Re-fighting America’s Vietnam War and confronting the Paradox of Imperial Consent

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Introduction: Groping toward a neo-Gramscian approach to geopolitics

Having spent most of the 1990s thinking about the politics of the world economy and contests over the meaning and future of globalization, I was both politically dismayed and professionally embarrassed by the turn toward more coercive forms of U.S. global power which masqueraded until the title Global War on Terror (with the appropriately Klingon-sounding acronym, GWOT) during the first decade of the 21st century (cf. Rupert, 2000, 2005). It seemed clear that my own work, but also more generally critical Marxian scholarship on world politics, had neglected the role of military force in creating and sustaining structures of global power. While a gratifying flow of scholarship has emerged attempting to re-think Marxian theories of imperialism and to theorize ‘the international’ within an historical materialist frame (see, for example, the various essays in Anievas, 2010), I have come to see my own potential contribution as a more modest one. In keeping with the broad emphases of my prior work dating back to my first book on Fordism (Rupert, 1995), I wish to return to the question of the historical structures of U.S. global power, but to do so in a way that is more attentive to the ways in which political economy and culture enable and support the coercive exercise of power on a global scale (Rupert, 2010b).

It has struck me as puzzling that a people whose political origin story centers around their successful struggle for independence from an oppressive colonial power should be able to project their own power repeatedly around the world, spreading domination in the name of liberty, without succumbing to self-doubt or even a healthy sense of irony. I have called this the paradox of imperial consent (Rupert, 2010b). How is it that Americans are unable to glimpse in themselves the imperial pretensions that most of the rest of the world so clearly sees as animating U.S. foreign policy? A large part of the answer, I think, lies in the mythology of American Exceptionalism, which casts American nationalism and American power as vehicles for the propagation of values that are presumed to be universal. Although these beliefs are hardly exclusive to neoconservatives, we are likely to find no clearer or more concise statement of this than in the writings of neoconservative policy intellectuals closely associated with the Bush Doctrine of U.S. military supremacy. On this view, American interests and American principles
are fused in a foreign policy that uses U.S. power to promote freedom around the world. In the words of William Bennett, “So long as we stay true to the principles of America’s founding, our self-interest as a great power will be inextricably linked to mankind’s universal interest in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Bennett, 2000: 304). According to William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “the American-led world order that emerged after the Cold War is a more just world than any imaginable alternative” (2000: 24). This not only sets U.S. foreign policy on a distinct moral plane but has -- or ought to have -- the happy effect of legitimating U.S. power in the eyes of the world: “It is precisely because American foreign policy is infused with an unusually high degree of morality that other nations find they have less to fear from its otherwise daunting power” (Kristol and Kagan, 2000: 22). This conflation of U.S. power with the cause of human freedom presents Americans with a kind of moral blank check in terms of which any action can be rationalized as serving not just American, but human interests. To the extent that this becomes a widely accepted presupposition, it provides broad legitimation for US global policy in the eyes of the American public, and absolves the public of responsibility for critical reflection on America’s role in the world.

As I have argued elsewhere (Rupert, 2000: chapter 2) narratives of American exceptionalism and the progressive role of American global power have become deeply anchored within popular common sense, helping Americans to make sense of their most profound world-historical experiences and providing languages of justification in terms of which America’s global role might be narrated. In the contemporary era, Andrew Moravcsik reports, “fully 71 percent of Americans see the United States as a source of good in the world… 70 percent have faith in their domestic institutions and nearly 80 percent believe ‘American ideas and customs’ should spread globally” (Moravcsik, 2005). Deeply embedded as they may be in American political culture and popular common sense, these beliefs are not simply hard-wired into the public mind: they must be culturally reproduced on an ongoing basis in the face of challenges large and small. Among the largest such challenge of the last hundred years has been the Vietnam War, and the widespread questioning of the nature of U.S. global power that the war provoked. The thesis of this paper is that a great deal of cultural energy has been, and continues to be, devoted to the cause of re-narrating America’s Vietnam War so that it can be comfortably accommodated within the familiar narrative of the morality of American power. The historical structures supporting American global power depend for their coherence upon this assimilation.

The Vietnam War and Popular Common Sense in the Imperial Homeland

In 1991, the historian Marilyn Young wrote insightfully of the cultural and political tensions swirling in the wake of America’s Vietnam War:

The course of the Vietnam War challenged all the axioms of the post-World War II world, and the ideological conviction the United States needs to pursue its global
dominion has yet to be recovered, if it ever can be. The Vietnam War remains today and is likely to remain for the foreseeable future a zone of contested meaning; and the struggle over its interpretation is central to American politics, foreign and domestic, and of American culture as well.

(Young, 1991: 313-14).

Among the presumptions of American political culture, underlying and enabling its exercise of global power, perhaps the most fundamental is that “this nation is always on the side of freedom and justice” and that its enemies are (and must be) intrinsically evil (1991: 314). It is precisely this dichotomous world view, along with the moral and political impunity it entails, which is at stake in those re-narrations of the Vietnam War which seek to recuperate America’s immaculate conception of its own global power.

Roots of Revisionism

The earliest accounts of the Vietnam war emphasizing themes now associated with right-wing revisionism came from military officers frustrated by the politics of the war; “By the summer of 1967, high-ranking military officers had become increasingly critical of what they considered unwarranted civilian limitations on military operations. …The hawks also believed that prospects for remedying strategic deficiencies were undermined by divisiveness at home, which not only was corrosive to national morale but aided the enemy” (Hess, 2009: 9). As President Nixon’s policies prolonged the war to obtain what he called “peace with honor,” the antiwar movement reached its peak with massive demonstrations in the fall of 1969. From the White House, Nixon addressed the nation, clearly implying that protests calling for “precipitate” U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam could be equated with betrayal:

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

(Nixon, 1969)

After the war, General Westmoreland, U.S. military commander in Vietnam 1964-68, lamented America’s abandonment of South Vietnam to Communist tyranny, reaffirmed the favorable qualities of American fighting men, and blamed civilian politicians, the media, and domestic opposition to the war for embracing Communist propaganda and fatally weakening the war effort.

As our soldiers were fighting and dying for the principle of liberty and the right to dissent, what did we see at home? Burning the flag, abusing public officials, destroying ROTC buildings, extolling the Vietcong, lying and cheating by young men to disqualify
themselves for military service… It encouraged our enemies, prolonged the war and sadly cost lives. …In a situation where our men’s lives were put on the line, it is lamentable that so many did all possible to erode support for a policy associated with six presidents… It is a sad commentary that our open society and our open political systems were masterfully manipulated by Hanoi and Moscow to serve their interests.

(Westmoreland, 1979: 39, 41)

Themes of valiant military men sacrificing in the name of liberty while misguided or mendacious civilians made it impossible to achieve victory in Vietnam have become staples of right-wing revisionism.

