck in the mosquito net to make it rat proof, how to lay out [his] combat gear in case Charley paid us a visit in the night, and how to shave in the dim glow of a candle."¹⁴⁸

Like Ludwig Wittgenstein before them, these men experience the common plight of excruciating drudgery that goes along with being an infantryman. Whatever its negative effects, it also serves to bind them together under the collective identity of

¹⁴⁴ Ketwig, *...and a Hard Rain Fell*, 18

¹⁴⁵ Ketwig, *...and a Hard Rain Fell*, 7

¹⁴⁶ Ketwig, *...and a Hard Rain Fell*, 9

¹⁴⁷ Ketwig, *...and a Hard Rain Fell*, 33

¹⁴⁸ Ketwig, *...and a Hard Rain Fell*, 35

infantrymen. In this identity, they find strength. Ketwig muses at great length about the hardships of war:¹⁴⁹

How would you react? Would you survive? In one piece? Every second brought you nearer to it. How would you die? Loved ones were far, far away; almost a fantasy. In their place you had come to love the guys, the buddies. You knew you were all experiencing the most horrendous, dangerous, profound experience of your lives. As the strongest steel is tempered by fire, you knew the friendships made in this pressure-cooker atmosphere were special.

Still he is able to partially redeem his time there in virtue of the friendships that he has developed simply by being associated with other men stuck with a similar fate.

When an opportunity arises to drive a truck in a convoy heading to nearby Dak To, Ketwig volunteers because he wants to seize this opportunity and control his own fate in the war, rather than letting the war approach him unawares:¹⁵⁰

In my comfortable youth, I had never been forced to face a situation of such awesome importance. The tension had grown unbearable. I had to know how I would act under fire; and the convoy offered the opportunity to find out. Today. In a few hours. The opportunity to find end the agonizing waiting, and to face both Charley and myself, out on the road to Dak To, away from my friends. If I failed, I would not directly threaten the guys.... If I have to meet the Viet Cong, let it be at the steering wheel.

While he still seeks other ways of avoiding an undignified fate, Ketwig still considers the safety of his platoon-mates in making this decision.

¹⁴⁹ Ketwig, ...*and a Hard Rain Fell*, 38

¹⁵⁰ Ketwig, ...*and a Hard Rain Fell*, 44

One last piece of John Ketwig's story to consider is the antagonism that he develops for the Army administration. While this might not be as surprising for someone like Ketwig (as opposed to someone like Sgt. Allen Paul, who was pretty gung-ho before he went to Vietnam), it does continue the trend of infantrymen bonding with their fellow servicemen while becoming detached from the formal administrative side of the Army. While jawing with another infantryman in the Kontum Highlands, Ketwig considers what the arrangements might look like if he were to die in Vietnam. "I hadn't thought about it. If I went home in a box, I didn't want the army involved in my funeral. Fuck 'em. I hadn't asked for any of this. I wasn't a hero. I would have to write to the folks, tell them not to allow a military funeral."¹⁵¹ Ketwig's determination to escape the auspices of the military show that his service, while binding him close to some, has alienated him even more from others.

John Ketwig further demonstrates the power of SCCT. While he was blatantly unwilling to adhere to a military culture in basic training, he proved much more amenable to associating with the men with and for whom he fought. Thus, his service was likely a defense of his buddies first and foremost, considerations of national duty and patriotism notwithstanding.

In 1978, Sgt. Allen E. Paul published a collection of letters he had written to both his mother and father and his girlfriend Beverly while in training and serving in Vietnam. He was deployed to Vietnam about ten years prior, in April of 1968, arriving back to America approximately one year afterwards.

¹⁵¹ Ketwig, ...*and a Hard Rain Fell*, 56

His letters demonstrate a reversal in opinions of sorts, but certainly not one engaged in the stated ideological reasons that President Lyndon Baines Johnson had for escalating American involvement in Vietnam in 1964. He states quite unequivocally that his letters "ha[ve] nothing to do with the political aspects of the war or the foreign policy of the times." They are "just one man's story of the war and how he saw it."¹⁵²

Despite this, Paul's example provides an interesting and instructive narrative of faith and disillusionment and the resulting mindset of someone who has gone through such an experience. His time in Vietnam is a good example of SCCT given his huge desire to be part of a certain division even before his tour begins. As we'll see, this desire quickly becomes a stronger motivator of his service than his overall allegiance to his country's war effort. While Paul entered the war believing in the righteousness of national service and holding somewhat glorified ideas about the 1st Cavalry Division in which he would eventually serve, he came to question the methods by which the American military was pursuing their goal in South Vietnam by the end of his service. His story illustrates another piece of the SCCT.

Prominent in the first letters Paul sends home during basic training is his desire to be a member of the 1st Cavalry Division. In a letter dated Nov. 5 1967, he hails them as an exalted division in the Army, saying, "the 1st Cav. really has beaten ass this past week in Nam. My Boys!! I hope."¹⁵³ As he is shipped out, he tells his parents, in a letter on the 26th of April, 1968 to "keep [their eyes] on the news for the 1st Cav."¹⁵⁴ Upon first arriving in country, Paul notes the relatively buoyant morale of the men he is with,

¹⁵² Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, author's note

¹⁵³ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 1

¹⁵⁴ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 17

chalking it up to a common identity in the Division: "The moral of most of the men seems pretty high. In fact, I'm quite surprised, but this fact might be because we are in the 1st Cav. - I don't know. I had my 1st Cav. combat patch put on my fatigues and it really makes you feel a little pride in yourself, even if you have to go through this hell to get it."¹⁵⁵ While this is never made clear in the collection, Paul likely has had previous exposure to this division, causing membership in it to be a strong modeling and motivating factor for him as a volunteer.

Paul's memories are not immune to the more unseemly aspects of the war. After spending a few months in country, he begins to describe the American presence in South Vietnam more as an occupational than a liberation force. "At times," he writes in a letter to Beverly in early July, "this place reminds me of Paris under the Nazi occupation because we do whatever we want, and the people really have no say about their own welfare or their country's. Its always the people that suffer the most when their country comes under military occupation."¹⁵⁶ He makes a crucial change in his MOS while in Vietnam, switching from his position as an artilleryman to operating a radio in the field alongside the infantry. Among the reasons that he lists - boredom, rank, money - is a new status with the 2nd unit of the 5th Cavalry Division, or as Paul puts it, "the unit that relieved Khe Sanh."¹⁵⁷ Apparently fed up with the anonymity of his job on the artillery squad and desirous of a job where he can participate in what can very loosely be called the more "social" aspects of the war, Paul becomes exposed to how the fight was being carried out in the jungles and hamlets of Vietnam in the most minute detail. What he

¹⁵⁵ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 18

¹⁵⁶ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 65

¹⁵⁷ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 66

experiences in this new position will eventually drive him to seriously reconsider his allegiance to certain aspects of the American military.

His closer contact with the uglier side of war and the sight of casualties amongst the platoon he follows prompts a closer examination of the human cost of the war; he begins to wonder if such a cost is justified compared to what is being accomplished. In collecting the remains of the pilots from two downed Hueys, Paul is struck by grief: "I feel so sorry for their families - at times it all seems so senseless to me!"¹⁵⁸ In his later letters, these antagonisms take a more palpable shape. Saying at one point that he "hate[s] the army and the war,"¹⁵⁹ he even goes so far as to dream about a book he wants to write, a compilation of all of the notes that he has taken in the field which would "not be in favor of this damn war."¹⁶⁰¹⁶¹ This antagonism stems not from any ideological opposition to the war's cause, but rather from negative responses to what Paul sees as inefficiency and incompetence on the part of the officer class. He develops an especially virulent dislike of the officer class, writing to his parents that he has "seen some of the poorest examples of leadership over here, and [that he's] surprised that more men have not been killed because of their stupidity!!"¹⁶² Whether Paul ever begins to question the motivations of the war, as opposed to criticizing its prosecution, remains unclear. In a letter address on January 13, 1969, he recounts "[seeing helicopters] bring in more dead G.I.'s, and I always ask the question Why? I just can't understand it."¹⁶³ What remains clear is his somewhat hostile attitude taken towards the prosecution of the war and its

¹⁵⁸ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 70

¹⁵⁹ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 72

¹⁶⁰ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 84

¹⁶¹ It can only be assumed here that this dream crystallized in this collection of letters culled for this project.

¹⁶² Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 88

¹⁶³ Paul, *Vietnam Letters*, 90

moral cost both in terms of American and Vietnamese lives.

Paul arrives back in the United States on April 18, 1969. His letters don't provide much evidence of his last thoughts on the war, but we can safely assume that he received an honorable discharge. In remembering the war, he shows a more definitive allegiance to his division and its collective identity while criticizing the broader costs of the war. It is likely that Paul is able to maintain these two standards because of the pride that he shares with other members of his unit.

These long narratives are valuable for the perspectives they provide both on the hardships of war and the relief provided by the fellowship of one's buddies. To further draw out this point, I'll look at two great accounts of what was perhaps the most storied company of the Vietnam War.

ii. Charlie Company

"We were the unwilling working for the unqualified to do the unnecessary for the ungrateful. This is about as truthful as you can get."