Reagan, Rambo, and Hanoi Jane

Elected in the aftermath of the Iran hostage crisis, which many Americans viewed as a national humiliation, Ronald Regan promised to strengthen the nation’s military so that America could once again “stand tall” in the world and vigorously support the cause of liberty with American power. Integral to this agenda was putting the Vietnam conflict of recent memory in the proper context, to which Reagan’s famously sentimental attitude toward American history and notoriously flawed memory was extraordinarily well-suited. Speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars about the need to confront Soviet Communism with a strategy of peace through strength, Reagan provided a comprehensive re-narration of the Vietnam War which reactivated a dichotomous Cold War world view, restored America to its position of righteousness, redeemed America’s fighting men, and placed the blame for war’s outcome on those who had opposed it. Almost entirely erroneous, Reagan’s fable of Vietnam was nonetheless compelling insofar as it resonated with self-understandings deeply embedded in popular common sense and tied them together into a more-or-less coherent narrative that seemed to make sense of an otherwise dauntingly complex and twisted historical conjuncture. “For too long,” candidate Reagan told the Veterans, “we have lived with the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’.”

Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors… Over and over they told us for nearly ten years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests. They had a plan. It was to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the field of battle in Vietnam… It is time we recognized that ours was in truth a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned. They fought as well and as bravely as any Americans have ever fought in any war. They deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern.
The lesson of Vietnam, Reagan continued, is that “we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win” (1980). As President, Reagan continued to repeat these themes. The following year Reagan presented the Medal of Honor to a soldier who performed heroically in Vietnam, summarizing the Vietnam experience in terms which suggested that the military had been betrayed by civilians and by their civilian leadership: “Several years ago, we brought home a group of American fighting men who had obeyed their country’s call and who had fought as bravely and as well as any Americans in our history. They came home without a victory not because they’d been defeated, but because they’d been denied permission to win” (Reagan, 1981). Later, Reagan suggested that the American military won its battles in Vietnam, so it was misleading to portray the war as having been lost: “We didn’t lose that war. We won virtually every engagement” (Reagan, 1985).² But despite the military’s successes, the media distorted the truth about victory in the noble cause, the public became disaffected and, in the end, Congress forbade funding for the military support that might have enabled South Vietnam to withstand the Northern offensive of 1975. American warriors, South Vietnamese anti-Communists, and ideals of freedom were betrayed by domestic opponents of the war.

Such narratives of Victory Betrayed became commonplace in the popular culture of the 1980s, with cartoonish movie heroes such as Sylvester Stallone (Rambo) and Chick Norris (Col. Braddock) returning to Vietnam to rescue American prisoners of war betrayed and abandoned by a government populated with self-serving bureaucrats and double-dealing politicians. Before agreeing to his return mission to Vietnam, Rambo famously asks: “Do we get to win this time?”; and his commander replies “This time it’s up to you,” implying of course that the last time it was not. And, employing all the violent means he wants, Rambo the hyper-masculine fantasy warrior returns to Southeast Asia to overcome Vietnamese resistance and American treachery, bring home the POWs, and redeem the Victory Betrayed. According to Bruce Franklin, by 1991 “69 percent of Americans surveyed in a Wall Street Journal / NBC News poll believed that Americans [were] still prisoners of war in Southeast Asia and 52 percent of those surveyed are convinced that the government is not doing enough to get them back” (Franklin, 1992: xi). Franklin’s history of this culturally resonant mythology suggests that it originated in the Nixon administration’s attempt to construct a publically acceptable rationale for continuing the war until a politically face-saving exit could be contrived. His investigation found “not a shred of verifiable evidence” that live POWs were still held in Vietnam (Franklin, 1992: 169). Yet, the mythology suggesting that men officially listed as Missing in Action are actually held as POWs has a firm grip on the public imagination, politicians pay ritual homage to the lobby groups which have emerged around this non-issue, and POW-MIA flags fly from public buildings and patriotic private properties across the country. Similarly embedded in popular culture, but devoid of evidentiary support, is the mythology of returning Vietnam veterans spat upon by anti-war activists. According to sociologist (and Vietnam vet) Jerry Lembcke, this mythology endures
because it “provides an alibi for why the most powerful and righteous nation on earth (as America perceives itself to be) lost the war to an underdeveloped Asian nation. The myth says, in effect, that we were not beaten by the Vietnamese but were defeated on the home front by fifth columnists”. In this way, “the responsibility for the loss of the war is shifted from those whose policies had failed to those who were critical of the policies all along” (Lembke, 1998: 184). Among those who are held by the militaristic right-wing to have betrayed the country during the Vietnam War, few are as bitterly reviled as Jane Fonda, the movie star and antiwar activist who traveled to Hanoi on a mission of peace and solidarity in 1972 and was photographed sitting at a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun. “Hanoi Jane” has become the very avatar of the treachery and danger lurking within the American cultural left: “Far more than a symbol of the military mission betrayed, Hanoi Jane represented the antiwar latent within the culture, the self-indulgent and rebellious underbelly of America that could, and did, turn hard men soft and cost the nation its victory in Southeast Asia” (Lembke, 2010: 38). By the 1980s, Reagan, Rambo, abandoned POWs, and Hanoi Jane were embedded in popular common sense, and could be called upon to articulate a powerful counter-narrative of Victory Betrayed and America emasculated in Vietnam. Echoing the notorious Nazi fable of the “stab-in-the-back” that purported to explain German acceptance of a harsh armistice despite the absence of crushing battlefield defeat in World War I, all of these popular mythologies speak of a virile and virtuous U.S. military which could have won in Vietnam had it not been undercut by the cultural left -- liberals, leftists, feminists, gays, and peace activists (Time, 1969; Kimball, 1988; Baker, 2006). In terms of this cultural narrative, restoring American greatness requires silencing these disloyal social forces, re-masculinizing America, and re-establishing the preeminence of a culture of militarism – which is to say that these mythologies embody a comprehensive conservative agenda for America and the world.

Television Wars

In 1983, America’s Public Broadcasting System (PBS) televised a 13-part documentary entitled *Vietnam: A Television History*. Taking six years to produce, the path-breaking series was a joint effort of PBS’s Boston affiliate (WGBH) along with British and French television production companies. Of its $4.6 million production cost, $1.2 million was underwritten by the National Endowment for the Humanities (Corry, 1983; Rothenberg, 1983; Shales, 1983; Butterfield, 1985; Public Broadcasting System, n.d.). Millions of American households watched the series, it was critically acclaimed, and won numerous awards. According to PBS:

> The series won television's top awards, including seven Emmys, the George Foster Peabody Award, the duPont/Columbia Journalism Award, the George Polk Award, two Writer's Guild Awards, and the Erik Barnouw Award of the Organization of American Historians. The duPont/Columbia jurors noted, "These 13 hours of spellbinding, journalistically exemplary television have deservedly been called a landmark in
Accolades notwithstanding, the series was the occasion for a public controversy about the meaning of the Vietnam War and its significance for Americans’ social identity, their collective sense of themselves in the world, their understanding of who they are and what they can and should do. While the series producers strove to maintain a reportorial tone without explicit editorializations, and were widely praised for their even-handedness, their narrativization of the war necessarily emphasized some aspects of this complex history and de-emphasized others. Thus, their emphasis on Ho Chi Minh’s nationalism was denounced by conservative groups as generating a more sympathetic portrayal than is warranted. By its relative de-emphasis of Ho’s Communist commitments and the sins of Vietnamese Communism (e.g., the Hue massacre of 1968), the PBS series understated the degree to which the war represented a ‘noble cause,’ and did a disservice to the Americans and South Vietnamese who fought to resist Communism. Reed Irvine, a pioneer of conservative media criticism and founder of Accuracy in Media (AIM), denounced PBS’s “blatantly pro-Communist propaganda” that represented “a glorification of Ho Chi Minh and denigration of our fighting men in Vietnam” (Irvine quoted in United Press International, 1986).