-Kit Bowen of Charlie Company, in a letter to his father, 1968, from *Charlie Company*

In the existing memoirs of the Vietnam War, many make references to Charlie

Company as being one of the most well-known of all companies under the umbrella of MACV (Military Assistance and Control, Vietnam). I'll initiate this discussion with two memoirs from members of Charlie Company. Both make similar arguments, but arrive at their conclusions by dissimilar routes. What is common between them is a running theme of the company's collective identity as being highly valuable in the minds of its membership. The men of Charlie Company took pride in being a part of this storied company, even if in the context of a war for which they had mixed feelings.

In *Charlie Company: What Vietnam Did To Us*, co-authors Peter Goldman and Tony Fuller speak in passionate detail about their tours of duty as members of this hallowed group. They tell stories of men at war and boys at play, and paint a picture of their times in Vietnam filled with bravery and fear, duty and camaraderie. Altogether, there book is an excellent stepping stone towards grasping the mentalities that existed in many different companies throughout Vietnam, and are likely observable in war as a human endeavor.

Before getting into the positive descriptions of Charlie Company, Goldman and Fuller couch their story in general terms of the war context. The story of Charlie Company¹⁶⁴

is not military history in any formal sense; it is not, that is, the record of general staffs and grand strategies, or of territory seized and held, or of great battles won or lost. Vietnam was not that sort of war, and Charlie Company's piece of it was fought over bloodied patches of ground that could not be found on maps and that nobody really wanted anyway.

¹⁶⁴ Goldman & Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 7

In this general respect, this description of Charlie Company is a metaphor for the focus of this project as a whole. It deliberately focuses on the experiences of only a certain set of men who served in Vietnam, namely, the infantry, or those who did most of the fighting and dying. While the names of the general and political leaders make it more often into the history books, the perspective of the infantryman, as I've stated before, should not be ignored. It can demonstrate for us fascinating aspects of military history not evident in studying only the famous campaigns, battles, and those who called the shots throughout.

After making this opening point, Goldman and Fuller begin to establish the credentials of Charlie Company, describing its tough assignment and its even tougher membership. Assigned a particularly hostile part of the country,¹⁶⁵ the men of Charlie Company "made, and for a time basked in, a barracks notoriety as a rough, tough, take-no-prisoners fighting force that seemed to trail trouble in its magnetic field. When another company would get in a jam and have to be lifted out by chopper, it was Charlie Company that went back for the bodies."¹⁶⁶ And they weren't just rowdy and dangerous; they were tough as nails. The red shoulder patch of Charlie Company became in the minds of its membership a coveted possession, a definitive mark of toughness tested and masculinity proven. As Goldman and Fuller had been told during their orientation presentation to Charlie Company:¹⁶⁷

It was said in Charlie Company that the Big Red One shoulder patch was born the day a doughboy in the Great War caught a piece of shrapnel in the ass, ripped off a fragment of what was left of his underpants, daubed a numeral '1' on it with his

¹⁶⁵ North of Saigon and stretching over Vietnam to the Cambodian border. This section will later come to be known as the "Iron Triangle," and many vets who were stationed there refer to it as such.

¹⁶⁶ Goldman & Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 29

¹⁶⁷ Goldman & Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 27

own blood and fixed it to his sleeve. The division brought back five Medals of Honor from that war, winning what some historians consider the turn-of-the-tide battle at a wayside town in France called Cantigny. It rang up sixteen more cutting a swath of fire across North Africa, Sicily, France, Belgium, and Germany in World War II.

So, not only did Charlie Company achieve a particular identity during the Vietnam War, but its membership had an entire history of military success and glory upon which to base their identity. By informing men of the history of their companies, the collective identity became something that infantrymen in Vietnam could grasp as real.

By establishing this kind of identity, the men of Charlie Company reinforced a normativity that prescribed for new members a certain set of accepted behaviors and attitudes. To truly be a member of Charlie Company was not just a matter of being assigned, but rather assimilating this group identity of toughness and rowdiness. This common identity bound the men of Charlie Company together, and made them fiercer defenders of the identity and the buddies that they made.

Friendships were a powerful source of strength in Vietnam, but also a palpable risk. There was, in the context of hot war, “something leveling about 'Nam with its democracy of death.” As a result, the sheer fact of service in such a context “made friendship hard because there were too many painful goodbyes.” However, it remained a necessity if for nothing else than to palliate the struggle. In “'Nam,” you needed friendship “because you needed friends to survive.”¹⁶⁸ “Survival,” then, can be taken here in two different senses. First, in its biological sense, your buddies in the bush, as we saw

¹⁶⁸ Goldman & Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 40

with William E. Merritt, were your unofficial bodyguards. Second, in its psychological sense, your buddies in the bush provided solace not only through companionship, but also through their supporting roles as members of the same collective identity.

The combination of friendships formed and collective identity embraced was born out in the after-hours antics of Charlie Company. Of course, in a war like that in Vietnam there were no true periods of ceasefire, VC ambushes and mortar attacks often occurring at night. However, in whatever downtime Charlie Company could secure while in country, Goldman and Fuller recall a pretty raucous time. The men were “raucous as frat boys and mean as snakes, nearly as fearsome to the cadre on their own home base as they were to the VC out in the boonies...” After the “last truck would clear, and the MPs, in tribute to the company’s feral reputation, would draw the concertina wire across the road behind them – *as if to say, okay ... we don’t want you people going anywhere, and if anybody escapes, we’re gonna kill you.*”¹⁶⁹ The men reveled in this type of treatment by their superiors, as it affirmed everything that made it desirable to be a member of Charlie Company. Just as they were special in the field given their reputation for toughness and effectiveness, they were revered as wild and crazy partiers, who needed to be quarantined during their downtime.

These downtime parties were also an important crucible wherein intra-company unity was forged. Such periods of their tours were:¹⁷⁰

where the men of Charlie Company were permitted to be boys again – to be as rowdy as hell week at the Deke (Delta Kappa Epsilon) house and as macho as a street gang defending its turf. Sometimes they would turn deadly serious, in boozy

¹⁶⁹ Goldman & Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 64

¹⁷⁰ Goldman & Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 65

imitation of the war they had left behind in the bush... But mostly the sport at Lai Khe [a party haunt of Charlie Company] was of a post-adolescent sort, half beer bust and half pot party, drinking or smoking in part to forget where you were and in part so you could brag the morning after about how wrecked you had got the night before. It was all for laughs, and sometimes the quality of the wit could be unmercifully strained...

This type of carousing played an incomparable role in binding units together, and in intertwining men's fates to the others with whom they served. It was here that they could unwind and get to act 'normal,' normalcy being defined as everything that you couldn't do when on official duty. Goldman and Fuller note this attitudinal dichotomy in saying that the men:¹⁷¹

were boys at play in those interludes when the war did not require them to be men; their sport and their memory of it were all beer, smoke, and braggadocio. But there was a strain of desperation to their comedy as well, a primal scream of laughter in the valley of the shadow of death. You would party all night ... but in the morning you had to shake off your hangover, go over to headquarters and take care of business.

So, friendships were formed, and the collective identity of the company was strengthened both by combat and in downtime. Whatever the context, Charlie Company made sure that any time spent went towards hardening the social ties between its membership. As these ties strengthened, service for their participants became that much easier. This is not to say that one's buddies eliminated completely the struggle of military service, but simply

¹⁷¹ Goldman & Fuller, *Charlie Company*, 66

made it more tolerable.

So, if Goldman and Fuller present a story of hardships combatted with the establishment and embracing of a desirable reputation among a company of men, Norman L. Russell in his memoir *Suicide Charlie: A Vietnam War Story*, paints a similar picture but with different colors. Nonetheless, the collective identity of Charlie Company surely played a very important role in the lives and perspectives of its members. They did not rely, as the men described by Tim O'Brien in the above passage from *The Things They Carried*, on solely internal factors to help them through this difficult time in their lives. In many ways, their service was motivated by those who went through the experience with them, and the bonds of friendship and love that were so thoroughly created based on that shared experience.

Suicide Charlie: A Vietnam War Story gives us a more personal account of what Goldman and Fuller are seeking to describe: the collective identity of Charlie Company in Vietnam, and how that identity affected the behavior of the company's membership. Written by Norman L. Russell in 1993, this account presents in beautiful prose his experience being drafted and trained, and eventually serving from 1968 to 1969. Like other veterans cited in this project (Kovic, O'Brien), Russell chooses to present certain episodes of his service as anachronisms. Before we hear about his life before the war or his experience in basic training, he gives us his first impression on joining Charlie Company, or as he will come to know it "Suicide Charlie," in the field:¹⁷²

All through the first day, and the second we chopped at the hard soil, burrowing

¹⁷² Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 3

into the ground with the instructive determination of dung beetles. Charlie Company, 4th of the 9th, was the name of my unit. Suicide Charlie, more commonly. A company of survivors. They'd come by their name honestly. Three weeks before, they had lost most of their comrades in an ambush. It wasn't the first time. We were the replacements for dead men.

It's important to note that Russell will refer to the company almost universally by the sobriquet of "Suicide Charlie" for the rest of the memoir. It becomes a persona for him, something that he can become part of along with the other men in the company. Russell places this episode early in the memoir, deliberately throwing off the linearity of his memory to emphasize this point. He was not primarily an individual fighting in Vietnam, but a member of the storied "Suicide Charlie" Company, and he wants his reader to remember this. As he progresses through the memoir, the initial misgivings Russell had about his service in Vietnam develop into palpable antagonisms. In many ways, membership in Suicide Charlie plays a key part in Russell's confrontation with his own rebelliousness and moral unease with what he is required to do.