To produce an antidote, a counter-documentary, Irvine raised $120,000 from AIM membership while William Bennett, neoconservative chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities under Reagan, tapped a discretionary fund to provide AIM a grant for $30,000 to assist the project. Narrated by Charlton Heston, AIM’s documentary entitled Television’s Vietnam was completed in 1984 and enjoyed a well-publicized screening in the Reagan White House and an endorsement from the Gipper himself (Butterfield, 1985; Laurence, 1985; Unger, 1985; Accuracy in Media, 1984-85). In effect, the primary charge against the PBS series was that it narrated the story of the Vietnam War without privileging the familiar binaries of Cold War anti-Communism in which a unified global Communism menaced southeast Asia and the Free World more generally. According to Heston’s narration, the PBS series offers “no hint that two ways of life, one based on freedom, the other on Communism, were struggling for southeast Asia” (AIM, 1984). Ostensibly manifesting a pro-Communist bias, PBS failed to represent the roots of the Vietnam War in an invasion of independent, democratic South Vietnam by a foreign army from the North motivated and supported by globally expansionist Communism, and PBS downplayed the dire results for human rights after the U.S. abandoned southeast Asia to the Communists. Historian George Herring summarizes:

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

(Herring, 1987: 1123-24)

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

AIM’s indictment of the media went further than PBS and its 1983 Vietnam documentary. In the second part of AIM’s counter-documentary, Television’s Vietnam suggested that the American military had been close to victory in Vietnam but, in the words of Heston’s narration, “our will to win was eroded by the way our media, especially television, reported the war” (Heston quoted in Corry, 1986). AIM suggested that the media, public opinion, and US war policy had been successfully manipulated by Communist disinformation, and it was this manipulation which resulted in ultimate Communist victory. PBS was persuaded to air the first part of the AIM documentary in June 1985, followed by a panel discussion of AIM’s charges against the original PBS documentary. When PBS declined to show the second part of AIM’s film contending that the media had in effect lost the war, Irvine threatened to seek Congressional de-funding of PBS (McCloskey, 1986). Individual PBS affiliate stations apparently decided to broadcast the film in their own local communities during fall, 1986. Subsequently, AIM distributed the film itself by advertising in conservative outlets. A full-page advertisement published in National Review (April 10, 1987) featured a giant headline that asked “Who betrayed those who died in Vietnam? Was it our own media?” (Culbert, 1988: 255). In this way, the contest over public memory was extended to the public airwaves and home TV screens as the first major attempt to present a popular video history of the Vietnam War rekindled debates potentially implicating the nature of US global power. The conservative backlash was not idiosyncratic, and needs to be understood in this broader context.

Fighting the Global War on Terror with Yellow Ribbons

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2001, the United States launched a series of military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. The roots of this so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) are complex, and will not be dug up here (for an overview, see Rupert and Solomon, 2005: chapter 5). Rather, I want to focus on the ways in which American militarism
reproduces itself culturally, through the omnipresent yellow ribbons, messages commanding the public to “Support the Troops,” and attempts to combat the effects of a Vietnam Syndrome in which the public supposedly became disaffected from the military and the war, robbing us of the victory that might have been. While Bush the elder famously declared that America had finally kicked the Vietnam Syndrome after its 1991 military victory in Kuwait, there is abundant evidence that considerable cultural energy continues to be devoted to putting the Vietnam genie back in the bottle of American Exceptionalism (Franklin, 2000: 23-46). For those who embrace the lessons of Vietnam offered by conservative revisionists, it is essential to avoid a repetition of that self-inflicted disaster if America is to play its self-appointed role as global defender of freedom and scourge of terrorists.

To preclude a recurrence the Vietnam Syndrome during the GWOT, the Pentagon has conducted an astonishingly vigorous and comprehensive public relations campaign that provides it with public visibility and with a familiar, readily accepted presence across a wide array of popular cultural activities. During the Bush Administration, this included a program explicitly designed to encourage Americans to support US troops, and to create among US military personnel an impression that their efforts and sacrifices are valued back home and that the American public stands behind them as they continue the occupation of Iraq and the indefinite war on terror. This double-edged sword aimed at both a public and a military audience was called America Supports You (ASY). Allison Barber, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Internal Communications and Public Liaison, was in charge of the American Forces Information Service, parent organization of American Forces Press Service (AFPS) and the military magazine Stars and Stripes, as well as ASY. Explaining the mission of ASY in an environment when support for the occupation of Iraq was waning and Bush administration approval ratings were in free fall, Barber wrote in January 2007: “the American people are beginning to fatigue, even in their support for the troops …I don’t think we have a minute to lose when it comes to maximizing support for our military, especially in the new political environment” (Barber, quoted by Source Watch).

According to AFPS, “The Defense Department launched [ASY] in November 2004 to showcase support for the country’s men and women in uniform from the American public as well as the corporate sector” (Miles, 2008). With the aid of a multi-million dollar contract with a private public relations firm, a private foundation called the America Supports You Fund, major corporate partners such as Wal-Mart and Microsoft, and hundreds of local affiliate groups, ASY organized mass “Freedom Walks” in over fifty cities nationwide to commemorate 9-11 and encourage hyper-patriotic militarism. They sponsored pro-troop events at NASCAR and Indy 500 auto races, and induced professional wrestlers, golfers, baseball players, and rodeo cowboys and to publicly express their support; developed a special “teaching supplement” for inclusion in the Weekly Reader to encourage grade school kids to be grateful to and express support for US troops; and sponsored mass campaigns cajoling people to write appreciative text messages ostensibly sent to troops serving overseas at Thanksgiving. Also, ASY teamed up with
Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry to send holiday care packages to the troops and partnered with Wal-Mart to donate laptops, toys, food and cash to military families at Christmastime. They sponsored a special holiday “CD for the troops” in which 13 recording artists contributed songs downloadable free of charge to service members; and distributed an ASY Calendar of Support highlighting occasions throughout the year when ASY wished to prompt outpourings of public support. ASY strategically targeted a mix of old and new media: in addition to a radio show, ASY launched a blog and a My Space page, and uploaded videos to You Tube. On every important holiday throughout the year, and across a range of popular cultural activities and venues, ASY organized mass expressions of popular support for the troops.