Before I say more about Russell's development while in country, I'll give a little background information about who Russell was before he went to war. This will help illuminate some of his behavior during his tour. Early in the memoir, he recalls a conversation he had with a Navy enlistee from his hometown named John. In the conversation, John questions Russell about his recently being drafted: "What are you going to do Norm? Go to Canada? Go to jail?" As Russell well knows, "His real question goes unspoken, but I know what he's thinking. It's been on all of our minds. Do I think

that I could kill?"¹⁷³ This question will resurface again as Russell goes through the tumultuous process of reconciling with being drafted. It appears that he does not have the same kind of community- or family-based influences that Lewis Puller did. If he does, they are clearly not having the same effect.

The images of the war that he sees on television exacerbate Russell's self-doubt. Still, he will eventually decide to answer the draft for what he considers humanitarian reasons:¹⁷⁴

I watched the carnage on the nightly news like most everyone else, and the sight of it sickened me. I had my doubts about the War, and I didn't want to go to some appendix-shaped country halfway around the world to be maimed, killed, or turned into a mental basket case because President Lyndon Johnson had an ego twice the size of Texas. But I couldn't duck out on my duty and let some other poor bastard of fight in my place just because I was scared.

Though he is unwilling to fight, the shame of having someone else die in his place because of this unwillingness functions as the trump card in this deliberation. He reports to Fort Benning in Georgia basic training ready for his duty, however fearful of what it might require of him. If Russell is to be believed here, these views will have serious implications for his behavior while in the field and his willingness to take another life when ordered to do so.¹⁷⁵

At basic training, Russell begins the process of cohering to a group norm.

¹⁷³ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 10

¹⁷⁴ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 14

¹⁷⁵ Though Russell may well not be the only veteran guilty of 'embellishing' his experience of the war as he remembers it to suit his own tastes as a storyteller, it should be mentioned here that his recounting of his experience at boot camp and while in country is told with a high degree of accuracy which was likely impossible to maintain during the time after he returned from his tour and began to write his memoir. Thus, his account may be, consciously or unconsciously, tweaked to cohere with other memories that he had.

Throughout his marching drills, he remarks about the feeling of abnegation that emerges along with the training regimen. While marching in the Georgia heat, “we learned to submerge our individuality into that of the group – and to someone who often had been cast in the role of outside it felt damn good to be part of a team.”¹⁷⁶ This remark is potentially key, as it is the first signpost that Russell is embracing rather than rejecting the group-oriented attitude of military service. His affections for his fellow servicemen begin to grow while still in training, and he values the friendships he forges with them. For several of his fellow boot camp trainees he:¹⁷⁷

took the opportunity to discuss the reasoning behind their enlistments.... They all gave pretty much the same answer. They came from poor families who lived in small rural towns and had no chance of going to college or finding a meaningful career. Rather than live a lifetime of punching the cash register at the local five & dime, they had taken the army up on its offer to let them see the world. It all made sense to them, but I remained unconvinced, unable to comprehend fully why anyone would voluntarily dress in uniform, put up with constant verbal abuse, and give up total control of his or her life to do so.

So, while he still appreciates being included as a member of the military, he is still hesitant to devote himself fully to the cause. The violence involved with military duty still keeps him partially alienated from the other people in training. Where he could build solidarity with them based on their common backgrounds, he remains somewhat aloof, unwilling to submit to the group mentality. However, he does attempt to build bridges with other soldiers who he feels might share his plight. After a day out on the firing

¹⁷⁶ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 28

¹⁷⁷ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 36

range, Russell concludes that “It's one thing to fire at pop-up targets on the rifle range, another to shoot at an actual human being.... Many soldiers, from the sounds of it, lacked the requisite fierceness to pull the trigger. And paid for it, immediately.”¹⁷⁸

While he is unable to get over his hesitation in using deadly force, the undertones of someone longing for social support are definitely there. It will take Suicide Charlie to really establish Russell's net of support when he most needs it. His time in country will test both his ability to trust others and to trust himself.

Russell gets stationed in the with “C” Company of the 25th Infantry Division in the Iron Triangle, the same geographic location that Goldman and Fuller described, about 100 miles north of Saigon and close to the Cambodian border. To the Vietnamese this place was known as the Tay Ninh province, but Russell rebrands it Mole City, a reference to the imputed affinity for tactical burrowing of the VC. He speaks of his platoon-mates with an author's relish, savoring the features that make them unique and at the same time, part of the unit's common identity. Kumo was, “a gifted story-teller who, like an good Hawaiian, played the ukulele.” Harry, “our squad leader, was an interesting fellow who seems oddly out of place and yet fit in, anyway.” Stan “walked around with the swagger of a sailor on shore leave.” Francis “came without pretensions. He was an aboriginal Bubba with a barrel chest and a pronounced drawl that was peppered with obscenities. A few of us made a bet one at as to who could get Francis to say a sentence without swearing. We all lost.”¹⁷⁹ The amount of detail he provides shows that Russell values these men for who they are in addition to the function they provide in the war. These bonds will be the bedrock upon which he builds what will become for him the social

¹⁷⁸ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 37

¹⁷⁹ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 49

construct of Suicide Charlie.

After spending a few days in Tay Ninh, Russell begins to feel an affinity for the place. He writes how "Mole City had become my home. As a child, I had always been an outsider. Being raised by a widowed mother when two-parent families were the norm may have been a factor... The army changed all that. Now I was part of a community of men and glad to be in it, considering the alternative."¹⁸⁰ This is the value of the company for Russell, and likely for many other soldiers like him in Vietnam. It is a place where they can feel safe, can feel as though they belong, even in the midst of the miserable drudgery and scarring horror of warfare.

This identity gets annealed after a large firefight, and a subsequent visit by the Army brass. Now that Russell has seen the VC, he is exposed to another party in Vietnam for whom he has palpable and understandable ill will. After the firefight, Mole City becomes the topic of discussion and cachet among the high ranks of the Army:¹⁸¹

A lot of very important people wanted to check us out, and it would do for them to stub their toes. We were about to become a Must See on the Vietnam Tour.

Admirals, four-star generals, perhaps the very people who sent us here to be killed, were coming to gawk at us and marvel at the fact that we were still alive.

The irony of the situation was obvious. I wouldn't have minded their dropping in for the day, if only they'd stayed the night.

Just as the process of fighting and defending each other contributes to the hardening of the bonds between and the strengthening of the identity of the membership of Suicide Charlie, this visit by the higher-ups in the military administration serves a similar

¹⁸⁰ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 54

¹⁸¹ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 65

purpose. This tension causes Russell to retreat more into the haven of his social construct.

As a result of this, the company developed its own perceptions of the validity of military service. Though they were willing to fight (as we shall soon see with Russell), they were not willing to accept the characterizations of their service that the officer class, and more importantly the imprimatur of their country's political institutions, offers.

Russell remembers how their captain would,¹⁸²

[b]efore he set us loose to party, [give] us a good-going-guys-you-earned-it pep talk, telling us that we were the most high decorated outfit in Vietnam. Nobody was much impressed, medals representing more of a curse than an honor. I don't know whether he got his numbers from Guinness or where but, given that a congenital coward such as myself had already been decorated twice for valor, there may have been some truth to this statement.

Here we can see how far detached Russell has become from the military hierarchy existing above his company. This detachment only drives him closer to the men in his unit and the collective identity they have established.

This adherence comes to fruition in a Russell's description of a firefight, in an anachronistic passage near the beginning of the memoir. As he and his buddies prepare for an assault, they¹⁸³

scurry out from our bunker and, for the moment, it is absolutely silent. It is the quiet before the thunderclap, the cut before the pain. Time is suspended as we wait for the ground attack; then the enemy opens fire and eternity begins... I crouch behind my parapet, transfixed by the bloodcry of the dark that comes from

¹⁸² Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 125

¹⁸³ Russell, *Suicide Charlie*, 6-7

beyond the grave. It calls to an ancient tribal memory buried deep in my soul. It is the voice of the Devil, screaming. Instinctively, I reach for my rifle. It is time we made our acquaintance, the Devil and I. I am an infantryman now.

Along with his identity as a member of Charlie Company, Russell has also come to accept that of an infantryman. To properly adhere to the prescribed group norms of the company, which he deems to be very desirable, protecting your buddies during a firefight is simply another prescribed behavior. That Russell, a self-diagnosed “congenital coward” finds himself able to do this is, I submit, due to SCCT.

To be sure, the bounds of SCCT should not be limited to infantrymen alone. This phenomenon is observable in a wide gamut of military positions, all of which have a reason to establish a collective identity. Major Michael Andrews served as a Platoon Leader for the “Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoon (CRIP), 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division in Dau Tieng from June of 1968 to June of 1969. This platoon was organized specially for the purpose of intelligence gathering.¹⁸⁴ Major Andrews had the power to select men from other units in the area, which bred an identity of privilege amongst those chosen. He remembers there being¹⁸⁵

an awful lot of esprit in the unit for many reasons. One was that it was perceived to be a very elite unit. It was different. It was important. I think the soldiers perceived that and did a better job, their enthusiasm was a little higher... There was a lot of teamwork. People know what to expect from the other person, and without question, it was a good hit to be with for that reason.