Ostensibly apolitical, one of the underlying purposes of the ASY program was to combat the Vietnam Syndrome in which popular opposition to US militarism was perceived as undermining the ability effectively to deploy military force overseas, as an AFPS report backhandedly suggested: “Barber, who heads the Defense Department’s internal communications and public liaison programs, said service members returning from war today are returning to heroes’ welcomes, unlike their Vietnam-era counterparts. ‘Vietnam has not happened yet because of you,’ she said [to an audience of ASY activists]” (Barber paraphrased and quoted in Quigley, 2007). President Bush repeatedly encouraged public participation in ASY as a way to support the GWOT: “Our troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and other fronts in the war on terror are serving in a cause that is vital and just. And on this Fourth of July, I ask every American to find a way to thank the men and women who are defending our freedom and the families that support them.”(Bush quoted in Miles, 2007). Bush lauded ASY for sending the troops a message of unstinting support for “the vital work [they] do to achieve victory in Iraq”(Bush quoted in Quigley, 2007). And ASY is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. The Military-Industrial-Cultural complex is deeply entangled with movies and television, sports, video games and the internet, schools, and colleges (Bacevich, 2005: chapter 4; Giroux, 2007; Turse, 2008). Himself a former army officer and political conservative, the militarization of American culture has been highlighted, and lamented, by Andrew Bacevich (2005:2):

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

To legitimate himself and his war in Iraq, President Bush (in)famously sought to play on these powerful cultural themes, triumphantly emerging from a navy jet in full fighter pilot regalia and striding manfully across the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln to bask in militarized glory and celebrate “mission accomplished” in the wake of the initial US invasion. But the Bush administration and the Pentagon were not alone in seeking to keep the Vietnam Syndrome at bay. For decades, a small group of right-wing foundations (including the Scaife, Bradley, Olin, and Coors foundations) have invested in the development of a network of think tanks, media and public relations
organizations providing the public intellectual infrastructure of the New Right in America. Much of what David Brock has termed the “Republican noise machine” or what Eric Alterman calls “the (really) conservative media” has been actively engaged in re-narrating America’s Vietnam War in order to sustain the social mythology of freedom’s empire (Alterman, 2003: chapter 13; Brock, 2004).

Regnery’s Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War

Long a leading conservative publishing house, Regnery Publishing is proud of its catalog of highly contentious, partisan, and popular books, of which thirty-two titles have ascended into the ranks of the top ten bestsellers since 1996. Among these was the notorious *Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans speak out against John Kerry* (2004), which impugned the Vietnam military record and subsequent antiwar activism of Democratic presidential candidate Kerry. *Unfit for Command* spent 13 weeks as the number one bestseller and a focus of national attention. That same year, Regnery published its *Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*, billed as recapturing America’s history from the “politically correct” but distorted dogmas of the American cultural left. Authored by Thomas Woods, *The Guide* broke sales records with the Conservative Book Club, whose editor-in-chief explained, “Conservatives are sick of the PC nonsense that fills textbooks and ‘scholarly’ history books – you know, the founding fathers were racist slaveholders, that kind of nonsense” (Field, 2004). Reviewing it for the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* – no bastion of PC – commentator Max Boot memorably referred to this book as “an absurd manifesto,” conjuring “a Bizzaro world” in which history is twisted beyond recognition in order to offer apologetics for the likes of Southern slave holders, isolationist Nazi-sympathizers, and Senator Joseph McCarthy. Boot noted the author’s close association with neo-Confederate groups and causes, and warned readers that the book was not just “politically incorrect,” but factually and morally dubious as well. Much to his credit, Boot advised conservatives to look elsewhere for historical edification (Boot, 2005). Despite this and other critical reviews, *The Guide* was featured on Fox News programs, endorsed by popular conservative commentators such as Sean Hannity and Pat Buchanan, and quickly became a commercial success, selling over 100,000 copies, spending twelve weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and reaching eighth position. Regnery plunged ahead with plans to produce a series of *Politically Incorrect Guides* (PIGs). The PIG to Islam (authored by an associate of JihadWatch.org) claimed that Islam should be understood as an intrinsically violent religion. The PIG to Science claimed to expose “the liberal and anti-religious propaganda we’re being fed by textbooks, college professors and the mainstream new media in the name of science.” And the PIG to Women, Sex and Feminism claimed that feminists have misled women into believing that both career and family goals are appropriate and attainable. Advertised as “great books to read in college,” there are now nineteen titles and three bestsellers in the PIG series (Doolittle, 2004; Human Events, 2004; Rutledge, 2006; www.Regnery.com/pig).
Written by a former Marine pilot and alumnus of the CIA’s Air America, the latest title in the PIG series explicitly sets out to redeem “my fellow Vietnam veterans who have been so badly mistreated by the media and cultural trendsetters in this country.” Accordingly, it purports to correct the PC orthodoxy by telling “the true story of the Vietnam war, as it actually was, by someone who fought there.”

According to its author, the book was necessary “because the people who misreported the war, hammered vile lies about it into our national consciousness, and now tout its supposed ‘lessons’ are the very same people who created ‘political correctness’ in the first place” – antiwar professors, journalists, and the cultural left (Jennings, 2010: 2, 3).

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

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

(Jennings, 2010: 1).

Yet, despite the fact that the U.S. military left the field with the highest score, they were not recognized as winners; they were apparently robbed of the victory Jennings believes that they earned with their sweat and blood. “It is obscene to say these sacrifices were in vain. It is without reason to say that America’s servicemen ‘lost’ anything” (Jennings, 2010: 139).

Drawing heavily on the writings of disgruntled military commanders and a small group of heterodox conservative historians, Jennings claims that America’s Vietnam War was as good as won at three different historical junctures, but on each occasion defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory by varying combinations of strategic interference and micromanagement of the war by civilian officials; vacillation or half-measures applied by weak-willed Democratic politicians; misrepresentations of the war effort by liberal media and antiwar activists; and the moral cowardice of Congress who ultimately betrayed and abandoned the South Vietnamese and the American servicemen who had fought with them.

In his account of the war’s onset Jennings categorically asserts that the Diem regime was the legitimate government of an independent, sovereign state under attack from foreign forces. “The Vietnam war was not a civil war among the people of South Vietnam; it was a war of
Communist aggression by North Vietnam against the sovereign, free, internationally recognized nations of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia” (2010: 160-61, also 48, 67). He does not acknowledge that the creation of the regime, and the state of South Vietnam itself, was the result of an American-led effort to frustrate the Geneva Accords of 1954 and prevent the unified rule of Vietnam by the overwhelmingly popular Viet Minh forces who had defeated the French colonial occupiers and were almost certain to win the country-wide elections called for by the Accords. Nor does he acknowledge the deep roots and self-sustaining dynamics of the insurgency in the countryside of South Vietnam. Jennings avoids direct and explicit engagement with historical evidence of the dubious origins and legitimacy of the Diem regime (indeed of South Vietnam as an allegedly sovereign state), its thin and fragile social base, and its early and enthusiastic embrace of violent repressive measures including routinized torture and execution of political opponents or suspected Communist sympathizers, and the basis of the insurgency in opposition to all of that (cf. Jennings, 2010: 20-30; Fitzgerald, 1972: chapter 3; Baritz, 1985: chapter 3; Kolko, 1985: chapters 7-10; Sheehan, 1988: 169-96; Young,1991: chapters 3-4; Spector, 1993: 74-5, chapters 5, 9; Hess, 2009: 73-80; Schmitz, 2005: 18-28). While offering the briefest of hints that the Diem regime was corrupt, nepotistic, and brutal, Jennings quickly dismisses these issues by asserting that “his [Diem’s] methods were considerably less harsh than those of the Stalinist Ho Chi Minh – whose Soviet and Communist Chinese backers endorsed any and all means to achieve a Communist state” (2010: 23-4). Jennings’ analysis of the Diem regime reduces to a simple dichotomy strikingly similar to Jeanne Kirkpatrick’s notorious apologia for repressive right-wing ‘authoritarian’ regimes as opposed to left-wing ‘totalitarian’ ones (Kirkpatrick, 1979). According to Jennings, the situation in Vietnam can be understood in terms of “a stark divide between a conservative, authoritarian, Western-leaning government and a Communist tyranny. One was on the side of religion, tradition, and relative economic and civil freedom; the other crushed religion, tradition, and any sort of freedom at all” (Jennings, 2010: 21-22). On that basis, Jennings asserts that the Diem government in Saigon was legitimate, effective, moderately progressive, and was actually winning the war against the guerillas until Diem was deposed and murdered in a military coup supported by the Kennedy administration. By betraying “the most experienced, respected, and unifying leader South Vietnam had,” Kennedy committed “the largest American blunder of the Vietnam war,” setting the stage for the tragedies to come (2010: 23, 60).

In Jennings re-narration, the second episode of Victory Betrayed occurred at the culmination of Lyndon Johnson’s war. Foolishly following the advice of civilian defense intellectuals enamored of game theory, Johnson had gradually escalated the bombing of the North in hopes of ratcheting up the pressure for them to cease their “invasion” of the South. In so doing, he had ignored the wise advice of commanders who called for massive bombing “to prove to the Communist government in Hanoi that it would have to accept the existence of an independent South Vietnam – or face the obliteration of the North Vietnamese capital” (Jennings, 2010: 82). In the South, Westmoreland – an otherwise admirable soldier – adopted a flawed strategy of attrition based on “search and destroy” operations designed to bring American firepower to bear
on enemy forces. According to Jennings, the strategy was flawed because a totalitarian
Communist government could coerce its people into fighting to the last soldier, because the
Communists had sanctuaries “off-limits to U.S. firepower” in Laos and Cambodia, and because it
destroyed and destabilized large areas of South Vietnam (2010: 69-70). It is precisely this
widespread destruction in the Vietnamese countryside, and the massive civilian casualties and
dislocations this necessarily entailed (Schell, 1987: 198; Appy, 1993: 190-205), that led many
commentators to view the war as immoral – a position Jennings dismisses as being both naively
idealistic and slanderous of American military servicemen.

During 1967 General Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker, and the Johnson administration
conducted a public relations campaign at home to shore up public support for the ongoing war by
asserting again and again that steady progress was being made in Vietnam, the enemy was being
ground down, and victory was within sight (Westmoreland’s infamous “light at the end of the
tunnel”). Then the guerillas launched the Tet Offensive of early 1968, attacking over a hundred
targets across South Vietnam, including major cities and military bases as well as such symbolic
bastions of the U.S. presence as the American embassy in Saigon. These attacks were spectacular
and shocking (all the more so in light of the official narrative that the war was all but won), but
they also exposed the guerillas to concentrated American firepower. “From a military point of
view, the Tet Offensive was a massive Communist defeat, both in terms of casualties and in
proving that if the people of South Vietnam were ever to rise up, it would be against the
Communists, not for them” (Jennings, 2010: 93). Leaving aside this latter, highly dubious claim
(presented without direct evidence of anti-Communism among the South Vietnamese people), it
is widely agreed that the guerilla forces in the South suffered punishing losses during early 1968,
perhaps as many as 58,000 casualties (Schmitz, 2005: 98). For Jennings, this translates into a
decisive military victory that was misrepresented by the media and antiwar forces at home,
derundermining political support for the war at the moment when a more aggressive follow-up
could have won the war.

Again, Jennings’ interpretations run contrary to much of the historical literature on the war. Two
recent scholarly examinations directly assess the claim that Tet was a decisive military Victory
betrayed by negative reporting. In his book-length reassessment of Tet, Historian David Schmitz
presents evidence that U.S. commanders and analysts recognized after Tet that the guerillas had
increased their control in the Southern countryside (having drawn US and ARVN forces into
urban combat around the country) and were able to recruit in such numbers that, despite their
losses, their “recovery is likely to be rapid” (Schmitz, 2005: 110, quoting Chairman on the Joint
Chiefs). Schmitz concludes:

American forces could prevent the overthrow of the Saigon government, inflict a high
level of casualties, and create enormous destruction. But they could not create a stable,
legitimate government in South Vietnam or destroy the enemy’s capacity and will to
fight. ...The Tet Offensive demonstrated that the United States could not win a limited
war of attrition in Vietnam and had to change policy. In these terms, Tet was, in fact, a
defeat. A defeat for the strategy of attrition and limited war in Vietnam, and for the strategy of using military power to force a political structure on Vietnam.  

(Schmitz, 2005: xiv, 165)

Nor is the evidence of media misrepresentation persuasive, as Gary Hess demonstrates in his even-handed assessment (2009: chapters 6-7; see also Schmitz, 2005: chapter 5). The public response to Tet was not a dramatic reversal, but the continuation of a trend of declining public support for the war that had begun well before Tet (Schmitz, 2005: 52-3, 112, 158, 163; Hess, 2009: 7-8).

Moreover, the group having the greatest influence on the Johnson administration’s post-Tet policy shift was not the anti-war left, but hard-nosed business, legal, and foreign policy elites. Clark Clifford, who succeeded McNamara as Secretary of Defense, was instrumental in translating these elite views into a shift in war policy.

Now I make it a practice to keep in touch with friends in business and law across the land. …Until a few months ago, they were generally supportive of the war. They were a little disturbed about the overheating of the economy and the flight of gold, but they assumed that these things would be brought under control; and in any event they thought it was important to stop the Communists in Vietnam. Now all that has changed. …The idea of going deeper into the bog strikes them as mad. They want to see us get out of it.

(Clifford, quoted in Young, 1991: 229)

In March, 1968 Clifford convened a meeting of the so-called Wise Men, the most experienced and influential foreign policy advisors of the preceding decades, and after hearing the latest evidence of the situation in Vietnam, they offered the administration their assessment (Young, 1991: 227-29; Schmitz, 2005: 143-47). Schmitz summarizes as follows the thinking of administration officials and their elite advisors and constituents:

Had they thought the war could still be won in a reasonable time frame and within reasonable costs, they would have supported further escalation. But after Tet, most officials in the Johnson administration, along with the Wise Men, could no longer see that as feasible. The evidence showed that …due to the Tet offensive the NLF was stronger and had gained greater control of the countryside, that the pacification program had collapsed, that the enemy had reserve strength and could match an American escalation, and that the Saigon government was weaker than a year earlier. No progress had been made since 1965. All that was achieved was a costly stalemate with no end in sight.

(Schmitz, 2005: 164)

Including Wall Street lawyers, investment bankers, former generals, veteran cold warriors, these men were anti-Communist to the bone and had supported the war during earlier consultations
with the Johnson administration. But now, viewing the war against the backdrop of a U.S.-centered capitalist world order, they concluded that the massive and increasingly costly stalemate in Vietnam was undermining the political economy of U.S. global power – generating inflation and eroding international confidence in the dollar, cornerstone of the capitalist world order since the Bretton Woods Agreements of 1944. (Schmitz, 2005: 112-116; also Franklin, 2000: 98). As Schmitz succinctly puts it, “the establishment consensus on Vietnam broke” (2005: 125). Their pessimistic view of the ongoing war and its larger costs in terms of the health of the U.S. economy and its place in the world, coinciding with urgently phrased Pentagon requests for hundreds of thousands of additional troops, rattled Johnson badly and directly contributed to his decision to seek peace talks and pursue disengagement.