¹⁸⁴ To be sure, selection was likely based on an established record of combat experience.

¹⁸⁵ Santoli, *Everything We Had*, 187

We can see through the example of Maj. Andrews how collective identities were *not* limited to units that saw regular combat, even if they had served in a regular-combat capacity before. Rather, the function and prestige of being chosen for a specific company seems to have a lot to do with the willingness that the men of the CRIP have when performing their military duties.

iii. Survey Data

We've seen the personal accounts, now let's take another look at some survey data. As opposed to Section III, the questions here probe what might be hazier parts of these veterans' memories. As such, they are likely more susceptible to change over time and new experience. The first two responses we'll look at come from the statements: "My service was motivated by a desire to defend American and its values," (#11) and "My service was motivated by my family/community." (#12)

Table 2

	Infantry n=394	Non-Infantry n=1,084
Question #11	4.5	6.1
Question #12	5.9	6.2

These data cohere nicely with the trends pushing young men toward service as outlined in section III. There appears to be a sizable difference in initial motivations for service between infantry and non-infantry MOS's. While the latter seem to have an easier time putting their service in terms of national duty, the former are more hesitant to do so.

However, let's take a look at how these motivations compare with the socialization processes that came only as a condition of service itself: basic training and service in the field. This next set of data come from responses to the following two statements: "My service was motivated by the people I went through training with," (#13) and "My service was motivated by the men in my unit" (#14).

Table 3

	Infantry n=394	Non-Infantry n=1,084
Question #13	5.2	4.8
Question #14	6.5	4.3

These data seem to demonstrate that the average infantryman's motivation for service *increased* as he became more familiar with fellow service men through training and experience in the field. On the other hand, these same types of motivations seem to be, if not lacking, than certainly less potent among non-infantry servicemen. It must be mentioned however that these responses are based on memories that are in some cases almost 50 years old. They may well have been changed by a kind of 'distortive amnesia'.

What the data associated with survey questions #11-#14 demonstrate is an interesting difference between infantry and non-infantry servicemen in the Vietnam War. Overall, it suggests the motivation for service was initially lower for those who would become infantrymen than it was for those who wouldn't. As they became socialized through the process of training and through the process of fighting alongside their platoon-mates, only then did they find more satisfying reasons for service. This does not mean to imply that they began also to approve of the war's moral underpinnings or the

ways in which it was being prosecuted (as we've seen above perhaps the opposite is true), but simply that they had more compelling reasons for consenting to their service; namely, the men with whom they served and with whom they developed deep, nurturing, and oftentimes tragically short relationships. In contrast, those who did not serve in positions with regular combat seem to have relied more on their desire to uphold the values of the families and communities from which they have come. Since they were not disposed towards the kind of bonds forged in the heat of combat, their fellow servicemen do not play the same role as those of Infantrymen.

In his book *Against the Tide*, Lieutenant Colonel Peter B. Petersen, presents data supporting the conclusion presented in this section. He too compares "combat soldiers" to "headquarters soldiers" along many different criteria, testing both groups while in country and then again approximately 1 year after their discharges. When asking about each group's "preferences for social interaction," Petersen found that each group underwent a precipitous drop from their in-country level.¹⁸⁶ With respect to all of the data he lists, Petersen finds that "after they returned to the United States, the same group of individuals, when they were stationed as infantrymen in Vietnam, placed a significantly higher value on the approval from others, on social interaction, and on group participation."¹⁸⁷

In *Fields of Fire*, James Webb captures these sentiments nicely in describing the experience of a veteran returning home to an acutely unwelcome welcome home

¹⁸⁶ Petersen, *Against the Tide*, 172. This initial level of "preference for social interaction," taken while in country for both groups, was not very high to begin with and dropped considerably afterwards (from -3 to -46 for combat soldiers, and from -6 to -24 for headquarters soldiers)

¹⁸⁷ Petersen, *Against the Tide*, 173

reception:¹⁸⁸

‘Suffering,’ he had told them, with a stone-faced attempt at nobility, ‘is inherently undignified when shared.’ They had been sitting in an expectant circle in his parents’ living room, his brother and sister and their families, five grade-school children between them, two high-school friends, and his parents... ‘Oh, God,’ he had mumbled. ‘Oh, no.’ He then turned to his father. ‘Do you really have people in there?’