The third act of Jennings’ military tragedy occurred in 1972-73. Jennings lionizes President Nixon for his willingness to bomb North Vietnamese cities, and to send US and South Vietnamese troops and bombers against Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. As the author sees it, Nixon’s pit bull toughness once again brought victory within reach. For Jennings, the Paris Accords of 1973 were a Communist capitulation to the Nixon onslaught.10 However, liberal and antiwar forces in Congress sought to cripple Nixon’s policies with funding cutoffs and with the new War Powers Act, and ultimately prevented the U.S. from using airpower to sustain South Vietnamese independence in the face of renewed Northern aggression (Jennings, 2010: chapter 4). Presuming that it was within America’s power to sustain South Vietnam indefinitely, Jennings holds Congressional Democrats, biased journalists, academics and antiwar activists “responsible for the loss of South Vietnam to the brutal rule and atrocities of the Communist North” (2010: 165, also 152).

Overarching all of this is the presumption of the fundamental righteousness of the U.S. war in Vietnam, in Daniel Ellsberg’s words, the “tacit, unquestioned belief that we had a right to ‘win’ in ways defined by us” (Ellsberg, 2002, 247).11 Grounded in a stark, unreconstructed Cold War world-view – dichotomous, zero-sum, strongly reminiscent of NSC-68 – Jennings asserts that Communism was simply the world’s greatest evil, that it had its source in the expansionism of the USSR and Communist China (rather than in socio-political dynamics particular to various countries and regions where it arose), and that the lessons of Munich (appeasement of tyrannical aggressors is folly) applied as much to global Communism as to Hitler (cf. Jennings, chapters 1, 5; NSC-68 reprinted in May, 1993). Following the procrustean logic of NSC-68, “a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere” and vital interests are therefore at stake in every context where Communism and freedom confront one another (NSC-68 in May, 1993: 29). On this view, the dubious origins, unrepresentative nature, and manifold sins of the Southern regime are beside the point. So long as it was anti-Communist, the U.S. military effort that sustained that regime was ultimately about preserving the “Free World” in the face of Communist expansionism, its single greatest menace. Understood in these terms, the war was indeed a noble cause, and to claim otherwise was to support the enemy in wartime or, now, is to betray the legacy of the Americans who fought there. Not surprisingly, Jennings’ book spends little time
actually weighing the arguments of those with whom he disagrees since the underlying presumption is that there can be no good reasons to put forth an alternative interpretation, no honest and moral person would say any such thing. For Jennings and those who think like him, these are not debatable differences of historical interpretation; to represent the war differently is an act of bad faith, moral bankruptcy, abject betrayal – a stab-in-the-back.

The *Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War* has been favorably reviewed in a range of conservative outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal, Washington Times, Human Events*, and *World Net Daily* (Fletcher, 2010; Kann, 2010; Robbins, 2010; Toto, 2010). These reviewers welcomed it as an important corrective to liberal cultural orthodoxy. Amazon.com sales rankings indicate that the PIG is selling well among books on the Vietnam war, and responses by reader-reviewers are enthusiastic. Jennings maintains an active Facebook page for the book’s fans (Facebook, 2010). Clearly, segments of the American public desperately want reassurance that U.S. foreign policy is intrinsically moral, that the U.S. military is virile and masterful, that outcomes which fail to reflect this nobility and power must result from unmanly cowardice and betrayal by particular segments of the American public, and that the history of the Vietnam War somehow affirms all these beliefs.

**Victory Betrayed: Conceptual Furniture in the Right-wing World**

These kinds of re-narrations of the Vietnam War have become commonplace in the political discourse of the American right-wing. The mythology of Victory Betrayed forms a kind of taken-for-granted background knowledge, of the sort that “everybody knows” so it needs little support aside from its regular reassertion. The most popular conservative radio, television, and print commentators are happy to do precisely that. Speaking on Bill O’Reilly’s talk show, Ann Coulter provided a concise (if ungrammatical) summary statement of the betrayal narrative: “We lost it [the Vietnam War] because the broadcasters like Walter Cronkite going on and saying, ‘We’re losing, we’re losing’ …demoralizing the American people, Democratic Congress not backing our allies” (Coulter on The O’Reilly Factor, Fox News, August 19, 2005).

Bill O’Reilly of Fox News (Alterman, 2003: 35-38; Brock, 2004: 335-46) acknowledges that all was not well with the South Vietnamese regime, but he does presume that the U.S. military was winning the war, antiwar forces were responsible for ending the war and aiding the enemy, and that a direct consequence was the enslavement of the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge killing fields. Further, O’Reilly sees all of this as creating an obligation to re-establish the cultural status of American fighting men.

That’s the biggest myth in the world that the U.S.A. lost the [Vietnam] war. We didn’t lose the war.... The United States armed forces did not lose one engagement, not one... And we pulled out of there for political reasons. ...our political will was not there.
American protesters succeeded in shutting down the war effort in Vietnam. And that was a good thing. The South Vietnamese government was corrupt and President Johnson would not fight the war to win because he was afraid of Chinese and Soviet intervention. But when U.S. troops pulled out of southeast Asia, many bad things began to happen. Two million Cambodians were slaughtered by Pol Pot and his Communist killers and millions were enslaved by a totalitarian regime in Vietnam. In you remember, peaceniks back then said nothing about those atrocities, ignoring the holocaust in Cambodia altogether.

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

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

The king of conservative talk radio, Rush Limbaugh (Alterman, 2003: 72-75; Brock, 2004: chapter 11) embraces the thesis that protesting against the war was betrayal of the country and its military: “Let’s get one thing straight right here about this protester policy and what they were really trying to do. They weren’t trying to save lives. They were not trying to do anything other than defeat U.S. policy in this war. They were on the side of our enemy, whether they want to admit it or not” (Rush Limbaugh show, October 28, 1992). The conservative magazine, Human Events, approvingly quoted Limbaugh’s definition of patriotism: “Patriotism is supporting our troops on the battlefield, not undermining the mission and morale” (Limbaugh quoted in Andersen, 2007). Interviewed on CNN’s Larry King Live, Limbaugh explained that the American left is almost hard-wired to be disloyal: “I have a theory about the left and the military. I think they – it’s not a theory, it is fact. Just listen to them, whenever we’ve got a military
deployment – Gulf War, Desert Storm, Vietnam – it is always the U.S. military that is in error. Our existence is the problem. U.S. military is the focus of evil in the modern world. …My theory is they kind of like it when our military screws up, gets defeated, or commits atrocities” (CNN, 2001).

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

The greatest generation…understood that despite America’s flaws, she was a force for good in the world, a beacon of freedom and an island of hope in an ocean of tyranny. They understood deep in their souls that if America went down in flames, the liberties of men and women all over the globe would eventually be lost as well.

(Hannity, 2002: 49)

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

(Hannity, 2002: 290)

A new generation of liberals, far more radical than their New Deal-era predecessors, not only opposed the Vietnam War but sought the evisceration of certain core American institutions, including the military, law enforcement, and capitalism. By the early 1970s this movement had virtually hijacked the Democratic Party.…. 

(Hannity, 2002: 69)

Such radicals…have come to wield real power [in the Democratic Party, the media, and the entertainment industry], and their ideas have taken root. They have succeeded in turning their radical theories into real policies, and consequently have weakened our national security and made us all more vulnerable…

(Hannity, 2002: 71).

A professional culture warrior and red-baiter funded by the sugar daddies of the radical right such as the Scaife and Bradley foundations (Alterman, 2003: 86-7, 251; Brock, 2004: 100-108), David Horowitz is also at pains to re-narrate the Vietnam War in ways consistent with the mythology of American Exceptionalism and Victory Betrayed. Horowitz and his leftist-tracking
organization, Discover the Networks, identify the Vietnam War era as a time when American radicals attained a disproportionate and pernicious cultural influence:

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

(Discover the Networks, n.d.)

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

In a book entitled The Enemy Within, Dinesh D’Souza -- a former Reagan administration policy advisor subsequently associated with conservative culture war hot-houses such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institution -- spins out a comprehensive, sinister, and frightening version of the betrayal myth:

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

(D’Souza, 2007: 271).

D’Souza claims that this internal enemy demoralized America, degraded our culture, weakened our defenses, and all but invited the terrorist attacks of 2001. And when loyal Americans seek to eliminate this terrorist threat, the enemy within does everything in their power to bring about another Vietnam-like betrayal. These are the kinds of background understandings called up, for example, when Sarah Palin accuses the Obama-Biden ticket of planning “a white flag of
surrender in Iraq and that is not what our troops need to hear today” (Vice Presidential Debate, October 2, 2008).

But the implications go much deeper than electoral rhetoric. Narratives scapegoating entire segments of society are a tradition of long standing on the American right and constitute a central element of right-wing populism (Berlet and Lyons, 2000). Scapegoating internal enemies who are presumed to be both dangerous and incorrigible lends itself to a form of political rhetoric David Neiwert calls “eliminationism”: “a politics and culture that shuns dialogue and the democratic exchange of ideas in favor of the pursuit of outright elimination of the opposing side, either through suppression, exile and ejection, or extermination” (2009: 11). Citing examples from the political statements of Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, Bill O’Reilly, Dinesh D’Souza, David Horowitz and other popular conservative commentators, Neiwert argues that “Eliminationism has become an endemic feature of modern movement conservatism…. It shows itself as an unwillingness to argue the facts or merits of issues and to demand outright the suppression or violent oppression (and ultimately the purgation) of elements deemed harmful to American society” (2009: 18). The ideological confluence of national rebirth through militarism, scapegoating and eliminationist rhetoric comes uncomfortably close to replicating core elements of fascism’s political culture. Even if that darkest possibility remains unrealized, this discourse of treachery and betrayal by disloyal segments of society is a potent cultural weapon with which to discredit and isolate those who do not embrace, or fit easily within, the culture of militarism.

Conclusion

Mark Fenster has argued that “just because overarching conspiracy theories are wrong does not mean that they are not on to something” (1999: 67). He sees them as distorted forms of populist critique, expressing an intuitive sense of unequal social power and injustice, and an aspiration to speak and act in resistance to these. I suggest that narratives of Victory Betrayed in Vietnam might be similarly understood.

The U.S. did not win the war, and this was not because liberals and anti-war activists were duped by the Communists or betrayed their country and its men and women in uniform. Vietnamese endured the horrendous suffering meted out by the American war machine and persevered in order to win their independence. To acknowledge this does not require us to presuppose that one side was morally pure and the other entirely evil. In those senses, the narrative of Victory Betrayed is wrong.

But it is not implausible to suggest that ordinary Americans were lied to and manipulated, their unequal sacrifices exploited, by powerful social forces that continue to dominate American politics and pursue strategies of world order that enhance the wealth and power of the globally privileged few. As I understand it, the Vietnam War was an attempt to police the boundaries of the “Free World” – that is, the U.S.-centered capitalist world order that American state managers
sought to construct and maintain in the decades after World War II. Pursuing a world order strategy guided by an overarching concept of “economic security,” they conflated the defense of capitalism with the defense of liberty, and defined any and all non-Communist countries and peoples as parts of the Free World presumptively under American leadership (Pollard, 1985; Saull, 2007). Viewing global geopolitics through the zero-sum prism outlined in NSC-68, and faced with what they construed as a relentlessly menacing and expansionist Communist monolith seeking to displace and ultimately destroy America’s capitalist world order, they saw Vietnam as a test of America’s resolve which would have global geopolitical ramifications. They were unable or unwilling to understand the conflict within the context of Vietnamese history and politics. Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh, the National Liberation Front, all were represented straightforwardly as Communists, avatars of the evil empire. Undermining the 1954 Geneva Accords and conjuring the nation of South Vietnam, installing and supporting an unrepresentative, undemocratic, and repressive regime in Saigon, all of this could be assimilated with the defense of freedom so long as the Saigon regime was firmly anti-Communist. Maintaining anti-Communist South Vietnam became the overriding goal of successive American presidents who misrepresented the nature of the war as an invasion of the free and independent country of South Vietnam by the foreign Communists, hid important aspects of their policies from the American public, fabricated justifications for escalations they knew would not suffice to end the war, and sustained a war that killed and maimed millions, and badly scarred both Vietnam and America. In America, the most profound costs of the war were born by the predominantly working-class soldiers the country sent to fight on false pretenses.

Vietnam, more than any other war in the twentieth century, perhaps in our history, was a working-class war. The institutions most responsible for channeling men into the military – the draft, the schools, and the job market – directed working-class children to the armed forces and their wealthier peers toward college. Most young men from prosperous families were able to avoid the draft, and few volunteered. …In Vietnam, American soldiers encountered a reality utterly at odds with the official justifications of the war presented by American policy-makers. Though many men arrived in Vietnam believing they had been sent to stop communism and help the people of South Vietnam preserve democracy, their experiences fundamentally contradicted those explanations. Told they were in Vietnam to help the people, soldiers found widespread antagonism to their presence. Told they were there to protect villagers from aggression, they carried out military orders that destroyed villages and brought terror to civilians. Told they were fighting to prevent the spread of communism, they discovered that support for revolution already flourished throughout the country and could not be contained behind fixed boundaries. (Appy, 1993: 6-7)

While many soldiers may have become skeptical of the war’s official justification and the ways it was carried out by the military brass, the fact that the burdens of living these contradictions –
or dying for them -- were placed primarily upon working-class Americans generated a bitter class-based tension that continues to lend itself to articulations of populism and militarism. The memoir of a Vietnam War veteran is highly suggestive: “To so many of us the peace phalanx parading American streets were the spoiled, gutless middle class kids who cowered in college classrooms to escape the battlefield and who, to soothe their cowards’ consciences and regain their lost self-respect and their girlfriends’ admiration now campaigned with ball-less envy to destroy what honor and prestige we might earn through our courage and sacrifices in battle. The peaceniks might not be attacking the integrity of American soldiers directly but they were proselytizing against the war as dishonorable and contemptible and we who were participants in the conflict therefore felt that, by implication, we too were being made contemptible” (quoted in Appy, 1993: 221; but compare pp. 304-5, and Lembke, 1998: 27-48). In light of this longstanding source of tension and resentment – aggravated now by the steep economic inequalities generated by thirty years of neoliberal political economy -- it is not particularly surprising that relatively privileged leftist and liberal academics, students, intellectuals, writers, journalists should be especially reviled in contemporary narratives of Victory Betrayed.

Unaccountable power, unequal social privilege, duplicity as to ends and means, and betrayal of avowed normative commitments are demonstrable parts of the war’s history, and in that sense – despite its historical distortions -- the betrayal narrative is indeed on to something. It is this that accounts for its populist appeal and its enduring political danger. Until Americans interrogate that history, critically examine those structures of social power that provided the war with its conditions of possibility, and rethink what it means to be American-in-the-world, they will be susceptible to the siren call of militarized nationalism justified by ideologies of American exceptionalism and providing a rationale for the negation of internal and external others.
Notes

1 This perspective on cultural politics owes much to my reading of Antonio Gramsci and contemporary interpreters of Gramsci such as Stuart Hall: see Rupert, 2005, 2009, 2010b.