While he may well have depended, consciously or not, upon the support of his platoon-mates while in country, the thought of incorporating his family and friends into this group is clearly unwelcome. This is an interesting corollary to the research I have performed, and perhaps tells us something more about the effects of SCCT beyond the time a soldier spends in country.

iv. Conclusion

The biggest lesson to take away from this project is that war is first and foremost a social phenomenon for the people who actually do the fighting – these men did not serve in a vacuum. Thus, their willingness to follow orders should not be interpreted as an avowal of the overarching political agenda of their country. Just as military service is meant to condition them into the young men of tomorrow, their actual experiences in the

¹⁸⁸ Webb, *Fields of Fire*, 322

field condition them to accept the hardships of war through a shared identity and friendship with their buddies (however, as Petersen's research demonstrates, this *does not* translate into their postwar lives). This safety net makes it easier for those who had the toughest jobs in Vietnam to get through their tours and return home. Therefore, it makes it more difficult to level criticism against them for supporting the military agenda of the government that sent them to war in the first place. If anything, infantrymen came back from their tours with strengthened bonds of friendship, while their relationship with the military hierarchy and the war's general cause soured in many cases.

This project makes a positive and I believe accurate contribution to the understanding of Vietnam veterans, the war in which they fought, and, in a small way, military history. By looking closely at the specific motivations of these men, I have identified important reasons for their service that might not be clear to the casual observer. In coming to understand how wars can be fought for numerous different reasons, we can reach a fuller understanding of, and perhaps nurture healthier relationships with, the veterans in our society.

To return to the initial question of the project, the infantrymen surveyed here were not ideal consenters in the Zinnian sense. They did not by and large believe that service in Vietnam supported a political agenda that cohered with their inner most values and principles. Rather, they were subjected to the behavior modifying effects of Social Construct Consent Theory, and created networks of friendship and support to make the drudgery of warfare less taxing. Understanding these kinds of motivations for fighting in war gives us a better sense of the type of consent exhibited by men fighting for their countries in general, and we would be remiss to deem it as anything less than a hugely

important sociological phenomenon. And this seems entirely appropriate.

Appendix A: Participating Chapters of VVA and VFW

The following chapters of the VVA participated in the survey portion of this project:

Johnstown, PA; Media, PA; Reading, PA, Valley Forge, PA; Upper Bucks/Lower Lehigh, PA; Somerset County, PA; Blair County, PA; Rochester, NY; Glendale, NY; Mesquite, TX; Southeast, TX; Houston, TX; Alamo, TX; Dickinson, TX; Hill Country, TX; Riverside, CA; Redondo Beach, CA; Santa Barbara, CA; Redding, CA; Oakland, CA; Tonkawa, OK

The following chapters of the VFW participated in the survey portion of this project:

Washington Heights, PA; Angell-Bolen, PA; Bentz-Isles, PA; William Leavell, CA; Spring Branch, TX; Jack F. Lee, TX; Fridley, MN; Meles Jain, CO

Appendix B: Complete Survey Questions

1. Were you drafted or did you volunteer for service in the Vietnam War?
1 (Drafted) 2(Volunteered)
2. What was your Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)?
(answers grouped into “infantry” and “non-infantry” categories)
3. My first tour began on _____ & ended on _____
4. Did you volunteer for a 2nd tour?
1(Yes) 2(No)
5. My second tour began on _____ & ended on _____
6. I am from a military family.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. I am from a community where compelled military service is seen as a duty.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. I had reservations about enlisting (response only required for draftees).
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. I understood the military objective of the United States in South Vietnam before I was deployed.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. My service involved relatively frequent contact with enemy forces.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11. My service was motivated by a desire to defend America and its values.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
12. “ “ my family.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
13. “ “ the people I went through training with.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
14. “ “ the men in my unit.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
15. I am proud of my service during the Vietnam War.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
16. I had a good relationship with my officers.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
17. I had a high regard for the Vietnamese as people during my service.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
18. I had a high regard for the Vietnamese as soldiers for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) during my service.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
19. I had a high regard for the Vietnamese as Viet Cong (VC) soldiers during my service.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
20. I am unsure of how my service contributed to the aims of the war.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
21. Knowing what I know now, I would still have served in the Vietnam War.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Appendix C: Complete Survey Results

Survey Responses (1,478 received; 8,694 distributed; ~17% response rate)

Question #	Infantry MOS (n=394)	Non-Infantry MOS (n=1084)
1	1:112 2:282	1:285 2:799
2	As above	As above
3	Answers vary	Answers vary
4	1:13 2:381	1:37 2:1,047
5	Answers vary	Answers vary
6	5.2	6.1
7	5.8	6.3
8	5.5 (n=112)	4.5 (n=285)
9	1.9	2.3
10	6.6	3.2
11	4.5	6.1
12	5.9	6.2
13	5.2	4.8
14	6.5	4.3
15	6.3	6.1
16	4.8	5.8
17	3.8	4.3
18	2.0	3.3
19	1.6	2.1
20	6.2	5.6
21	5.3	6.4

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