2 No military historian, I am nonetheless skeptical of this enduring claim on the basis of at least two widely known examples. In the aftermath of the famous 1965 Ia Drang battle for landing zone X-Ray depicted in a 2002 blockbuster movie starting Mel Gibson, a battalion of the U.S. 7th cavalry was ambushed, overrun, and decimated by North Vietnamese forces near landing zone Albany (Moore and Galloway, 1992) – an outcome not highlighted in the film. And in 1967, an army unit known as the Black Lions met a similar fate at the hands of the Viet Cong guerillas in the battle of Ong Thanh, as portrayed in a bestselling and award-winning book (Maraniss, 2003). It’s not clear to me how such engagements could be reinterpreted as military victories, nor am I confident that these are the only such cases since the vast majority of combat engagements were initiated by the VC or NVA on their terms, often ambushing Westmoreland’s endlessly patrolling “search and destroy” missions (Appy, 1993: 163-4, 171).

3 Some readers may be asking themselves: “Gays? How did gays come into this mythological betrayal narrative?” Homophobia has been a subtext of Cold War anti-Communism at least since the Red Scare / Lavender Scare of the 1950s. Cold War culture imagined homosexuality and Communism as two secretive expressions of the same basic moral corruption, dual threats to an American masculinity capable of global dominance in the name of freedom. Accordingly, the reproduction of the hegemonic form of Cold War masculinity and the defense of the Free World required vigilance against hidden Communists and homosexuals whose loyalty and integrity were presumed to be dubious. Since these hidden threats could be anywhere, could be anyone, it was important for policy makers continually to demonstrate their firmness and manly resolve. Well into the Vietnam War, “this stigmatizing discourse equating diplomacy, appeasement, weakness, and conspiratorial homosexuality continued to shape assumptions about manliness and political legitimacy in Washington” (Dean, 2001: 243; see also Epstein, 1994; Cuordileone, 2000). The association of hegemonic masculinism and militarism, and the stigmatization of alternative perspectives as effeminate and treacherous, continues to play an active role in US political culture (see, e.g., Rupert, 2010a). Moreover, avoiding an open acknowledgment that hegemonic American masculinity met its match in Vietnam – with all the painful and potentially wrenching cultural reconstructions that might entail -- may be one of the major elements at stake in the continuing cultural battles over the significance of the Vietnam War (Jeffords, 1989; Gibson, 1994).

4 Even before founding Accuracy in Media in 1969, Irvine had a long history as a red-baiter. Irvine and AIM have been recipients of the largesse bestowed upon vociferous right-wing culture warriors by the Scaife and Coors foundations, and other conservative funders (Alterman, 2003: 251; Brock, 2004: 75-80). According to David Brock, “AIM advocated that domestic protestors of the Vietnam War be charged with treason under the Alien and Sedition Act” (2004: 76). In 1985, Reed founded Accuracy in Academia to pursue the right-wing culture war on America’s campuses.
This section of the paper draws on research that was originally published in Rupert 2010a.

Note here the presumption that in understanding the war’s significance, the perspective of the warrior is, or ought to be, privileged. Implied is the reduction of war’s multidimensional political character to the instrumental application of violence – precisely the central strategic error of the American war effort. It also suggests that those who did not fight in the war are not qualified to make judgments about it, another implicitly political claim with potentially profound ramifications for democratic participation and civilian control of the military.

Note Jennings’ use of gendered language here, and throughout. Between 7,000 - 11,000 American women served in Vietnam (Young, 1991: 322), but it is the reputation of military servicemen – male warriors – that Jennings is at pains to redeem by insisting on their battlefield mastery over the Vietnamese. This would seem to support arguments that American martial masculinity was perceived to be at stake in Vietnam, and still is (Jeffords, 1989; Gibson, 1994; Dean, 2001).

Daniel Ellsberg, whom Jennings names as one of the individuals most responsible for pernicious anti-war myths (2010: 163-4), agrees with the claim that the Vietnam War should not be viewed as a civil war, but not for reasons that Jennings would find agreeable. “It was no more a civil war after 1955 or 1960 than it had been during the U.S.-supported French attempt at colonial reconquest. A war in which one side was entirely equipped and paid by a foreign power – which dictated the nature of the local regime in its own interest – was not a civil war. …In terms of the UN Charter and our own avowed ideals, it was a war of foreign aggression, American aggression” (Ellsberg, 2002: 255).

Jennings might argue that the strategy of limited war was precisely the problem, and that direct, massive attacks on North Vietnam would have been the appropriate solution. Once again, this presumes – incorrectly, I believe – that the nature of the War is understandable straightforwardly as an invasion of the independent nation of South Vietnam by the foreign armies of the North. If this is not the case, if the Southern insurgency had Southern roots, and if the Southern regime was little more than an American creature sustained by the life support of U.S. military occupation and massive aid, then the destruction of the North would accomplish little more than the destruction of the North. On the improbability of attaining victory by bombing the North, see Hess, 2009: 85-91, 107-8. Invasion of the North might have triggered a Chinese military response, and Ellsberg argues that even if it did not, it would not have ended the war but mired the US in an insurgency even more intractable than the one in the south (2002: 200-01).

Jennings’ interpretation of the success of Nixon’s Christmas bombing of Northern cities is contradicted not just by the historical literature, but also by Kissinger aide John Negroponte, whose assessment was that “We bombed them into accepting our concessions” (quoted in Hess, 2005: 201; see also Baritz, 1985: 221-225; Young, 1991: 278-80).

After having actively participated in the war as a self-described cold warrior and a Pentagon insider, Ellsberg came to understand the war outside the terms of the prevailing Cold War narrative, and was led to the conclusion that the war was immoral and that he needed to do what
was within his power to stop it. “Eisenhower’s support after 1954 of a police state [in southern Vietnam] dedicated to silencing, jailing, or exterminating every political figure in Vietnam, Communist and others, who called for observance of the provisions of the Geneva Accords for elections and unification ensured that armed struggle would resume. We had no more right to win that struggle than the French had, and that was zero. Moreover, though like the French with U.S. assistance, we could prolong it year by year, we had no better prospect of winning than the French had had. Again, zero.” The Pentagon Papers revealed that each President since Truman had been advised directly and explicitly that their chosen approach to the Vietnam conflict “would be stalemated and would at best postpone departure and defeat. …Yet each of them had chosen ‘soldier on,’ deceiving the public on what he was doing and what he had been told its prospects were” (2002: 274-5). Ellsberg concluded: “If the war was unjust, as I now regarded it, that meat that every Vietnamese killed by Americans or by the proxies we had financed since 1950 had been killed by us without justification” (2002: 257) While the precise toll will never be known, best estimates suggest that somewhere around two million people were killed in America’s Vietnam War (Baritz, 1985: 344).

12 In the interest of full disclosure, I note that this club of self-indulgent academic radicals is one to which I personally have been ascribed membership by Horowitz and discoverthenetworks.org (n.d.). It is not an exclusive club: Horowitz claims that 55,000 “anti-American” professors are effectively in league with terrorists and represent “a huge danger for the country” (quoted in Media Matters, 2006).

Sources

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